Purpose Marketing and Brand Activism:
The Need for Contextual Strategies

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Abstract. Companies are increasingly taking a stand on socio-political issues, engaging in political discussions, and embedding overarching (social) goals in their business operations. In addition, the topic of purpose marketing and its more extreme variant, brand activism, is becoming increasingly important in research. While there are some empirical findings on the effects of purpose marketing, they are often contradictory. Furthermore, there is a lack of practical overviews that can guide companies in communicating their purpose and point the way to future research. This paper summarizes key findings mainly from previous research and formulates propositions that should provide practitioners with initial recommendations for effective purpose communication. In this way, the paper contributes to reducing uncertainties in the use of purpose marketing and brand activism in practice and maximizing their positive impact on corporate image.

Key words. Purpose Marketing, Brand Activism, Marketing Strategy

Introduction: Purpose Marketing and Brand Activism

For some years now, a phenomenon that can be observed especially in practice has been discussed – in Germany and elsewhere – under the term "**purpose marketing**": More and more companies are taking a socio-political stance, not only on environmental issues, but also explicitly on many other topics, such as diversity, politics, elections, and so on (Brendel, 2020; Bruce & Jeromin, 2020; Frohne, 2020; Mücksch et al., 2023). "Purpose" in this context means that "companies define socio-political purposes for themselves in addition to the purpose of making a profit and, in connection with this, take an explicit socio-political stance and/or engage in concrete socio-political activities" (Rüger & Siems, 2024). The "new" in this approach is in contrast to older concepts like corporate social responsibility that this purpose should include the entire company (Bruce & Jeromin, 2020; Hollensbe et al., 2014; Rüger & Siems, 2024) – it is not just something a company occasionally does, it is how a company thinks and continuously acts.

Parallel to the term "purpose marketing", the term "**brand activism**" has evolved (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). While a purpose can focus on any socio-political goal in addition to profit and revenue generation, such as relatively uncontroversial issues like gender equality or child poverty alleviation, socio-political activist brands are those that make a "public demonstration (statements and/or actions) of support for or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue" (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1). Brand activism is always about controversial issues. Activist brands therefore have a purpose that has not yet been socially negotiated.

Brand purpose acts as an ethical stance that puts values at the center of everything a brand does, beyond the benefits of the product itself (Errichiello & Schmidt, 2024). By contrast, **corporate social responsibility** refers to voluntary actions – those not required by law – that seek to promote a social good, address a social ill, or address the externalities of a brand's operations in the world (Gatti et al., 2019). It usually entails an environmental, social and economic dimension (Dahlsrud, 2008).

There are various examples of purpose marketing and brand activism in practice around the world: sports goods manufacturer Nike launched the "Dream Crazy" campaign in 2018 with American football player Colin Kaepernick as its main testimonial, who knelt during the U.S. national anthem before several games to protest discrimination against African Americans and police violence, which was very popular but also led to discussions (Bruce & Jeomin, 2020). During the coronavirus pandemic in Germany in 2021, many companies took a joint stand in favor of coronavirus vaccination (Unckrich, 2021). Russia's war against the Ukraine has led several companies to discuss the production and sale of their products in Russia (Armano, 2022; Campillo-Lundbeck, 2022). Additionally, food retailers such as Penny in Germany take explicit positions on issues such as the pandemic, the war as well as social division in their Christmas ads (PENNY, 2022).

Research is also dedicated to this new trend: **previous research** on the topic of purpose marketing has attempted to establish a theoretical foundation for this new sub-discipline and to adapt existing theories from neighboring disciplines – e.g., political science – that relate to this sub-discipline. Rüger and Siems (2024), for example, discuss the transferability and usefulness of Joseph Nye's theory of soft power (1990; 2004) for purpose marketing. At the same time, empirical studies attempt to examine the acceptance of individual purpose measures among customers (Chu et al., 2023; Hydock et al., 2020; Jungblut & Johnen, 2022; Mücksch et al., 2023; Rüger et al., 2024; Schmidt et al., 2022).

The results show that the issue has become critical in practice and is highly relevant today. At the same time, there is still little theoretical basis and that the empirical findings often provide polarizing, sometimes contradictory results regarding the impact on target groups (which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2).

This raises the question of whether and, if so, how companies with a purpose marketing strategy can be successful.

