

The Complexities of Political Engagement and Consumer Response to Woke Design

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Abstract

What happens when brands engage in activism and involve themselves in the socio-political lives of their consumers? The rise of social issues and political messages in brand design is an emerging topic for the Design discipline. Designers are asked to communicate more complex ideologies in products and advertising campaigns. Designing-in values, individuality and political stance is becoming more commonplace though the impact of such efforts on consumers is mixed. This study explores the complexity of political engagement to woke design. A series of case studies discussed in this paper show that when brands are involved in activism, it impacts their consumers, reputation, and products. The analysis of evidence extracted from case studies indicates that activism campaigns have polarizing effects on consumers, increasing the brands' reputation. Moreover, a visual model mapping the dynamics of activism in brand design is presented to allow an assessment of the phenomenon.

Keywords

Political engagement
Activism
Brand design
Woke design
Consumer response

Introduction

In an age where big business is seen by many as an “irresponsible steward” and consumers are demanding more authenticity and value alignment from brands, the rise of ‘woke’ design is apparent (Carroll & Brown, 2018). Consumers want to buy from brands that align with their identity and in so doing they signify to others what group they belong to. “Cool consumerism” is powered by a drive to avoid conformity and even express criticism of capitalism (Heath, 2001). Indeed, Heath argues that anti-consumerism shopping has now become the central ideology of the capitalist system (2001).

While ethical consumerism began with a focus on global inequalities and sustainability, it has more recently moved to embrace counterculture and political spheres in response to Gen Z’s more radical outlook (Gutfreund, 2016). This positioning by companies within a political debate is termed brand activism and further research into this area has been called for (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

Designers are therefore required to communicate more complex ideologies within products, packaging, branding and advertising campaigns (Zajzon et al., 2017) in an effort to attract ‘cool consumers’ and avoid being cast on the wrong side of right vs wrong in an increasingly moralised arena. Designing-in values, individuality and even political stance is becoming more commonplace, though the impact of such efforts on consumers can be mixed (Mirzaei et al., 2022).

Consumer backlash in the form of boycotting or countercampaigns on social media is a risk of such activities, particularly where there is a perceived lack of authenticity (Carroll & Brown, 2018).

Aim and Methodology

This study reviews literature relating to woke design, brand activism and authenticity to examine the impact on the consumer-brand relationship. The analysis of works produced by notable scholars in the field of Design is used to provide consistency to the theories considered for this work. Four brand activism campaigns are later used to examine relevant patterns and designed elements including products, advertising campaigns and packaging, as well as criteria for design activism. Campaigns were selected based on the following five criteria:

- The brand must be western, and the campaign released within the past 15 years must be documented by the brand, for data comparison with Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020);
- The brand must produce clear evidence of design; or the impact of the brand campaign is implemented through a recognisable design output, such as communication design, new products, etc.;
- The goal of the Campaign must be pro-social and communicated through the brand’s products/services;
- The main industry of each brand must be different, to broaden the findings of this study;
- The campaign must have been discussed by external authors, close to its release. These are used to gain a less biased insight on the campaign’s effect on the brands, consumers, and reputation.

In order to select the brand campaigns, the terms “brands and activism”, “brand activism campaigns” and “brand activism” were inputted into Google. From there, a list of campaigns was collected from the first two pages of the results of each term. The selected brands included outdoor clothing company Patagonia, Lush cosmetics, Starbucks coffee and Ben and Jerry’s ice cream. These case studies were analysed and presented under the themes of perceived authenticity, design decisions, level of controversy and consumer response.

The case study approach enabled us to examine the multi-faceted nature of brand-activism and the complex relationship between design, consumer brand relationships, activism and authenticity. The real-life nature of the campaigns provides a snapshot of a fast-evolving area of marketing, branding, and design. Findings are synthesised into a graphic proposing a model for interpreting the relationships within brand activism and design.

