

Can authenticity be built? Looking for factors that influence authentic brand activism

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Abstract

Framing of the research. Many brands have started acting as political activists, taking public actions in favor of or against contentious issues such as immigration, police brutality, abortion, LGBTQIA + rights, or racism. Brand activism appears to be a strong paradigm change such that brand management is becoming a hot topic among scholars and companies.

Purpose of the paper. Authenticity is the key variable of the activist strategy; however, its characteristic elements remain unknown. Thus, this study analyses consumers' perceptions of Ben & Jerry's-an historical activist brand-to understand, first, whether it is perceived as authentic; and second, to identify possible factors contributing to authentic brand activism.

Methodology. Data was collected from the American Instagram profile of Ben & Jerry's. All comments were manually checked and analyzed using Infranodus. We performed text network analysis and topic modeling to gain insights from the collected text corpus as well as a users' sentiment analysis. Based on the obtained positive consumer perceptions, we then examined the official Ben & Jerry's website, attempting to detect constitutive elements of its authenticity.

Results. Some exciting word clusters emerging from topic modeling reveal that activism is a critical element of Ben & Jerry's consumers' evaluation, becoming a topic of discussion at the same level as the brand's products. Additionally, sentiment analysis contributes important insights, confirming the crucial relevance of authenticity in brand activism strategies. Potential constitutive elements of the authenticity of Ben & Jerry's emerged from the in-depth analysis of consumer perceptions crossed with the examination of Ben & Jerry's official website.

Research limitations. The study employed user comments on posts, which are declarations, not actions. This analysis was also restricted to the United States and only considered a three-year period.

Managerial Implications. This research offers significant insights for practitioners who look to implement activist strategies. First, although it is challenging and uncommon to develop authenticity, we confirm its crucial role in brand activism. Second, it is essential to grasp consumers' perceptions to understand how they could react to a company's activist stances. Additionally, this study reveals potential constitutive elements of authenticity in brand activism, which can be further explored in future research and applied by companies looking to enter the political arena.

Originality of the paper. This paper provides the groundwork for an in-depth identification of constitutive elements of authenticity in activist strategy. By examining a well-known activist brand and following positive consumer sentiments, we identified crucial and peculiar elements that could help to build authentic brand activism.

Key words: brand activism; authenticity; consumer perception; social media; socio-political issues

1. Introduction

Many businesses have started embracing activism as they have become aware that corporate social responsibility (CSR) alone is no longer enough to address the wicked problems of society (Pimentel *et al.*, 2023; Sarkar and Kotler, 2018).

From this standpoint, as highlighted by Resciniti (2020), marketing is more crucial than ever in modern society since it may encourage the development of solutions to suit the needs of people, businesses, and institutions, enhancing the lives of people and society at large. This approach has also been heavily strengthened by the American Marketing Association, which has emphasized the need for research to move in this direction and has created new terms like “Mitigation in Marketing” (Mende and Scott, 2021), “Better Marketing for a Better World” (Chandy *et al.*, 2021), and “Marketing as a force for Good” (American Marketing Association, 2021).

Consumers also expect brands to play an increasingly social role (Weber *et al.*, 2023). Specifically, they believe businesses should take a more proactive approach by taking public stances on sensitive themes (Maks-Solomon and Drewry, 2020). Thus, *brand activism* refers to the phenomenon of businesses taking positions for political, social, or economic reasons (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020; Thürridl and Thompson, 2023). It is considered an evolution of CSR that is more in keeping with consumers’ expectations and the new societal role of brands (Kotler *et al.*, 2021). Different brands are becoming activists, such as Nike supporting the Black Lives Matter movement (Schmidt *et al.*, 2022), Airbnb supporting refugees (Moreano, 2019), Gillette against toxic masculinity (Xu and Xiong, 2020), American Airlines refusing to transport children separated from their parents by immigration officials, or Lush Cosmetics promoting an anti-Israel song (Weber *et al.*, 2023).

The key variable in brand activism is *authenticity*, defined as the full coherence between the brand’s activist position and its historically promoted values and between communication and its corporate practices (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020). However, its constituent and critical elements of success remain poorly understood (Verlegh, 2023). In fact, consumer response to brand activism is still varied and unpredictable (Guha and Korschun, 2023).

