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When Brands Take a Stand - Navigating Emotional Reactions to Brand Activism

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Ein Interview mit Maximilian Groth

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Die Geschichte eines Missverständnisses

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The Impact of Cookie Banner Tonality and Regulatory Fit

Cookieless Marketing –
Ein Interview mit Jakob Schellhorn, Markus Kerken & Benjamin Tück

Knowing is Half the Battle –
The Influence of Marketers' Privacy Literacy on SMEs' Privacy Orientation

Spektrum

When Brands Take a Stand –
Navigating Emotional Reactions to Brand Activism

E-Commerce and Luxury –
From the Perspective of Female German Customers

Digitale Plattformen für KMUs –
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When Brands Take a Stand

Navigating Emotional Reactions to Brand Activism

Brands increasingly take a stand on controversial sociopolitical topics – and receive applause as well as severe backlash. Based on four clusters of moral emotions, this paper provides a framework for managers to better understand consumers' emotional responses to brand activism and design future campaigns more effectively.

Prof. Dr. Stefanie Wannow, Martin Haupt, M.A., M.Sc.

«Just like the NFL, whose ratings have gone WAY DOWN, Nike is getting absolutely killed with anger and boycotts. […] As far as the NFL is concerned, I just find it hard to watch, and always will, until they stand for the FLAG!»

Former US President Donald Trump
as cited by (Green, 2018)

Led by big purpose-driven brands like Ben & Jerry's and Patagonia, a growing number of brands have recently been taking a stand on divisive, sociopolitical issues (Moorman, 2020), often creating public controversies, as the quotes about Nike exemplify. Marketing a product or brand solely on its basic performance characteristics is no longer sufficient today as the ethical assessment of products and companies increasingly determines consumer behavior (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). This development is linked to global challenges such as political unrest, racism, or climate change and requires CEOs and marketers to rethink their societal role and marketing approaches. Consequently, taking a stand and contributing to society through brand activism has been on the rise lately. However, several brands, including Nike, Gillette, Pepsi, or the German beverage manufacturer Fritz Kola, have had to learn that speaking up on controversial issues comes with significant risks and can cause severe backlash. This "explosive" characteristic of brand activism is, in fact, fundamental to its definition, differentiating it from related but less controversial approaches such as corporate social responsibility and cause-related marketing (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Accordingly, Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020, p. 2) define brand activism as "the act of publicly taking a stand on divisive social or political issues by a brand or an individual associated with a brand".

Even though scholars and practitioners acknowledge brand activism's emotional and polarizing nature (Appels et al., 2020; Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Hsu, 2020; Moorman, 2020), the role of specific emotional responses to activist campaigns has been widely neglected. This is surprising – not only because of the apparent occurrence of emotions in the given context but also because different emotions relate to various specific attitudinal and behavioral outcomes which brand activism seeks to evoke (e.g., prosocial behavior, attitude change). Accordingly, when consumers disagree with the brand's stand, brand activism can arouse different negative emotions, resulting in different consumer behaviors (e.g., negative word-of-mouth (WOM) vs. "silent" disengagement). It is essential to understand that simply considering positive versus negative affects is insufficient: specific emotions create specific outcomes triggered by specific factors (Tracy et al., 2007).

«What can I do? […] I'll wear Nike. I'll wear Nike to say thank you. Thank you for leading the resistance! We need more corporate America to stand up also.»

Actress Jennifer Lewis
as cited by (Levenson, 2018)