Literature Review

Branding and Design

Brands represent and promote individuals, products, and companies. The term “brand” encompasses any features (name, term, design, symbol etc.) that identify one seller’s goods or services as distinct from those of another (Slade-Brooking, 2016). Wheeler and Millman (2017) define brand identity as a tangible asset that “fuels recognition; amplifies differentiation; combines disparate elements into systems; appeals to the senses”. To motivate consumers to purchase its products/services, a brand needs to build upon its relationship with its targeted consumers (Slade-Brooking, 2016).

Consumer Brand Relationships

Literature on consumer-brand relationships has identified the diverse types of relationships consumers have with brands (Gómez-Suárez et al., 2017). Our purchase choices are not only influenced by our basic needs but by our social pressures, aspirations, and desires (Slade-Brooking, 2016). Thus, the products and services consumed are a representation of the consumer’s identities, thoughts, and feelings.

Consumer-Brand Identification (CBI) refers to the phenomenon that occurs when an individual relates to a brand because of its unique properties. Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) define CBI as a “consumer’s perceived state of oneness with a brand”.

Brand Activism/Woke Activism Branding

In Design, the concept of activism has been discussed by notable authors such as Carl DiSalvo, Harun Kaygan and Guy Julier in relation to the cultural transition toward social design.

Kaygan and Julier (2013) discuss the notion of design activism as an emerging design practice imagined and practised in worldwide localities that can shape entire design cultures; the idea discussed in the work of these authors is important because the concept of activism is linked to a new culture that must be embraced in order to transition toward more holistic designs, as well as to the need to influence the design community to develop social and economic change. The work of Kaygan and Julier shows similarities with those by Victor Papanek (1985) — design interventions for the weakest population — and by Ezio Manzini (2019) — design for social innovation. Conversely, DiSalvo (2010) proposes the concept of “agonistic pluralism” in relation to the wider idea of design for democracy, as a model of democracy grounded in productive conflict or contest. DiSalvo’s work is important because it articulates the concept of social design from the perspective of democracy and political design: when designers adopt informed design practices to enrich the significance of a design intervention with political meanings and foster democratic conditions. Dissensus, provocation, and contestation as models of participation are collateral aspects discussed by Knutz and Markussen (2020) in relation to DiSalvo’s work as applied to participatory design.

We use the term “woke design” to describe instances in which designerly skill has been applied to cultural and consumerist assets in a way that signifies or contributes to the “woke-ness” of a brand, product, or service. It is interesting to examine how woke design fits into the spheres of design activism, consumer cultures and political design because, particularly in the realm of brand activism, design skill is a key component. The drive of brands to align with gen Z’s politically engaged outlook can be seen as a sales tactic or a method of change-making within a neoliberalist system. Either way the tools of design are central to the success of such actions.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘woke’ as alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice. Woke design is more self-conscious and consumer-focused than the type of activist design described by Manzini (2019), and it could also be argued as suggested by Julier (2013), who defines design activism as spanning both a utilitarian and political action.

As Julier points out (2013), activist design is able to exploit the neoliberalist environment of consumer markets to “recycle and program” in order to achieve change.

With regard to brand activism, in 2016 the Marketing Science Institute recognized the decision as to whether brands should court activism as an emerging critical issue (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). A view reflected by the increase in brands such as Nike, Coca-Cola and Gillet taking stands on socio-political issues (Peters & Silverman, 2016). Activism has been defined as “an emerging marketing tactic for brands seeking to stand out in a fragmented marketplace by taking stances on social and political issues” (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 444).

Social design intends to bring change to pursue collective and social ends. Armstrong et al. (2014, p. 15) assert that “social design highlights the concepts and activities enacted within participatory approaches to researching, generating and realising new ways to make change happen towards collective and social ends, rather than predominantly commercial objectives”. Victor and Sylvia Margolin (2002) discuss the value of social design in allowing companies and designers to work with human welfare, and address how they can play a significant role in developing collaborative processes to make social interventions. The value of the social aspects is further reinforced by Margolin’s work (2002) that links the value of a social-oriented design practice operated by designers that enable bottom-up interventions linking people, contexts, design artefacts; accordingly, designers are seen as informed facilitators of radical changes (through educational pathways). Therefore, social design is a design practice that includes other domains such as: social entrepreneurship, design activism and socially responsible design (Armstrong et al., 2014).