Based on these premises, the purpose of this study is to understand whether a brand historically known for being an activist is perceived as authentic in its stance, and if so, to identify the crucial elements of its authenticity. We selected Ben & Jerry’s, a well-known activist brand, which has built its success on the principle of social justice ever since it first opened its doors in 1978. In the content of its news releases, the company declares: “Ben & Jerry’s is a company that seeks social justice and believes in a bigger calling than to merely generate profits from selling products” (Ben & Jerry’s, 2017).

We analyzed consumer perceptions of Ben & Jerry’s by collecting online user comments from the American Instagram profile of the brand. We chose the United States of America (USA) because it is the primary market

for Ben & Jerry's, and activism was born and developed in this country (Cammarota *et al.*, 2023). Thus, this market should be more sensitive to this theme. The research questions of this study are twofold:

RQ1: How do consumers perceive brand activism campaigns?

RQ2: Are there factors that contribute to the authenticity of a brand's activism? If so, what might they be?

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The current study fills some significant gaps in the existing literature on brand activism. First, prior research confirms that consumer reactions to brand activism are still diverse and uncertain (Guha and Korschun, 2023), but they are generally negative (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020). By contrast, this study examines perceptions towards a well-known activist brand to determine whether authenticity is, at least in this case, validated and, in turn, how consumers respond.

Second, research on authenticity highlights its importance (Tressoldi *et al.*, 2023), its effects (Ahmad *et al.*, 2022), and some macro dimensions of its development (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020; Sibai *et al.*, 2021), such as the brand's tone of voice (Verlegh, 2023), the alignment between the brand communication and corporate practice, and the consistency between brand values and the activist position (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020). To the best of our knowledge, there are no studies that have identified the key elements of authentic brand activism that companies can adopt to create authenticity. Therefore, this research aims to understand consumer responses to brand activism and to identify potential elements that may strengthen the authenticity of this complicated and risky strategy.

2. Literature Background

2.1 The strategy of brand activism

Brands have begun to compete in the political arena, becoming significant activists (Korschun *et al.*, 2020). In the literature, brand activism is considered a new marketing strategy (Shoenberger *et al.*, 2021, an intersection between politics and marketing (Klostermann *et al.*, 2022), or a positioning tactic (Schmidt *et al.*, 2022).

Brand activism can be defined as "public speech or actions focused on partisan issues made by or on behalf of a company using its corporate or individual name" (Moorman, 2020). In addition to making public statements (Bhargava and Bedi, 2022), activist companies can also take stances on controversial sociopolitical issues by making financial commitments (Klostermann *et al.*, 2022), working with social movements, non-governmental organizations, and other stakeholders (Wettstein and Baur, 2016), or even by modifying their products to show support or opposition to a particular cause (Koch, 2020). Hence, through communication and practice (Kotler and Sarkar, 2018), brands express their opinions, concerns, or values in divisive public debates (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020).

Many different variables are contributing to the growing trend of brand activism. One of the most intriguing aspects has to do with the public's

growing mistrust of institutions and governments, perceiving them as incapable or unwilling to deal with social issues (Radanielina Hita and Grégorie, 2023). As a result, companies are actively pursuing this role.

The goals of brand activism are manifold (Smaldone *et al.*, 2023); by getting involved in sensitive issues, brands hope to affect positive social change (Eilert and Cherup Nappier, 2020), not only by raising consumer awareness of these issues but also by positively influencing consumer behavior and attitudes (Villagra *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, this strategy aims to bring the attention of the media to such issues and to pressure policymakers and institutions to address these problems (Den Hond and De Bakker, 2007). Hence, businesses use their visibility to shape public perception of these issues (Haski-Leventhal *et al.*, 2021). Brand activism could also have significant business impacts (Radanielina Hita and Grégorie, 2023; Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020). In fact, brand activism may result in significant competitive advantages in the market. First, it could be a tool to enhance the brand-consumer relationship, with potential outcomes on brand image (Hambrick and Wowak, 2021), brand reputation (Johnson *et al.*, 2022), brand attachment (Flight and Coker, 2022), consumer engagement (Kotler *et al.*, 2021), consumer loyalty (Key *et al.*, 2021), or consumer purchase intention (Zhou and Dong, 2022). Second, brand activism may also have favorable effects on the relationship between a company's employees and investors (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020; Cadvar Aksoy *et al.*, 2023 IN BIBLIO CAVDAR).

