

The Impact of Brand Presence on Consumer Perceptions of Controversial and Noncontroversial Topics

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Abstract

Considering recent events, there has been a growing concern regarding the consequences for brands that take a stand in controversial matters. However, little attention has been given to the potential implications of brand involvement in noncontroversial matters. This study aims to explore the effects of brand presence in both turbulent and non-turbulent waters. Drawing from a marketing perspective, we delve into the subjective perceptions of consumers, considering their cognitive processes, emotions, personal experiences, and cultural backgrounds. Cognitive processing is identified as a vital factor in facilitating consumers' comprehension and interpretation of brand messages. Additionally, emotions and cultural values play significant roles in shaping consumers' perspectives on controversial topics. Social interactions and peer dynamics further contribute to consumers' perceptions and alignment with viewpoints. Through an experimental study, we examine the influence of controversy levels and brand presence on consumers' perceptions of both the topic and the brand itself. Our findings highlight that consumers tend to perceive branded content associated with controversial topics as more likely to elicit irritation. Notably, the presence of a brand intensifies the perceived disturbance of controversial topics, while noncontroversial topics are considered more disturbing in the absence of a brand. This research sheds light on the intricate relationship between brand presence, consumer perceptions, and controversy, providing valuable insights for brand strategists navigating both turbulent and non-turbulent waters.

Keywords: brand activism; brand authenticity; controversy; consumers perception; activism.

1. INTRODUCTION

The most recent definition of Marketing includes “society at large” as one of the main stakeholders for Marketing (AMA, 2022), and it is a role that Marketing must fulfill to help societies improve over time (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020; Sidibe, 2020). However, recent cases such as Nike’s Kaepernick and Gillette’s antitoxic masculinity campaigns (Kim et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020) suggest that consumers may react negatively when there is an incongruence of values between what the brand stands for and consumers’ values.

One would expect less controversial topics (i.e., environmental concerns) to lead to a less turbulent discussion and impact than more controversial topics (i.e., gender identity, LGBTQIA+). However, this difference needs to be addressed in the literature, and this is the focus of this study. What the authors mean by controversy needs to be clarified, as their definition does not specifically define the specific characteristics of controversy and if it only needs to be a little controversy to classify as brand activism.

We begin by briefly reviewing the literature on the main concepts of brand activism and different levels of controversy. Then we present the results of one experimental study we conducted to test how different levels of controversy may lead to different outcomes in consumers’ perception of brands investing in activist choices in the market. Our results show that consumers often expect brands to take a stand on controversial topics, and they possibly attribute a positive impact on brand image.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Vredenburg et al. (2020) proposed a definition for brand activism that differentiates it from Cause Marketing, Corporate Social Marketing, and Advocacy Advertising - similar and earlier versions of classification for brands addressing societal issues – specifically because in Brand Activism, brands choose to take a stand and speak up their brand voices on controversial topics (such as racism, gender equality, LGBTQIA+, among others), generating a mix of different reactions amongst consumers. In their proposed framework, consumers’ responses may vary from delight to outrage, depending on how these values are intertwined.

Looking deeper into this definition, we see two points that need further exploration to be better understood in marketing literature. One is the definition of controversial and how scholars can address this concept when analyzing and discussing brand activism. The second point to address is if there is a way to measure – or at least consider – different levels of controversy. Topics may be too much or too little controversial, and these differences may lead to different outcomes for brands that take a stand related to these matters.

2.1. DEFINITION OF CONTROVERSY

Defining what is controversy is a complex task, as it entails different perspectives. One common perception of controversy is that it is defined by the hegemonic ideology (Camicia, 2008) as they would help define the norms in which consumers – and people – live. As we are discussing from a marketing perspective, it is important to include consumers’ perception of controversy, as they are the ones we are interested in understanding if and how much one topic may be controversial. We are adopting, thus, a subjective understanding, interpretation, and evaluation perspective that individuals have regarding issues that elicit diverse and often conflicting perspectives, opinions, and emotions. It refers to how consumers perceive, process, and make sense of controversial subjects based on their beliefs, values, attitudes, experiences, and sociocultural context (Treise et al., 1994; Gupta & Gould, 1997; Jennings et al., 2015).