Researchers such as Chen et al., (2016) and Zajzon et al., (2017) acknowledge that social design stems from the writings of authors such as Victor Papanek (1985), Victor Margolin (2015) and Nigel Whiteley (1994). There is growing international interest from companies (IDEO, Think Public) and researchers (Markussen, 2013; Julier, 2013; Manzini, 2015; Chen et al., 2016).

A more literal example of design’s capacity to bring social and political change can be seen from the Two-tailed Dog Party’s (MKKP) billboard campaign Fig. 1. From 2015 to 2016, MKKP crowd-funded a billboard campaign against Viktor Orbán’s anti-immigrant referendum on a mandatory resettlement quota which would have given Orbán the power to reject the European Union’s refugee distribution plan (Zajzon et al., 2017; Nelson, 2018). As a result, this encouraged Hungarian residents to vote against Orbán.



Fig. 1
MKKP’s billboard against
Viktor Orbán’s anti-im-
migration referendum
(Karáth, 2016).

Trust is courted by brands as a desirable element of consumers' relationship with them. The perceived authenticity of a brand is becoming increasingly important in a market in which cynical consumers can voice their criticisms and call brands out on disingenuous campaigns. Indeed, consumers that trust a brand to do the 'right thing' in terms of social issues are more likely to advocate and defend that brand than if they trust it on product quality (Ries et al., 2019).

Mirzaei et. al.'s 2022 study investigated consumer responses to two woke branding campaigns from Gillette razors and Nike sportswear. They analysed online audience commentary and identified various reasons for a perception of inauthenticity. They propose a conceptual model for authenticity of woke branding based on six authenticity dimensions Fig. 2.

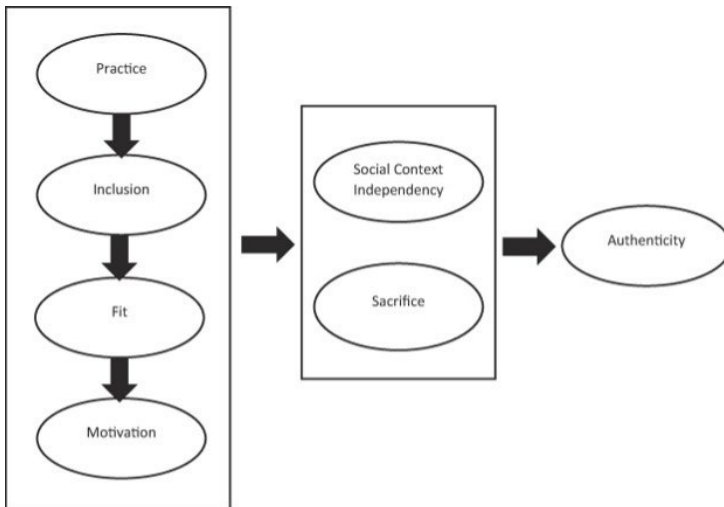


Fig. 2
Woke activism authenticity framework (WAAF),
(Mirzaei et al., 2022).

Design plays an important role in the pursuit of successful, authentic-feeling woke branding. Socio-political products, ad campaigns and branding all attempt to convey, through design, that they represent a stance on a particular political issue and seek to persuade the audience to join them in that stance.

Graphic design and, one could argue, product design serve four purposes: to convey information, persuasion, decoration and "magic" (Barnard, 2005). The rise of woke brand campaigns by companies requires designers to tell more complex, value-driven stories and evoke a sense of outrage, comradery and counter-cultural energy.

In 1985 Buchanan viewed design as a commentator on social issues "Design is an art of thought directed to practical action through the persuasiveness of objects and, therefore, design involves the vivid expression of competing ideas about social life." (Buchanan, 1985). It seems unlikely that he could have imagined how far this function would develop forty years later.