This article presents and substantiates the thesis that no clear recommendation for an "optimal" purpose marketing strategy exists. Instead, it is argued that a context-specific decision should be made as to whether and how purpose marketing should be designed for a company – and what the key influencing factors might be that need to be taken into account. In addition to initial conceptual considerations, primarily previous empirical studies serve as a basis for argumentation, accompanied by the results of a new pre-study presented here for the first time.

Discussion of the Necessity of Contextual Strategies for Purpose Marketing and Brand Activism

Looking back on the last 50 years of marketing research, searching for a generalized concretization of an optimal purpose marketing strategy does not seem very helpful. In various areas of marketing – especially in communication and advertising research, but also in pricing, branding and relationship marketing – it has been shown repeatedly that it is not so much a question of "if" an effect exists, but rather of "when" (Adjei & Clark, 2010; Bruhn, 2022; Gretry et al., 2017; MacKenzie & Spreng, 1992). The practical (and, according to our understanding of marketing as an applied science, scientific) added value therefore lies primarily in the identification and subsequent management of possible influencing factors and moderating variables (Adjei & Clark, 2010; Bruhn, 2022; Christodoulides et al., 2021; Guttena et al., 2024; Kumar, 2022).

A similarly high relevance of moderating and mediating effects has also been shown, for example, in the thematically related area of corporate social responsibility: Bai and Chang (2015) found, that "marketing competence fully mediates the effects of all CSR activities on firm performance" and that "the positive relationship between CSR toward customers and marketing competence is enhanced by market turbulence" (Bai & Chang, 2015, p. 505).

Based on previous conceptual work and studies on purpose marketing, the following theses for contextual strategies for purpose marketing can be established.

Thesis 1: There are differences between target groups

Previous studies, such as the one by Mücksch et al. (2023) on the topic of purpose marketing, have shown that only some target groups appreciate purpose marketing: In this study, which surveyed a young (academically educated) target group in Germany (n=180), 12.2% of respondents answered the question "Should companies and organizations make their political positions public?" with a 6 on a scale of 1 ("does not apply at all") to 6 ("applies completely"), and a further 34.3% with a 5. Thus, only just under half of the respondents (top two in sum: 46.5%) welcome this.

In another study, Mücksch et al. (2024) came to a similar conclusion, interestingly in Germany as well as Austria. Figure 1 shows the individual frequencies for the question posed analogously

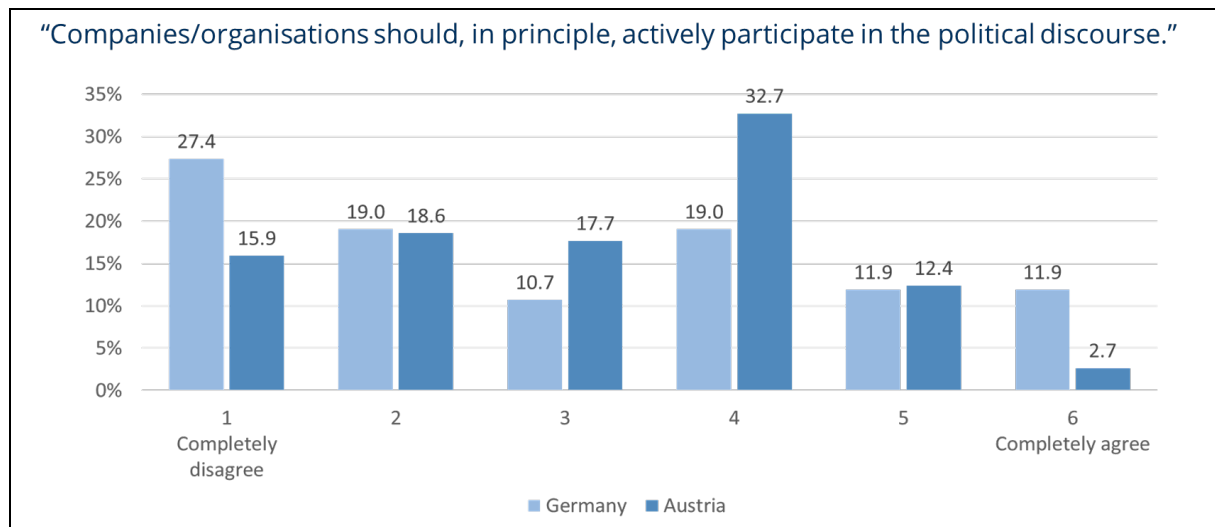to the above study by Mücksch et al. (2023). As can be seen: purpose marketing (in this form) polarizes.

"Companies/organisations should, in principle, actively participate in the political discourse."

