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Brand Activism: Toward an Integrative Literature Review

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Abstract

Brand activism the deliberate public engagement of brands on social, political, or environmental issues beyond their commercial positioning has generated a rapidly expanding body of research. Yet the field remains theoretically fragmented: studies accumulate empirical findings without connecting them into a coherent explanatory structure, and two central constructs, perceived authenticity and perceived legitimacy, are systematically conflated despite referring to distinct mechanisms. This paper presents an integrative literature review conducted on a corpus of 97 peer-reviewed articles drawn from Scopus (2019–2026), guided by the methodological frameworks of Torraco (2005) and Snyder (2019). The review yields an integrative conceptual framework organized around the consumer response continuum ranging from active acceptance to active backlash. Perceived authenticity the consumer's judgment of the sincerity of brand engagement and perceived legitimacy the socially granted right of the brand to take a position are identified as the two central mechanisms whose interaction determines consumer response. Four configurations are derived from their combination. Three moderating variables shape these mechanisms: brand-cause fit, consumer social and political identity, and cultural context. The latter represents the most significant gap in the existing literature, as virtually all empirical studies are conducted in Western contexts, leaving non-Western consumer markets entirely unaddressed. A five-point research agenda identifies priority directions for future empirical work, including the longitudinal dynamics of backlash and the role of brand silence as a strategic variable.

Keywords: Authenticity; Backlash; Consumer response; Legitimacy; Woke washing