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# Adbusting: How advertising altered by activists affects brands

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## Abstract

A subversive phenomenon is challenging advertisers and brand managers: adbusting, a form of activism that alters existing brand communication (e.g., a billboard ad) to promote social/political issues (e.g., pro-environmental behavior) or denounces the targeted brand (e.g., its labor standards). We conceptualize the effect of adbusting on consumers and provide empirical evidence that adbusting has ambiguous effects on consumers' brand perception. On the one hand, the incongruity of the message with consumers' existing brand schemata raises ad awareness. On the other hand, the effect of an adburst on subsequent cognitive and behavioral outcomes depends on the content of the adburst: if the brand itself is targeted (vs. a social or political issue), brand perception, word-of-mouth, and purchase intention are negatively affected. This negative effect is mitigated if the adburst targets a social/political issue. In a mixed-method design, we use a panel of real-world adbusts (Pilot Study) and four experimental studies (Studies 1–4) to shed light on these effects.

## KEYWORDS

ad awareness, adbusting, brand perception, political activism, subversive advertising, subvertising

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Companies invest in marketing activities such as advertising to build brand equity (Rego et al., 2009). To maximize the impact of these investments, brand managers aim to influence brand perception strategically (Eisend & Küster, 2011). A subversive form of activism is emerging, however, in which brands lose control over consumers' brand perception: *adbusting*. Also referred to as “brandalism” or “billboard hacking” adbusting involves a third party (e.g., an activist group) altering existing brand communications to promote social/political issues or to attack the brand (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004), thereby displaying resistance against the brand's actions or societal developments

(Schmitt et al., 2022). Adbusts typically take place in the offline space and involve replacing or altering original brand communication to communicate a divergent claim (see examples in Figure 1). Subsequently, adbusts often receive widespread attention online and in the press, thereby increasing the adbusts' impact on brands. While extant research has investigated the effects of brands promoting their products and image through advocating social and political issues (e.g., Cristobal et al., 2022; Eyada, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Zhou et al., 2023), less attention has been directed at cases where the brand is *unwillingly* the vehicle of activist communication.

Adbusting is prevalent in many markets and can take the form of isolated incidents or widespread campaigns. For example, in 2021, a

Erik Maier and Alexander Mafael contributed equally to this study.

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Original ads



Brand adbusters



Social/political adbusters



FIGURE 1 Examples of adbusting campaigns.

UK-wide campaign targeted advertising billboards and bus stop posters of major brands (e.g., Shell, BP, Land Rover, and EasyJet) to criticize their involvement in carbon-intensive industries (The Drum/Ormesher, 2021). Not surprisingly, firms are concerned about adbusting because they fear it negatively affects consumers' beliefs about the brand and threatens brand safety (i.e., the extent to which the brand is in control of its public appearance, Lee et al., 2021), especially when the adbust criticizes the brand and motivates consumers to boycott (Klein et al., 2004). Industry experts have cautioned firms as adbusting “reveals a different side of a brand—often the side the company wants to keep quiet” and, given potential online amplification of adbusters, have asked, “what impact does this have on brands and should they be concerned?” (MarketingWeek/Hammett, 2018).

Judging the impact of an adbust is difficult for brands because it differs from other forms of third-party-induced advertising in which an entirely new creative is produced, mostly positive or humorous in content, and disseminated online taking part in cultural conversations (e.g., spoofs, parodies, and memes; see Gelb, 1997; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). In contrast, adbusters alter existing ads, taking a pronounced critical stance, often towards the brand (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Thus, the advertising brands need to understand the influence of adbusters, as a new form of socio-political activism at the citizen-brand interface (Korschun et al., 2020). At the same time, providing a deeper understanding of how consumers respond to

adbusts and how characteristics of the adbust influence their perceptions of the brand is necessary to help companies strategically manage the phenomenon (Chisam et al., 2022).

Introducing further complexity, examples from real-world adbusters illustrate that the effects of adbusting on brands might be more ambiguous than they first appear. Specifically, adbusters that target a brand focus on criticizing the brand for their actions, while social/political adbusters use the brand's platform to communicate a message but do not criticize the brand itself. Figure 1 illustrates this with examples from real-world adbusters: the brand-targeted adbusters (bottom left) criticize the brand for food quality (McDonald's), environmental destruction (Burger King), or vehicle emissions (Volkswagen), and can, therefore, harm brand perceptions. In contrast, social/political adbusters (bottom right) use the brand platform to communicate a social or political cause, such as the dangers of smoking (Marlboro), the dangers of right-wing parties (Nutella), or the depiction of women in advertising (H&M), without necessarily criticizing the brand itself. These socio-political adbusters might, therefore, increase awareness for a given ad and even have a positive impact on brand perceptions. For instance, in 2018, an activist collective “hijacked” a German Coca-Cola advertisement to promote resistance against a right-wing party. Both the media and consumers disseminated the campaign extensively, creating widespread awareness for both the original ad and the adbust, and substantial positive word-of-mouth (The New York Times/Karasz,

2018). This even created follow-up adbusters (e.g., the Nutella adburst in Figure 1).

To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to investigate the effects of adbusting on consumers and brands. In doing so, we extend the conceptual work by Rumbo (2002) and make three main contributions to the literature. First, we define adbusting and contrast it against established types of third-party-induced advertising and brands using advocacy in their advertising. Second, we extend the literature on the influence of third parties on brand perception (e.g., Korschun et al., 2020) by showing how adbusting affects consumers' ad awareness and brand perception and, in turn, brand intentions. Third, our mixed method approach combines data on real-world adbusters with experiments, allowing for ecologically valid estimates of the impact of adbusters on brands as well as a more fine-grained understanding of the underlying consumer reactions that inform these aggregate-level effects. Therefore, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of how the activities of political activists and groups influence marketing strategy (Chisam et al., 2022; Korschun et al., 2020) and brand communication. Our empirical application highlights that adbusting has consistent and substantial effects on brands that are moderated by the adburst's content focus (brand vs. social/political). We show that adbusters criticizing the brand harm brand perception and, in turn, reduce consumers' positive word of mouth and purchase intention, while adbusters that focus on social/political issues exert a positive effect.

## 2 | CONCEPTUALIZING ADBUSTING

Advertising is considered one of the key instruments to build brand image over time (Chaudhuri, 2002). Such brand advertising extends to political (e.g., for a candidate or party; Spenkuch & Toniatti, 2018) and social cause advertising (e.g., for healthy eating; Skard & Thorbjørnsen, 2014). In recent years, many brands have advocated social/political issues as a form of brand activism (Moorman, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Sibai et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2023). A common feature of these advertising types is that brands and institutions initiate and control them, and thereby influence consumers' brand perceptions strategically.

In contrast, other forms of advertising have emerged that modify existing advertising and media content for different purposes (see Table 1). *Memes*, *parodies*, and *spoofs* use recognizable elements from existing popular culture, such as publicly available media, to create new and often humorous and positive messages (Gelb, 1997; Sabri & Michel, 2014). Parodies, memes, and spoofs are internet phenomena and often have a known originator (e.g., consumers, brands, or institutions) that aims to generate awareness for themselves or their message (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). Successful memes often inspire additional memes, resulting in different digital versions of the initial content. Memes are rarely critical of a brand or a social/political issue, but often a positive and playful treatment of existing media content. Consequently, parodies, memes, and spoofs tend to produce positive

**TABLE 1** Adbusting in comparison to different types of advertising.

Type	Brand activism	Memes, parodies, and spoofs	Adbusting
Approach	Brands use their advertising to take a public stand on social or political issues	Use and reimagine key elements of a public medium (e.g., a photo, video screenshot or an ad)	Activists alter existing brand communication, e.g., through billboard hacking
Intent	Communicate the brand's stand on certain issues while promoting the brand and its offerings	Mock and imitate specific (cultural) phenomena to draw attention to the content	Critique or comment on specific brand activities or draw attention to social/political issues
Advertising example	Nike takes a stand on race equality following the "Black Lives Matter" protests Gillette uses the #MeToo movement to promote rethinking the role of men in society	Animation firm parodies "Epic Split" Volvo ad with Jean Claude van Damme Heating company memes Bernie Sanders' 2021 inauguration look to promote its services	Greenpeace alters Shell billboards to criticize the company for exploiting the environment. Activists alter H&M poster to criticize depiction of women
Originator	Brand	Consumers and brands	Nongovernmental organizations, activist groups, artists
Identity of the originator	Known	Known	Unknown
Content focus	Social/Political Issues	Diverse	Criticism of a brand or social/political issues
Content	New	New content based on original content	Altered original content
Valence	Positive	Typically positive	Typically negative
Media	Any	Online	Typically physical ads
Legality	No legal issues	Typically protected under fair use laws	Illegal
Exemplary research	Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020)	Gelb (1997)	This research

brand-level effects (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Therefore, brands increasingly use memes, parodies, and spoofs: On the one hand, brands produce “meme-able” content for their brand communication (Forbes/Greenwald, 2019). For example, Volvo’s “Epic Split” ad featuring Jean-Claude van Damme sparked more than 100 memes on YouTube. On the other hand, brands are producing their own memes, such as a glove company using an image of the freezing politician Bernie Sanders. Thus, marketers are less concerned about memes’ brand effect and more about whether they should also use memes themselves.

In contrast to these positive forms of advertising, activists increasingly target firm advertising to promote their messages. We refer to this as *adbusting*, where activists alter existing brand communication (e.g., billboards: see Figure 1, top part) to convey an alternative message that diverges from the original brand advertising claims (Billboard Liberation Front, 2008; see Figure 1, bottom part). This form of activism rejects advertising as a common market practice by taking communicative resistance against the ad as a representation of mainstream consumerist ideology (Schmitt et al., 2022). Adbusting, thus, poses a challenge to traditional advertising. Brands, therefore, are the object and not the originator of activist content (Sibai et al., 2021). While adbusts are similar to memes and spoofs in that they alter existing brand communication, they differ in their intent. Spoof advertising often has a positive connotation (Berthon & Pitt, 2012) and usually pivots on existing advertising claims (Thota & Villareal, 2020). In contrast, adbusting is usually critical and negative, as the underlying intent is to voice criticism, related to either the brand itself or a social/political issue.