From this standpoint, using social media to communicate with stakeholders and announce one's activist stance is essential. Brand activism is an inherently public action that manifests through advertising, public relations, and other online and offline communication (Korschun, 2021). According to numerous researchers (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020; Warren, 2021; Pöyry and Laaksonen, 2022; Johnson *et al.*, 2022; Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020), the main issue with brand activism is its risky nature. Taking a stand on political and social problems could result in substantial economic, financial, and reputational harm if the brands do not act in accordance with their history, mission, and values (Dodd and Supa, 2014; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020).

2.2 Perceived authenticity and consumer perceptions of brand activism

Perceived authenticity is considered the most relevant factor in a brand activism strategy (Schmidt *et al.*, 2022; Pimentel *et al.*, 2023; Ahmad *et al.*, 2024;). Generally, consumers perceive an activist brand as authentic when its actions are truly motivated by a purpose and values (Vredenburg *et al.* 2020). Authenticity results from the consistency between a firm's actions and its online and offline communication (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020). Authentic brands frequently set themselves apart by being sincere, steady, consistent, credible, unique, real, unattached to business interests and stakeholder oriented (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2006; Bruhn *et al.*, 2012; Yang and Battocchio, 2020; Romito *et al.*, 2023). When a brand is perceived as authentic, it increases trust, credibility, and reliability among stakeholders (Mingione *et al.*, 2020) Thus, this variable is crucial to reduce skepticism

toward the activist position of the brand (Hoppner and Vaddakkepatt, 2019; Villagra *et al.*, 2021; Ahmad *et al.*, 2022; Mirzaei *et al.*, 2022).

When brands fail to constantly align their stated values with their actual actions, they risk damaging their reputation (Siano, 2012). This issue becomes particularly evident when a brand adopts activist positions that are inconsistent with its historical values or when there is a difference between its corporate practice and communication (Mirzaei *et al.*, 2022). Such inconsistencies can lead to perceptions of inauthenticity in the brand's commitment to activism, often referred to as "woke-washing" (Sobande, 2019).

In such cases, consumers accuse businesses of utilizing this tactic as a marketing gimmick (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020) to boost sales. It is thus essential that a brand's target audience perceive its activist positions as genuine (Ahmad *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, consumer responses to brand activism could be varied and highly fragmented, mostly because activism focuses on contentious issues on which the public strongly disagrees (Guha and Korschun, 2023); generally, these issues do not present a universal and accepted solution by all individuals (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, brand activism often generates primarily negative and polarized sentiments and attitudes (Radanielina Hita and Grégoire, 2023) as compared to other initiatives like CSR or cause-related marketing, which garner more positive responses from customers (Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020). This leads to a situation in which, on the one hand, consumers increasingly expect companies not to remain neutral on certain issues, while on the other hand, they often react negatively to brand activism by initiating a backlash (Sarkar and Kotler, 2018; Atanga *et al.*, 2022) or even boycotting brands (Neureiter and Bhattacharya, 2021; Haupt *et al.*, 2023).

A negative response from consumers can be attributed to two main factors: first, they believe the brand is inauthentic in its activist stance (Schmidt *et al.*, 2022); second, they may not share the stance and values promoted by the brand (Atanga *et al.*, 2022). In both cases, consumers could express their disapproval through boycotts or other means of dissent. This backlash can be intense (Pöyry and Laaksonen, 2022), especially when it is fueled by social media platforms (Klostermann *et al.*, 2022), which are crucial channels for spreading negative sentiment (D'Arco *et al.*, 2019).

The sentiment in user-generated content has important effects on a business' brand reputation and financial performance (Rust *et al.*, 2021). Thanks to social media platforms, today's consumers can publicly express their negative emotions through electronic word-of-mouth eWOM (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020; Zhou and Dong, 2022), by generating firestorms (D'Arco *et al.*, 2019; Klostermann *et al.*, 2022), or even by creating anti-brand communities (Brandão and Popoli, 2021; Pöyry and Laaksonen, 2022). Some studies have also suggested that brand activism has a stronger negative impact on people who disagree with the promoted cause than it does on people who support it (Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020).

Brands involved in sociopolitical causes can also obtain positive consumer responses and support for their activist actions (Hydock *et al.*, 2020). As previously stated, positive sentiment is primarily derived from two conditions: the brand must be perceived as authentic in its activist

stance, and it should promote values shared by its consumers. According to Johnson *et al.* (2022), almost two-thirds of consumers are willing to support or reject a brand based purely on the social ideals promoted by it.