We first need to consider the **subjectivity** of consumers’ perceptions, influenced by their unique cognitive processes, emotions, and personal experiences. It varies from person to person and may be shaped by their perspectives and biases. One controversial topic is, thus, related to consumers’ subjective beliefs and norms. One study that addressed how subjectivity influences consumer behavior was conducted by Alsaad (2021). It found evidence to support the hypothesis that consumers act according to their subjective norms when there is a strong ethical identification. We recall the “Share a Coke” campaign, where Coca-Cola printed different popular names in their cans of Coke and Diet Coke, prompting consumers to buy the product when they found their names on a can of Coke. Let us look for examples of treating subjectivity influencing consumer behavior.

How consumers process the messages is also relevant when discussing the subjective perception of controversy, as consumers need to process the information to understand and interpret the message. Their **cognitive process of a message** is thus important to include in the discussion of consumers' perception of a controversy. On that matter, Kitchen et al. (2014) proposed an intricate model to understand consumers' elaboration of messages. Creating catchy phrases, songs, and sounds is used by marketers as a resource to ease consumers' cognition and elaboration processes. One global example is McDonald's "I am loving it" campaign.

Consumers' emotional response is also one relevant topic to include in the discussion, as controversial topics often evoke strong emotions in consumers. These emotions, such as anger, fear, empathy, or excitement, can influence how individuals perceive and evaluate the topic, shaping their attitudes and behavioral responses. This is a broad topic that has been extensively discussed in the literature. Schindler et al. (2017) extensively reviewed aesthetic consumption, including emotions, and proposed a tool to measure aesthetic emotion. Nike's "Dream Crazier" campaign uses emotion to connect with consumers and improve their relationship with the brand.

Consumers' underlying **values, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds** significantly shape their perception of controversial topics. These factors can act as filters through which information is processed, and judgments are made. Hassan et al. (2022) conducted an extensive literature review on how ethics influence consumer behavior, showing that cultural values play a decisive role in consumers' perception of any marketing tactics and actions and, therefore, maybe a part of the discussion of consumers' perception of a controversy. The Body Shop is an established beauty brand that, since its entrance to the market, has focused on its position against animal testing in the Cosmetics and Beauty Industry, appealing to consumers' ethical and moral values.

Social interactions and group dynamics can influence **consumers' perceptions of controversial topics**. Social norms, peer pressure, and conformity can impact how individuals perceive and align themselves with certain viewpoints or positions. Several studies have addressed how peer pressure influences consumer behavior (e.g., Johnstone & Hopper, 2016; Huang et al., 2012), and it is also expected to influence consumers' perception of a controversial topic.

When considering the definition of consumers' perspective of controversy, it is essential to include consumers' subjectivity, cultural norms, cognitive processing, peer influence, and their values, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds, as they likely impact the way consumers perceive, process, and signify the messages they receive.

2.2. RANGE OF TOPICS THAT MAY BE CONTROVERSIAL IN THE MARKETING ARENA.

When discussing contentious subjects within the marketing field, a wide range of potential topics emerges that can be deemed controversial. We have meticulously chosen eight distinct topics to explore, accompanied by real-world marketing examples that exemplify how brands adeptly navigate through these intricate waters.

