

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336875447>

# Brand activism

Article in *Communication & Society* · October 2019

DOI: 10.15581/003.32.4.343-359

---

CITATIONS

5

READS

13,228

1 author:



Juan Luis Manfredi

University of Castilla-La Mancha

68 PUBLICATIONS 274 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Diplomacy & International Communication [View project](#)



Tnink Tanks [View project](#)

---

**Juan Luis Manfredi-Sánchez**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9129-2907>

Juan.manfredi@uclm.es

Universidad de Castilla La  
Mancha

---

**Submitted**

April 29th, 2019

**Approved**

July 14th, 2019

---

© 2019

Communication & Society

ISSN 0214-0039

E ISSN 2386-7876

doi: 10.15581/003.32.4.343-359

[www.communication-society.com](http://www.communication-society.com)

---

2019 – Vol. 32(4)

pp. 343-359

---

**How to cite this article:**

Manfredi-Sánchez, J. L. (2019).

Brand activism. *Communication & Society*, 32(4), 343-359.

## Brand activism

**Abstract**

**In this work, brand activism is defined as a strategy that seeks to influence citizen-consumers by means of campaigns created and sustained by political values. It involves a transformation in corporate communication management and social responsibility practices, which borrows from those of social movements to contribute to the social production of identity of citizen-consumers. This corporate political shift involves the use of messages, slogans and content based on final (of common interest) or instrumental (linked to the industry in which they are applied) political values. Political behaviour does not operate in a vacuum but is the response to a change in values of the young generations employing digital technologies and demanding a different behaviour from global firms. However, these political advertising practices have been heavily criticised in the field of political economy, insofar as it is contended that they are impostures lacking authenticity. Thus, 45 campaigns were analysed to determine the characteristics of brand activism in this new socio-political context. From the results it follows that this activist practice, of Anglo-Saxon origin, is a relevant trend in political communication because it aligns individual identity, the management of public assets and corporate action in the political sphere.**

**Keywords**

**Brand activism, corporate political shift, corporate diplomacy, campaign, environment, consumer-citizen, identity, authenticity.**

### 1. Introduction

The political activity of companies is one of the most relevant subjects in the recent academic literature in a social context of growing public distrust for the institutions. Ideas such as CEO activism (Chatterji & Toffel, 2019), excellence (Thürer, Tomasevic, Stevenson, Fredendall & Protzman, 2018), corporate reputation (Lange, Lee & Dai, 2011) and global public relations (Xifra, 2017) have appeared. Doctrine development has standardised a semantic umbrella that includes the notion of corporate visibility in public affairs in order to have and exercise “the right to be heard,” creating expectations to attract talent and investment (Villafañe, 2012), improving relations with stakeholders (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2008) and implementing new sustainable marketing strategies for differentiation (Achrol & Kotler, 1999).

On the one hand, organisations have fine-tuned business management tools. Corporate ethics and sustainability are common aspects of the strategic management of public (Longo, 2010) and private (Den Hond *et al.*, 2013) organisations. This phenomenon explains the boom in corporate social responsibility, public affairs management and related training programmes, among other things (Matilla *et al.*, 2019).

On the other, they have exploited consumer brands to promote specific aspects and to broaden the range of values that they convey to include core political issues, even controversial ones. This is what has been called here the “corporate political shift,” whose aim is not to increase direct sales of products or services, but to take a stance on political issues. Sarkar and Kotler (2018) consider that the change in management corresponds to a transformation in marketing, which has abandoned good intentions to take action. Marketing for a cause is not enough, for the intention should be to redirect the way of doing business at a global level in line with the new capitalism described by Richard Sennett (2006).

In short, a series of communication practices have emerged in the intersection between politics, the corporate world and activism. This transformation begs the following research questions: what political issues are broached by companies with their brand strategies? Are these issues related to their area of economic or industrial activity or to the problems of globalisation (climate change, equality, public health, etc.)? And are they local or international issues? These questions have allowed us to form the following two working hypotheses:

H1. Companies have included political affairs in brand management, leveraging burning issues to position their products or services. They thus convey values to citizen-consumers, above all the younger generations who are now more demanding than ever.

H2. The corporate political shift can be summed up as the defence of a number of increasingly more accepted global values, particularly in progressive circles. Climate change, equality, feminism and the fight against cancer are all pre-political ideas, far removed from conventional issues (e.g. party and trade union affairs). Campaigns respond to facts, statements or situations in order to portray the organisations launching them in a responsible light.

This paper analyses the brand activism of 45 campaigns in order to identify patterns consistent with those described in the academic literature on movements pursuing social change. To this end, the data was collected and organised by topics with a view to identifying behavioural patterns.

## **2. Corporate political activity: concept and evolution**

In 1997, the journalist David Halberstam published a comprehensive biography of Michael Jordan, the then best player in the National Basketball Association (NBA) and, by extension, in the world. In his book, Halberstam describes the transformation of the professional basketball league into a global phenomenon promoted thanks to Jordan and other stars, transnational TV channels and the sale of sports clothing. The creation of global stars and, to a lesser extent, teams gave rise to a brand that was recognisable to the public at large: “[...] the signature commercial representative of this great new athletic-cultural-commercial empire would be an American and a basketball player [Jordan]” (Halberstam, 1997, p. 131).

At the time, there was no doubt as to Jordan’s capacity, either as a sports star or as an advertising icon, to influence political affairs. Notwithstanding this, he decided not to become involved in politics or election campaigning –even being attributed the much-cited phrase, “Republicans buy sneakers, too”– thus refraining from offering his express support to the Democratic candidates for Congress and the Senate, despite the racist comments made by the Republicans. However, the current situation is very different. Twenty-two years on, the same company has lent its support to Colin Kaepernick, a player in the National Football League (NFL), owing to his ties with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The campaign, entitled “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything,” yielded partisan results: the Trumpists employed the hashtag #BurnYourNikes to share videos of themselves burning or throwing away their trainers. This transformation in advertising activity shows that there is currently a powerful relationship between consumer brands and the political sphere. To the point that Jordan himself, who has never confirmed whether or not he was quoted literally, has become just another political commentator.

