

Consumers will dub activist brands as 'woke-washers' if they cannot prove moral competency

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New research shows that consumers judge 'activist brands' based on how morally competent they are perceived to be when challenging free

speech.

The report, co-authored by experts at the Business School (formerly Cass), Birkbeck, University of London and the University of Sussex Business School explains that stakeholders draw their conclusions on the biggest brands by measuring three moral skills: sensitivity, vision, and integration.

Lacking these traits, a [brand](#) raising controversy is judged as transgressing, reproducing and manipulating the boundaries of free speech. Displaying these traits proves the brand is not merely 'woke-washing'—using customers' social awareness to meet their own ends.

Based on the analysis of 113 controversies involving 18 brand companies such as Nike, Ben & Jerry's, Greenpeace, and Starbucks over the last 38 years, the report authors have created a new method of calculating whether consumers will think of an activist brand as 'real' or 'fake' based on their approach.

- Moral sensitivity—a brand must recognize the moral content of a situation as failure to do so is likely to damage customer satisfaction, customer-brand relations, and brand equity. For example, in 2014 Greenpeace activists in Peru hung a banner on the Nazca lines to appeal for renewable energy, but as this is considered a world heritage site and a Peruvian cultural symbol they were declared morally insensitive.
- Moral vision—a brand must show a clear moral vision when outlining challenges to free speech that help solve problems for markets and society as failure to do so results in brands being dubbed as 'conformists'—those who reproduce the dominant moral judgments about what is acceptable to say publicly. For example, Mattel's introduction of Barbie Entrepreneur was criticized for promoting 'unhelpful stereotype career images' in

2014, because of the brand's roots in how women are defined by appearance.

- Moral integration—a brand must have the ability to pursue their moral beliefs in all situations as failure to do so results in brands being dubbed as 'opportunists' and 'fame-seekers'—manipulating the boundaries of free speech to serve personal interest rather than reform morality. For example, cosmetics brand Lush has been praised for its continued stance as ethical, fair, and sustainable, without seeking attention.

The study also introduces new strategies by which brands can implement their activist stance and avoid 'woke-washing'. The three methods managers can use controversies to communicate their brand effectively are;

- Creating monstrous hybrids—breaking down taboos and revitalizing interest around important but displaced causes, such as environmentalism, or bringing to light emerging values in public debates, such as gender non-binaries.
- Challenging the moral establishment—bringing to light the flaws in the moral judgments promoted by powerful social actors.
- Demonstrating moral exemplarity—by pioneering moral precepts, supporting emerging moral leaders whose values align with theirs, or even creating their own social movement.

Dr. Laetitia Mimoun, Lecturer in Marketing at the Business School and co-author of the report, said: "This report illuminates new ways of revising free speech boundaries but also the risks and responsibilities for brands that engage in such debates. It is imperative that consumers can trust brands and for that to happen brands must not overstep the mark by falsely labeling themselves as activists to further their own agenda."

Dr. Olivier Sibai, Lecturer in Marketing at Birkbeck, University of

London, and co-author of the report, said: "Believers in brand activism embrace the trend as a branding revolution, while cynics discount it as a marketing gimmick. We find that brand activism matters because it changes the boundaries of free speech. Yet, marketers must use it responsibly or they will waste an amazing opportunity to turn brands into a force for good."

Dr. Achilleas Boukis, Lecturer in Marketing at the University of Sussex and co-author of the report, said: "Our work is a roadmap for activist brands so that they can harmonize their brand comms with their activist profile and stay afloat among the myriads of brands that recklessly jump on the social activism bandwagon."

'Authenticating Brand Activism: Negotiating the Boundaries of Free Speech to Make a Change' by Dr. Olivier Sibai, Lecturer in Marketing at Birkbeck, University of London and former visiting scholar at the Business School, Dr. Mimoun, Lecturer in Marketing at the Business School, and Dr. Achilleas Boukis, Lecturer in Marketing at the University of Sussex, is published in *Psychology & Marketing*.

More information: Olivier Sibai et al. Authenticating brand activism: Negotiating the boundaries of free speech to make a change, *Psychology & Marketing* (2021). [DOI: 10.1002/mar.21477](https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21477)

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