Figure 1: Perception of purpose marketing among young target groups according to a study by Mücksch et al. (2024, p. 5).

The question that now arises is which target groups tend to agree and which tend to disagree. The study by Mücksch et al. (2024) provided a notable result: women, in particular, rated purpose marketing significantly more positively than men (p=0.02). Similarly, Schmidt et al. (2022) concluded in their study that women hold more positive attitudes toward socio-politically activist brands than men, both in the USA and Germany. Consequently, **gender** appears to exert a relatively substantial influence on the perception of purpose marketing, which is somewhat unexpected in the present era and within our cultural context.

Age could also play a greater role if one assumes that perceptions differ according to age, especially in the case of socio-political issues to which purpose marketing ex definitione refers. In the studies mentioned above, such effects were not detectable due to the very homogeneous sample in terms of age (students), but relevance is very conceivable. Concerning the socio-political topics of purpose marketing, not only the age in years, but above all the affiliation to one of the generations (z, x, y, ...) could play a role, which is currently being discussed more and more often in the marketing context (see Nica et al., 2019). Since purpose marketing can be seen in close connection with the relationship marketing of organizations and companies (Schmidt & Siems, 2025), consideration of the so-called family life cycle (in which, among other things, age is still seen in connection with marital status and the presence/absence of children, Gilly & Enis, 1982, p. 273), which has proven itself for segmentation in relationship marketing (see e.g. Siems et al., 2015), could also be very interesting for a differentiated view of the perception of purpose marketing.

Of course, other socio-demographic characteristics could also be considered for possible differentiation, such as the **country or region of the target group**. As mentioned above, the study cited is initially surprising in that there is little or no difference in perception between Germany and Austria, at least within the young target group surveyed and for this general reference question. For other countries, however, and especially for other, more detailed questions, differences can certainly be assumed, especially if they are assigned to different cultural groups. For example, concrete political issues within purpose marketing (e.g., statements against xenophobia) could be much more differentiated, as election results in different countries and even within a country in different parts of the country show.

In addition to socio-demographic characteristics, it can be assumed that **psychographic characteristics** (attitudes, interests, lifestyle, for example, Tynan & Drayton, 1987), in particular, also result in differences in perception and, again, presumably strongly dependent on the individual topic in question.

This directly leads to our second thesis:

Thesis 2: There are differences depending on the purpose topic

As we have seen, purpose marketing covers a wide range of topics. It can be assumed that the effect on the target groups can **vary from topic to topic**, and even within a topic, depending on the specifics. First studies support this assumption (see Bellger et al., 2025).

One specific aspect that is currently the subject of academic – and highly controversial – debate is the question of how strong the **affinity between the company, its services and customers and the purpose object** should be. For example, Bruce and Jeromin (2020) explicitly state that, in contrast to pure charitable giving, there should be a link to the company's value chain in order to speak of a genuine purpose. In their view, this also implies a certain affinity of the cause to the company's services.

According to other experts, a large distance from the core competence – or simply what customers expect from a company – can also trigger negative reactions from target groups (Campillo-Lundbeck, 2022). Ebeling (2020, p. 10) also puts it in a nutshell: "**Not every brand can save the world**" (author's translation). Accordingly, less can be more. We believe Stadtwerke Magdeburg 2023, a regional energy service provider in Germany, is a particularly successful example: "SWM [Stadtwerke Magdeburg] is not a cheap energy discounter. But we do want the best for the people of Magdeburg. After all, we are neighbors ourselves. We are good neighbors. A good neighbor is honest, friendly, and committed to the community. They are similar to you, always have an open ear, and are always willing to lend a hand. For example, he lends me his e-bike, helps me build my house, and sometimes takes me to the movies. Sometimes, he even gives you tickets to the FCM [soccer team]." (Stadtwerke Magdeburg, 2023; author's translation). In contrast to promises to save the world, this is an honest, regional positioning with a clear stance. It also presents a very successful metaphor that mentions and explains individual measures. In our opinion, the affinity is clear, which certainly increases credibility.

How high the affinity should actually be in individual cases – and whether a lower affinity might not sometimes be particularly successful or even necessary (also from the target group's point of view) – remains an open question and an exciting future research topic for science.

These considerations lead immediately to the next thesis: Obviously, it depends not only on the topic but also on the company.

Thesis 3: There are differences between companies/brands

One difference could be **brand awareness**.