**Illustration 1:** Campaign Coelin Kaepernick “Believe in Something” (Nike).



Source: <https://twitter.com/kaepernick7/status/1036695513251434498?lang=es>.

This work aspires to identify the relationship between political affairs and brand behaviour, considering global audiences as the spearhead of a model of capitalism. Brands embrace activist causes close to the counter-hegemonic agenda that challenges the system of symbolic production, whose “action system, rather than being interiorized in a way that fosters collective identity, is exteriorized through constant engagement with other movements and progressive communities” with an eye to “constructing a ‘politics of connections’” (Carroll & Hackett, 2006, p. 100) that does not aspire to a regulated political identity, but to an emotional connection with the community based on specific values. The sociologist Alberto Melucci anticipated the use of cultural codes for the benefit of the cause being promoted:

The new organizational form of contemporary movements is not just “instrumental” for their goals. It is a goal in itself. Since the action is focused on cultural codes, the form of the movement is a message, a symbolic challenge to the dominant patterns. [...] A different way of naming the world suddenly reverses the dominant codes. The medium, the movement itself as a new medium, is the message (1985, p. 801).

This logic that links the political orientation of brands to consumption and the construction of the individual image itself explains the emergence of a new field of research that analyses the behaviour of companies in activities of a political nature.

### 2.1. *The foundations of corporate political activity*

The transformation dynamics of globalisation affects the management of companies that have included political issues on their agendas for two reasons. Firstly, the multiplication of regulatory levels has blurred the line between public and private interests (Coen & Katsaitis, 2015; Manfredi, 2018). Scherer and Palazzo (2011) consider that this political activity is justified because it offers a different competitive edge based on the moral legitimacy of a good cause, beyond particular corporate interests. For Den Hond *et al.* (2014), aligning social interests with

political initiatives and entrepreneurial activity can generate broader social benefits. To this end, it is essential to gain legitimacy, to attract partners to build robust alliances and to have the ability to choose between collaboration and competition (Mogensen, 2017).

Secondly, globalisation has expanded markets and increased the demand for consumer goods and products. According to Capriotti, in a saturated market images contribute to build a “mental idea of an organisation formed by audiences after processing all of the information relating to it” (2013, p. 29). In a context of saturation, there are two types of attributes that, together, shape corporate identity: (1) physical features and visual elements such as brands, logos, slogans, designs and symbols; and (2) cultural or personality traits, like beliefs and cultural values. In the corporate world, according to Aced (2013), the brand builds identity and embodies the essence of an organisation. Value has an extra meaning for consumers who observe characteristic attributes and associate them with behaviours, lifestyles or political meanings.

The political issue consists in the incorporation of values deriving from the political and, to a lesser extent, commercial spheres: environmental defence, equality, feminism, the respect for employment and LGBT rights, the support of immigrants, etc. Values build identity on the basis of social behaviour, whereby the logic of brands with a political slant has distanced itself from commercial arguments to approach other final values inherent to immaterial goods, shared interests or the global public good.

## *2.2. Brands, activism and current political affairs*

Recourse to political affairs and politics in advertising is a recurrent issue in critical theory and cultural studies (Fuchs, 2008; Zafra, 2017). The literature points to how advertising shapes mentalities and leverages memorable ideas, slogans or photographs for profit and for creating new business opportunities (Davies, 2016; Illouz, 2007).

For this first current of thought, the corporate political shift is an imposture. Lekakis (2013, p. 5) ponders on whether there is a “politics in a pocket” or if consumption of a political nature is no more than a neoliberal fallacy that benefits the producers of goods at the expense of consumers, who are under the impression that they are participating in fair trade, solidarity or environmental protection campaigns. Zeisler (2016) criticises the fact that the boom in feminist policies has turned a social demand into an element of pop and market culture, which depoliticises the movement to create a utility for the sale of books, films or products. In relation to the Kaepernick campaign, Chadwick and Zipp (2018) wonder whether “By exploiting injustice for commercial purposes, Nike may be undermining or demeaning the causes it declares to support. All of this begs the question of what relation social justice and equality bears to training shoes anyway.”

This current connects with the research on the boycotting of companies or products for political reasons. Nielsen (2017) remarks that such behaviours are understood as shared –tribal– experiences that involve rituals of collective acceptance or rejection of specific brands. Well-known boycotts include those resulting from the Vietnam War and South African apartheid, plus many others simply for commercial reasons (Friedman, 1999) and, more recently, the so-called “BDS Boycott Disinvestments and Sanctions” against Israel (Feldman, 2019). Popp, Horbel and Germeln (2017) performed another relevant and more specific study on social media movements against sports teams and brands for political or environmental reasons or for betraying their “essence.” In the same vein, Kuehn (2017) holds that the opinions shared by the users of digital platforms fall into the category of “apolitical” when referring to the defence of local businesses against the expansion of multinational brands.

Nonetheless, another current of thought identifies political orientation with a substantial change in the practices of capitalism and consumerism. Social movements are beginning to employ professional techniques with a view to standardising their participation in public

decision-making. Dauvergne (2017) contends that the labels “sustainable” and “eco-responsible” consumption have changed the palm oil consumption model but have not eradicated its use. For which reason, he recommends that we differentiate between the capacity to influence corporate decisions and effectiveness in environmental terms.

Professional management is an indication of a social movement’s maturity, which consists in the issuing and distribution of defined messages consistent with the political action being pursued. For one, because social movements are striving to give visibility to their demands and behaviours in major advertising campaigns. To give but one example, Sender (2012) has enquired into how brands identified the male homosexual niche as from the 1960s and launched campaigns aimed at this collective’s consumption patterns, allowing at the same time for the building of its identity. And on the other, because advertisers focus on the preferences of the so-called “millennials,” aligning themselves with their values (Quart, 2017), for as Benner notes:

Others see brand activism as a way to target a coveted young audience who is far more progressive and political than their parents. To reach millennials, brands must tap into the political energy that generation created and show young people that they can take a stand (2018, p. 8).

