EXTRA TOPPING NEVER HURTS: EXPLORING CONSUMERS' PERCEPTIONS OF BRAND ACTIVISM CAMPAIGNS VIA TEXTUAL BIG DATA ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper analyses consumers' perceptions of brand activism campaigns, a newly emerging phenomenon that has recently attracted deep attention from both scholars and practitioners. Brand activism means that companies engage in delicate socio-political issues by taking public stands on them. This study is focused on the case of Ben & Jerry's, which is considered a leader in the brand activism field. Users' comments posted to the brand's Instagram profile have been scraped and analysed via big data analysis and text mining techniques, processing about one million characters. Results show powerful insights for both researchers and firms on the topic of brand activism, informing tailor-made marketing campaigns related to social causes and human rights.

Keywords: Authenticity, Big Data Analysis, Brand Activism, Social Media, Text Analytics, Topic Modelling.

Introduction

In last years, increasingly often, marketing has been considered a *problem-solving force* (Martin & Burpee, 2022), capable to face the enormously socio-political issues of our era. A new dominant paradigm has quickly developed based on the urgency to go beyond mere profit maximisation (Freeman, 1984) by adopting a socially responsible approach, in line with the emergent demands and expectations of consumers, investors, and other stakeholders (Stanley, 2020). Based on this new vision, many brands have been beginning to fight for social questions by promoting justice, inclusiveness, and trust values (Cammarota et al., 2021). Historically, despite the huge power and visibility of companies (Moore, 1973), most of them have always avoided taking positions on delicate issues (Rasmussen et al., 2021), considering these actions to be extremely risky for the brands themselves (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Nowadays, contrarily, brands encapsulate this "political character" (Wettstein & Baur, 2016), declaring it publicly, and committing to concrete actions. Topics such as immigration, gender issues, racial justice, abortion and so on, have got in the communication campaigns of many brands, triggering positive or negative consumer responses. From this standpoint, a brand that has always stood out for its political involvement in social issues, and it has often been described as *an activist,* is *Ben&Jerry's,* the world's fourth best-selling ice cream brand (Zhou, 2016). The first ice cream company in the United States was founded in 1792 by a woman named Elizabeth Faulkner, but, since its opening in 1978, Ben & Jerry's has always stood out for its social commitment and is considered the real social active ice cream brand (Ciszek & Logan, 2018), by operating philosophy of *capitalism infused with activism* (Gelles, 2015). Many causes are actively supported by the brand, i.e., the #Blacklivesmatter movement, LGBTQIA+ rights, abortion, cannabis legalisation and so on. Besides, in 2009, the company temporarily changed its brand to

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Chubby Hubby to celebrate the same-sex marriage law passed in Vermont, home of Ben&Jerry's headquarters (Wettstein & Baur, 2016). The crucial success factors of this brand's activism seem to be its core values and vision, centred on the social role that Ben&Jerry's wants to play in society. Based on these premises, this study analyses the online communication of the British Instagram profile of Ben&Jerry's to obtain the first findings of consumer responses to a brand that is historically involved in activism. Notably, the attention is focused on the major question emerging at this stage: *how do consumers perceive brand activism campaigns and then express their opinion via social media?*

Literature Background

Brand activism has recently attracted much attention from researchers and practitioners (Sibai et al., 2021). It is a nascent concept from the intersection between marketing and politics (Klostermann et al., 2021; Jung & Mittal., 2020), which addresses a social demand (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019) to reach a fairer more inclusive society. Brand activism is defined as "public speech or actions focused on partisan issues made by or on behalf of a company using its corporate or individual brand name" (Moorman, 2020). This strategy can have several purposes, firstly, help to generate positive changes within society (Eilert & Cherup Nappier, 2020) by lobbying policymakers and institutions (Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007).

Secondly, it influences the attitudes and behaviour of stakeholders (Villagra et al., 2020), who could be consumers, other companies, or suppliers. When brands take positions on these issues, they may go against individual consumers' values and beliefs, harming the retention of their customers (Moorman, 2020). Consequently, it is fundamental that companies carry out in advance a political consumer segmentation (Flight & Coker, 2021).

Brand activism can materialise through statements or/and actions, the first one concerning written or verbal declarations to support or boycott one side of a controversial issue without financial commitment or other forms of donations. Actions, instead, go beyond declarations by providing financial support, offering, discontinuing products or services, and making or breaking contracts (Bhagwat et al., 2020). To reach successful activist campaigns, authenticity is the key element (Zhou & Dong, 2022; Hydock et al., 2020). From this standpoint, when brands are perceived as inauthentic, opportunistic, or untrue, consumers could accuse them of so-called *woke-washing* (Sobande, 2019), and even boycott brands (Neureiter & Bhattacharya, 2021).

Consumers' perceptions of authenticity are related to ideas of genuineness, reality, and truth (Grayson & Martinec, 2004); hence, activist brands are perceived as authentic if they are coherent with their previous actions (Key et al., 2021), values communicated, promises made to stakeholders and, lastly with their online and offline communication (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Moreover, authenticity needs that socio-political communication, and the related commitment of brands are always reflected in corporate practice (Dodd & Supa, 2014).

In the strategy of brand activism, communication plays an essential role, and it is much more complex than traditional brand messaging (Key et al., 2021). Brands should communicate messages highly aligned with practice (Ahmad et al., 2022; Moorman, 2020).

Nevertheless, they have to be cautious with this kind of communication, especially on social media platforms. As highlighted by Kietzmann et al. (2011), social media are crucial tools for communicating and implementing marketing strategies, monitoring them, and initiating engagement processes with consumers. Online communication could be a crucial factor also for successful activism campaigns.