Barnes (2017) examined the way that design can be used to mislead the consumer through inauthentic branding in her 2017 study of Tesco's redesign of their value food range. Tesco were widely criticised for deliberately giving the impression that their

ranges of meat, fruit and vegetables were coming from tangible farm locations. The packaging design strengthened this story through textures evocative of farmers' markets, copy writing that suggested a connection to single farm suppliers and logo elements with a 'rural country show' aesthetic. It is clear that skilful design is a powerful tool in conveying a clear, value-led message within woke branding.

Case Studies

Patagonia: Don't Buy This Jacket

Patagonia's 2011 *Don't Buy This Jacket* campaign detailed the company's socio-political stance on consumerism and its impact on the environment Fig. 3. The advertisement encouraged consumers to reconsider buying the R2 jacket due to its environmental impact, despite the use of recycled materials within it. It also aims to encourage consumers to use its Worn Wear platform, a repair service intended to extend the life of Patagonia's products (Patagonia, 2021). The design of the campaign mainly uses visual communication strategies to generate cultural and social frictions in consumers. While corporate attention is on the production of more durable products, the marketing and communication codes were designed to trigger unconscious reactions that stimulate the cultural side of the purchasing experience. In essence, the campaign juxtaposes contradictory aspects: the quality of the product and the antithetical message of not buying.

In terms of market results, this campaign produced a rise in Patagonia's revenue, reputation and CBI, and sales increased over 30%. Hwang et al. (2016) reported that the campaign lowered the purchasing intentions of consumers when compared to Patagonia's past advertisements, fortifying the effectiveness of the campaign itself.

The use of design methods resulted in the creation of new services, which incorporated activism within Patagonia's brand identity, as brand products and services are elements that contribute to its identity (Wheeler, 2013). Furthermore, the campaign also positively impacted the brand's reputation and relationship with consumers — pro-company effects.

DON'T BUY THIS JACKET



Fig. 3
Patagonia's 'Don't Buy
This Jacket' campaign
(Patagonia, 2021).

The Ben & Jerry's 2018 *Pecan Resist* campaign aimed to combat Donald Trump's regressive policies on racial and gender equity, immigration, climate change and LGBTQ rights, issues the company declares to be at the core of their social mission (Ben & Jerry's, 2018). The campaign utilises both intangible messaging and tangible actions to achieve its goals. The tangible commitments are the donations made — over \$100,000 towards NGOs — and the production of a limited-edition Pecan Resist flavour. By using intelligent graphical design strategies — i.e. the colour palette and graphical images to reflect Ben & Jerry's diverse base of consumers — the brand also recalled relevant social values such as inclusivity and democracy.

In terms of the effects on consumers and reputation, five days after the campaign was released a 4.74% increase in the brand's stock was reported (Knoebel, 2018) suggesting *Resist* had positively impacted the brand's reputation with consumers.

Pecan Resist uses engaging visual communication to evoke cultural feelings and visual links in consumers, such as tribalism, local values, cultural heritage, etc. The overall experience produced by the redesign of the packaging is clear proof of how the political message behind the campaign can produce a rebranding of packaging. In terms of design strategy, the work of Ben & Jerry abides by the core principles of social design and political design, due to its positions clearly antithetical to the top-down governmental positions. *Pecan Resist* is therefore a design activism campaign, because it voices its pro-social stance through design in a way that seeks to raise awareness of Ben & Jerry's pro-social mission against regressive policies. By donating to NGOs and designing a new product to proclaim its stance, *Resist* further built the brand's identity and activism. The campaign also affected the brand's relationship with consumers, due to the controversial topics it explored.

Lush: Spy Cops

In 2016, Lush launched an activism campaign entitled *Spy Cops* to bring awareness to the crimes committed by undercover police units when infiltrating activist groups [Fig. 4]. The campaign was inspired by a public enquiry initiated by Theresa May (Lush, 2018) and ran for several weeks until the company cancelled it due to threats against its employees.