- **Ethical Considerations:** A crucial aspect involves delving into the ethical implications associated with marketing practices, encompassing deceptive advertising, data privacy concerns, targeting vulnerable populations, and promoting potentially harmful products or services. Brands must carefully address advertising to children and substance-dependent consumers, as well as privacy matters and marketing products or services that could potentially harm consumers. An example that sparked substantial debate is Spotify's "Embrace People's Weirdness" campaign, which humorously exposed peculiar user behaviors on their platform. This campaign incited discussions regarding how companies may exploit user data as valuable assets.
 - **Social Responsibility:** Another pivotal area to explore is how companies tackle social and environmental issues. This encompasses their commitment to sustainability, diversity and inclusion, labor practices, and corporate social responsibility initiatives. An exemplary illustration of a brand demonstrating social impact is TOMS Shoes' "One for One" campaign, wherein they pledged to donate shoes to a child in need for every pair purchased, exemplifying their dedication to effecting positive change in society.
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- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Respecting diverse cultures and avoiding cultural appropriation, stereotyping, or offensive representations in marketing campaigns is paramount. Nike's "Juntas Imparables" campaign serves as an enlightening example, successfully portraying Mexican and Latin American cultures while expressing support for women's rights. This video resonated with the target audience by capturing the essence of their cultural identity.
- **Gender and Sexuality:** Examining how marketing perpetuates or challenges gender norms, stereotypes, and heteronormativity is crucial to the controversy. Brands must address issues of inclusivity, representation, and LGBTQ+ rights in their advertising campaigns. Diesel's "Francesca" campaign provides an intriguing case study, showcasing the gender transition journey of a trans woman, including her religious transformation as she ultimately becomes a nun.
- **Body Image and Beauty Standards:** Exploring the impact of marketing on body image and self-esteem, including the portrayal of unrealistic beauty standards and the promotion of unhealthy practices, requires careful examination. Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign offers a fresh perspective on how the advertising industry often fosters women's insecurities about their bodies. By promoting a more authentic perception of beauty, Dove aims to empower and inspire consumers.
- **Political and Social Activism:** Analyzing the role of brands in supporting or engaging with political and social movements necessitates a comprehensive evaluation. The potential risks, benefits, and authenticity of brands taking a stance on controversial issues must be considered. Airbnb's "We Accept" campaign exemplifies how a brand responds to immigration policies while promoting inclusivity by featuring diverse individuals. This campaign raised awareness and emphasized the importance of acceptance in society.
- **Greenwashing and Sustainability Claims:** Thoroughly discussing the potential for misleading or exaggerated environmental claims by companies and the significance of authentic sustainability efforts is essential. H&M's "Conscious Collection" campaign, highlighting its endeavors to promote sustainable fashion through organic cotton and recycled materials, faced criticism for potentially stimulating an increase in clothing consumption. In response, H&M launched the "Bring It On" campaign, reaffirming its commitment to collecting all used products in its stores and responsibly recycling them.
- **Targeting Children and Vulnerable Populations:** Scrutinizing the ethical concerns associated with marketing to children encompasses examining manipulative techniques, unhealthy food marketing, and the potential impact on their well-being. McDonald's "Happy Meal" campaigns, featuring healthier menu options and educational initiatives that promote exercise and nutrition for children, exemplify how brands can proactively address these concerns and contribute to positive change.

The marketing arena presents a myriad of controversial topics that warrant careful consideration. The selected examples offer valuable insights into how brands effectively navigate these complex issues. By thoroughly exploring these areas, marketers can understand the intricate dynamics involved, enabling them to make informed decisions that align with ethical values and societal expectations.

Does it mean brands must always address controversial items to be considered activists? Brands must be cautious when affirming their values in all the topics society is interested in, or is it specific to controversial matters? This question is especially important in a context where Generation Z has become the largest one in society. One of their main characteristics is expecting brands to act positively toward constructing a better world (Spitznagel, 2020). This research aims to answer questions like "How does a brand know if they can enter into the discussion of a specific matter?" and "What makes consumers perceive a brand as authentic when taking a stand in specific matters?"

In this work, we discuss if brand authenticity and image are affected by the presence of activism in a brand campaign on highly controversial and low-controversial topics. We selected these constructs as they are most connected to brand activism discussion in the literature.

2.3. BRAND AUTHENTICITY

Brand authenticity is a vastly discussed topic in the literature (Key et al., 2021; Sibai et al., 2021; Södergren, 2021) and may offer a valid lens for this discussion. Brand authenticity refers to the genuineness, transparency, and credibility a brand exhibits in its interactions with consumers and stakeholders (Key et al., 2021). It refers to the alignment between a brand's identity, values, and actions, creating a sense of trust and reliability among its consumers. Authenticity is especially relevant in a competitive marketplace (Södergren, 2021), where consumers increasingly seek meaningful connections and experiences with the brands they support. It goes beyond surface-level marketing tactics and extends to the core of a brand's purpose, culture, and relationships. An authentic brand stays true to its essence, consistently delivering on its promises and remaining loyal to its values, even in the face of challenges or changing market trends.

Some elements contribute to brand authenticity: Purpose and Values: An authentic brand has a clear sense of purpose and operates according to a set of core values that guide its decisions and actions. This purpose goes beyond profit-making and reflects a genuine commitment to positively impacting society or the lives of its customers. In other words, a brand must invest in showcasing its values in the topics they choose to support, and they need to be consistent with how they position itself in the market. One of the greatest examples we can find in the market is Patagonia. Their values are in the core communication strategy they offer to the market. To be sustainable is a key value at the center of all marketing and communication strategies Patagonia offers to its customer base and the market at large.

Another element that is essential to be seen as authentic is consistency. Consistency builds trust and reinforces the brand's identity in the minds of consumers, and it also helps shape consumers' expectations. To be consistent means delivering a consistent brand experience across all touchpoints, including messaging, visuals, customer service, and product quality. Apple is one of the most consistent brands in the marketplace, as its product lines, communication, and marketing strategy are aligned and behave in an expected manner. The experience of owning an Apple product is the same, regardless of the product you use. They are all integrated into one system, consistent with their services, in-store experience, and communication strategy.