Adbusts thereby “challenge the role advertising plays in promoting ...consumerism” (The Conversation/Dekeyser, 2015) to reclaim public (ad) spaces (Rumbo, 2002). Adbusts typically occur in physical spaces (e.g., billboards) and are subsequently shared online (e.g., through photos). The originators behind an adbust leverage the fact that well-known brands have a distinct and recognizable communication style; for example, H&M’s red logo, Coca-Cola’s cursive font, and the McDonald’s “M” are easily identifiable parts of brand identity. Using existing color schemes, fonts, and even the communication style employed by a brand makes it difficult for consumers to distinguish adbusts from actual advertising. This element differentiates adbusts from memes, which use the theme of an ad or image and alter the latter in an obvious manner.

In summary, adbusts are a form of activism that differs from brand advertising and third-party-originated advertising in the following five ways: They (1) alter existing brand communication without prior consent (vs. using recognizable elements to create something new), (2) typically occur in a physical (i.e., offline) setting (although they might be shared online), (3) directly target a brand or a related social or political issue (vs. simply convey humor), (4) do so in a negative and critical (vs. a positive and promoting) manner, and (5) are focused on the message rather than the originator, with the latter often remaining unknown. Thus, adbusting is a novel form of advertising, and its effect on targeted brands requires systematic empirical investigation (see Table 1 for an overview).

## 2.1 | How adbusting differs in content focus

Adbusting can take different forms, depending on the main intent motivating the adbust, the content of the adbust, and how it voices criticism. We distinguish two main forms of adbusting depending on the content focus of the adbust: those where the adbust criticizes the brand (Figure 1, bottom left) and those where the adbust sheds light on social or political issues without criticizing the brand (Figure 1, bottom right). When the focus is on criticizing the brand, the main intent behind the adbust is to voice criticism for the brand’s actions, products, or advertising strategies. The content typically modifies existing brand messaging to highlight and satirize the brand’s messaging, drawing attention to the (presumed) problematic behavior. The content of the adbust can refer to different themes but oftentimes focuses on societal issues where the brand is perceived to be a part of the issue. For example, an adbust voicing criticism for a fast fashion brand’s exploitation of natural resources criticizes the brand’s actions by targeting the (social) issue of resource exploitation.

Alternatively, the adbust might not target the brand itself but rather be directed toward a social or political issue (e.g., climate change, gun violence) to raise public awareness and change perceptions of the issue without criticizing the brand (Nomai, 2008). Here, the primary intent is to draw attention to broader societal or political concerns, rather than critiquing the brand itself, by utilizing the brand’s communication as a vehicle. As a result, the message advocates for societal awareness of these issues.

In summary, the adbust’s content focus captures the main target of the adbust, that is, whether it is directed at criticizing a brand or whether it aims to promote attention to a social/political issue.

## 3 | THE INFLUENCE OF ADBUSTING ON BRANDS AND CONSUMERS

Since adbusts use the communication means of existing brands to promote their message, several questions arise: How do adbusts affect ad awareness and brand perceptions of the focal brand? Do adbusts exert a positive or a negative effect on brand perceptions and does this translate to brand intentions, such as positive word-of-mouth or purchase intention? Does the content of the adbust moderate consumers’ response?

In investigating the impact of adbusts on ad awareness, brand perceptions, and subsequent brand intentions, we turn to the Hierarchy of Effects (HOE) model as our conceptual framework (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961). Rooted in a systematic progression of advertising effects on consumers (Smith et al., 2008), the HOE delineates a sequence encompassing cognition (e.g., attention and awareness), affect (e.g., brand perception), and intentions (e.g., word-of-mouth, purchase intentions). The HOE model offers distinct advantages in unraveling the nuanced dynamics of advertising impact that go beyond more granular theories of persuasion.

One central advantage lies in the HOE model’s systematic approach, enabling the identification and exploration of key

components of advertising processing sequentially and empirically (Barry, 2002). This sequentiality aligns with our research objective, facilitating a nuanced examination of adabust effects across various stages of consumer response. The HOE model's structured framework allows for the systematic study of relationships between cognition, affect, and intentions, providing a comprehensive understanding of how adabusting influences consumers' perceptions.

Moreover, the flexibility inherent in the HOE model permits the inclusion of additional moderators, offering a nuanced and adaptable analytical tool (Barry, 2002). This flexibility is particularly advantageous in the context of studying adabusting, where the content of the adabust may act as a potential moderator of consumer response. By incorporating additional moderators, the HOE model accommodates the complexity of real-world advertising scenarios, enhancing the robustness of our investigation.

In essence, the HOE model's systematic progression and flexibility distinguish it from more granular theories of persuasion, making it an invaluable framework for dissecting the multifaceted effects of adabusting on consumer responses to advertising.

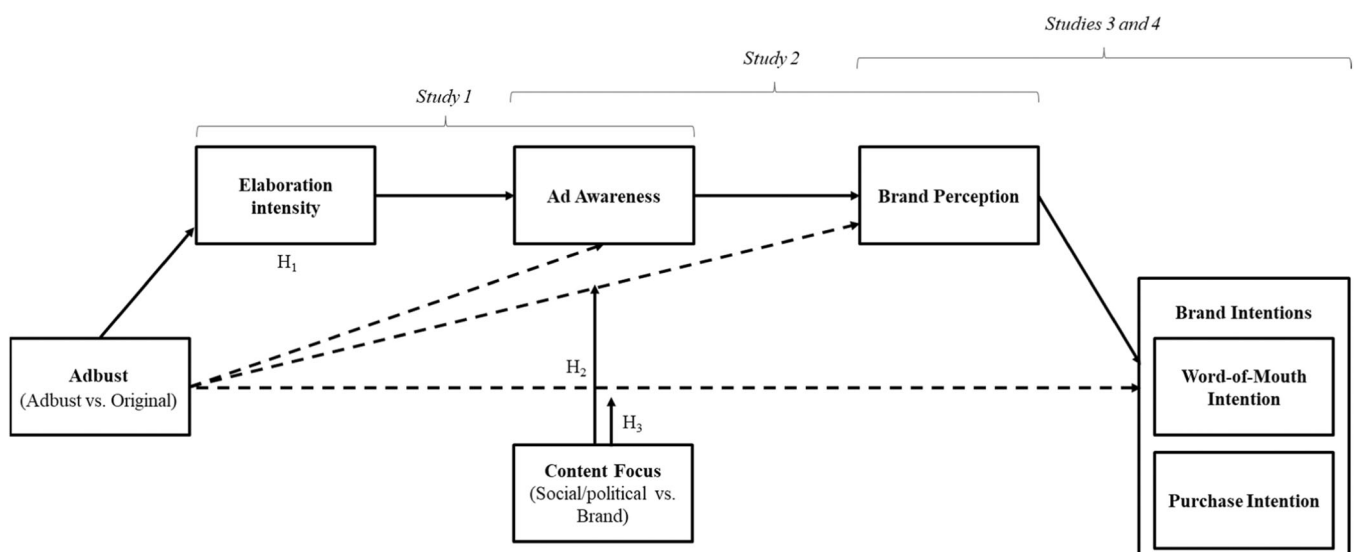
Figure 2 summarizes our conceptual framework. When an adabust occurs, it first needs to generate ad awareness to inform consumers' response to the adabust. Specifically, we argue that when an adabust occurs, it increases ad awareness through increased elaboration, since consumers need to reconcile the adabust with their expectations towards the focal brand's advertising. Second, the adabust influences consumer's brand perception through increased awareness. Whether the adabust has a stronger (vs. weaker) negative effect on brand perception depends on the content of the adabust (brand vs. social/political issue). Third, depending on consumers' brand perception, they will adapt whether they will share positive or negative word-of-mouth with other consumers and whether they intend to purchase the brand's products.

### 3.1 | The effect of adabusting on ad awareness

To conceptualize how adabusts influence consumers, we derive our formal expectations from schema theory and the literature on advertising processing. Adabusts constitute an unexpected (i.e., schema-incongruent) stimulus, "a skip on a record that the needle passes over with a minor interruption" (Gilman-Opalsky, 2013, p. 3). Thereby, the adabust increases awareness, defined as consumers' recall of branded advertising (Heath & Nairn, 2005), and influences subsequent downstream consequences associated with brand ads (e.g., recall, word-of-mouth).

Schema theory suggests that memory is organized in knowledge structures known as schemata that serve as a reference frame for individual judgment (Aronson et al., 2012). For example, empirical and conceptual research on branding frequently conceptualizes brand knowledge as a schema that advertising messages reinforce (Park et al., 1986).

Information acquired from external stimuli can either be congruent or incongruent with existing schemata. Schema incongruity occurs when incoming information is not compatible with existing knowledge and expectations (Fiske, 1982). Prior research suggests that incongruent ads motivate more extensive cognitive processing and stronger evaluative judgments than congruent advertisements (Goodstein, 1993) because schemata reflect consumers' expectations of brands' advertising communication (Loef, 2002). Building on this argument, we propose that when consumers observe adabusts, they activate additional elaborative resources to reconcile the incongruent stimulus with their brand schema. Specifically, the use of an existing brand's recognizable communication cues a familiar schema, while the alteration (i.e., the adabust) provides an unexpected event that requires reconciliation (Alden et al., 2000). The increased elaboration of the incongruent stimulus facilitates ad awareness (Smith et al., 2008). This initial awareness



**FIGURE 2** Conceptual framework and studies. Dotted lines mark main effects, hypothesized to be moderated by the adabust target.

orients consumers' cognitive resources toward processing the ad and reconciling the existing incongruence (Halkias & Kokkinaki, 2014). Schema incongruity, indicative of pronounced misalignment between incoming information and established schemas, triggers heightened cognitive disruption and demands increased processing efforts to resolve the incongruity (Mandler, 1982). An adburst constitutes an incongruity that takes effort to resolve (Jhang et al., 2012) and should be harder to resolve than seeing a (schema-congruent) regular advertisement. An adburst requires consumers to update their schema based on the information communicated in the adburst and, therefore, is directly related to an increased number of cognitive steps to achieve resolution (Alden et al., 2000). Due to these reasons, we expect that, compared to a regular brand advertisement, an adburst will increase ad awareness.