For their part, companies align their messages with these organisations to demonstrate their commitment to the environment and society, which has given rise to the notion of “corporate citizenship” (Altman, 1998). Waddock (2004, p. 9) defines this concept as “the strategies and operating practices a company develops in operationalizing its relationships with and impacts on stakeholders and the natural environment.” Capriotti and Moreno take a leaf out of Waddock’s book to describe that evolution:

[...] the concept of corporate citizenship has acquired relevance in the past decade to incorporate a global focus and the concrete approach of the stakeholder theory into corporate social responsibility (CSR) (2007, p. 86).

Micheletti, Follesdal and Stolle unify social and corporate change, pointing to “political consumption,” which they describe as “the use of market purchases by individuals, groups, and institutions, who want to take responsibility for political, economic, and societal developments” (2006, p. V). Collective concern for political issues is more akin to the behaviour of social movements than to that of individuals. In the same work, W. Lance Bennett (2006) theorises about global citizenship, the result of the globalisation of biographies, the reach of brands and the standardisation of consumer products and services. He places the accent on the new generations, born since 1970, who have embraced the advantages of globalisation and conceptualise politics in terms of standards differing from the traditional ones. Political –or sub-political (Beck, 2000)– identity is built on other foundations:

Insofar as politics matters at all to many younger citizens, it makes sense within the personal life considerations of job, recreation, shopping, entertainment, fashion, sports, self-improvement, family, friends, and the community involvements that can be scheduled around these things (Bennett, 2006, p. 6).

Palazzo and Basu are of the same mind (2007, p. 337): “[...] the brand, thus, becoming the product, with values serving as reference points rooting it within the consumers’ self-identities.” Escalas (2004) concludes that self-perception as a citizen and consumer is completed in purchase decisions: the brand forms part of the narrative inherent to how we are perceived and how we want to be perceived. This alignment between the consumer and the citizen considers brands as symbolic frames with solid meanings, including status and recourse to emotions. Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) believe that it is necessary to analyse both dimensions together.

For this reason, the citizen-consumer demands of companies a behaviour coherent with their political values. Kuehn (2017, p. 209) criticises the academic literature for separating both spheres:

For this reason, Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) suggest that it is time critical scholars stop relegating citizenship and consumerism to oppositional spheres of activity in the attempt to reclaim what it means to “do activism” in neoliberal times. Rather, they suggest that “marketized modes of resistance” must be taken on a case-by-case basis to evaluate how and “whether such interventions have any ‘real’ power to make social change” (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 3).

The epistemological problem consists in defining what is politics, now without artificial separations between the public and private spheres. To this issue should be added the growing social polarisation around non-conventional political axes such as identity and religion. In their study, Matos, Vinueles and Sheinin (2017) consider that in a “partisan” setting the transfer of values activates a repertoire of behaviours and cognitive processes that give rise to more risks than opportunities. Although the companies analysed here avoid political parties and institutions at all costs, they do align with values representing more progressive or conservative positions. It is a risky decision because “a misalignment between brand political-position and individual political-affiliation should be perceived as an impactful norm violation of brand trust and the underlying brand relationship [...]” (*idem.*, p. 128). These authors recommend caution when dealing with polarisation:

This suggests managers should tread carefully when linking brands with political positions. Our results suggest there is limited upside potential of this approach and a more significant downside risk. The potential differentiation and attention-generating benefits of the strategy may be associated with significant negative implications such as inhibiting a beneficial consumer brand relationship and developing a potent SBC, as well as declining sales and/or profitability (*idem.*, p. 135).

In a nutshell, the phenomenon has been described as a set of cognitive and emotional attributes, with a defined cultural and social basis, which it aspires to transcend. Political economy considers that this behaviour gives priority to citizenship status over the consumer profile and, following that logic, it can be inferred that the former will act rationally, embracing or rejecting products in terms of their values. In contrast, the approach connecting citizens and consumers suggests that the relationship is responsible, but there is nothing that drives or checks a purchase decision owing to a specific political act.

### **2.3. Characteristics of the corporate political shift**

In this study, brand activism is defined as a communication strategy whose aim is to influence the citizen-consumer by means of messages and campaigns created and sustained by political values. As to its inner workings, it borrows from the campaigns of social movements, copying their aesthetics of authenticity, and has four main characteristics.

The first has a symbolic character and value, insofar as it is not associated with any product or service. It pursues the creation of an intangible good of a reputational nature, with cognitive and emotional values. It is not built for an audience who consume according to rational criteria, but for one who believes that the brand influences the status of the citizen-consumer. The triangulation between identity, consumption and values relies on the public nature of private goods. It is a distinctive social value.

The second has to do with the redefinition of politics far removed from conventional structures. It is grounded in transversal and final values, such as equality and environmental protection. It does not involve any express support for a political party, but the defence of

certain –controversial– positions by the progressive sectors of society. In contrast, there are less cases involving the defence of traditional values.

The third characteristic is defined by the recipient. Although it is a trend of Anglo-Saxon origin, companies attempt to engage a global audience. In point of fact, this peculiarity is essential for defining a campaign, for the digital media capture, reuse and disseminate it globally. For this reason, even though what is involved is a local campaign –or one that pretends to be local– it is aimed at the general public. This open orientation is significant because it does not override other actions, e.g. a lobby aimed at legislators, but is indeed consistent with the aspirational values of a global brand. The corporate political shift is completed with alliances with third parties, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), activists and celebrities.

Lastly, the action of brands has digital roots, whose repertoire is hybrid. It draws from digital activism and allows for the redistribution of videos and the use of logos, while being committed to the aesthetics of authenticity and mastering the simultaneous language of the global and the local. As a discursive strategy, it employs the languages, objects and techniques of the digital generations. Spontaneity is hazardous and superficial campaigns run the risk of prompting counter-campaigns.