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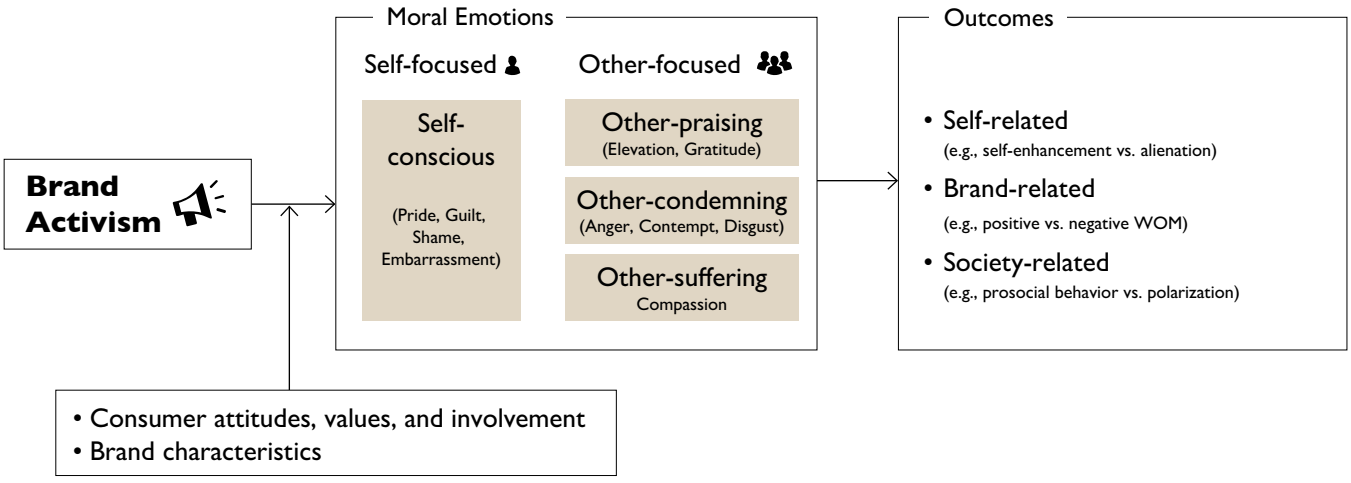
Let's consider Gillette's controversial "We believe" campaign on toxic masculinity. Depending on the individual attitude towards gender issues, consumers will experience different positive or negative emotions. For instance, while one group of consumers might feel compassion for the victims portrayed in the ad (e.g., bullied boys, molested women), others might feel deeply moved and grateful towards the brand for having addressed the topic – possibly caused by their own similar experiences. Likewise, some consumers might feel offended, angry, or even disgusted in case of topic disagreement, while others might feel "only" mildly annoyed. Consequently, consumers will exhibit different action tendencies, as some emotions foster overt behavior (e.g., pro- versus antisocial actions), whereas others lead to avoidance and withdrawal. Besides individual predispositions, company and campaign characteristics also influence the emotional responses. In the case of the Gillette campaign, many consumers perceived the campaign as too offensive and accusing and, therefore, anger and contempt were common reactions (Wannow et al.,

Figure 1: Moral Emotions As Mediators Between Brand Activism And Its Outcomes



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2021). Finally, a lack of credibility can counteract the brand activism goals (Appels et al., 2020), such as creating feelings of gratefulness towards the brand.

The present paper aims to develop a first framework of emotional reactions to brand activism. Theoretically, the framework draws on Haidt's (2003) typology of moral emotions, which we apply to the emerging field of brand activism. Moral emotions present an adequate theoretical foundation, as brand activism addresses morally relevant issues, and therefore, commonly evokes these types of emotions. Existing research provides a sound basis for deriving initial insights on, first, the factors that drive specific moral emotions and second, the typical outcomes linked to these emotions. Practically, this framework should help to predict likely reactions to specific activist campaigns more accurately. By giving an overview of antecedents and outcomes of moral emotions, the framework will help managers design their activities to maximize intended favorable reactions (e.g., prosocial behavior) while minimizing detrimental outcomes (e.g., consumer alienation). Furthermore, the framework offers a sound theoretical foundation for future empirical research. Further studies are needed to explore the role of these emotions in depth and to provide a more nuanced understanding of brand activism campaigns. Figure 1 gives an overview of the focal concepts and their relationships.

Management Summary

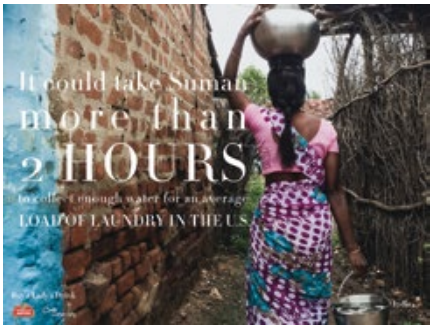
Brands increasingly launch campaigns that take a stand on controversial sociopolitical topics. Due to the divisive character of brand activism, stakeholder reactions can range from outrage to enthusiasm. Based on four clusters of moral emotions and current brand activism cases, this paper provides a conceptual framework for managers to understand consumers' emotional responses and design future campaigns more effectively. Relevant and concrete do's and don'ts are derived that help to trigger constructive emotions and reduce harmful reactions to brand activism.