As a result, values appear to be a key determinant of consumer decisions (Chatman, 1991), guiding their behaviors and attitudes toward a brand. Consumers tend to prefer products and brands that represent their values and identities (Hydock *et al.*, 2020). By associating with identity-coherent brands, consumers can express a version of their self-concepts (Reed *et al.*, 2012; Bertoli *et al.*, 2019), which also strengthens the consumer-brand relationship. As highlighted by Hydock *et al.* (2020), consumers identify with brands that are in political alignment and disidentify with brands that are in political misalignment with their values. Consequently, a brand that is perceived as authentic in its activist commitment could possibly generate important benefits not only for civil society but also for the company itself.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design: the case of Ben & Jerry's

To the best of our knowledge, Ben & Jerry's, the fourth most popular ice cream brand worldwide (Zhou, 2016), is a *Top-of-Mind brand* when it comes to activism. Because of this, it lends itself to being a fascinating case study from which to better understand the phenomenon of brand activism. Since its debut in 1978, this brand has distinguished itself for its social commitment (Ciszek and Logan, 2018). This is due to its operating philosophy of *capitalism infused with activism* (Gelles, 2015). The brand actively supports several issues, including police brutality, legalizing marijuana, LGBTQIA+ rights, and abortion. In fact, on October 6, 2016, Ben & Jerry's made a contentious public statement on its social media sites endorsing the polarizing Black Lives Matter campaign. The brand's posts are often controversial, sharp, and specific; we report a Ben & Jerry's Instagram post in Figure 1.

Fig. 1: Ben & Jerry's Instagram post against policy brutality



Source: Ben & Jerry's Official Instagram Profile

Additionally, in 2009, the business temporarily changed its name to Chubby Hubby to honor the passage of the same-sex marriage statute in Vermont where Ben & Jerry's headquarters are located (Wettstein and Baur, 2016). The underlying principles and vision of this company, which are focused on the social role that Ben & Jerry's intends to play in society, are the key success factors of its activism.

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3.2 Research method

Our research approach involved performing exploratory research using content analysis, as the topic examined is still relatively unexplored and needs to be structured based on more thorough investigation (D'Arco *et al.*, 2019). We used a case study methodology that allows researchers to achieve a holistic picture of a phenomenon (Zarestky, 2023) and is more suited to the real-business context (Yin, 1984). Focusing on a single case might be appropriate when dealing with unique or exceptional cases, despite its inherent limitations (Siggelkow, 2007).

Ben & Jerry's is a distinguishable brand that was established with a powerful activist spirit and mission (Ciszek and Logan, 2018). Due to its distinctive nature, this single-case study offers alternative viewpoints that differ from the prevailing paradigm (Siggelkow, 2007; Retolaza, 2017), particularly on negative perceptions of activist brands by consumers (Neureiter and Bhattacharya, 2021; Atanga *et al.*, 2022; Pöyry and Laaksonen, 2022; Radanielina Hita and Grégorie, 2023). Lastly, single-case data analysis techniques might facilitate deeper insights and more accurate, data-based findings (Ninci, 2019). They are particularly effective in specific situations, depending on the aims and types of data (Manolov *et al.*, 2017).

This approach allowed us to perform a deep content analysis of scraped comments posted on Ben & Jerry's U.S. Instagram profile to identify how consumers perceive the company's activism.

According to Marino *et al.* (2020), online scraping and data analysis offer marketing researchers and practitioners a unique opportunity to analyze people, communities, and society. Social media constitutes a diverse and wide-ranging source of information. Instagram was chosen as the platform for data collection because it provided more data in the form of comments than other social media platforms. Data was scraped from the company's official US Instagram profile, ensuring compliance with legal standards and respect for user privacy (Walker and Kaye, 2022). About 58k comments in total were gathered from all the posts between 2020 and 2022, with 12k for 2020, 31k for 2021, and 15k for 2022. All personally identifiable information was anonymized in the dataset. After conducting a preliminary analysis of the purified dataset, we selected all comments to thoroughly examine activism-related themes, ensuring a comprehensive and unbiased analysis. Next, we uploaded the datasets to Infranodus to perform a text network analysis and a sentiment analysis for each year. We conducted an automatic content analysis because of its elevated dependability and accuracy as well as its reasonable level of efficiency in contrast to the efficiency of manual methods, its high validity, and its high reliability (Lee *et al.*, 2020). Infranodus groups thematically related

words using graph theory instead of a probability distribution (D'Arco *et al.*, 2023). This approach assigns words to distinct groups, resulting in the emergence of main topical clusters. With the aid of sophisticated visualization tools, which can be used for both quantitative and qualitative research, this application of graph theory helps to better understand the structure of textual discourse (Paranyushkin, 2019).