**H1.** Adbusting (vs. brand advertising) increases ad awareness through higher elaboration.

### 3.2 | The effect of adbusting on brand perception and the moderating role of content focus

Being exposed to an adburst will not only increase awareness of the ad but also lead consumers to adapt their perception of the brand depending on the information conveyed in the adburst. When an advertisement does not match an existing brand schema, consumers are likely to evaluate the claims made in the ad and reevaluate their perceptions of the brand (Yoon, 2013). We argue that this reevaluation depends on the content focus. Adbursts usually either criticize the brand or use the brand's advertising to draw attention to a social/political issue. For example, criticizing a fashion retailer for the labor conditions in its production facilities directly targets the brand (e.g., Figure 1: Volkswagen "Drive cleaner. Or just pretend to."), while commenting on the unrealistic look of models in fashion ads draws attention to a nonbrand-related social/political issue (e.g., Figure 1: H&M).

When the adburst criticizes the brand's activities, this negatively influences brand perception as the consumer's brand schema requires reconciliation with the negative information. However, if the adburst uses the brand's communication as a vehicle to promote a social/political issue independent of the brand, the adburst may have a less negative impact on brand perceptions. Specifically, when the brand's communication is simply used to promote awareness of a wider social/political issue (e.g., sexism in advertising) the unexpected message contained in the adburst is easier to reconcile with an existing brand schema, as the message does not attack the brand. Consequently, it should be easier for consumers to reconcile the brand's established image and advocacy for a social/political issue. In addition, resolving the incongruity is easier because no specific updating of the brand schema is necessary, as consumers' processing can inform their assessment that the focus of the adburst is on promoting a social/political issue (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

We argue that adbursts that focus on a social/political issue are less likely to harm brand perception, yet, one could argue that these adbursts also have the potential to harm the brand. More specifically, adbursts are per definition not under the control of the brand. This implies that activists who leverage the brand's communication to promote a social/political issue might focus on issues that do not align with the brand's established values, potentially causing confusion and discord among consumers who identify with the brand (Chauhan & Sagar, 2021). Similarly, consumers may perceive the association of the brand with a social/political issue as misaligned with their values, causing polarization in brand perceptions (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). For example, when Nike took a stand supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, many consumers felt alienated and distanced themselves from the brand (Hsu, 2020). However, we reason that the incongruity resulting from the adburst will trigger increased elaboration, which should help consumers detach the brand from the social/political issue, and thereby mitigate these potential negative consequences.

In summary, we propose that the extent to which the adburst exerts a negative influence on brand perception depends on its content focus: An adburst targeting a brand (vs. a social/political issue) is more difficult (easier) to resolve (Halkias & Kokkinaki, 2014), offers negative (no negative) information about the brand and, therefore, results in a more (less) negative response.

**H2.** The content focus of an adburst moderates the effect of an adburst on brand perception, such that the effect of an adburst on brand perception is less negative if the adburst content focuses on social/political issues than when it targets the brand.

### 3.3 | The effect of adbusting on brand intentions and the moderating role of content focus

Depending on consumers' perception of the focal brand they will adapt their behavioral intentions towards the brand. In the context of this research, we conceptualize consumers' brand intentions as engaging in more positive (vs. more negative) word-of-mouth about the brand and their intentions to purchase from the brand. Following our previous argument, we propose that the content focus of the adburst moderates its effect on brand intentions.

#### 3.3.1 | Word-of-mouth

Schema incongruity may stimulate conversations about the brand due to increased awareness of the brand's communication efforts (Dahlén & Lange, 2004). For example, Berger and Milkman (2012) study the likelihood that readers email news articles to others and find that surprising content is more likely to be shared. Content is perceived as surprising when it contains elements that are unexpected in the context of the message (Mafael et al., 2021), such

as when an adburst contains unexpected claims that are incongruent with the brand's typical communication. In turn, the valence of word-of-mouth depends on the emotions and opinions elicited by the adburst's content (Berger, 2011). When the adburst targets the brand's actions, this highlights negative aspects of the brand and, therefore, increases the likelihood that consumers would share that negative sentiment with others. In contrast, when the adburst content focuses on a social/political issue, it merely uses the brand's advertising as a platform to promote the issue. As a result, consumers are less likely to associate negative emotions with the brand and might even engage in positive word-of-mouth because they may perceive the brand as engaging with the issue (Kim et al., 2015).

### 3.3.2 | Purchase intention

The impact of adbursting on consumers is manifold and its effect on consumers' brand perceptions and behavioral intentions is likely to depend on the content focus of the adburst. Advertising messages influence consumers' purchase intentions in part through their effect on brand perceptions (Pechmann & Stewart, 1990). Critically, advertising is more likely to enhance purchase intentions when it promotes favorable brand perceptions, while it is more likely to decrease purchase intentions when it leads to negative perceptions of the brand or its activities (Spears & Singh, 2004). Thus, in cases where the adburst targets the brand and highlights negative aspects of the brand, the adburst negatively affects brand perceptions and, in turn, decreases purchase intentions. In contrast, when the adburst highlights a social/political issue using the brand's advertising as a vehicle, it may exert a less negative effect on brand perceptions and, in turn, purchase intention. In summary, we derive the following hypothesis:

**H3.** The content focus of an adburst moderates the effect of adbursting on (a) word-of-mouth and (b) purchase intention, such that the negative effect of adbursting is mitigated (vs. amplified) when the adburst content focuses on a social/political issue (vs. the brand).

## 4 | OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

A pilot and four experimental studies provide empirical evidence for the effects of adbursting. Table 2 provides an overview of all studies, the corresponding hypotheses, and the main findings. Specifically, in our Pilot Study, we explore the influence of real-world adbursting events on ad awareness, brand perceptions, word-of-mouth, and purchase intent for 29 adbursts to provide initial evidence for the relevance of this phenomenon. In Study 1 (experiment), we replicate the effect of adbursting on ad awareness by providing evidence that consumers exhibit increased elaborative processing when seeing an adburst. Study 2 (experiment) details the increased elaboration process, highlighting that adbursts lead to a higher perception of schema incongruity and lower ease of resolution. In Study 3 (experiment), we investigate the influence of

adbursting on brand perceptions and word-of-mouth intentions. Finally, in Study 4 (experiment), we study the effect of adbursting on word-of-mouth and purchase intentions.

## 5 | PILOT STUDY: EVIDENCE FROM REAL-WORLD ADBURSTS

### 5.1 | Data and measures

We collected data on 46 adbursting events that occurred in France, Germany, and the UK between 2015 and 2019. For more details on the data collection, modeling, and results, see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix A.

For dependent variables, we relied on data from the market research firm YouGov. YouGov monitors about 1500 brands by surveying more than 4000 consumers daily; respondents are randomly drawn from a panel of up to 2 million adults (Luo et al., 2013). For each brand and country, we used indicators for ad awareness, brand impression (as a proxy for brand perception), positive word-of-mouth, and purchase intent as our dependent variables (Hewett et al., 2016). As the focal moderator, we assessed the content focus of the adburst as either a social/political issue or the brand itself. We excluded cases for brands or institutions where no brand metrics were available from YouGov, retaining 29 adbursts. For each of the adbursts, two coders independently classified the content focus of the adburst as either "social/political" or "brand" ( $\kappa = 0.85$ , cases reconciled after discussion).

As advertising effects are subject to the influence of a large number of unobservables (e.g., overall advertising volume) and demand effects (e.g., before Christmas), we conducted a difference-in-difference analysis where we analyzed the dependent variables relative to the focal brand's main competitor in the market where the adburst happened (Liaukonyte et al., 2015; identified in a separate pre-study [ $n = 16$ ]). All subsequent analyses were based on differenced data (absolute differences) for 60 days before and after the adburst (we determined the date of the adburst based on the first [social] media mention; see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix A, Table A.3 for non-differenced results). This resulted in a sample size of 29 (adbursts)  $\times$  60 (days)  $\times$  2 (pre vs. post adburst) = 3480 observations.

### 5.2 | Results

Model-free evidence supports our assertion that adbursts exert a brand effect (see Figure 3). Comparing the month before to the month after the adburst shows that ad awareness for the "busted" brands increases relative to their main competitor, but more strongly if the adburst targets a social/political issue (+21%), compared to when it targets the brand (+9%). Similarly, the issue-focused adburst resulted in a more favorable brand impression (+31%) compared to the brand-targeted adburst (+13%). Positive word-of-mouth increased for both adburst content types (+31% and +28%). Purchase intent, however, was negatively affected if an



**TABLE 2** Overview of empirical studies.

Study	Pilot	1	2	3	4
Focus	Adbusting effect in actual cases (external validity)	Effect of adbusting on ad awareness	Effect of adbusting on ad awareness	Effect of adbusting on brand perception and brand intentions	Effect of adbusting on brand perception and brand intentions
Type	Field study	Experiment	Experiment	Experiment	Experiment
Data and design	$n = 3820$ 29 (adbusts) $\times$ 60 (days) $\times$ 2 (pre vs. post) Differenced to main competitor	$n = 192$ 3 adbust (yes: social/political issue vs. yes: brand target vs. no: original ad, between) 4 brands and 11 filler ads	$n = 279$ 3 adbust (yes: social/political issue vs. yes: brand target vs. no: original ad, between) 1 brand and 4 filler ads	$n = 141$ 2 adbust (yes vs. no/original, within) $\times$ 2 adbust target (brand target vs. social/political, between) 1 brand	$n = 321$ 3 adbust (yes: social/political issue vs. yes: brand target vs. no: original, between) 2 brands (between)
Country	France, Germany, UK	United States	United States	Germany	United States
Dependent variables	Ad awareness Brand perception Word-of-mouth Purchase intention	Elaboration intensity Recall	Ease of resolution Recall Brand perception	Brand perception Word-of-mouth	Brand perception Word-of-mouth Purchase intention
Hypotheses	H1: $\checkmark$ H2: $\checkmark$ H3: $\checkmark$	H1: $\checkmark$	H1: $\checkmark$ H2: $\checkmark$	H2: $\checkmark$ H3: $\checkmark$	H2: $\checkmark$ H3: $\checkmark$ H3: $\checkmark$

adbust's content targeted a brand ( $-33\%$ ), but positively affected if the adbust focused on a social/political issue ( $+36\%$ ). The results of a series of random-effects models provide empirical support for our hypotheses. For more details on the modeling results, see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix A and Table A.2.