### **3. Research design, method and limitations**

In this study, 45 campaigns (n=45) were analysed in order to identify the political messages that they convey as part of their communication strategy. At this point, it is important to stress that it is the brand, rather than the company, that leads the process of change, because the objective is to engage or transmit values to the citizen-consumer. Thus, campaigns contribute more to the social production of identity than to the corporate discourse of a multinational, which has a different rhetoric. On the contrary, they do include internal actions (employees, suppliers, etc.) when they are launched via media destined for global audiences. The discourse of the president of Microsoft, Iberdrola or Telefónica is not limited to the company's intranet blog, but is publicised in different media, thus transmitting the values of the company along with those of the brand.

Accordingly, the methodological triangulation of qualitative and quantitative techniques (Gaitán & Piñuel, 1998) was employed. As Soler and Enríquez (2012) note, this basically consists in contrasting information from different sources to obtain a suitable contextualisation of the phenomena under study.

To start with, the recent literature was reviewed to establish concepts and to gain further insights into corporate political activism, in line with the evolution of corporate social responsibility and marketing for a cause and the consolidation of the citizen-consumer model. Specifically, the intention was to determine why companies embrace political causes and why these are often associated with social or civic demands or concern for the environment.

Accordingly, a descriptive and analytical method was employed to examine the campaigns with a political slant in a broad sense of the word. As the monitoring of advertising activity can be a gargantuan task, a systematic review of all the advertising campaigns or inserts was avoided, focusing instead on those that had a greater impact on either the bottom lines of the companies involved or on the public sphere. The campaigns analysed here were launched between 2011, coinciding with the Arab Spring in Egypt, and 2019, when the discourse on climate change has now become a common feature in major campaigns. For the sake of readability, the list of the campaigns and the brands launching them can be found in the annex at the end of this work.

In the sample, priority was given to the Anglo-Saxon market (28 campaigns) because it is where this trend is more firmly established and developed, followed by Spanish campaigns (seven) and other global ones (10). The corpus was limited because data saturation was



reached, i.e. the qualitative data ceased to provide new information confirming the two research hypotheses. Due to the fact that it was an initial exploratory analysis, neither the values nor the units of analysis were conjectured, with the aim of avoiding predetermined criteria or statistical biases. As the research involved a review of the academic literature and an information search in the specialised press, the sample of 45 campaigns was regarded as quite sufficient, insofar as it was considerably large bearing in mind the initial theoretical framework. That said, it is not a representative sample of the advertising industry, for the intention here was to perform a preliminary analysis to evaluate the political dimension of the brands under study.

The campaigns were then classified in four general categories (politics and regulatory issues, society, economy and environment), looking for specific rather than general ones. The aim of this limitation was to gain a global understanding of the phenomenon, rather than systematic data collection. With these research tools, it was then possible to identify the main topics appearing in the discourse of activist brands, to integrate and analyse them and to validate the working hypotheses. Thus, the aim was to determine whether or not the corporate political shift has gathered momentum in the past years in a context of globalised political polarisation.

Owing to the fact that each brand had a unique advertising model, it was not an easy task to draw comparisons between different companies, countries and topics, even though they possessed common features. Thus, the methodology elaborated by Charles C. Ragin (2000) was employed to combine databases with qualitative interpretations. In this study, the strategies implemented by the brands were not the result of the aggregation of predefined variables, but of the combination of objective data, environmental conditions and the particular aspects of each case. This fuzzy set analysis explores inferences and correlations but avoids mono-causal explications. The success of an advertising campaign with a political slant cannot be solely justified by the investment made, the charisma of the main character or its impact, but is the aggregation of these variables, among others. Multiple indicators are positive predictors (willingness to buy, alignment with different values, connection with audiences and market niches, etc.), but do not restrict the capacity of an advertising action.

A fuzzy set analysis was conducted here to contrast theory with data, with an eye to identifying similarities and differences in the campaigns, instead of reducing the database to Boolean logic or statistical correlation, not readily available to the general public in the form of income statements. Thus, each brand may regard its model as successful in terms of its own political strategy, rather than according to a standard pattern of corporate political activity. This logic involves the search for common patterns and conditions that achieve a specific objective (for instance, a brand committed to environmental protection) and not only the creation of a closed theoretical model. So, the chances of success of a brand are based on identifying the sufficient conditions for that success. Some of these “fuzzy” variables can be the economic situation, the political orientation of consumers, tradition or belonging to an influential alliance. In qualitative research, this methodology can be found in several comparative studies (Hussain & Howard, 2013; Downey & Stanyer, 2010).

The study design has two main limitations. The first has to do with the difficulty in pinpointing the cause or origin of a political campaign. Companies do not tend to state the reasons for their decisions, but convey, circulate or insert their images, slogans and videos with a view to influencing consumers. The second limitation is economic: advertising campaigns can be measured in terms of a series of planned objectives, but an increase or drop in sales cannot be associated with a single cause. Nike’s Kaepernick campaign has been positively assessed in terms of marketing. Brand acceptance and willingness to purchase its products increased by 34 points, reaching 76 per cent, with significant growth among the millennials. The campaign generated US\$43 million on social networking sites and over US\$163.5 million via its combined media exposure on radio, TV, the Internet and social media

(Novy-Williams, 2018; Lavito, 2018). However, the company's shares fell by 3 per cent following the launching of the campaign (Daniels, 2018).

#### **4. Results**

In this study, 45 campaigns were classified in four categories (see Annex) and analysed. The first of these categories, i.e. politics and regulatory affairs, focused on those issues affecting the design and implementation of public policies and over which legislators have real power. It does not consist in good practices implemented at a corporate level, but in modifying the regulatory environment. This category includes controversial political issues that affect the public sphere, but which have nothing to do with the economy. Examples include express support for a political party, the fight against fraud, honesty and transparency in lobbying, global employment rights, homosexual marriage, the migration issue and support for Israel or Palestine.