Moral Acts Cause Moral Emotions

By positioning themselves on sociopolitical or environmental issues, activist brands become moral actors. When they take a stand on controversial topics, such as abortion rights or migration, brands overtly express their moral values and, thereby, appeal to or challenge consumer values. Accordingly, through their consumption choices, individuals can make moral statements, e.g., by boycotting (supporting) a brand that violates (promotes) their own moral standards and values (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Sibai et al., 2021). A common reaction to moral acts is the experience of so-called moral emotions, which represent "those emotions that are linked to the interests or welfare either of a society as a whole or at least of per-

LEGO® "Everyone is Awesome": the brand openly promotes equality, inclusion, and diversity.

Nike: ad campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick.



Stella Artois: Addressing the global water crisis, this ad refers to Westerners' disproportionate water consumption, potentially inducing self-critical feelings.

sons other than the judge or agent" (Haidt, 2003, p. 853). In his pioneering work, Haidt (2003) describes moral emotions as disinterested, pointing out that these emotions can be triggered even without a direct personal stake in the topic. As a second prototypical feature of moral emotions he identifies prosocial action tendencies, such as donating to a cause. Depending on the focus (self vs. other) and the valence of the moral emotions, four distinct clusters of emotions are derived: self-conscious, other-praising, other-condemning, and other-suffering emotions.

Main Propositions

1 Brand activism, by definition, causes stronger and more polarized emotions than other brand-related campaigns and is, therefore, a risky endeavor.

2 Using Haidt's framework of moral emotions, managers can design campaigns more effectively to trigger productive and prevent destructive emotions.

3 Depending on the specific campaign, the evoked emotions and their respective outcomes will be more or less focused on the consumers' selves, the brand, or the group represented in the campaign.

4 Moral emotions differ in their activation potential: Some moral emotions motivate people to act – in support of or against something or someone – while others lead to "silent" reactions, such as withdrawal.

5 Also, several emotions can co-occur in consumers, e.g., guilt and compassion, leading to mixed emotions as a possible reaction to brand activism.

Self-Conscious Emotions

Self-conscious emotions cover both positive (pride) and negative (guilt, shame, embarrassment) moral emotions that are directly linked to perceptions and evaluations of the self (Tracy et al., 2007).

On the positive side, *pride* is now a commonly used theme in marketing campaigns. For example, many companies celebrate "Pride Month" in June, which is dedicated to supporting the LGBTQ+ community. With claims like "Love what makes you real" (Chipotle Mexican Grill advertising), products like the LEGO® "Everyone is Awesome" set, or collaborations and donations, brands openly promote equality, inclusion, and diversity. These messages and actions can evoke pride in the recipient. As pride is typically connected to a sense of achievement, feelings of self-worth can be triggered (Onwezen et al., 2013). Thus, expressing appreciation and support of marginalized groups can contribute to their empowerment by strengthening their self-esteem. It is noteworthy that feelings of pride can also be caused by behaviors of associated others (Lazarus, 1991a) – you can feel proud of someone else, and these feelings might spill over to the self. Pride has been connected to prosocial behavior (e.g., sustainable purchase behavior), self-esteem, and brand loyalty (in case of identifying with a "pride-worthy" brand) (Bagozzi et al., 2020; Onwezen et al., 2013).

Marketing communication can also address negative self-conscious emotions as the following campaign text by Stella Artois illustrates: "It could take Suman more than 2 hours to collect enough water for an average load of laundry in the US" (Blubaugh, 2015). The ad shows a woman carrying buckets on her head and in her hand. Addressing the global water crisis, this ad refers to Westerners' disproportionate water consumption, potentially inducing self-critical feelings. *Guilt*, *shame*, and *embarrassment* represent the self-critical or negative subgroup of self-conscious moral emotions (Tracy et al., 2007).

Using *guilt* appeals in marketing communications has been a common tactic in charity, health, safety, sustainability, and other areas (Cotte et al., 2005). Guilt is broadly defined as a negative emotion resulting from an actual or expected self-caused violation of one's moral values or some social norms (Burnett & Lunsford, 1994). According to Burnett and Lunsford (1994), moral guilt arises when learned moral values are affected.

Guilt based on social responsibility is evoked when someone behaves in a way that is considered wrong by the society and does not meet the expected social obligations. It is crucial to understand that guilt is caused by perceptions of one's wrong or immoral behavior, whereas *shame* is linked to the appraisal that something is wrong with one's character or self (Haidt, 2003). Lastly, *embarrassment* is a reaction to others' undesirable impressions of one's self caused by uncontrollable events such as loss of bodily control or cognitive shortcomings (Leary, 2007).