Upon its release, mentions of the brand spiked by 2331% on Twitter; most were negative, because people perceived the campaign as an attack against all police officers due to the graphic image of a uniformed policeman used on the poster (Belam, 2018).

Although early mentions of the brand were negative, *Spy Cops* later received overwhelming support from its consumers, as they continuously voiced their support on social media. This surge is further supported by brand activism literature, which reports that backlash caused by brand activism cements and increases CBI among its supporters (Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2020).

Spy Cops voiced pro-social stances through design. By using a series of graphic elements to redecorate Lush's stores, it communicates a socio-political position: the main poster displayed

two images of an officer with provocative messaging including ‘paid to lie’. The campaign is a diligent example of how visual communication elements used to convey social issues have been able to produce higher cultural engagement in a brand’s message. In terms of activism, it evoked friction in the sense of perceived safety, beyond stereotypes and a political sense of justice — as evinced by Fig. 4 *Spy Cops* was therefore considered a value-driven advertising campaign that drew immediate backlash, and was then overwhelmed with positive support from consumers. By using elements that contribute to its brand identity to voice its stance, Lush further developed its brand identity: an activist brand.



Starbucks: Hiring Refugees

In 2017, Starbucks launched the *Hiring Refugees* campaign to help the integration of displaced refugees into “new societies” and hire over 10,000 refugees by 2022 in response to Trump’s executive order (Starbucks, 2021). The campaign sought to integrate refugees by working with pro-refugee NGOs to redesign their hiring process, as well as to create more supportive services that would make it easier for refugees to enter its workforce. This impacted the brand’s identity since employees also contribute to a brand’s value and identity (Wheeler, 2013).

Although the campaign mainly resulted in the adoption of strategic messages aimed at repositioning the vision of the brand itself — standing with the weakest, as a part of a political commitment — it is an excellent example of socially inclusive design-oriented strategy aimed at improving the social and economic lives of workers and enhance the company’s reputation. Accordingly, the design of the campaign directly and indirectly influenced the corporate responsibility toward marginalised workers. Following

Fig. 4
Lush’s *Spy Cops* advertisement displayed in a shop window (Belam, 2018).

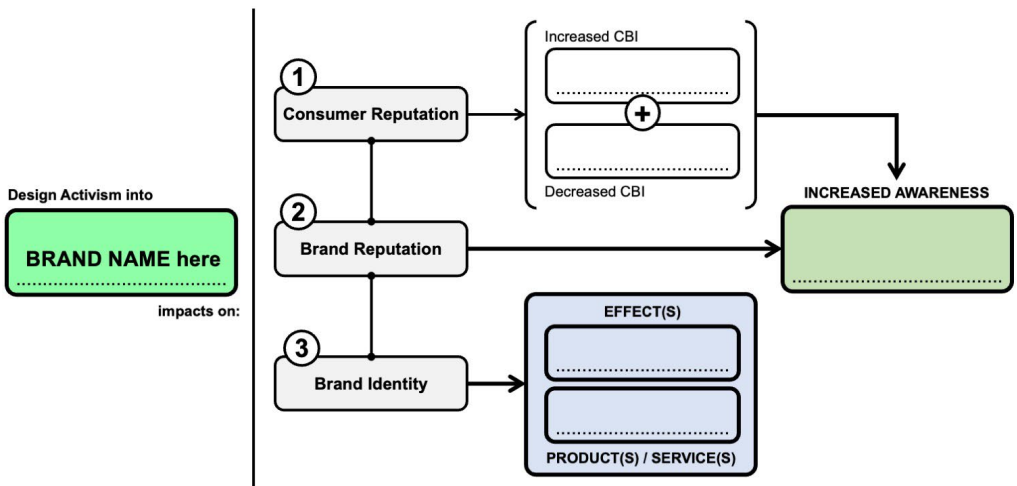
its release Starbucks was subject to a mix of negative and positive views — calls for boycotting its products were contrasted with those in support of its stance.