For its part, the economy and business category involve protecting the global supply chain and the free market, competition, the distribution of wealth, wages, business ethics, the salaries and indemnities of top management and bonuses and stock options, among other aspects.

Moving on to the broad society category, encompassing the demands of social movements, this includes feminist positions, the defence of equality, the fight against sexual harassment (#MeToo), the LGBT issue and other sub-policies such as employment rights in the platform economy (salaries and dignified employment), the Tobin Tax, the fight against corruption and so on and so forth.

Lastly, the environmental category encompasses climate campaigns, pollution, recycling, single-use products, the Paris Agreements, sustainable urban mobility, bicycle use, intelligent cities, etc.

These four categories are not closed, for some campaigns can serve two or more objectives, for example, those relating to the employment rights of women and to structural salary review. In this study, it was decided to include them in one sole category according to their subjective importance.

In the sample, a distinction was drawn between final and instrumental values. The former is generic and unrelated to business. Brands broach political or social issues in the quest for the global public good, thus corresponding to a general approach to burning issues that avoids partisan connotations. They appropriate platitudes that are increasingly more accepted in society, above all among the younger generations. In the building of personal identity, in its consumer dimension, they do their utmost to avoid party or political structures in favour of values like feminism, tolerance and sexual orientation. In the context of political economy, instrumental values can affect economic activity per se and, therefore, be less transparent with respect to their ultimate purpose. Investment in these campaigns would be attuned to corporate interests and in line with the traditional lobbying activities. The second group of campaigns may seek to gain a direct competitive edge: regulation, competition, access to decision-makers and impact on public opinion. The use of values as a marketing technique for creating niches has attracted a fair bit of opprobrium. For instance, Rynair's criticism of Brexit has nothing to do with the EU ideal, but with restrictions on the freedom of movement and mobility rights, the cornerstone of the airline business.

##### **4.1. Campaigns involving politics and regulatory issues**

Political polarisation is a recurrent issue evinced in the brand actions linked to the migration issue, Trump's election as US president or the commitment to peaceful coexistence in Spain. This polarisation enables companies to associate their consumer products with final values of interest to the common good, and to distance themselves from instrumental uses relating to the effective purchase of a product or service. It is also interesting to highlight here the

media's recourse to this branding technique. In light of society's mounting distrust of the public institutions, *The Washington Post* has promoted its brand as a guarantor of the democratic system and freedom of expression. Dove has acted similarly against fake news and alternative facts, in a clear allusion to the words of President Trump. The call to participate in elections appears in countries governed by different systems (the United States, Spain and Iran), for that participation is a safe value of a political nature, but without any significant connotations. They are not campaigns in favour of a particular ideology, but whose aim is to encourage the public to exercise their right to vote.

There are new issues such as that of employment rights pursuant to the disconnection of employees and privacy and personal data protection. Both issues are of a political nature insofar as they need to be legislated in collaboration with companies and workers. They have been included here because they contribute a third variable to the citizen/consumer dichotomy, which is the status of employee or user of technological networks. Telefónica and BBVA have associated their campaigns with the universal notion of digital citizenship that includes privacy and personal data protection.

As to consumption, in addition to the well-known Kaepernick case, other companies have launched campaigns grounded in current political affairs. The ice cream company Ben & Jerry's has created "Pecan Resist" as a permanent protest against the policies of the Trump administration. The outdoor clothing and gear brand Patagonia urged Americans to vote in the presidential elections with the slogan "Vote Our Planet," directly insinuating that they should not cast their ballot for Trump. In successive Christmas campaigns, Campofrío has promoted values such as understanding and peaceful coexistence in Spain under the title of "Children of Understanding." The clothing that the candidate Pablo Iglesias (Unidas Podemos) wore in the TV debate during the 2019 general election campaign in Spain also deserves a mention. He chose the brand 198, whose slogan is "the clothing brand of the people," a habitual signifier in the discourse of Podemos. This clothing company uses slogans ("They shall not pass"), logos (International Brigades) and names ("Bella Ciao jersey," "intifada jacket") with strong political connotations. The firm also stands out for its use of the colours of the flag of the Second Spanish Republic in 35 of its products. Another commercial use is the LGBT sandwich launched by the chain M&S, whose acronym –which also stands for lettuce, guacamole, bacon and tomato– reproduces the colours of the rainbow flag. Both the cosmetics chain Sephora and Starbucks have publicised the closure of their establishments for a day in order to give their employees training courses. Following racist incidents, filmed and disseminated on social networking sites, the top management made a decision affecting their bottom line and demonstrating their commitment. In the United States, Netflix has entered the debate on reforming the abortion law in Georgia, a state where the Internet entertainment service produces content to the tune of €2,300 million.

**Illustration 2:** Campaign “See you tomorrow” (Starbucks).



Source: <https://twitter.com/starbucks/status/1001434476222664704?lang=es>.

**Illustration 3:** Campaign “Pecan Resist!” (Ben & Jerry's).



Source: <https://www.instagram.com/benandjerrys/p/Bpj2vQ4g2LD/>.

From an international perspective, the actions of Vodafone and Google relating to the Egyptian demonstrations in 2011 are relevant. Both companies decided to continue to offer their telecommunications services in the country, contrary to the regime's rulings. Their respective slogans were orientated towards the decision-making capacity of individuals and the value of networks for the success of a social movement. What is interesting here is the capacity that digital service brands possess to influence political perception. AirBnB, Expedia and TripAdvisor, among others, have been heavily criticised for offering accommodation

located in Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), as with some social networking sites for allowing users to register as citizens of unrecognised or partially recognised states (e.g. the Catalan Republic and the Republic of Macedonia).

Lastly, the instrumental purpose appears on several occasions. Ryanair's campaign is against the United Kingdom leaving the European Union, arguing that the decision undermines its European status, although its objective is not a global public good, but to defend its own economic interests.