Among these emotions, guilt is the most constructive emotion, as it often motivates prosocial behavior, such as helping others (Boudewyns et al., 2013; Haidt, 2003). These prosocial action tendencies are caused by feelings of regret, worry, and responsibility and the desire to reduce the experienced guilt. Still, using guilt appeals does not come without risks. When consumers perceive guilt-inducing communication as non-credible and manipulative, the persuasive attempt can backfire. Instead of feeling guilty, recipients develop negative attitudes towards the message and its sender (Cotte et al., 2005). Moreover, exaggerated guilt appeals can be perceived as unfair and therefore cause anger (Boudewyns et al., 2013; Haidt, 2003).

Other-Praising Emotions

"The new @Nike ad campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick is beautiful, powerful, and inspiring. I love it," rapper Common tweeted in support of the famous Nike campaign against police violence and racism (Common, 2018). This reaction expresses the moral emotion of *elevation*. Haidt (2003, p. 864) describes elevation as "a feeling in the chest of warmth and expansion" elicited by "manifestations of humanity's higher or better nature". Examples of these manifestations are altruistic acts like charity, self-sacrifice, or other acts of kindness and moral beauty. Elevation can be described as a "broadening" emotion as it does not only create affection towards the source of elevation but also motivates people to become better persons and to contribute their share to the well-being of society (Haidt, 2003; Romani et al., 2016; Van de Vyver & Abrams, 2015).

While elevation results from stories of kind acts unrelated to the self, *gratitude* is caused by personal benefits received from another person (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Important elicitors of gratitude are purposeful behavior, genuine motives, and high costs for the benefactor or giver (Bridger & Wood, 2017). In their content analysis, Wannow et al. (2021) identified gratitude as the second most frequently expressed positive emotion in YouTube comments on gender-related activist ads. Gratitude can be understood as a response and as a motivator of moral behavior at the same time. It promotes reciprocity, i.e., the desire to return the received favors and personal well-being, as well as social engagement (Haidt, 2003). Therefore, similar to elevation, gratitude evokes positive reactions directed at the benefactor (e.g., brand loyalty) and society (e.g., prosocial behavior).