However, social media platforms have also a *dark side* (Baccarella et al., 2018; Smaldone et al., 2020), and this type of communication can also cause several incidents and troubles for brands (Smaldone et al., 2021), for instance, negative word-of-mouth phenomena (Klostermann et al.,

2021), social media firestorms (D'Arco et al., 2019) and also brand hate (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021).

Methodology

The present research employs an explorative approach to detect customers' perceptions to brand activism campaigns via big data analysis (BDA) techniques because the sample structure presented a data type of $v > n$. Particularly, this study is focused only on the United Kingdom (UK) brand's profile, as this is a pilot study to test consumers' perceptions, which in future research will involve all countries in the Anglosphere. Data were scraped from the UK Instagram official profile of the company, considering all posts between 2018 and 2022. *In specie*, the research considered about 32k comments, recording 1,034,782 characters in 286,654 words.

Data mining has been applied to the extracted users' comments adopting BDA and text mining (TM) techniques. **Phase one** employed text analysis tools to assess, arrange, sort, clean and sense-make the obtained data via TM (Smaldone et al., 2021). Subsequently, term entities have been mined and visualised as per the bigrams obtained after the stylometry process. **Phase two** aimed to cluster text entities, via probabilistic topic modelling based on the latent Dirichlet allocation, into thematic areas to detect the principal patterns to which brand activism is expressed (Jacobi et al., 2016; Nikolenko et al., 2017; Rehurek & Sojka, 2010). **Phase three** aimed to compute the sentiment of British consumers, based on the AFINN lexicon has been employed to metrically detect the sentiment on a standardised interval. After conducting the analysis, findings were properly visualised via diverse plots.

Findings and Discussion

Results highlighted interesting findings related to the brand activism phenomenon that will be further discussed. For British consumers, it is as if Ben&Jerry's activism does not affect the company's core business, even if the statistical influence on the corpus is about 80%, with a good network density (42%). An analysis of consumers' sentiment shows that almost all of them are neutral towards the brand's campaigns (62%). Not by chance, only 11% of consumers expressed a negative sentiment, with the remaining 27% of alacritous customers expressing positive sentiment. This consideration is reinforced by findings that show a strong consumer interest in the differentiated characteristics of Ben & Jerry's products. The corpus was clustered into four topics. The emerging first topic has been named "working people rights", with particular attention to LGBTQIA+, immigrants, black segments and the related government regulations and protests due to an unfair exploit.

The second topic regarded "vegan flavours and products", and contains words such as "taste", "dairy-free", "new flavour", "cherry", and "version".

Most people do not know that ice cream companies also sell cookie dough, brownies, and fudge, but engaged customers do. Not surprisingly, the topic also considered entities such as "dough", "brownies", "cake", "store", and "bake". The topic of vegan ice cream appears to be an important emerging trend (4%), showing good statistical conductivity (18.3%), and diversivity (19.4%). In the UK, several consumers make sure to vegan flavour their favourite foods, like cherry pies and good dough chocolate cookies.

The third topic shows a negative acceptance by British consumers of brand activism campaigns the topic name is "boycott Ben&Jerry's". The topic is referred to the percentage of negative comments (11%) and considers words such as "boycott", "support Israel", "buy anymore", "doing wrong", and "disgusting".

The fourth topic regards "political commitment", containing terms such as "Russia", "Palestine", "free Palestine", "destroy", "border", "speak", "try", and "stop". In addition, the results show a significant engagement of consumers, even if they are geographically and culturally distant to

some causes promoted by the brand, i.e., occupied Palestinian territories, they are extremely sensitive to those.

Conclusion and implications

As exposed in the introduction, the research aimed to explore consumers' perceptions of the brand activism campaigns, with a focus on Ben&Jerry's company. The study investigated in particular the *consumer response* to a set of random posts derived from the British official corporate Instagram profile. Several methods have been implemented to manage and analyse thousands of data, such as TM, topic modelling, and sentiment analysis, given the exploratory purpose of the research. BDA allowed to collect blueprints and to get quick answers to the major question raised. Considering the brand activism phenomenon, which is not so explored in the literature, and is misunderstood, BDA has to be considered a powerful tool to gain insights into consumers' attitudes and behaviour regarding actions of brand activism. Based on these considerations, the previous analysis confirms the considerations suggested by Vrendenburg et al. (2020) on *brand authenticity*, triggering new elements contributing to enhancing the understanding of the phenomenon. The BDA identified different factors influencing and affecting consumers' responses to brand activism, both positively and negatively. Based on the results, it is possible to confirm that a determinant variable of successful activism, shared and supported by consumers, is *authenticity* (Key et al., 2021). Notwithstanding, the crucial role of "political commitment", the title of one of the topics, determined most of the positive sentiment, but also most of the negative when misunderstood by consumers, generating boycott phenomena. As mentioned, the research is structured as a primary pilot study to conduct an exploratory BDA, to test the feasibility of the analysis. The study presented some limitations, such as, i.e., selecting only the Instagram platform and only the posts comprised between the 2018–2022 time range. Particular considerations have to be made regarding consumers' declaration to boycott the brand. Specifically, even if is impossible, at this stage, to verify a consequential switch from words to action, having a presence of negative perceptions, and a set of keywords related to a voluntary "not-buying", potential harm for firms and investors should be considered (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Resuming, the phenomenon needs further investigations, according to the extant literature, to deeply profile consumers' perceptions and the impact of brand activism on profit, brand equity and reputation, (Vrendenburg et al., 2020). Concluding, *brand activism could be a two-sided weapon*, although, it represents a critical *extra topping* to all that firms that are developing brand activism campaigns as a bite of their corporate heart: the *brand identity*.

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