In summary, an investigation of real-world adbusts provides initial evidence for the effect of adbusts on brand awareness (H1), brand perceptions (H2), and, in turn, brand intentions (H3) moderated by the content focus of an adbust (social/political vs. brand-targeted). Importantly, the pilot field study provides an aggregate (vs. an individual) perspective, where the overall effect of an adbust on a brand might be more positive compared to the individual-level effect. Specifically, increased ad awareness and buzz around a brand are likely to create even more ad awareness among consumers—which in turn is going to increase ad awareness further and, in turn, may improve brand perception. The field study, thus, does not contradict our hypothesized effect. The subsequent four studies, however, employ an individual-level experimental approach to investigate the underlying consumer process of being confronted with adbusts.

## 6 | STUDY 1: THE EFFECT OF ADBUSTING ON AD AWARENESS

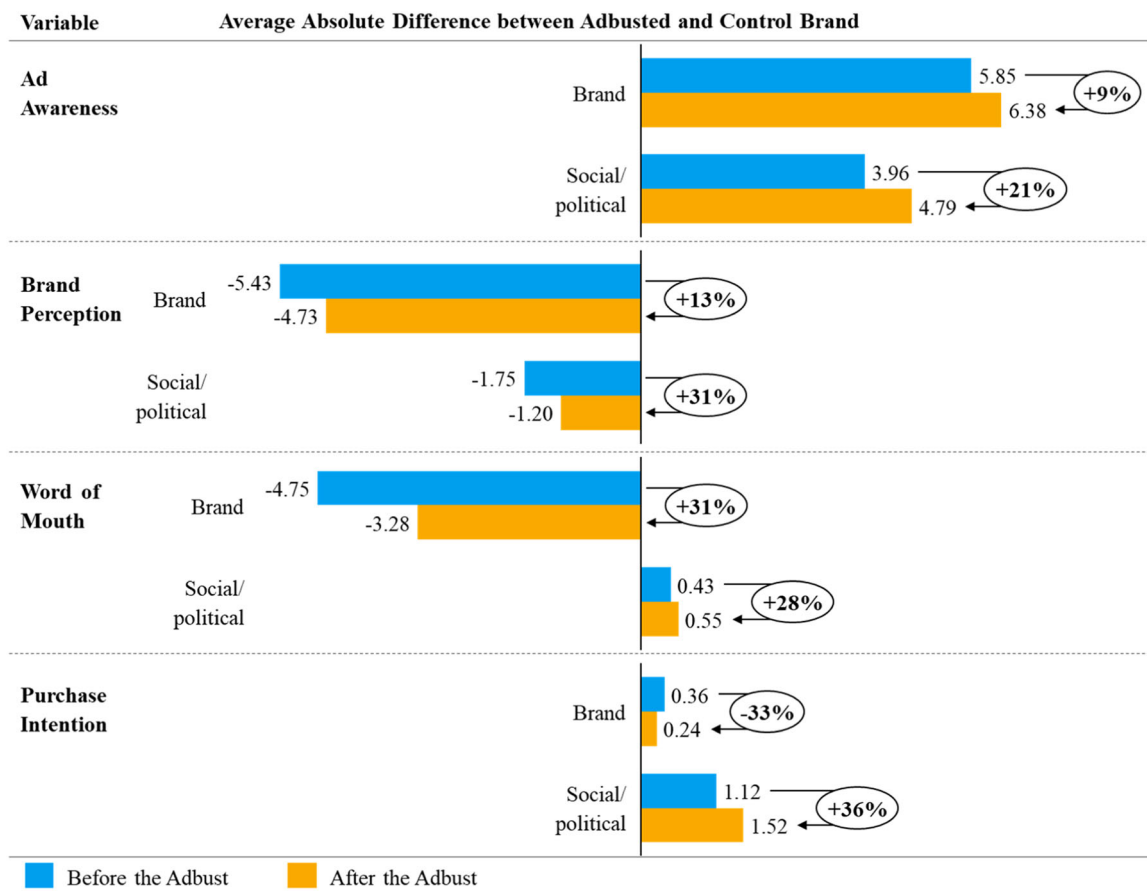
Study 1 establishes the awareness effect of adbusting in an advertising setting with different ads. Specifically, participants saw the target ad and the corresponding adbust as part of a series of

other advertisements because advertisements typically are embedded in a context of multiple ads which may influence consumer processing.

### 6.1 | Participants, method, and design

As focal stimuli, we developed adbusts based on several original ads from well-known consumer brands (e.g., Apple, McDonalds, Starbucks, and Under Armour; see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix B for details on the stimuli). For each brand, we created two ad versions: the original brand ad and the adbust. Two adbusts targeted the brand and two focused on a social/political issue.

We selected the four ad stimuli used in the main study from a set of eight brands (and adbusts) based on a pretest ( $N = 161$ ,  $M_{age} = 37.9$  years, 44.9% female): The manipulation worked as intended, as the brand adbusts had lower perceived favorableness of the claim for the focal brand (Under Armour:  $M_{adbust, brand} = 3.42$  vs.  $M_{original} = 5.27$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Starbucks:  $M_{adbust, brand} = 3.55$  vs.  $M_{original} = 5.77$ ,  $p < 0.001$  for details on the items, see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix B, Table B.1), while the social/political adbusts did not (McDonald's:  $M_{adbust, social/political} = 3.95$  vs.  $M_{original} = 4.53$ ,  $p = 0.18$ ; Apple:  $M_{adbust, social/political} = 4.95$  vs.  $M_{original} = 5.59$ ,  $p = 0.15$ ). Further, participants correctly recognized the social/political (vs. brand) issues in the two social/political adbusts (e.g., "exploitation of labor" for Apple  $M = 5.85$  vs. other social issues  $M = 2.38$ ; "animal welfare" for McDonald's  $M = 5.71$  vs. 2.37). Respondents correctly identified



**FIGURE 3** Descriptive results for the pilot study. Average absolute difference between target brand and its main competitor for 30 days before and after.

whether the advertisement or the adbust originated from the brand or from a different author ( $M_{\text{Apple, original}} = 5.00$ ,  $M_{\text{Apple, adbust}} = 2.44$ ,  $M_{\text{UnderArmour, original}} = 5.18$ ,  $M_{\text{UnderArmour, adbust}} = 2.46$ ,  $M_{\text{McDonalds, original}} = 5.08$ ,  $M_{\text{McDonalds, adbust}} = 3.03$ ,  $M_{\text{Starbucks, original}} = 5.57$ ,  $M_{\text{Starbucks, adbust}} = 3.42$ , where lower values signal that someone else was the author and higher values signal that the brand was the author, all  $p$ 's < 0.001). The four adbusts did not differ in terms of ease of processing ( $M_{\text{Apple}} = 3.96$ ,  $M_{\text{UnderArmour}} = 4.38$ ,  $M_{\text{McDonalds}} = 4.28$ ,  $M_{\text{Starbucks}} = 4.10$ , all  $p$ 's > 0.50) and were perceived as equally realistic ( $M_{\text{Apple}} = 4.21$ ,  $M_{\text{UnderArmour}} = 3.94$ ,  $M_{\text{McDonalds}} = 4.57$ ,  $M_{\text{Starbucks}} = 4.10$ , all  $p$ 's > 0.50). A separate prestudy ( $N = 55$ ,  $M_{\text{age}} = 36.28$ , 48% female) confirmed that participants were familiar with all brands ( $t$ -test for perception larger than scale mean:  $p < 0.001$  for each brand). Brand perception ( $M_{\text{Apple}} = 5.92$ ,  $M_{\text{McDonalds}} = 5.57$ ,  $M_{\text{Starbucks}} = 5.31$ ,  $M_{\text{UnderArmour}} = 5.31$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ) and purchase intention ( $M_{\text{Apple}} = 5.78$ ,  $M_{\text{McDonalds}} = 5.65$ ,  $M_{\text{Starbucks}} = 5.50$ ,  $M_{\text{UnderArmour}} = 5.14$ ,  $p = 0.10$ ) were comparable, although differences here would not have mattered as the manipulation happened within each brand (original vs. adbust). We used computational image analysis to ensure that the selected adbusts and originals did not differ in complexity ( $M_{\text{adbust}} = 0.37$  [0.06] vs.  $M_{\text{original}} = 0.37$  [0.05]), symmetry ( $M_{\text{adbust}} = 0.47$  [.28] vs.  $M_{\text{original}} = 0.47$  [.26]), and typicality ( $M_{\text{adbust}} = 0.43$  [0.08] vs.  $M_{\text{original}} = 0.43$  [0.07]) on a scale from 0 [not at all typical] to 1 [perfectly typical]; for details on all measures, see Mayer, 2021; Mayer & Landwehr, 2018). The

selected adbusts were shown as part of a series of filler ads, which were original ads for other well-known brands (e.g., Amazon Prime, Nike). To enhance ecological validity, we placed all ads in a real-world advertising environment (here: billboards).

One hundred and ninety-two participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 36.9$  years, 46% female) completed the main experiment on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). No participants were filtered. Participants saw a series of 15 advertisements in randomized order (11 filler ads and 4 target ads, resulting in  $192 \times 4 = 768$  observations; see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix B for sample size calculation). First, participants saw four filler ads and were then exposed to one original ad and one adbust from different brands, which we randomly selected. Next, they viewed another set of four filler ads before being exposed to one original ad and one adbust from different brands. Finally, they saw one filler ad. While all participants saw the same filler ads, we randomized whether the target ad was a normal brand ad or an adbust, and, among the adbusts, whether the content focused on the brand or a social/political issue. Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix B provides information on a randomization test. Thus, each participant was exposed to a total of two adbusts and two original ads of the focal brands in a randomized sequence (adbust first vs. original ad first) in a between-subject design. To assess the ad awareness effect (H1), we measured unaided recall (by asking

participants after having viewed all ads to recall the brands they saw using an open text field, 1 = correctly recalled, 0 = not recalled, e.g., as in Romaniuk & Wight, 2009). Unaided recall of brands is key for many consumption choices and, therefore, frequently studied in consumer research (e.g., Thoma & Wechsler, 2021). To provide evidence for our reasoning that adbusts increase ad awareness through increased elaboration, we measured participants' message elaboration (as the time before proceeding to the next ad, e.g., Albrecht & Carbon, 2014). Before debriefing participants, we asked for their demographics.