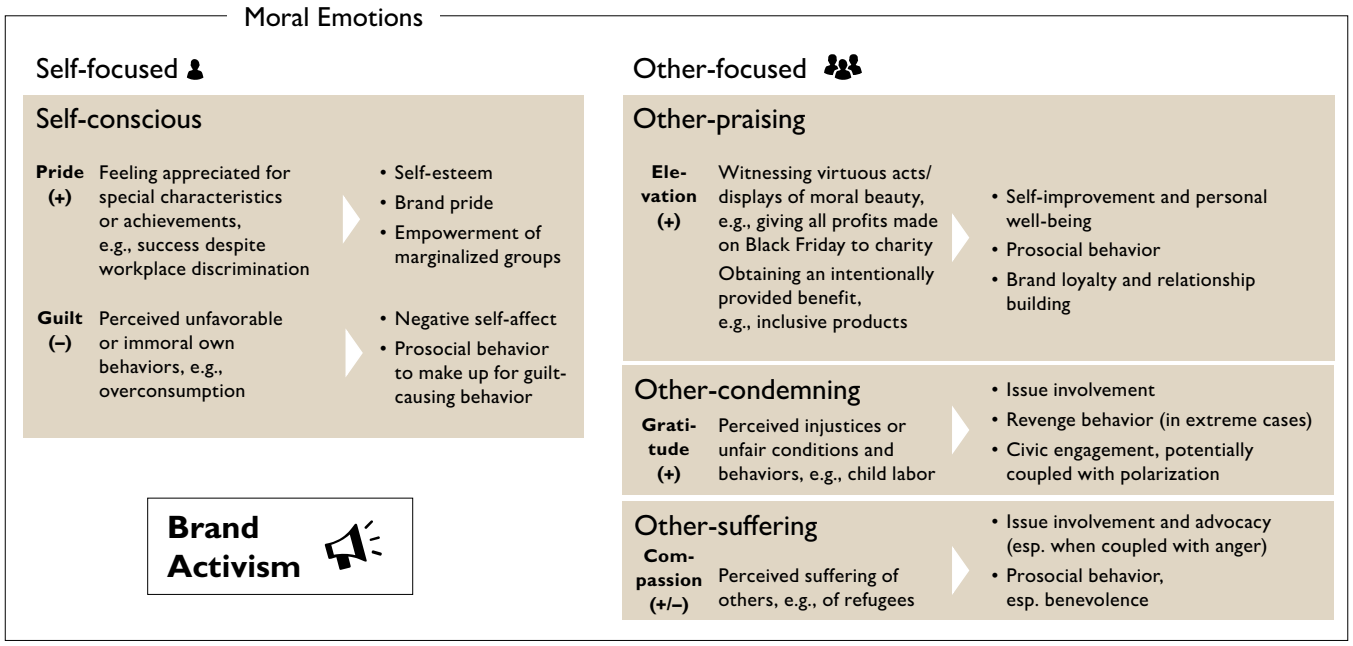
Lessons Learned

1. Companies should first select a brand activism topic that their target group broadly supports, and, second, carefully consider which emotions they want to provoke to meet the predefined goals.
2. Contempt, disgust, shame, and embarrassment should be avoided as they lead to destructive reactions such as complete disengagement.
3. Guilt appeals can help the prosocial cause but will backfire if exaggerated. Similarly, anger can make consumers want to change the addressed injustice, but can also be directed at the company depending on the consumer's stand.
4. Compassion entails a prosocial action tendency and can motivate people to support an activist cause and people in need.
5. Brands seeking to enhance their brand value should strive to elicit gratitude and elevation in their target group as these emotions induce reciprocity, i.e., returning favors to the brand.

Other-Condemning Emotions

Contempt, anger, and disgust ("CAD"), referred to as the other-condemning triad, are common emotional reactions when consumers do not share the stand of an activist brand. For example, in a study analyzing user comments on gender-related ads, anger and contempt were the emotions most often expressed (Wannow et al., 2021). According to Haidt (2003, p. 856), *anger* is "a response to unjustified insults, and anger can be triggered on behalf of one's friend, as well as oneself". Typical causes of anger are perceived unfairness, injustice and immorality, immediate social threats, and personal autonomy violation (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011; Rozin et al. 1999; Scherer, 1997). *Contempt* is sometimes described as the "cooler" sibling of the "hot" emotion of anger (Izard, 1977). It is caused by an appraisal of incompetence (e.g., of the activist brand) and reflects feelings of superiority (e.g., looking down at political opponents) (Haidt, 2003). Similarly, moral *disgust* is also a response to appraisals of character: the perceived lack of morality of someone

Fig. 2: Typical Antecedents and Likely Outcomes of Moral Emotions



Source: Own illustration.

causes disgust (instead of contempt) (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011).

Anger in particular has been characterized as the most prototypical moral emotion as it can motivate consumers to act prosocially (i.e., to redress injustices). In contrast, contempt is less active and more strongly associated with an attitude change (e.g., less respect for the "offender"), and disgust with avoidance (i.e., moving away from the offending entity). Therefore, from a company's standpoint, anger is probably the least negative other-condemning emotion, especially when the anger is not directed toward the company or brand but the injustices addressed. However, even when the anger is directed at the company, consumers will at least not hold back their irritation and possibly open up for a dialogue. Yet, outraged consumers might also seek revenge (Romani et al., 2015). Contempt and disgust will more likely lead to complete disdain and silent withdrawal from the activist brand.

Other-Suffering Emotions

Campaigns such as the mentioned Stella Artois ad can also trigger feelings of *compassion*. We feel compassionate when "being moved by another's suffering" (Lazarus, 1991b, p. 8226). Some crucial antecedents are psychological closeness to the sufferer(s), e.g., perceived similarity or geographical closeness, or the degree to which the victims are perceived as blameless for their situation (Antonetti & Maklan, 2017). Compassion represents the most prototypical moral emotion as the prosocial action tendency is one of its constituting characteristics (Goetz et al., 2010). Empirical research has linked feelings of compassion to various prosocial outcomes, including increased perceived self-other similarity to weaker others (Oveis et al., 2010) and giving for charities (Small & Verrochi, 2009). However, compassion can also induce anger, which in turn leads to revenge and consumer advocacy against the offending party (Antonetti & Maklan, 2017).

Figure 2 summarizes the discussed moral emotions and typical antecedents and outcomes in the context of brand activism.