To be an authentic brand, it is mandatory to be transparent in its communications and operations. Brands must be open and honest about their processes, ingredients, sourcing, and any other relevant information consumers may value. Transparency builds trust and fosters a sense of credibility and reliability, especially if consumers are experts in finding information about the brands in the online environment. Any noise they find in the communication process reverberates quickly in social media. ISTO, a Portuguese brand, is the first 100% transparent brand. They expose all their costs to produce and distribute their products, including sensitive information such as the name and contacts of their supplier and the profit margin they operate in the distribution channels.

Authentic brands prioritize their customers' needs and strive to create meaningful connections. They actively listen to customer feedback, engage in open dialogue, and continuously improve their products or services based on customer insights. Authentic brands aim to build strong and lasting relationships by putting the customer at the center. Amazon is known in the market. They operate as a customer-centered brand, offering excellent levels of consumer service and constantly innovating in providing different formats of service and customer experience.

Storytelling is one of the key elements that brands use to build and foster authenticity. Creating stories where their values are intertwined with their personality is a valuable tool to be perceived as authentic by their customers. They ought to find ways to create and communicate a compelling story that resonates with their audience. They effectively communicate their brand narrative, origins, and values, allowing consumers to connect emotionally. Storytelling helps create an authentic brand identity and fosters a sense of shared values and experiences. Nike uses their tagline – Just Do It – as a connector of different stories they tell in their Marketing and Communication strategies. It began in 1984 when they first released the tagline to the market in an advertisement where a 75 years-old man talks about their running routine, showing a just-do-it attitude.

While consistency is crucial, authentic brands also understand the importance of evolving and adapting to changing market dynamics and consumer preferences. They stay true to their core values but are willing to

embrace innovation, respond to feedback, and improve their offerings to remain relevant. Levi's is one example of such adaptability. Their Marketing and Communication strategies adapt to the demand of the youth generation of more than 100 years old. Their main product, 501®, has been in the market since 1890, with hundreds of different commercials and campaigns adapted to the youth market's needs.

To be authentic, brands need to establish a unique and genuine relationship with their customers. Consumers are more likely to trust, support, and advocate for authentic brands because they perceive them as reliable, credible, and aligned with their values. Authenticity is essential to resonate with an activist campaign.

3. METHODOLOGY

We conducted a study employing a 2 (brand x no brand) x 2 (controversial high x low controversial) design, where participants were randomly assigned to different scenarios. Our objective was to manipulate high controversy by using gender equality and gender issues as the topic of manipulation in the study.

This commercial explicitly expresses Gillette's stance against toxic masculinity, which generated significant consumer backlash. In the brand-high controversy condition, we utilized Gillette's "The Best a man can be" commercial (<https://bit.ly/exp1Brand>) as the brand-related stimulus. On the other hand, in the high controversy, no brand condition, we employed the commercial for the #PowerlessQueen movement (<https://bit.ly/expNoBrand>). This commercial juxtaposes the game of Chess, where the Queen holds significant power, with the unfortunate reality that women in India lack power, facing discrimination and limited access to education and independent careers. The message conveyed is that society suffers when women lack power.

We focused on sustainable and socially responsible production issues for the low controversial scenarios. In the brand condition, we presented H&M's "Bring It On" commercial (<https://bit.ly/expLowControv>), encouraging consumers to return their used items for reutilization, reducing their environmental impact. As for the no-brand condition, we showcased the "2 Euro T-shirt" commercial (<https://bit.ly/expNoControv2>), emphasizing that consumers, aware of the unethical production practices behind cheap clothing, opt not to purchase them. The duration of each commercial ranged from 93 to 118 seconds, and participants were randomly assigned to one of the conditions, watching one of the commercials at the beginning of the experiment.

Gen Z consumers are recognized for their critical perspective on the role of brands in society (Rue, 2018), often expecting brands to take a stance on relevant social issues. We recruited respondents from undergraduate courses, resulting in a sample predominantly composed of Gen Z consumers with an average age of around 21 years. Participants were asked to provide their perceptions of brands before and after watching the video, including the brands featured in the experiment. Additionally, to account for potential covariates, participants responded to scales assessing ecological behavior, gender issues, and regulatory focus.

4. RESULTS

We collected 192 responses. Seven needed to be completed, four did not pass the attention check, and we had 181 valid responses. Respondents were mainly women (67.4%), the mean age was 22, and 91.7% were from the Gen Z generation (166 respondents from 18-26).