## 6.2 | Results

For the analysis, we compared the adbusts with the original version of the same brand. Descriptively, we find that an adbust increases message elaboration (+2.1 s or +17%, see Figure 4) and unaided recall, despite the already high unaided recall rates for the well-known brands (+13% from 30.7% to 34.6%).

We investigated the effects of adbusting with four regressions, controlling for participant-fixed effects. We find that an adbust (vs. a normal brand ad for the same brand) increases message elaboration (Model 1:  $\beta_{\text{Adbust}} = 2.39$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta_{\text{Intercept}} = 12.78$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta_{\text{DummyBrand2}} = -2.86$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta_{\text{DummyBrand3}} = -0.56$ ,  $p > 0.10$ ;  $\beta_{\text{DummyBrand4}} = 1.02$ ,  $p > 0.10$ ), and ad awareness, measured by unaided ad recall (Model 2:  $\beta_{\text{Adbust}} = 0.11$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta_{\text{Intercept}} = -1.20$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta_{\text{DummyBrand2}} = 0.59$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta_{\text{DummyBrand3}} = 0.82$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta_{\text{DummyBrand4}} = -0.32$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Message elaboration time, in turn, increases ad awareness (Model 3:  $\beta_{\text{Elaboration}} = 0.005$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) with the adbust main effect remaining robust ( $\beta_{\text{Adbust}} = 0.10$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta_{\text{Intercept}} = -1.26$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta_{\text{DummyBrand2}} = 0.61$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta_{\text{DummyBrand3}} = 0.82$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta_{\text{DummyBrand4}} = -0.32$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). In line with H1, a mediation analysis confirms that increased message elaboration leads to higher ad recall (Process

model 4: CI 95% = [0.002; 001] with 5000 bootstraps). An additional model showed that the content of an adbust does not influence its effect on ad awareness (Model 4:  $\beta_{\text{Adbust} \times \text{Social/political}} = -0.249$ ,  $p > 0.10$ ;  $\beta_{\text{Social/political}} = 0.004$ ,  $p > 0.10$ ; other variables consistent). Further, order effects did not influence elaboration ( $\beta_{\text{Order}} = -0.135$ ,  $p > 0.10$ ) or ad awareness ( $\beta_{\text{Order}} = -0.009$ ,  $p > 0.10$ ).

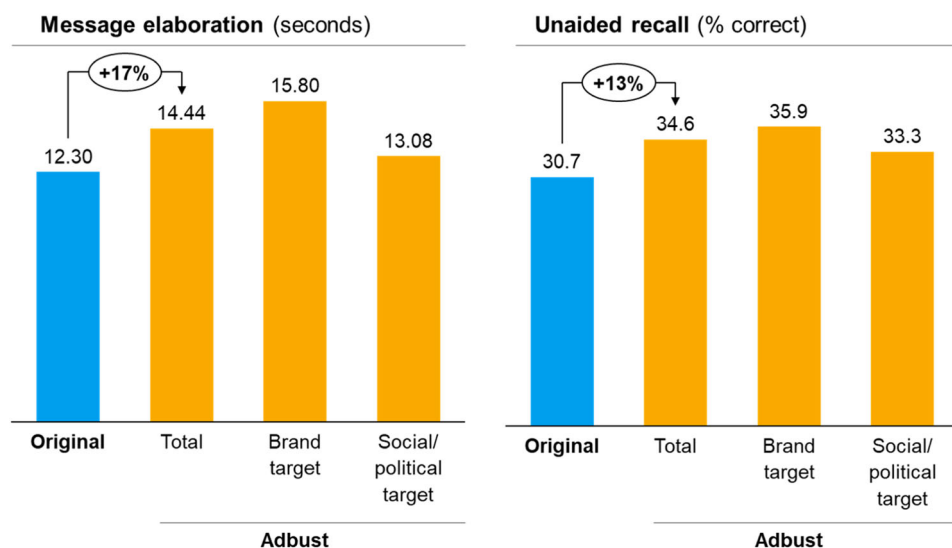
In summary, Study 1 highlights that an adbust (vs. a regular ad for the same brand) increases ad awareness through increased message elaboration in an ecologically valid experimental setting, where the adbust was embedded in a series of other ads.

## 7 | STUDY 2: DETAILING THE EFFECT OF ADBUSTING ON AD AWARENESS

Study 2 aims to replicate the findings of Study 1 while further detailing the process, specifically, showing that an adbust increases elaboration and ad awareness through higher schema incongruity and lower ease of resolution of the ad.

### 7.1 | Participants, method, and design

Study 2 replicates the design of Study 1 with different focal stimuli and includes additional constructs that allow for a more detailed investigation of the process of an adbust on ad awareness. As the focal stimulus, we altered a filler ad from Study 1 (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix C): The original ad communicated the benefits of Amazon Prime ("No Patience Required. Free Same Day Delivery. New in Your Area."), the social/political issue adbust raised awareness of the problem of air pollution ("No POLLUTION required. Free OUR STREETS FROM CARS. CYCLING: New in Your Area."), and the brand-focused adbust criticized the brand for tax avoidance ("No TAX PAYMENTS Required. Free Same Day Delivery.



**FIGURE 4** Empirical results in Study 1: Message elaboration and unaided recall over original ads and different forms of adbusts.

STOP AMAZON'S TAX FRAUD NOW." We pretested the manipulation (e.g., favorability toward the brand, recognition of the social/political issue) and the absence of the confounding covariates (e.g., ease of processing, complexity differences) in a prestudy (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix C). We randomized exposure to the type of focal ad between subjects. All participants saw the same two filler ads before and after the focal ad.

In addition to measuring unaided recall and message elaboration time (identical to Study 1), we measured participants' perception of schema incongruity ("Did the ad match your expectations of the brand \_\_\_\_?", 1 = Fully matched my expectations, 5 = No match at all; Jhang et al., 2012) and ease of resolution ("How many mental steps did you need to make sense of the advertisement above?": 1 = Few, 5 = Many, item reversed; Jhang et al., 2012). We then asked for participants' brand attitudes for the focal, as well as for all of the filler brands to avoid a bias from an obvious focus on one brand ("How do you view the brand \_\_\_\_?" bad-good, negative-positive, dislike-like on a five-point Likert scale; Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.87$ ; all factor loadings  $> 0.76$ ). Finally, a manipulation check asked participants for their perceived attribution of the ad ("Who do you think was responsible for the ad above?", 1 = Amazon, 5 = Someone Else) and their demographics.

Two hundred and seventy-nine participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 37.2$  years, 38.7% female) completed the main experiment on MTurk. No participants were filtered. As unaided recall and message elaboration time differed strongly between participants, we calculated the deviation from the average elaboration time and ad recall for the filler ads for each of the subjects.

## 7.2 | Results and discussion

Descriptively, we find that an adburst increases schema incongruity (Figure 5a, +32% from 1.83 to 2.41 [2.39 for the social, 2.43 for the brand adburst]) and lowers the ad's ease of resolution (Figure 5b, -18% from 2.63 to 2.15 [2.23 for the social, 2.07 for the brand adburst]), irrespective of the adburst's content focus. Elaboration time substantially increased compared to the original ad (+52% for the absolute evaluation time: 9.2–14.1), especially for the social/political adburst (+7.2 s vs. the filler ads [vs. +2.2 s]). Figure 5c shows the deviation of processing time from the filler ads, which accounts for individual differences in processing time. Further, the adburst increases ad awareness (Figure 5d), with the adbursts being recalled correctly 5.96% (social/political issue) to 13.54% more often (brand target) than the filler ads (compared to only 0.45% better recall for the original). As expected, the adburst lowered participants' brand perceptions (Figure 5e: -5% from 4.33 to 4.13 across both forms of adbursts), especially for the adburst that targeted the brand (-6% to 4.05) and, to a lesser degree, for social/political adbursts (-3% to 4.22). Participants recognized that the adburst was not originated by the brand, as the nonbrand attribution for the adbursts was considerably higher than for the original (Figure 5f).

We investigated the effects of adbursting through a series of linear regressions. First, we regressed all dependent variables of

interest (schema incongruity, ease of resolution, elaboration time, unaided recall, brand perception, and ad attribution) on a binary variable (no adburst vs. adburst). In line with our theoretical expectations on the influence process of an adburst, the latter increases perceived schema incongruity ( $\beta_{\text{Adburst}} = 0.58, p < 0.001$ ) and decreases ease of resolution ( $\beta_{\text{Adburst}} = -0.48, p < 0.01$ ). At the same time, ad evaluation time increases ( $\beta_{\text{Adburst}} = 7.83$ ), but only at  $p < 0.10$  and not significantly. As expected, an adburst increases ad awareness, measured through unaided recall ( $\beta_{\text{Adburst}} = 0.93, p < 0.05$ ; measured as deviation from the unaided recall of the filler ads; similar result for absolute recall in a logistic regression:  $\beta_{\text{Adburst}} = 0.63, p < 0.05$ ). In line with H1, the effect of the adburst on unaided recall was mediated through higher elaboration intensity (Process model 4: CI 95% = [0.001; 0.004] with 5000 bootstraps).