Moral Emotions and Successful Brand Activism

First propositions can be derived building on the different antecedents or appraisals leading to specific moral emotions and ultimately to particular outcomes. Based on theory and related studies on moral emotions, we derived some major recommendations for action and possible risks

[1]Please note that the overview is limited to the most prototypical moral emotions which are most likely to contribute to different goals of brand activism.

Table 1: How (Not) To Address Moral Emotions Through Brand Activism

Moral Emotions	Do's	Don'ts	Challenges and Risks
Pride 👤 +	• Acknowledge achievements and struggles • Focus on inclusion and consumer empowerment • Take bold actions	• Degrading others • Superficial statements or marketing gimmicks	• Lack of credibility • Alienation of certain consumer segments • Increased distance between self and others
Guilt 👤 –	• Use moderate guilt appeals • Offer simple and clear ways to take action	• Overly strong guilt appeals • Shaming people as 'bad persons'	• Negative brand effects • Avoidance and silent withdrawal • Harming people's self-worth
Elevation 👥 +	• Tell inspirational stories • Take bold actions including self-sacrifice • Be a pioneer and leader • Strive for consistency in all company activities	• Linking brand activism (mainly) to self-interest	• Moral excellence difficult to achieve • Moral standards not always universal
Gratitude 👥 +	• Illustrate brand's contributions and its sincere and costly efforts	• Woke washing, i.e. addressing consumers' values just to make a profit	• Motives might be questioned in case of low risks for the company • Non-beneficiaries might feel excluded
Anger 👥 –	• Illustrate problem in an objective way • Focus on credibility to mitigate negative reactions • Enable an open and fair dialogue with opponents	• Offensive communication • Violation of strong social norms • Disrespect of religious feelings, cultural values and symbols	• Causing contempt or disgust instead of anger, and therefore avoidance and withdrawal • Revenge behavior from opponents and stronger polarization
Compassion 👥 +/–	• Emphasize connection and similarity between consumer and sufferer • Offer simple ways to help • Connect cause to brand values	• Portraying the sufferer as responsible for his/her situation • Portraying abstract groups instead of specific people	• Absence of positive brand outcomes • Creation of negative brand associations (e.g., suffering)

Note: 👥 other-oriented, 👤 self-oriented, + positive, – negative, +/– mixed. Source: Own illustration.

involved (see Table 1). In combination with the framework presented above, a structured approach to address moral emotions with brand activism campaigns is provided. Marketers can use the framework as a guideline to develop compelling brand activism campaigns.[1]

For example, if the major activist goal is to motivate prosocial action for a particular cause, compassion can be an appropriate emotional theme of the respective campaign. To cultivate compassion, it is crucial to pick a cause authentically linked to the brand's purpose. Moreover, the campaign should introduce people in need that consumers can connect to and show simple ways to help. Still, marketers need to be aware that prioritizing social goals means putting the brand more in the background. More recommendations are summarized in Table 1.

Brand Activism – an "Emotional Minefield"?

Real brand activism will always cause controversy and, thus, strong emotional responses. Therefore, companies first need to select a topic worth fighting for that fits their core values and that has a significant number of supporters within their target group. Before engaging in brand activism, assessing stakeholders' opinions on a potential issue is the most fundamental task to avoid disproportionally adverse emotional reactions. Second, they should design the campaign in a way that minimizes harmful and destructive negative emotions. By deliberately choosing issues and an appropriate message design and execution, marketers can promote productive moral emotions (e.g., gratitude) and minimize harmful ones (e.g., disgust). Third, a consistent strategy and implementation are key: waving the rainbow flag in some countries but ignoring "Pride Month" in others will not resonate well with consumers.

Considering the risks (table 1), it seems that triggering moral emotions in brand activism campaigns can create strong adverse effects. Furthermore, many reactions are not mainly focused on the brand, but rather on the cause itself or the self. Only other-praising moral emotions seem to directly impact brand-related outcomes, such as brand attitude and loyalty. This might also be an explanation for the identified asymmetric effects of brand activism, i.e. detrimental brand-related consequences in case of disagreement and no significant or minor effects in case of agreement with the brand's stand (Hydock et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). More empirical research on the exact role of moral emotions is therefore needed and highly encouraged.

In conclusion, if companies take brand activism and its controversial character seriously, negative emotions cannot and probably should not be avoided entirely. Societal change will always lead to tensions between those who seek change and progress and those who want to keep the status quo (Proch et al., 2019). Therefore, brand activism can indeed be understood as an emotional minefield – however, the stakes can be minimized by addressing the right issue in the right way.

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