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to analyze the main effects of brand presence and topic nature and the interaction effect between these variables on participants' ratings of "it bothers people." The results demonstrated a statistically significant interaction effect ($p < 0.001$) between consumers' perceptions of controversy and brand involvement. In the No Brand condition, participants rated the noncontroversial topic moderately bothersome ($M = 4.7$). However, in the Brand condition, participants rated the same noncontroversial topic as significantly more bothersome, indicating a higher perceived level of controversy.

Results from our study indicate that brands should actively engage in controversial matters, and the extent to which they align with the discussed topic influences consumers' perception of brand authenticity. Analyzing the data using ANOVA, we identified a statistically significant interaction between brand presence and

controversial subjects ($F=8.18, p=0.005$) when participants were asked about their opinions regarding brands taking a stance on controversial matters and their perception of the discomfort experienced by consumers ($F=18.75, p<0.001$).

5. DISCUSSION

The observed statistically significant interaction effect between consumers' perception of controversy and brand involvement suggests that a brand's presence significantly influences the degree to which a noncontroversial topic is perceived as controversial. The finding that participants in the Brand condition rated the noncontroversial topic as significantly more bothersome highlights the power of brand presence in altering consumers' perception of the topic's controversial nature.

This outcome could be attributed to several factors. First, the association of a brand with a particular topic might trigger pre-existing beliefs or attitudes held by consumers, leading to a heightened perception of a controversy. Second, the presence of a well-established brand may increase the salience and credibility of the message, making consumers more receptive to perceiving the topic as controversial. Additionally, including brand elements in the commercial might elicit emotional responses that further contribute to perceiving the topic as more bothersome.

These findings have practical implications for marketers and advertisers. They underscore the importance of carefully considering the potential consequences of associating a brand with sensitive or noncontroversial topics. Marketers should know that brand presence can significantly impact consumers' perception of controversy, influencing their attitudes, behavior, and brand evaluations. Responsible and ethical branding practices should ensure alignment with consumers' expectations and values.

Results from our study indicate that brands should actively engage in controversial matters, and the extent to which they align with the discussed topic influences consumers' perception of brand authenticity. Analyzing the data using ANOVA, we identified a statistically significant interaction between brand presence and controversial subjects ($F=8.18, p=0.005$) when participants were asked about their opinions regarding brands taking a stance on controversial matters and their perception of the discomfort experienced by consumers ($F=18.75, p<0.001$).

However, the interaction did not reach statistical significance when participants were informed that their perception of brands improved after taking a stand ($F=0.21, p=0.65$). Interestingly, respondents demonstrated an overall improved perception of brands across all scenarios when the brands took a stand on the respective issues. This finding suggests that consumers favor brands that actively participate in controversial topics.

The interaction between brand presence and controversial topics significantly influenced the dependent variable related to the level of disturbance experienced by consumers ($F(1,181)= 18.75, p<0.001$). This indicates that when a brand is present, controversial topics tend to be perceived as more disturbing, while noncontroversial topics are considered more disturbing in the absence of a brand. Thus, a brand's presence may lead consumers to view controversial subjects as more unsettling.

Furthermore, the results indicate that participants perceived that brands should involve themselves in the controversial scenarios ($F=5.56, p=0.019$), rating brands higher in the noncontroversial scenarios.

These findings provide valuable insights and suggest avenues for further research. Future studies should explore the specific conditions under which brands should take a stand, delving deeper into the factors influencing consumer perceptions of brand authenticity in controversial contexts. By better understanding these dynamics, marketers can make informed decisions about their brand's involvement in societal debates, ensuring they align with consumer expectations and enhance brand-consumer relationships.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was conducted exclusively with Generation Z consumers, which may be a limitation that generalizes other generations of consumers as a complex and risky task. If this study were replicated with consumers from different generations, the results would be more interesting and compelling.

For future research, we suggest further investigating a more in-depth perspective on consumer attitudes and perceptions towards brands that stance their positions in the market, trying to understand the underlying mechanisms that explain different outcomes brands may expect from consumers. Future studies must investigate the effectiveness of different approaches brands can employ when addressing controversial matters, considering factors such as messaging styles, tonalities, and creative executions. Another potential topic to explore is the role of brand authenticity in navigating controversial topics, as consumers seek genuine and credible brand involvement. However, the way these concepts interact needs to be clarified in the literature. By examining these interconnected areas, brand managers and marketing scholars can gain insights into authentically connecting with consumers while effectively navigating the complexities of controversial issues.

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