Hiring Refugees is a design activism campaign due to its pro-social goal of improving the social and economic lives of refugees. Furthermore, the polarised responses received by the campaign also correlate with brand activism literature (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

Interpretative Model for Brand Activism and Design

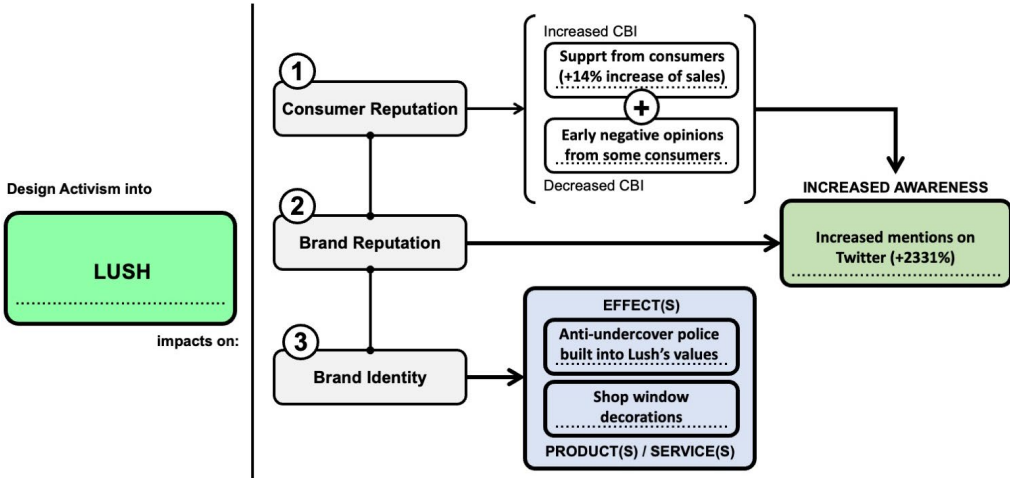
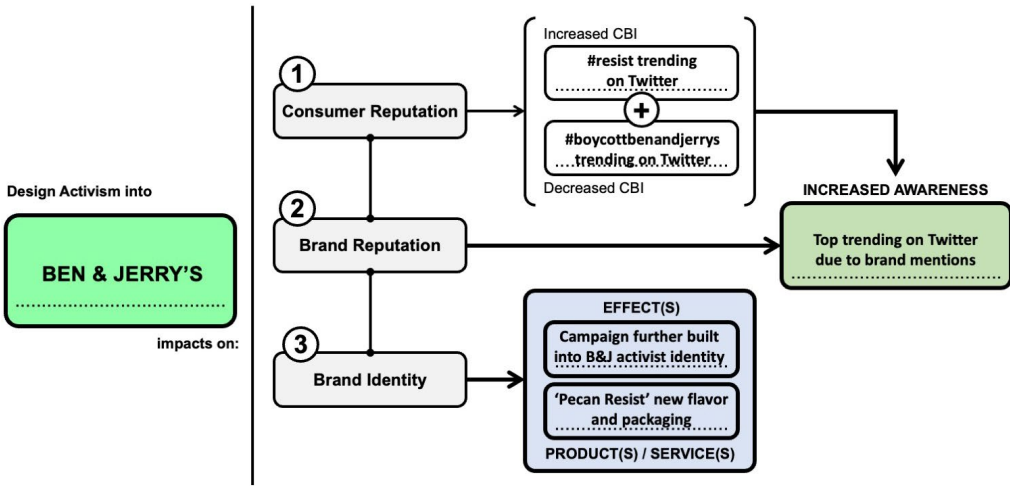
Assessing the impact of activism in branding design is paramount to understand the quality of design strategies used by companies when approaching complex social issues. Both design strategies, design outcomes (i.e. new services), and impact on CBI help organisations to map the hidden and explicit actions needed to increase awareness of social topics. Here the number of mentions on Twitter is used to gauge awareness of the issue raised and the impact on design activism in terms of igniting debate.