In the summer of 2024, part of the author's team conducted an online survey to initially explore a possible effect of brand awareness on perceptions of purpose marketing with this pre-study. Specifically, respondents were shown two versions of a (fictional) print campaign, one with an

unknown (fictional) brand and one with a known brand. Figure 2 shows the setup, with the real brand covered up for copyright reasons as well as the unknown brand. The campaign features a chocolate bar with the respective brand logo. The packaging of the chocolate features a rainbow design with hands of different skin tones reaching for it, accompanied by the slogan "A CHOCOLATE FOR EVERYONE", reinforcing the campaign's message of diversity and acceptance.
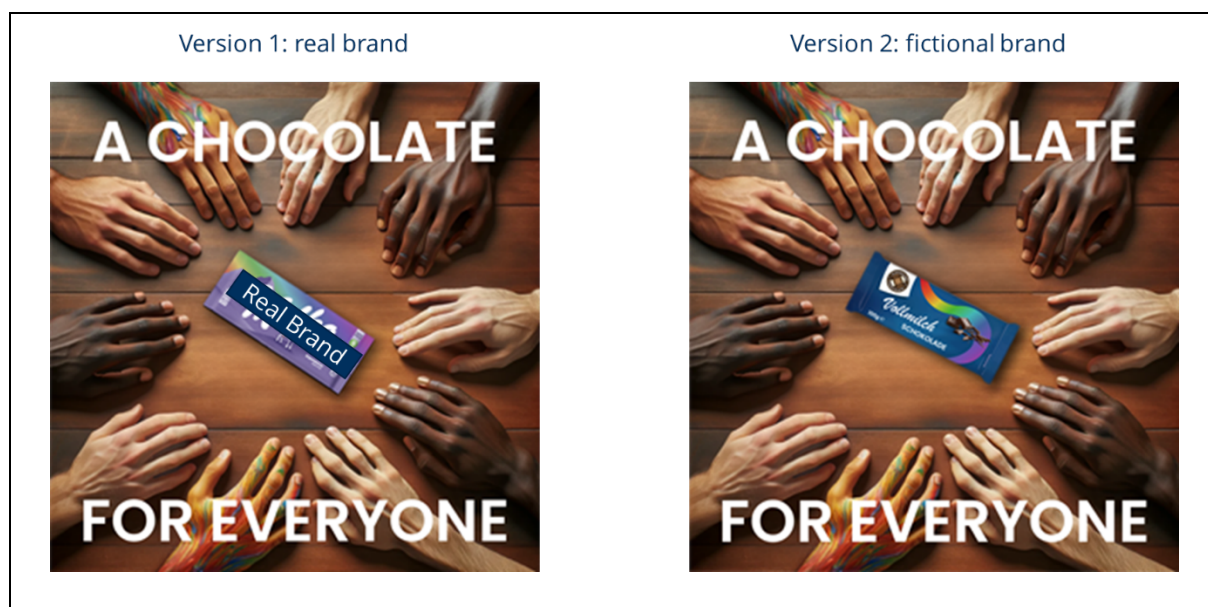

Figure 2: Experiment on the perception of purpose marketing from a known vs. an unknown brand.

The results show (n=94, target group were young adults between 18 and 30 years): On a 5-point Likert scale (1 - strongly disagree, 5 - strongly agree), the statement "I rate this campaign as good" is rated on average with a mean of 3.3 in campaign 1 and 3.23 in campaign 2. This difference is not significant. The assessment of the legitimacy (M1=3.38; M2=3.55), credibility (M1=2.77; M2=2.87), and authenticity (M1=2.60; M2=2.70) of the campaign also did not differ significantly between the two campaigns. However, a false premise (washing) was more likely to be suspected in the real brand campaign than in the fictitious brand campaign (M1=3.26; M2 =2.89; p=0.041). In addition to the quantitative questions, participants were asked to give reasons why they would decide for or against buying the presented product. This was done to get an idea of the factors that fundamentally influence the purchase decision. The results show that the quality and loyalty associated with the known brand and the price were more likely to influence the purpose marketing campaign. For example, one of the participants gave the following reason for his (potential) purchase decision: "Because the quality of the product has impressed me in the past" and another participant stated: "I've always bought [this brand]". While a respondent in the survey with the fictitious brand stated: "I would choose not to buy this chocolate because I would choose other established brands". Price and quality were also identified as key factors in this group's purchase decision.