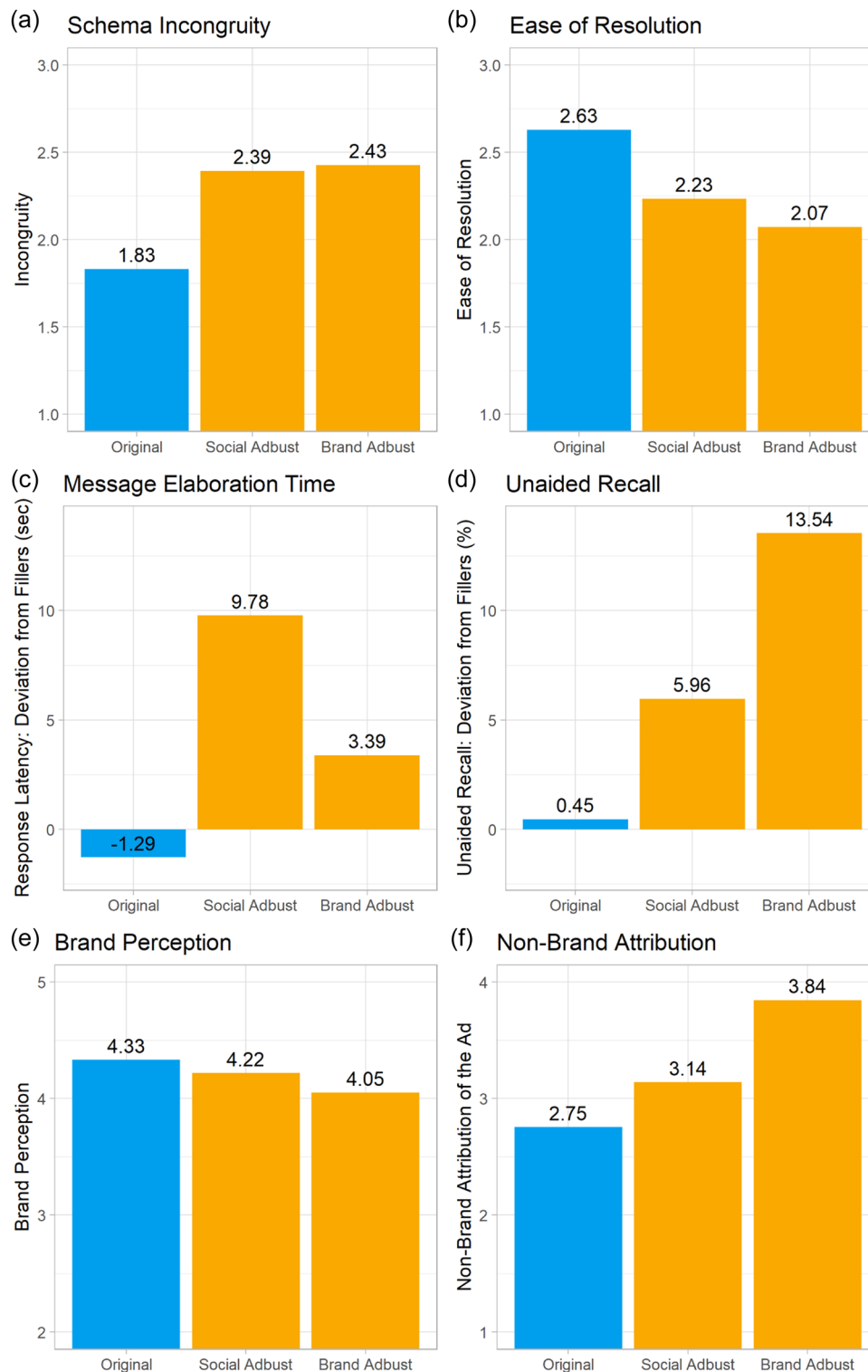
Brand perception does not significantly, but only marginally, decrease after seeing the adburst ( $\beta_{\text{Adburst}} = -0.20, p < 0.10$ ). This aligns with H2: a follow-up analysis differentiated between the content focus of an adburst, including dummy variables for the adburst on a social/political issue and the adburst with the brand as the target. In line with H2 we find that the social/political adburst does not significantly deteriorate brand perception ( $\beta_{\text{Adburst: Social}} = -0.11, p > 0.10$ ), while the brand-targeted adburst does so ( $\beta_{\text{Adburst: Brand}} = -0.28, p < 0.05$ ). Importantly, adbursts are attributed significantly more to nonbrand entities, which serves as evidence that consumers recognize adbursts as such and do not take them for brand communication. Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix C (Tables C.1 and C.2) provides further details.

In summary, Study 2 replicates the ad awareness effect from Study 1. Additionally, we find evidence that adbursts increase perceived schema incongruity and are more difficult to process, which explains the longer processing time and higher recall.

## 8 | STUDY 3: THE EFFECT OF ADBUSTING ON BRAND PERCEPTIONS AND WORD-OF-MOUTH

### 8.1 | Participants, method, and design

Study 3 investigates the effect of adbursting on brand perception and word-of-mouth intention. Specifically, we used a  $2 \times 2$  mixed experimental design with the presence of the adburst (original vs. adburst) as the within-subject factor and the ad's content focus (brand target vs. social/political) as the between-subjects factor. We altered two original ads using visuals and language common to real adbursts (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix D, Figure D.1). While the original ad highlighted how consumers can save money by shopping at the retailer, the brand-targeted adburst used that narrative to criticize the retailer for its cheap, low-quality assortment. Similarly, while the original issue claim focused on the ecological aspects of shopping with the retailer (unwrapped vegetables and fruit), the adburst criticized the use of naked women in advertisements (without specifically attacking the retailer). Note that only the



**FIGURE 5** Empirical results in Study 2: Effect of adusting on (a) schema incongruity, (b) ease of resolution, (c) message elaboration time, (d) unaided recall, (e) brand perception, and (f) non-brand attribution.

claims were altered; the visuals remained unchanged. A pretest ( $N = 64$ ,  $M_{\text{age}} = 41.4$  years, 45.3% female) confirmed that the manipulation worked as intended and was not biased by covariates (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix D for details on the pretest).

We randomly allocated 141 participants recruited from a German online panel ( $M_{\text{age}} = 41.0$  years, 38% female) to one adusting content group (brand target vs. social/political). No participants were filtered. Participants were first exposed to the original ad and then to the adburst (which serves as the within-subject factor). We

operationalized consumers' word-of-mouth intention by asking participants after each ad/adbust how they would react to the ad in a social media setting ("Assume you see the following ad on social media. How would you react?") using commonly available emojis to express their emotional response (positive: thumbs up [like], heart [joy], laughing face [joy], and face with open mouth [surprise]; negative: crying face [sadness] and angry face [anger]; Shoeb & de Melo, 2020) or a "would not react" option.

Next, participants stated their global brand perception along different retailer characteristics (Chowdhury et al., 1998: "How do you evaluate [RETAILER] along the following dimensions?": value for money, product quality, service quality, atmosphere; five-point bipolar scale ranging from "very bad" to "very good,"  $\alpha = 0.90$ , smallest factor loading = 0.65), and through a single-item measure, which we used to assess the robustness of our findings ("What do you think about [RETAILER] in general?"; ten-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "very negative" to 10 = "very positive"). Finally, as control variables, we collected information on participants' attitudes toward advertising (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989: "How would you describe your attitude toward advertising? I find advertising: believable-unbelievable, truthful-manipulative, trustworthy-deceiving"; five-point bipolar scale,  $\alpha = 0.82$ , smallest factor loading = 0.71) because skepticism toward advertising is common among consumers (Calfee & Ringold, 1994), and their attitude toward various social/political issues ("How urgent are the following social issues in your opinion: e.g., climate change, sexism, social injustice?"; Likert scale from 1 = "not at all urgent" to 5 = "extremely urgent"). Participants were finally informed that the advertisements used were partly fictional.

## 8.2 | Results and discussion

Descriptive results (see Figure 6) highlight how the adbust creates additional awareness: Participants spent more time considering and evaluating the adbust than the original ad when the brand was targeted (Figure 6a, message elaboration: +6.64 s or +59% vs. the original ad that promoted the brand; social/political: +1.5 s or 8% vs. the original ad that promoted an issue). The content of the message claim moderated the effect of the adbust on global brand perception (Figure 6b): while brand perception was similar before and after seeing a social/political adbust (+0.16 or +3%), the brand perception strongly declined if the adbust targeted the brand (-0.66 or -11%). Brand-targeted adbusts increased consumers' propensity for negative social media reactions (Figure 6c: +19.44 percentage points from 18.06% to 37.5% of participants) and decreased the propensity for positive social media reactions (Figure 6d: -29.17 percentage points from 54.17% to 25.00%)—both effects are weaker for social/political adbusts (negative: +1.45 percentage points, positive: -10.15 percentage points).

A series of repeated-measure regressions (fixed effect model; dependent variables: brand perception and negative and positive social media interaction; subject fixed effects; see Table 3) on the

presence of the adbust, the content focus of the adbust (brand target vs. social/political), and the interaction between the adbust and its content focus confirm our hypotheses. First, in line with H2, although the adbust decreases brand perception ( $\beta_{\text{Adbust}} = -0.34$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), this effect is offset for adbusts with a social/political (vs. brand target) focus ( $\beta_{\text{Adbust} \times \text{Social}} = +0.30$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This effect is robust when using a global measure of brand perception (not reported in Table 3:  $\beta_{\text{Adbust}} = -0.65$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta_{\text{Adbust} \times \text{Social}} = +0.81$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Second, in line with H3, an adbust decreases positive word-of-mouth, but this effect is mitigated at  $< 0.10$  for adbusts with a social/political (vs. brand) content ( $\beta_{\text{Adbust}} = -1.40$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ;  $\beta_{\text{Adbust} \times \text{Social/Political}} = +0.93$ ,  $p < 0.10$ ). Similarly, an adbust increases negative word-of-mouth, but this effect is mitigated at  $p < 0.10$  for adbusts with a social/political (vs. brand) content ( $\beta_{\text{Adbust}} = 1.29$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ;  $\beta_{\text{Adbust} \times \text{Social/Political}} = -1.17$ ,  $p < 0.10$ ).<sup>1</sup> Thus, Study 3 provides evidence that the adbust's content influences brand perceptions and brand intentions.