#### ***4.2. Campaigns involving the economy and the business world***

The presence in this category of a global investment corporation is quite remarkable. The annual letters of Larry Fink, the president of BlackRock, dovetail with the typology because they are addressed to a global audience and pursue a common public good, totally unrelated to the corporation's market operations. Fink recognises the need for collaboration between the public and private sectors in order to promote social and political transformations, with special emphasis on inequality and the future of employment. To this end, rather than exclusively pursuing financial profitability, it is necessary to benefit all of the stakeholders.

In the same vein, mention should go to the permanent campaign launched by Patagonia. The company –whose most well-known political slogan has already been noted above– has been closely linked to social movements, embracing principles such as the reduction of consumption, recycling, fair trade and campaigns for saving the environment at home in the United States and abroad in the Arctic. This economic approach to production and corporate operations appears under different guises. For instance, P&G leverages diversity in the campaign “Secret Deodorant” that alludes to the discourse of equality. While the global cosmetics firm Lush claims that it has eliminated animal testing from its products.

The economic base of feminist social movements is also worth noting. Remarkable developments include the public statements issued by Ana Patricia Botín, the president of Santander Bank, in defence of feminist values. On several occasions, and not only at shareholders' meetings but also at events open to the general public, the president has explained how the bank should involve itself in causes such as equality, the promotion of women to top management positions and the implementation of policies that benefit parity. It is one of the most significant initiatives detected in this study because it links the brand to clear-cut progressive and by no means apolitical values.

In brief, in the campaigns involving the economy and the business world some brands have opted, whether or not in the public interest, for a new governance model that increases the participation of society, rather than being aimed solely at shareholders. The solution lies in establishing long-term measurements, for which reason new legal instruments would be appropriate.

#### ***4.3. Social campaigns***

As many different issues fall under the social heading, companies can design activist brand campaigns at diverse levels. They focus mostly on generic final values that promote a society along progressive lines. This is an interesting point because it has been difficult to find examples of activist brands associated with a more conservative thinking (e.g. taking a stance against homosexual marriage). Brand activism does not operate in a vacuum but apes the demands of a generation with certain political and social values. In a future study, it would be interesting to investigate the relationship between political positions and demography, to wit, to determine whether or not campaigns of this sort target demographic segments stratified by age, gender, income, etc. Nonetheless, the results point to a defence of equal opportunities in both the gender dimension and that of migration.

It is important to note the boom in feminism as an attitude inherent to brands, as regards both final and instrumental values. As to the latter, consumer brands have used some or other

slogan (“No Is No,” for example) on their products. The instrumental use of a cause does not invalidate it but does indeed bear out the arguments deployed above. It is possible that activist brands borrow ideas or trends from social movements not for changing society, but with the aim of boosting their sales. This criticism of “commodity feminism” is inherent to advertising practices. In this connection, Nike has come under much criticism for its unfair treatment of the athlete and Olympic champion Allyson Felix who, after becoming pregnant, has signed an advertising contract for less money. The LGBT community is also a frequent target of brand activism, examples including Adidas and Equinox whose campaigns advocate for sexual tolerance and diversity.

**Illustration 4:** Carmen Calvo, the acting vice-president of the Spanish government, wearing a T-shirt with the slogan, “Yes, I am a feminist” (Campaign Mango).



Source: <https://smoda.elpais.com/moda/actualidad/carmen-calvo-traje-zara-camiseta-mango-victoria-psoe/>.

The social issue is not without its problems. Two examples of failed campaigns were those run by Pepsi and Starbucks. The former, starring Kendall Jenner, was withdrawn a few days after being launched as a result of the complaints of citizen-consumers. The global counter-campaign accused the beverage brand of combining the aesthetics of the fight against racism with trivial arguments. For its part, Starbucks’ #RaceTogether campaign was censured because the brand had associated itself with corporate values differing from those that it was promoting. On social networking sites, the same hashtag was used to highlight the problem of gentrification relating to the arrival of the café chain, with those affected suing the brand. Yet again, Nike has very recently been the centre of controversy for producing trainers

featuring the Betsy Ross flag, the first American flag and contentious because of its association with the ultraconservative values of slavery. Kaepernick himself has criticised its use.

All things considered; social issues require extreme caution because they can involve values that are clearly not in line with the behaviour of the company in question. It should be observed that in the sample this concern is reflected in the fact that companies prefer final values (equality, the fight against racism, etc.) to those that may affect their profits. For this reason, it is important to stress that the chairmen and chief executives of listed companies do indeed raise their voices in defence of specific causes. For example, the chairmen of Salesforce, Microsoft and AT&T have used their position to criticise public policies and to defend higher taxes, a fairer redistribution of wealth and immigration.

#### 4.4. Environmental campaigns

In this category, the results obtained are not as relevant as might be expected in light of the working hypotheses. The environment and the fight against global warming or climate change are important issues unrelated to instrumental corporate values. Initially, it was fertile ground for positioning activist brands committed to causes for the common good. As before, Patagonia stands out for its bold stance against President Trump's environmental policies. Its slogan, "The President Stole Your Land," is a call to action to halt a series of decisions on the reclassification of protected areas. In the main, the campaigns analysed offer a rather insubstantial vision. They identify climate change with other issues pertaining to political causes inextricably linked to regulation and public policies. When they broach environmental issues, activist brands focus on the political sphere without creating a different category. The table in the annex includes two campaigns launched by Caixabank and Iberdrola, because they revolve around the use of green energy, the ecological transition and the values of the Agenda 2030. As to communication, mention should go to the campaign run by the newspaper *The Guardian*, which believes that there should be more information relating to the environment and that the accent should be placed on the current vision of climate change. This issue is underscored here because it is a clear reflection of the interest of the newspaper's readership, although the activist brand campaign has a different objective.