The main goal was to obtain a more profound and wide-ranging description of the phenomenon, identifying not only consumer perceptions through sentiment analysis but also possible factors that could have affected the consumer's perceived authenticity of the brand. For this purpose, the topical clusters derived from topic modeling and keyword extraction helped us to better understand Ben & Jerry's activism and the variables that are most influential with consumers. After the data analysis, we proceeded with the interpretation stage (Izzo and Storlazzi, 2021) by matching the results with a further investigation of Ben & Jerry's official website to identify elements that contribute to its authenticity.

4. Findings

Consumer responses to brand activism on social media platforms seem to depend on multiple factors, such as post content, reporting period, and the issues supported. In our analysis, we examined user comments on the American Instagram profile of Ben & Jerry's for the three years of 2020, 2021, and 2022.

4.1 Topics and relations

By means of topic modeling, we identified the main clusters that emerged from each year's comments. Four main clusters were found in 2020: Ben & Jerry's (20%), Chunky Flavors (19%), Political Ice Cream (17%), and Cheesecake Bliss (14%).

Table 1 shows the main keywords in the *political ice cream cluster* regarding activist topics. The keywords include "Biden", "people", "political", "joe", "white", "country", "justice", "vote", "issue", "Trump", "call", and "support". By analyzing the relationships among the most frequently used words, the top twenty words related to brand activism were identified with their targets, occurrences, weight, and betweenness. "Weight" measures the strength of connection between two nodes in a graph. It signifies frequency or intensity of the link. In contrast, "betweenness" identifies frequently occurring nodes on the shortest paths between any two nodes in the network (Paranyushkin, 2019).

In 2021, the top clusters identified were: Anti-racism Movement (29%), Israel-Palestine Conflict (21%), Vegan Ice Cream (21%), and Palestine Advocacy (12%).

Some of the words identified for the *Anti-racism movement cluster* are "racist", "movement", "policy", "Jewish", "hate", "history", "American", and "standing". For this cluster, we specifically alluded to the Black Lives Matter Movement, which drew a wide range of reactions, including widespread

Table 2 reports the top twenty words related to brand activism in 2021, which were identified based on the analysis of the relationships among the most frequently used words, with their targets, occurrences, weights, and betweenness.

Tab. 2: Keyword Relations Analysis 2021

Source	Target	Occurrences	Weight	Betweenness
free	Palestine	44	132	0.2886
human	right	10	29	0.0137
speak	Palestine	11	27	0.2292
boycott	ben	8	22	0.1205
@benandjerrys	Palestine	5	18	0.6817
illegal	Israel	6	18	0.0172
support	Palestine	6	14	0.2499
support	state	5	14	0.0524
boycott	jerry	6	12	0.0369
stop	selling	4	12	0.0081
social	justice	4	12	0.0042
supporting	Palestine	4	11	0.2474
law	racist	4	10	0.0022
occupied	territory	4	10	0.0028

Source: Authors' elaboration

The clusters Corporate Abuse (18%), Political Activism (16%), Spiritual Reflection (16%), and Baked Treats (12%) were identified for 2022. Table 3 highlights the main words for this year.

Tab. 3: Keyword Relations Analysis 2022

Source	Target	Occurrences	Weight	Betweenness
cream	Israel	3	9	0.2187
people	day	4	8	0.0129
making	free	4	8	0.0199
love	bring	4	8	0.4322
vegan	food	2	6	0.0020
stay	politic	2	5	0.0004
abuse	murder	2	5	0.0005
abuse	rape	2	4	0.0008
vote	realise	2	4	0.0007
georgia	big	1	4	0.0041
selling	Israel	3	4	0.0004
rape	murder	1	3	0.0013
murder	animal	1	3	0.0005
animal	company	1	3	0.0130

Source: Authors' elaboration

Specifically, some of the most frequently used words for the *Corporate Abuse cluster* are “murder”, “animal”, “woman”, “rape”, “Iran”, and “slavery”. For the *Political Activism cluster*, the most frequently used words are “people”, “vote”, “politic”, and “choice”; while for *Spiritual Reflection*, the words are “political”, “police”, and “moral”. The Corporate Abuse cluster is related to several issues highlighted by consumers. First, it is associated with comments regarding Ben & Jerry’s position on selling vegan products. Second, it is also associated with Ben & Jerry’s position on the Iranian situation. In fact, the company was accused by many followers of not being active enough on this topic.