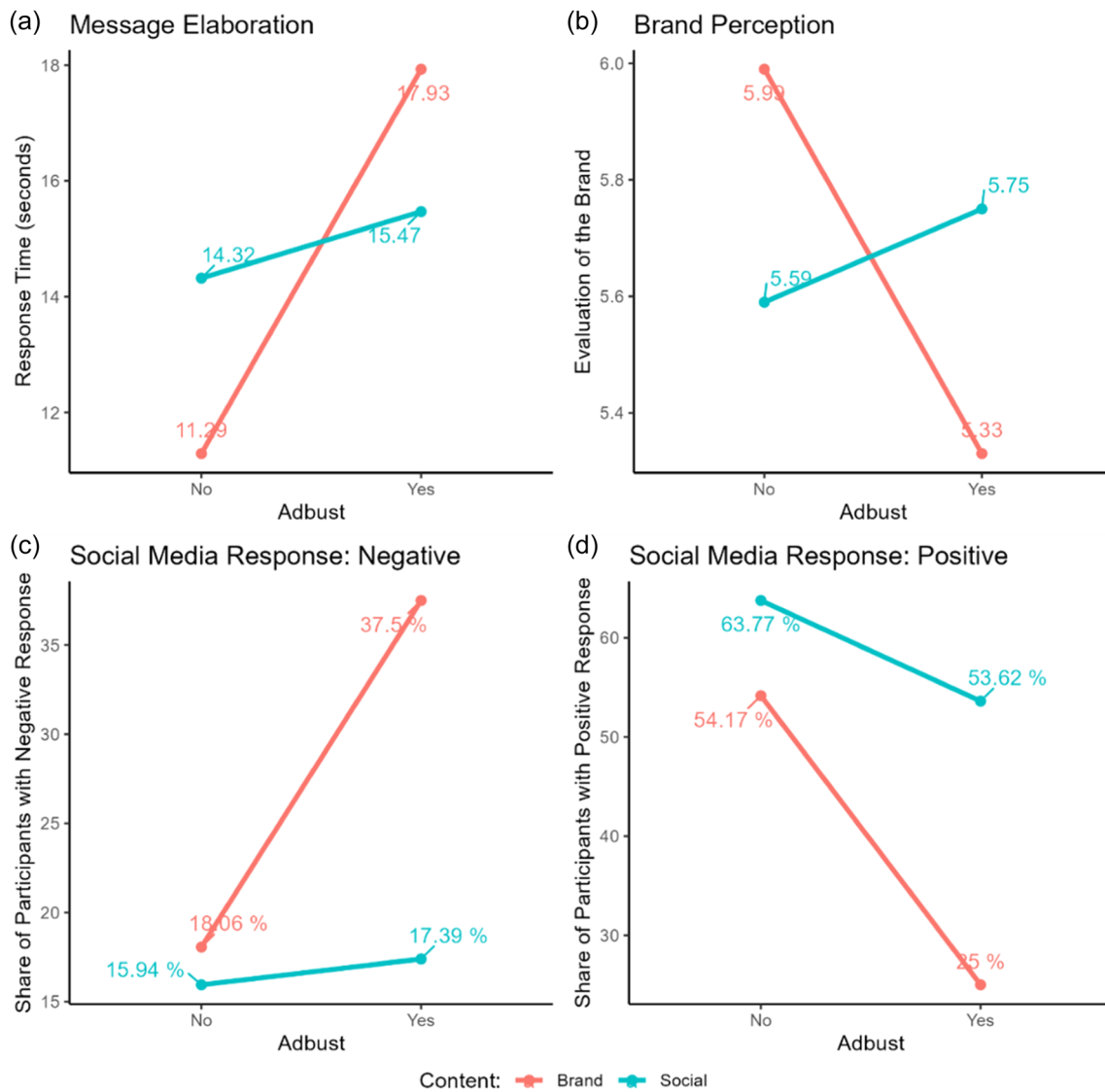
## 9 | STUDY 4: THE EFFECT OF ADBUSTING ON BRAND PERCEPTION, WORD-OF-MOUTH, AND PURCHASE INTENT

### 9.1 | Participants, method, and design

Study 4 focuses on the effect of adbusts on changes in consumers' brand perception, word-of-mouth, and purchase intentions. We selected adbusts for three brands based on the pretest reported in Study 1. We used a between-subjects experimental design to compare the effect of the ad (content focus: original vs. brand target vs. social/political) on brand perception. For two focal brands (Apple and Coca-Cola), we randomly exposed participants to either the original ad (e.g., the Apple "Shot on iPhone." campaign, see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix E), an adbust that criticized the brand ("Mine workers, exploited for your iPhone.") or an adbust that focused on a social/political issue ("Susan. Shot for her iPhone. Stop gun violence."). Three hundred and twenty-one participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 39.1$  years, 45% female, no participants filtered) completed the experiment on MTurk.

Participants reported their brand perception of a series of brands, including the focal brands, before and after being exposed to the (adbust) ads (scale adapted from Park et al., 2010,  $\alpha = 0.91$ ). We then computed the change in brand perception after being exposed to the stimuli (original, brand target, or social/political content focus). We also measured participants' positive word-of-mouth intention (Brown, 2005; "I would recommend the brand to a friend or relative," "I would share this advertisement online," Likert scale ranging from 1 = "very unlikely" to 7 = "very likely") and purchase

<sup>1</sup>Note that we do not conduct a moderated mediation analysis (Process Model 7: effect of adbust on brand perception and, in turn, brand intention, conditional on the adbust type), because we do not hypothesize a mediation process.



**FIGURE 6** Empirical results in Study 3: Effect of adusting and adusting type on (a) message elaboration, (b) brand perception, (c) negative social media response, and (d) positive social media response.

intent (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2009; “If you were going to buy an [CATEGORY] product, how likely would you be to buy from [BRAND]?”, Likert scale ranging from 1 = “no chance or almost no chance” to 7 = “certain or practically certain”). As controls, we again asked for participants' attitudes toward advertising, using similar scales as in Study 3 ( $\alpha = 0.95$ , smallest factor loading = 0.90).

## 9.2 | Results

Descriptively, the original ad improved participants' brand perception compared with their perception before seeing the ad (see Figure 7:  $\Delta = +0.09$  or +2%). As hypothesized, relative to the original ad, the brand-targeted adbust decreased participants' brand perception more strongly ( $\Delta = -0.52$  or -11%) than the social/political adbust ( $\Delta = -0.25$  or -5%). Positive word-of-mouth intention and purchase intent follow a similar

pattern, where the negative effect of the adbust is mitigated if the adbust has a social/political content focus (vs. targets the brand).

A series of regressions confirms these descriptive results and replicates our previous findings (see Table 4). In line with H2, a social/political adbust mitigates the negative main effect (Model 1:  $\beta_{\text{Adbust}} = -0.56, p < 0.001$ ) of an adbust on brand perception (Model 1:  $\beta_{\text{Adbust} \times \text{Social/Political}} = 0.31, p < 0.05$ ). However, an adbust mitigates the adbust effect on positive word-of-mouth (Model 2a:  $\beta_{\text{Adbust} \times \text{Social/Political}} = 0.49, p < 0.10$ ) and on purchase intention only at a marginal, nonsignificant level (Model 3a:  $\beta_{\text{Adbust} \times \text{Social/Political}} = 0.44, p < 0.10$ ). In line with the HOE model, a more positive brand perception positively influences both word-of-mouth intention (Model 2b:  $\beta_{\text{BrandPerception}} = 0.23, p < 0.05$ ) and purchase intention (Model 3b:  $\beta_{\text{BrandPerception}} = 0.49, p < 0.001$ ). In summary, Study 4 provides further empirical evidence that the negative effect of adusting on brand perception is mitigated for adbusts with a social/political content focus.

## 10 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

This research develops a conceptual framework and corresponding predictions about the effect of adbusting on consumers and brands through ad awareness, brand perception, and brand intentions (here: positive word-of-mouth and purchase intent). We provide empirical

evidence in support of our predictions using both field data (Pilot Study) and experimental data (Studies 1–4). Notably, our research does not investigate the legal and ethical issues associated with adbusting but treats it as an exogenous challenge to brands' communication practices.

**TABLE 3** Regression results for Study 3.

	Brand perception (1)	Word-of-mouth activity	
		Negative (2b)	Positive (3a)
Adbust (0 = original, 1 = adbust)	-0.34*** (0.06)	1.29** (0.47)	-1.40*** (0.40)
Social/political issue (0 = brand, 1 = social)	-0.21 (0.17)	-0.19 (0.55)	0.43 (0.38)
Adbust × Social/Political issue	0.30** (0.09)	-1.17† (0.68)	0.93† (0.53)
Attitude toward social/political issues	0.04 (0.11)	0.24 (0.27)	0.16 (0.19)
Attitude toward advertising	0.47*** (0.10)	-0.03 (0.24)	-0.10 (0.17)
Intercept	2.98*** (0.50)	-2.85* (1.33)	-0.19 (0.87)
N	282	282	282
Number of participants	141	141	141
R <sup>2</sup>	0.88	0.38	0.22

Note: Fixed effects model with subject fixed effects. Non-standardized coefficients and standard errors.

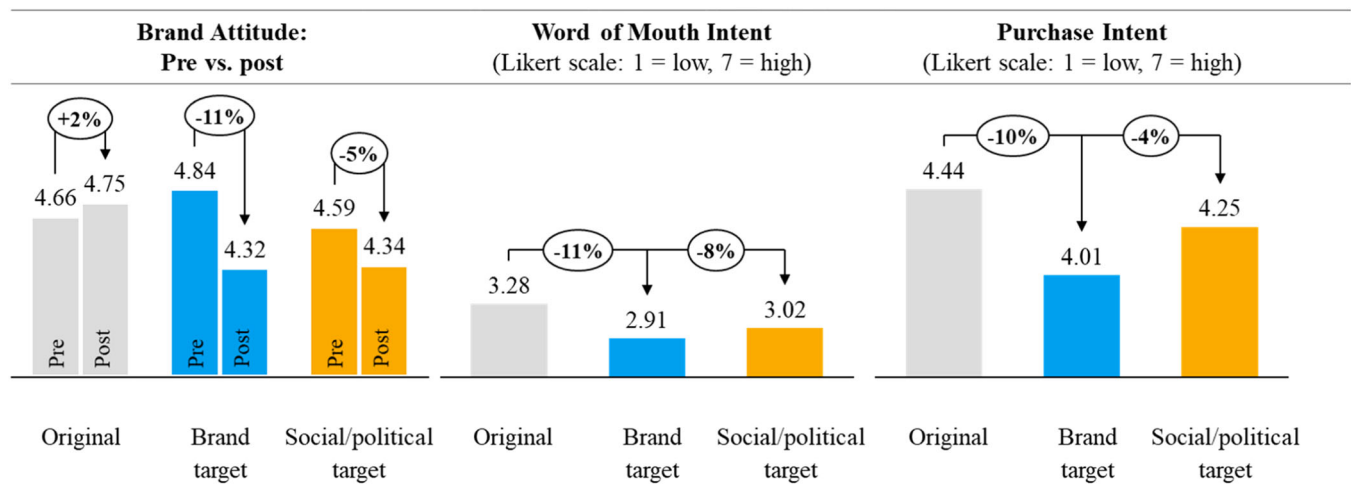
† $p < 0.1$ .