### 5. Conclusions

Brand activism contributes to the design and implementation of new communication management strategies in society. In this preliminary study, 45 campaigns reaching a global audience were identified and classified according to four characteristics (politics and regulatory issues, society, economy and environment). It should be stressed that the aim of this qualitative study is not statistical representativeness, for it solely intends to be an initial structural approach that confirms the trend. The phenomenon, in its political dimension, is a technique now well-established in the US market, which will ultimately spread in a unique way to the rest, irrespective of whether they are local, national or European. Therefore, the interest lies not in the extrapolation of data, but in the social meaning of the relationship between the corporate world and current political affairs.

In relation to H1, we have shown that current political affairs appear transversally in advertising management. As they are advertising campaigns, this allows for a swift response to a burning issue. The boom in different types of social movements has affected the way in which corporate values are transmitted, whose intention is to associate companies with the common good, immaterial values and other non-commercial aspects. It should be noted that the millennials –using the most popular designation– are predisposed towards political commitment through cultural or commercial manifestations.

As to H2, what is surprising is the lesser importance of issues relating to something as fashionable nowadays as climate change. It does not appear to be used as a differentiating factor, which is counterintuitive. The #FridaysforFuture are conspicuous by their absence. In

contrast, the defence of universal values is accepted more easily. Feminism and equality are omnipresent in the campaigns, while the issue of conventional political participation is less relevant. In this respect, the large number of T-shirts with feminist messages produced by most of the brands is also noteworthy: Mango's "Yes, I Am a Feminist," Zara's "Be Your Own Muse," Stradivarius' "No Is No," and Monki's "Salute Sisterhood." The values that emerge are progressive, although examples of controversial attitudes are few and far between.

Our conclusions point to citizen-consumers who demand from brands a sort of participation and shared responsibility in political and social issues and that corporate social responsibility should be redirected towards a comprehensive strategy of reputation and trust. This qualitative change has consequences for the general approach and design and implementation of persuasive advertising or marketing positioning actions. In a context of uncertainty, the commitment to activist brands, in their political dimension, has apparently paved the way for transversal campaigns, global audiences and symbolic production for social movements and activism. Thus, activist brands aspire to participate in the aesthetics of authenticity in the capitalism of consumption and values. This has opened up a line of research that we believe will be important in the years to come.

## References

- Aced, C. (2013). *Relaciones públicas 2.0: Cómo gestionar la comunicación corporativa en el entorno digital*. Barcelona: UOC.
- Achrol, R. & Kotler, P. (1999) Marketing in the Network Economy. *Journal of Marketing*, 63, 146-163. <https://www.doi.org/10.2307/1252108>
- Altman, B. W. (1998). Corporate Community Relations in the 1990s: A Study in Transformation. *Business and Society*, 37(2), 221-228. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/000765039803700205>
- Beck, U. (2000). *What Is Globalization?* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Benner, R. (2018). Brand Activism: Working Toward Progressive Representations of Social Movements in Advertising. Doctoral Thesis. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2PEcJYz>
- Bennett, L. (2006). Branded Political Communication: Lifestyle Politics, Logo Campaigns, and the Rise of Global Citizenship. In M. Micheletti, A. Follesdal & D. Stolle (Eds.), *Politics, Products, and Markets. Exploring Political Consumerism Past and Present* (pp. 101-126). New Brunswick: Transaction Books.
- Capriotti, P. (2013). *Planificación estratégica de la Imagen Corporativa*. Málaga: Instituto de Investigación en Relaciones Públicas (IIRP).
- Capriotti, P. & Moreno, A. (2007). Corporate citizenship and public relations: The importance and interactivity of social responsibility issues on corporate websites. *Public Relations Review*, 33, 84-91. <https://www.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2006.11.012>
- Carroll, A. B. & Buchholtz, A. K. (2008). *Business & Society. Ethics and Stakeholder Management*. Cengage Learning.
- Carroll, W. K. & Hackett, R. A. (2006): Democratic media activism through the lens of social movement theory. *Media, Culture & Society*, 28(1), 83-104. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0163443706059289>
- Chadwick, S. & Zipp, S. (2018, September 14). Nike, Colin Kaepernick and the pitfalls of "woke" corporate branding. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2GGwoom>
- Chatterji, A. & Toffel, M. W. (2019). Assessing the Impact of CEO Activism. *Harvard Business School Technology & Operations Mgt. Unit Working Paper* 16-100. <http://www.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2742209>
- Coen, D. & Katsaitis, A. (2015). *Institutional and Constitutional aspects of Special Interest Representation*. Brussels: European Union. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2ZK9dAr>
- Dauveger, P. (2017). Is the Power of Brand-Focused Activism Rising? The Case of Tropical Deforestation. *The Journal of Environment & Development*, 25(2), 135-155. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/1070496517701249>