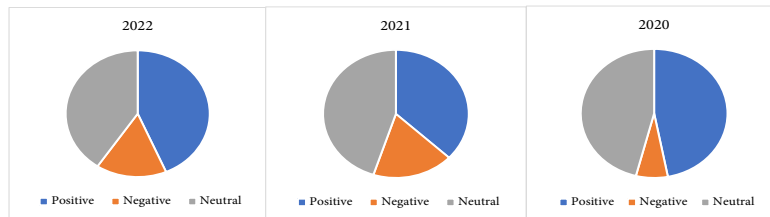
4.2 Sentiment analysis of consumer responses

Sentiment detected from comments over the three years was also analyzed and is reported in Figure 3. Consumer responses were classified into positive, negative, and neutral by using Infranodus.

In 2022, positive sentiment rose to 44%, negative to 16%, and neutral to 41%. In 2021 and 2020, a higher neutral sentiment was found than in 2022. In 2021, there was 45% neutrality, 37% positivity, and 18% negativity. In 2020, there was 47% positivity, 7% negativity and 46% neutrality.

The most pertinent remarks in relation to topical clusters on political, economic, and social issues are included here. They demonstrate how consumers react to the activism of Ben & Jerry’s.

Fig. 3: Sentiment Analysis (2020, 2021, 2022)



Source: Author’s elaboration

Table 4 shows some example comments for each of the identified clusters.

Tab. 4: Comments analysis of the main clusters

MAIN CLUSTERS	COMMENTS	SOURCE	SENTIMENT
Racial Justice	Use your platform to address settler colonialism in Palestine. For a year you've been speaking up on racial justice and human rights.	Instagram	Negative
Palestine Advocacy	@benandjerrys why do you have a factory in an illegal Israel settlement in occupied Palestine?	Instagram	Negative
	stop supporting ethnic cleansing and putting on a fake woke veneer. FREE PALESTINE		Negative
	Ben & Jerry has been silent on their corporate stand against the Israeli government ethnic cleansing of Palestine.		Negative
Ben & Jerry's Boycott	Every occupying state must be boycotted just as we must boycott the United States that conquered its territory from the Indians. #BoycottUSA	Instagram	Neutral
Corporate Abuse	Is all oppression connected? Including the oppression, abuse, rape, and murder of animals. Your company profits off of and enables the dairy industry: a cruel, oppressive, abusive, and totally unnecessary entity.	Instagram	Negative
	Racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and speciesism is everything wrong with the world. See YOUR part in it, Ben & Jerry's? The hypocrisy is insane.		Negative
	Thank you for supporting Israel!		Positive
	Thank you for all that you do and advocate for!! Love your products and support your company!		Positive
Political Activism	You guys are the best. Truly an organisation I want to financially support and would love to work for.	Instagram	Positive
	WARNOCK ALL THE WAY??????? GO GEORGIA!!!!		Neutral
	Come on Georgia we need you to show up and show out??????? #votewarnock		Neutral
	It's crystal clear their is a good candidate and a terrible candidate.		Neutral
	Choose wisely Georgia! The world is watching you.		Neutral
	GO VOTE! And Vote For Warnock!		Neutral
	Vote red save Georgia and the country!		Neutral
Oh great political Ice cream	Positive		
Spiritual Reflection	Aren't you an ice cream company? Stay out politics. Your responsibility is to make money for your shareholders.	Instagram	Negative
	I love your moral compass.		Positive
	White Russian for the love of god and donate proceeds to the Ukraine.		Neutral
	I'm a teacher and I can tell you a lot is at stake this November! Republicans want to take away puberty blockers, cross sex hormones and even gender affirming surgery! this is the most important election of our lifetime!		Neutral
	Love this and yes please vote.		Positive

Source: Authors' elaboration

Based on the results that emerged from the analysis of user comments, we then analyzed the official communication on Ben & Jerry's website. In particular, the comments analyzed concerned the social initiatives carried out by the brand: *Voting Rights*, *Racial Justice*, *LGBTQ+ Rights*, *Climate Justice*, and *Campaign Finance Reform*. These five areas of intervention are

clearly and precisely addressed on the official Ben & Jerry's website; they appear to be macro topics on which the brand intervenes by supporting small and specific causes pertaining to each area.