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

### 10.1 | Theoretical implications

Advertising is a key component of effective brand building. In particular, many successful brands develop a tightly controlled advertising identity that consumers can recognize everywhere. Yet, establishing a strong brand schema through advertising opens up the potential for third-party actors to leverage brand advertising to promote their agenda—a phenomenon we refer to as adbusting. In contrast to related work that considers settings where the brand itself is the advocate for social/political issues (e.g., brand activism, Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2020), we study a setting where the brand is not in control of its advertising efforts. In doing so, we contribute to the literature by exploring adbusting and its consequences for brands in three main ways.

First, we relate adbusting activism to established types of advertising and brand activism to improve our understanding of the interaction between political activity and marketing strategy (Chisam et al., 2022). To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first attempt to investigate the effects of adbusting on brands. Our results highlight that adbusting provides an interesting challenge for brands: When the adbust criticizes the brand, it can threaten consumers' brand perception and subsequent brand intentions, even though it also heightens awareness of the brand. In turn, when the adbust merely draws attention to a social/political issue, brands may receive more attention, which is a common goal for marketers. These findings relate to existing research that studies how brand advocacy through advertising impacts consumers (e.g., Cristobal et al., 2022; Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2020) and underscores the importance for brands to



**FIGURE 7** Empirical results for Study 4.



**TABLE 4** Regression results for Study 4.

	Brand perception (difference)	Word-of-mouth intention		Purchase intention	
	(1)	(2a)	(2b)	(3a)	(3b)
Adbust	-0.56*** (0.15)	-0.41 (0.26)	-0.28 (0.26)	-0.38 (0.25)	-0.11 (0.24)
Adbust × Social/Political Issue <sup>a</sup>	0.31* (0.15)	0.49 <sup>†</sup> (0.26)	0.42 (0.25)	0.44 <sup>†</sup> (0.24)	0.29 (0.23)
Attitude toward Social/Political issues	-0.10 <sup>†</sup> (0.05)	0.04 (0.09)	0.07 (0.09)	0.13 (0.09)	0.18* (0.08)
Attitude toward advertising	0.07 <sup>†</sup> (0.04)	0.67*** (0.06)	0.66*** (0.06)	0.45*** (0.06)	0.42*** (0.06)
Brand perception	—	—	0.23* (0.10)	—	0.49*** (0.09)
Brand 2 Dummy	0.17 (0.12)	-0.15 (0.21)	-0.19 (0.21)	0.67** (0.20)	0.58** (0.19)
Intercept	0.29 (0.33)	0.37 (0.56)	0.31 (0.55)	1.57*** (0.53)	1.43*** (0.51)
N	321	321	321	321	321
R <sup>2</sup>	0.06	0.30	0.31	0.19	0.27

Note: Nonstandardized coefficients and standard errors.

<sup>†</sup> $p < 0.1$ .

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

<sup>a</sup>No main effects reported due to multicollinearity.

consider the strategic implications of advocacy for social/political issues, even when their communications are used by activist groups.

Second, we draw on schema theory and the literature on advertising processing to devise a nuanced understanding of the impact of adusting, thereby contributing to the literature on brand management. Specifically, we provide empirical evidence in support of an HOE framework and illustrate how adusting affects consumers' awareness, brand perception, and subsequent brand intentions. Our empirical application shows that adusting exhibits consistent and substantial effects on brands. In particular, it positively influences consumers' brand awareness on an individual level (i.e., through more elaboration and recall), as well as across consumers through social media sharing of an adust. We explain this increased awareness through increased ad processing from higher schema incongruity and lower ease of resolution of the adust (Studies 1 and 2). This provides further evidence that not only brand-initiated conversations can support brand development, but also communication from third parties (Korschun et al., 2020).

Third, even though examples of activists altering brand communications abound, and brand protection agencies are tracking such activities to help brands understand their effects (Hesseldahl, 2007), empirical insight is limited (Thota, 2021). We not only investigate the effect of adusting per se, but establish the adust's content focus as an important moderating influence. Specifically, the effect of

adusting on consumers' brand perceptions and downstream brand intentions is negative when the adust criticizes the brand, but this negative effect is mitigated when the adust promotes social/political issues (e.g., climate change). Thereby, our findings provide a detailed understanding of the impact of different content foci of adusts on consumers and brands and open up this topic for future research.

## 10.2 | Managerial implications

It is commonly assumed that adusts pose a threat to brand perception (CNN/Monks, 2018). In contrast to initial fears that brand managers should "beware" of adusting as "the smallest act can be massively amplified online" (MarketingWeek/Hammett, 2018), we find that digital amplification could constitute an opportunity for brand managers because their effect is not uniform but depends on the content focus of the adust.

On an aggregate level, our Pilot Study shows that ad awareness (+16%), brand perception (+23%), and positive word-of-mouth (+26%) increase after an adusting incident relative to that brand's main competitor, but the positive effect is considerably stronger if the brand is not targeted itself, but a social/political issue is in focus.

Purchase intent even declines after a brand is criticized, while the purchase intent increases if the content focus of an adabust is social. The experimental studies confirm that the effect of an adabust depends on its content focus: on an individual level, adabusts that target the brand negatively affect brand perceptions, word-of-mouth, and purchase intentions. This effect is partially or fully offset if the adabust focuses on a social/political issue. Thus, our research specifies political scientists' suggestion that "sporadic subvertising cannot jam a culture of constant accumulation" (Gilman-Opalsky, 2013, p. 1), showing that adabusts can even support brands in their marketing efforts, as long as the brand is not the target.

Brand managers, therefore, are well-advised to closely evaluate specific adabusting incidents before they react. Our findings suggest that brand managers should worry about their brand perceptions when the adabust directly criticizes the brand and is likely to receive a large audience. In contrast, adabusts that criticize a social/political issue offer the opportunity of "free" increased ad awareness, while the negative effect of the adabust on brand perception is mitigated. This additional awareness is especially attractive in an environment where advertisers find it increasingly difficult to elevate their messages above the clutter of ad messages (Nelson-Field et al., 2013). In such a situation, it may even be beneficial for the firm to endorse the adabust through its online channels to reach a larger audience and increase brand buzz (Hewett et al., 2016). The aforementioned example of a Coca-Cola ad that was altered to promote a social/political issue highlights this: Because the adabust did not target the brand but a right-wing political party, the company even decided to endorse it—which further amplified the media reaction to the adabusting incident. However, brands need to be morally competent for their actions to have a positive effect (Sibai et al., 2021).

### 10.3 | Limitations and further research

There are limitations to our approach that may inform further efforts in this domain and contribute to a deeper understanding of adabusting.

First, our set of studies highlights conditions that explain the ambiguous effect of adabusts. Future research could investigate how a company can effectively respond when confronted with adabusts. For instance, a company might simply increase its marketing spending to "repair" damages to the brand perception, similar to situations when it needs to overcome a negative publicity event (Gao et al., 2015). Additionally, companies might also relate to the adabust, either by responding (e.g., by a counter campaign) or even by endorsing the adabust if the latter targets a social phenomenon and not the brand (e.g., Coca-Cola's endorsement of an adabust against a far-right party). This provides an opportunity to take a stance or to distance the brand from any social or political issues (e.g., Vredenburg et al., 2020) and would illuminate an important gap in the current literature (Siano et al., 2022).

Second, our empirical studies focus on offline adabusts. We do so because press releases about adabusts typically refer to offline

occurrences of adabusting, mirroring activists' aim to "reclaim public spaces". Thus, the adabust occurs offline but is quickly disseminated online to increase reach and impact. Yet, this does not preclude activist groups from increasingly posting altered brand communication online to leverage brands as a platform for their messages, similar to rhetoric subvertisement of brand advertising on social media (Middleton et al., 2022). While our research investigates consumers' intentions to share positive or negative sentiments about adabusts, we do not study *how* they do so (i.e., whether they advocate the adabust or distance themselves from the message) and with how many people they would share such content. Future research could study these questions to provide a more nuanced perspective on the dynamics of social media activity after an adabust occurs.

Third, the effect of an adabust might also depend on the interaction of the characteristics of the adabust with those of the viewer. Our manipulations used widely accepted social/political issues (e.g., gun violence, environmental destruction, stereotypical depiction of women), but even these are likely to interact with consumers' own opinions (e.g., some consumers deny climate change). Research on biased assimilation of opinions suggests that there may be an interactive effect of consumers' existing opinions and the influence of specific message claims on their brand evaluation because existing opinions influence the persuasiveness of contradicting claims (Mafael et al., 2016). Research on brand activism shows that audience alignment with advocated issues determines consumers' response to brand activism (Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2020). Further studies could systematically investigate whether similar effects emerge in the context of adabusting and whether such alignment effects are—at least in part—responsible for the effects observed in our empirical studies. In this, studying consumer emotions to adabusts that are in (non-)alignment with the brand and/or consumers' existing opinion might help further explain consumer reactions.

Fourth, our conceptual framework builds on the HOE model and focuses on consumers' cognitive processing in response to adabusting. Yet, other factors may be important in understanding the impact of adabusting, such as affective processes that inform consumers' response to the adabust's message. More specifically, and departing from our result that adabusts that criticize the brand affect consumers differently than adabusts that merely draw attention to a social/political issue, it would be valuable to understand whether the two content foci of adabusting inform different emotional responses. For example, research on schema incongruity suggests potential ways in which emotions may determine responses to adabusts (Smith & DeCoster, 2000; Yoon, 2013). Initial emotional responses, such as anger or surprise, may result from incongruity between the adabust and existing brand schemata and facilitate subsequent cognitive processing of the ad (e.g., through heightened awareness). Here, it would be interesting to study whether the content focus of the adabust leads to different emotional responses and to what extent these responses drive subsequent processing. Finally, future research could explore implications of adabusting for laws around parody, intellectual property, freedom of speech, among others.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from YouGov. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study. Data are available from the author(s) with the permission of YouGov.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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