An interpretative model is proposed to meet the above-mentioned needs Fig. 5 (Nyarambi, 2021). It was created to help designers and brand design strategists to map the basic information behind an activism campaign. By exploring the domains of branding, CBI, brand activism and design activism, it visually represents relevant links proposed by the literature to identify the impacts produced by activism actions on a brand's relationship with consumers, its reputation and brand identity. This also constitutes a link between brand activism and design activism, which depends on the campaigns' goal and communication methods.



The model was later tested experimentally in all case studies discussed in the previous section to identify relevant design impacts Fig. 6.

Fig. 5 Interpretative model for brand activism and design (Nyarambi, 2021).



Conclusion

This paper explored the impact of political engagement on woke design. It demonstrates that international brands, even those considered to be leaders in their sectors, can take serious political stands to publicly support social causes, regardless of the potential impacts that may be generated against public opinion. Trends that emerged in the analysis of the literature and the case studies prove that brands pay great attention to this fast-growing phenomenon. Accordingly, it can be deduced that any brand can act as an 'agent for change' (indirectly deduced by Manzini, 2019) to support bottom-up issues, even those potentially aligned to support the weakest. This linkage is paramount because it reveals intriguing links between the perception of brands as money-makers and the visions

Fig. 6
Use of the interpretative model for some case studies (Nyarambi, 2021).

expressed by social design, which require forms of economic discontinuities to trigger pro-social interventions. Thus, discontinuities in the perception of brands can be produced when a pro-social campaign is implemented. In terms of design, such mutations are channelled by strategic design, which is an important means to implement activism. Visual design as a part of a strategic design intervention is also needed to coordinate the design efforts toward clear trajectories, and to avoid creating excessive anomalies in customers' feelings.

On the other hand, the analysis of literature and certain notable brand activism campaigns show that activism clearly impacts brand reputation, products and consumers. Moreover, the cultural theories and the design evidence discussed in this work further illustrate the complexity of an emerging social phenomenon that has a direct impact on design practices (Nyarambi, 2021). Woke design has clear connections with design theory, such as social design, design for democracy, political design, and marketing. From the point of view of design, there are clear indications that document how the marketing campaigns operated by different brands can generate pro-social stances while reinforcing the CBI and opening brands to take committed positions.

In terms of the impact on brand identity, early findings discussed in this work (see case studies) indicate that when brands communicate their socio-political stances, through products or services, they include activism in their brand identity: when the socio-political stance aligns with the brand's values, the campaigns inspire brand loyalty and advocacy, which are pro-company behaviours caused by high CBI (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012).

Design activism can have a polarising effect, eliciting strong responses from consumers due to the fact that they tackle socio-political issues that have not yet reached a consensus in society (Nalick et al., 2016). When brands were subject to backlash as a result of their campaigns, some consumers rallied to their support. Case studies have shown a stronger increase in CBI as consumers who agreed with the brand's stance exhibited pro-company behaviour.

Design activism, and woke design in general, is an effective method for raising awareness. Products and services are then effective tools to raise awareness and to voice brands' socio-political stances.

Finally, the proposed interpretative model helps to map the impact of activism on brand design. As documented in the paper, the model is innovative as it shows — or it requires the inclusion of — a set of elements useful for descriptive and inductive analyses. In terms of descriptive process, it clearly depicts the different aspects composing a brand activism campaign by asking researchers to indicate only those qualitative and quantitative aspects that are relevant to describe a brand activism campaign. In terms of the inductive process, it produces qualitative evidence that can help to generate quantitative effects (re CBI) resulting from activism; therefore, the model can show designers the possible nature of results in relation to the adoption of certain design strategies — what can be obtained from a given design-led action. Overall, the model shows activism entering the brand and influencing its brand

identity, reputation, and relationship with consumers, areas that are interconnected and contribute towards a brand (Wheeler, 2013). Furthermore, it simplifies the reading of relevant links.

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