Through the analysis of the main topics covered and consumer sentiment, significant differences in the three years were discovered. First, it seems that Ben & Jerry's posts have become a space for discussing current issues in line with the brand's central values.

In 2020, an intense discussion on voting rights emerged, with particular reference to that year's election; for example, one relation identified "@benandjerrys" as the source and vote as the "target" and several keywords, such as "Biden" and "Trump". In 2021, however, an increased focus on social and racial justice was detected. The Israel-Palestinian crisis attracted increased attention through polarized comments encouraging support and action for human rights. The same themes were also identified in 2022, focusing on brand political activism. With respect to these themes, consumer perceptions were varied, leaving room for greater neutrality in the years 2020 and 2021. In general, there was a lower percentage of negative comments, and this is a particularly interesting result in the context of brand activism strategy. After a deeper analysis of the comments, it was found that followers tended to find that arguing their positions on particular topics of interest was more challenging than giving their own assessment of the brand's activist actions, thereby leaving room for greater neutrality of sentiment. Over the course of the three years, many more positive comments were noted.

On issues for which the brand does not advocate, consumers reacted negatively, expecting and demanding a greater degree of intervention. This could imply that the brand is recognized as an activist and that its stance is perceived as authentic. Although there is greater positivity of comments, negative comments were noted in 2021 and 2022 related to the brand's response to Unilever's decision to sell the Ben & Jerry's ice cream business in Israel to a local licensee in violation of the agreement between the two companies. Despite this, it is evident how authentic Ben & Jerry's is perceived in its decisions, addressing controversial issues without abandoning its values.

4.3 Potential constitutive elements of authenticity

We examined the company's social media platform as well as the official website to identify potential factors that could explain consumers' perceived authenticity of Ben & Jerry's activism.

We identified the following factors that could contribute to the company's authenticity. First, a strong *engagement strategy* based on "take action" and "call to take action", reports on both social media, and the brand's official website. The brand adopts a *process of educating* consumers by making them not only sensitive to specific issues but also aware of what might be the best concrete and immediate actions to implement.

Second, the brand's *continuity* in promoting human rights, social and economic justice, and environmental protection. From its inception, the brand has been guided by its core values and by giving its products a hidden purpose.

Third, its commitment to promoting activism is well understood and documented on its website and in previous years' posts, ensuring *transparency*.

Fourth, Ben & Jerry's has a strong familiarity with U.S. social issues; thus, there is a high consideration of controversial issues related to the *proximity* of the territory.

Finally, this brand takes a stance on *highly controversial* and *specific issues*, not limiting itself to hot media topics of the moment but ensuring continuity in promoting its core values.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Discussion and theoretical implications

The findings provide substantial implications for the academic debate about consumer response to brand activism and the construction of the authenticity variable in activist strategy. Brand activism is a burly shift in the management paradigm (Andersen and Johansen, 2023). However, we still need to understand whether activism can be adopted by all brands, how to predict consumer responses and, above all, whether authentic brand activism can be built. This study tried to establish the groundwork in this direction by identifying consumer perceptions of Ben & Jerry's activism and, in the case of favorable or neutral responses, detecting potential elements that may have contributed to the brand's authenticity in its activist stance.

Previous literature has highlighted that brand activism results in unfavorable reactions, hate speech, and even anti-brand actions (Pöyry and Laaksonen, 2022; Atanga *et al.*, 2022; Cammarota *et al.*, 2022). By contrast, our study shows that consumer responses to Ben & Jerry's activist communication are positive and shared by users, who perceive the brand as particularly authentic in its activist positions. According to Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020), boycott declarations and unfavorable eWOMs may arise from brand activism. Instead, our findings show that consumers not only make brief remarks but also tend to argue their online comments. Specifically, Ben & Jerry's posts look like *microblogs* where users participate in conversations about the social causes the company supports. These conversations occur not just between consumers and brands but also between consumers themselves, thus fueling a virtuous engagement process on social issues.

Lastly, studies on brand activism have also been conducted in the United States (Livas *et al.*, 2023) and have revealed negative responses. Conversely, our research reports a tiny percentage of negative user comments resulting from adverse reactions to Ben & Jerry's activist communication because the brand has not taken positions on issues that the user thinks are relevant. Additional evidence of how much consumers appreciate the activist commitment of this brand is that they expect it to take activist positions on different social issues.