- Daniels, C. (2018, September 7). Worth the sacrifice: Why Nike was willing to risk backlash to embrace Colin Kaepernick. *Prweek*. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2IUG7IS>
- Davies, W. (2016). *La industria de la felicidad*. Barcelona: Malpaso.
- Den Hond, F., Rehbein, K. A., De Bakker, F. G. A. & Kooijmans-van Lankveld, H. (2014). Playing on Two Chessboards: Reputation Effects between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Corporate Political Activity (CPA). *Journal of Management Studies*, 51(5), 791-813. <http://www.doi.org/10.1111/joms.12063>
- Downey, J. & Stanyer, J. (2010). Comparative media analysis: Why some fuzzy thinking might help. Applying fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis to the personalization of mediated political communication. *European Journal of Communication*, 25(4), 331-347. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0267323110384256>
- Escalas, J. E. (2004). Narrative Processing: Building Consumer Connections to Brands. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 4(1), 168-179. [https://www.doi.org/10.1207/s15327663jcp1401&2\\_19](https://www.doi.org/10.1207/s15327663jcp1401&2_19)
- Feldman, D. (2019). *Boycotts Past and Present. Palgrave Critical Studies of Antisemitism and Racism*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- Friedman, M. (1999). *Consumer Boycotts: Effecting Change Through the Marketplace and the Media*. London: Routledge.
- Fuchs, C. (2008). *Internet and society: social theory in the information age*. London: Routledge.
- Gaitán, J. A. & Piñuel, J. L. (1998). *Técnicas de investigación en Comunicación Social*. Madrid: Síntesis.
- Halberstam, D. (1997). *Playing for Keeps. Michael Jordan and the World He Made*. New York: Random House.
- Hussain, H. H. & Howard, P. N. (2013). What Best Explains Successful Protest Cascades? ICTs and the Fuzzy Causes of the Arab Spring. *International Studies Review*, 15(1), 48-66. <https://www.doi.org/10.1111/misr.12020>
- Illouz, E. (2007). *Identidades congeladas*. Buenos Aires y Madrid: Katz Editores.
- Kuehn, K. M. (2017). Brand local: Consumer evaluations as commodity activism on Yelp.com. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 18(2), 205-224. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/1469540515586866>
- Lange, D., Lee, P. & Dai, Y. (2011). Organizational reputation: A review. *Journal of Management*, 37(1), 153-184. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0149206310390963>
- Lavito, A. (2018, September 6). Nike's Colin Kaepernick ads created \$163.5 million in buzz since it began and it's not all bad. *CNBC*. Retrieved from <https://cnb.cx/2XS5eQz>
- Lekakis, E. (2013). *Coffee activism and the politics of fair trade and ethical consumption in the global north: political consumerism and cultural citizenship. Consumption and public life*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Longo, F. (2010). Ejes vertebradores de la gobernanza en los sistemas públicos. Un marco de análisis en clave latinoamericana. *Revista del CLAD Reforma y Democracia*, 46, 73-102.
- Manfredi, J. L. (2018). *Diplomacia corporativa: la nueva inteligencia directiva*. Barcelona: UOC.
- Matilla, K., Miranda, T., Compte-Pujol, M. & Oliveira, A. (2019). La formación de postgrado de los directores de comunicación españoles. *Revista Internacional de Investigación en Comunicación*, 19(19), 30-55. <https://www.doi.org/10.7263/adresic-019-02>
- Matos, G., Vinales, G. & Sheinin, D. A. (2017). The Power of Politics in Branding. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 25(2), 125-140. <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/10696679.2016.1270768>
- Melucci, A. (1985). The Symbolic Challenge of Contemporary Movements. *Social Research*, 52(4), 789-816. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970398>
- Micheletti, M., Follesdal, A. & Stolle, D. (2006). *Politics, Products, and Markets: Exploring Political Consumerism Past and Present*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publisher.
- Mogensen, K. (2017). From Public Relations to Corporate Public Diplomacy. *Public Relations Review*, 43(3), 605-614. <https://www.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.03.011>

- Mukherjee, R. & Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times*. New York: NYU Press.
- Nielsen, S. W. (2017). On Political Brands: A Systematic Review of the Literature. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 16(2), 118-146. <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2014.959694>
- Novy-Williams, E. (2018, September 4). Kaepernick Campaign Created \$43 Million in Buzz for Nike. *Bloomberg*. Retrieved from <https://bloom.bg/2vrxBc8>
- Palazzo, G. & Basu, K. (2007). The Ethical Backlash of Corporate Branding. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 73(4), 333-346. <https://www.doi.org/10.1007/s10551-006-9210-6>
- Popp, B., Horbel, C. & Germeln, C. C. (2017). Nature and Consequences of Social Media-Based Anti-brand Activism Against Sponsors and Investors of Sport Teams. Conference: 2016 AMS 19<sup>th</sup> World Marketing Congress, Paris, France.
- Quart, A. (2017, June 6). Faking “wokeness:” how advertising targets millennial liberals for profit. *The Guardian*. <http://bit.ly/2VwtieC>
- Ragin, C. C. (2000). *Fuzzy-Set Social Science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sarkar, C. & Kotler, P. (2018). *Brand Activism. From Purpose to Action*. USA: Idea Bite Press.
- Scherer, A. G. & Palazzo, G. (2011). The New Political Role of Business in a Globalized World: A Review of a New Perspective on CSR and its Implications for the Firm, Governance, and Democracy. *Journal of Management Studies*, 48(4), 899-931. <https://www.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2010.00950.x>
- Sender, K. (2012). *Business, not politics: The making of the gay market*. Columbia: University Press.
- Soler Pujal, P. & Enríquez Jiménez, A. M. (2012). “Reflexión sobre el rigor científico en la investigación cualitativa”. *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*, 18, 879-888. [http://www.doi.org/10.5209/rev\\_ESMP.2012.v18.40966](http://www.doi.org/10.5209/rev_ESMP.2012.v18.40966)
- Sennet, R. (2006). *La cultura del nuevo capitalismo*. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Thürer, M., Tomasevic, M., Stevenson, M., Fredendall, L. D. & Protzman, C. W. (2018). On the meaning and use of excellence in the operations literature: a systematic review. *Total Quality Management & Business Excellence*, 1-28. <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/14783363.2018.1434770>
- Villafañe, J. (2017). Claves empíricas de la satisfacción y del compromiso del talento en las organizaciones. *El profesional de la información*, 6(6), 1159-1170. <https://www.doi.org/10.3145/epi.2017.nov.15>
- Waddock, S. (2004). Parallel Universes: Companies, academics, and the progress of corporate citizenship. *Business and Society Review*, 109(1), 5-24. <https://www.doi.org/10.1111/j.0045-3609.2004.00002.x>
- Xifra, J. (2010). *Manual de relaciones públicas e institucionales*. Madrid: Tecnos.
- Zafra, R. (2017). *El entusiasmo. Precariedad y trabajo creativo en la era digital*. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Zeisler, A. (2016). *We were feminists once: From Riot Grrrl to CoverGirl, the buying and selling of a political movement*. New York: Public Affairs.