Based on the positive consumer sentiment toward the activism of Ben & Jerry's, this study confirms the previous literature on the critical role of

authenticity in brand activism (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020; Key *et al.*, 2021; Schmidt *et al.*, 2022; Hesse *et al.*, 2022; Ahmad *et al.*, 2024). However, from this perspective, our research offers an innovative implication for authentic brand activism. Prior studies have highlighted that authenticity is primarily determined by three dimensions (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020) and is a matter of morality (Sibai *et al.*, 2021). The three dimensions of authenticity are the alignment between the brand's values and the activist stand, business practices and communication, and tone of voice (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020; Verlegh, 2023). However, Verlegh (2023) pointed out that little is known about the probable construction of this widely recognized crucial construct.

Our article contributes to closing this gap by identifying potential constitutive elements of authenticity extrapolated from Ben & Jerry's social profile and official website. First, we argue that an activist brand's authenticity stems from its ongoing activism, a position on highly specific, contentious, and near issues that matter to the brand's target audience. For instance, the findings show that Ben & Jerry's adopts stances on social concerns consistent with the events and sensitivity of the American context. Topics about the "right to vote" for the US elections dominated in 2020, while "Human rights and Palestine" were hot topics in 2021. In addition, Ben & Jerry's has always taken a firm stance. "Political activism" with terms like *women*, *Iran*, and *choice* appears in 2022; this is likely due to the American Supreme Court's 2022 ruling on the right to an abortion as well as the terrible state of Iranian women.

Transparency is also one of this brand's main strengths, which helps to create its authenticity. All its activist commitments are clearly stated, illustrated, and documented on the brand's official website. This is accomplished through appealing storytelling that calls for consumer action and serves as both an informative and, notably, engaging process.

Thus, we argue that not all activist brands are perceived to be inauthentic, attacked by negative eWOMs, firestorms, or boycotted. There are brands like Ben & Jerry's whose market positioning, competitive advantage, and, perhaps, even the loyalty of its consumers depends precisely on it being an activist brand.

5.2 Managerial implications

This research offers interesting implications for activist companies, particularly those desiring to enter the political sphere. First, it is confirmed that authenticity is an essential antecedent for favorable consumer responses. Thus, it is likely that the activist strategy will fail if brands are not perceived as authentic by their consumers.

Second, companies should pay close attention to how consumers react to activist posts, not only to their own but also those of other companies, such as their competitors. By doing this, businesses will be better equipped to predict the mood and responses of consumers and avoid potential hazardous circumstances or inappropriate plans of action.

Third, we suggest that both the activist communication on the social media platform and the official website of the brands should be fully consistent. Our findings reveal that communication on social media should

be more direct, immediate, and faster, while institutional communication should be more explanatory, educational, and rigorous. However, both need to be in line with the language, issues, and goals of activism.

Lastly, our research identifies some potential authenticity building blocks that activist brands may put to the test. Beyond complete coherence in communication, we recommend: (1) a robust engagement strategy based on a consumer awareness process; (2) continuous, rather than intermittent, activism; (3) maximum transparency regarding brand actions, goal-achievement processes, and involved actors; (4) closeness to the topic so that it is felt by consumers; and (5) the issue should be specific and not general.

5.3 Limitations and future research

This article has some limitations that provide directions for further research. First, the current study is based on user comments, treated as declarations. Given that consumers frequently declare to boycott or support activist brands, we are not able to investigate whether any boycott declarations translate into consumer actions. Thus, future research should adopt other quantitative methods, such as surveys, to test intentions or experiments and conjoint analysis to test consumer behavior.

Second, we only looked at Ben & Jerry's American profile throughout a three-year period. Further studies ought to explore whether this positive consumer response exists in markets other than the primary one for Ben & Jerry's, such as the United Kingdom, Italy, Australia, or New Zealand; additionally, a larger time span should be considered to increase the data's generalizability.

Finally, the potential constitutive elements of the authenticity detected from Ben & Jerry's will have to be analyzed and studied in detail by future research because Ben & Jerry's can be an interesting case study of authentic brand activism. Specifically, we suggest that future research should investigate not so much the importance of authenticity in brand activism strategy but rather how to generate this authenticity, which brands may or may not be activists, and the elements upon which this corporate decision should be made. This is crucial to understanding if a brand can engage in activism and how it can do so, considering that brand activism is not a possible action for all brands (Korschun, 2021).

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