Additionally, criticism and skepticism of the campaign were often expressed, e.g., one respondent criticized the campaign of the known brand: "Especially with chocolate, it would be very hypocritical," and another respondent said, "In my opinion, the campaign has nothing to do with the product and therefore seems meaningless".

In summary, even though the results of this pre-study do not show a significant influence of brand awareness on the perception of a purpose marketing campaign, it provides evidence that

brand awareness might influence the effect of brand activism in terms of perceived washing or skepticism towards the campaign. This implies that well-known brands, in particular, should pay more attention to authenticity and brand fit in purpose marketing campaigns. In support of our initial results, Hydock et al. (2020) also argue that well-known brands take a high risk when taking a stand on socio-political issues, while small brands are more likely to benefit from purpose marketing campaigns because the opportunity to gain more customers outweighs the risk of losing existing customers.

In addition to the customers/target groups and the company/brand, it is also important how exactly a purpose is communicated:

Thesis 4: There are differences depending on how a purpose is communicated.

As an example, a current particularity of this aspect is highlighted:

Recent studies on chatbots show that **perceived humanness** can have a major impact on the perception of communication and customers' intentions to act (Hecker et al., 2024; Hildebrandt et al., 2023; Pietrantoni et al., 2022). If "purpose," as defined above, is understood primarily as an attitude, which is a human characteristic, the credibility of whether and what purpose a company has also depends on whether and to what extent the company and/or corporate communication is perceived as fundamentally human-like. At the same time, special care must be taken if a purpose is to be communicated in whole or in part through digital technologies. Depending on the design, these can also be perceived as more or less human (Hecker et al., 2024; Hildebrandt et al., 2023; Pietrantoni et al., 2022). Ways to make a chatbot appear more human include giving it a name, possibly an avatar, a personal form of address, delayed responses, the use of emoticons, etc. (see, e.g., Hecker et al., 2024).

It should be noted that an increase in (perceived) humanness does not always have positive effects, but can also have negative effects: For example, perceived humanness can directly increase frustration with a chatbot if it produces errors – but at the same time, perceived humanness can also increase satisfaction with the service, which in turn reduces frustration (a "paradox", Brendel et al., 2023). Once again, it is therefore necessary to examine which of the two effects is stronger in each individual case and, therefore, which form of design is better in each specific case.

Purpose marketing aims to create social change and positively impact society regarding current social debates such as sustainability, gender equality, etc. (Sarkar and Kotler, 2018). In addition to raising awareness and changing customer attitudes, changing people's behavior is a particular challenge (see, e.g., Intention-Behavior Gap; Carrington et al., 2014). One of many approaches to question consumer behavior and encourage, for example, sustainable purchase options could be using chatbots in customer service that specifically nudge people toward the desired behavior (Carmichael et al., 2022).

Nudging describes subtle impulses that are intended to encourage people to choose certain behaviors without restricting their freedom of choice (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). In marketing, well-designed nudges, such as product recommendations or behavioral cues, have been shown to increase the adoption of more sustainable alternatives, the rate of charitable donations, etc. (Goldstein et al., 2008; Goswami & Urminsky, 2016).

While chatbots are increasingly being used in customer service (Wirtz et al., 2018) – for example, to assist with ordering, rebooking, or answering general questions – there needs to be more research into their potential to effect behavioral change in the sense of purpose marketing. Initial studies, such as Pietrantoni, Lichtenberg, et al. (2023) or Pietrantoni, Greulich, et al.

(2023) on donation behavior in bodily markets or Baek et al. (2022) on charitable giving, suggest that the design of chatbots could play a critical role in shaping and changing people's intentions.

In sum, we argue that chatbots operationalize the principles of a purpose marketing strategy by engaging with customers in personalized, real-time interactions. Therefore, they can serve as a channel to deliver on the promises made through purpose marketing. Applying theories of nudging to explore how chatbots can encourage choices, aligning with the values communicated in purpose marketing might be an innovative way for further research.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions

To summarize (see Figure 3): There are many indications that the success or failure of purpose marketing is dependent on a variety of individual aspects (1) and that no simple way to success can be derived, but rather must be weighed up on a contextual basis. Depending on the company (2) and depending on the customers/target groups/market segments (3), certain measures can lead to approval or rejection. The communication of the purpose (4) is likely to play a key role as a link between the two stakeholder groups (Schmidt & Siems, 2025), where there is no right or wrong, as it depends on various factors. Following the approach of a brand personality (Aaker, 2001), employees and customers themselves will not only be the target group, but also the carrier and part of the communication and the corporate purpose (5, 6).
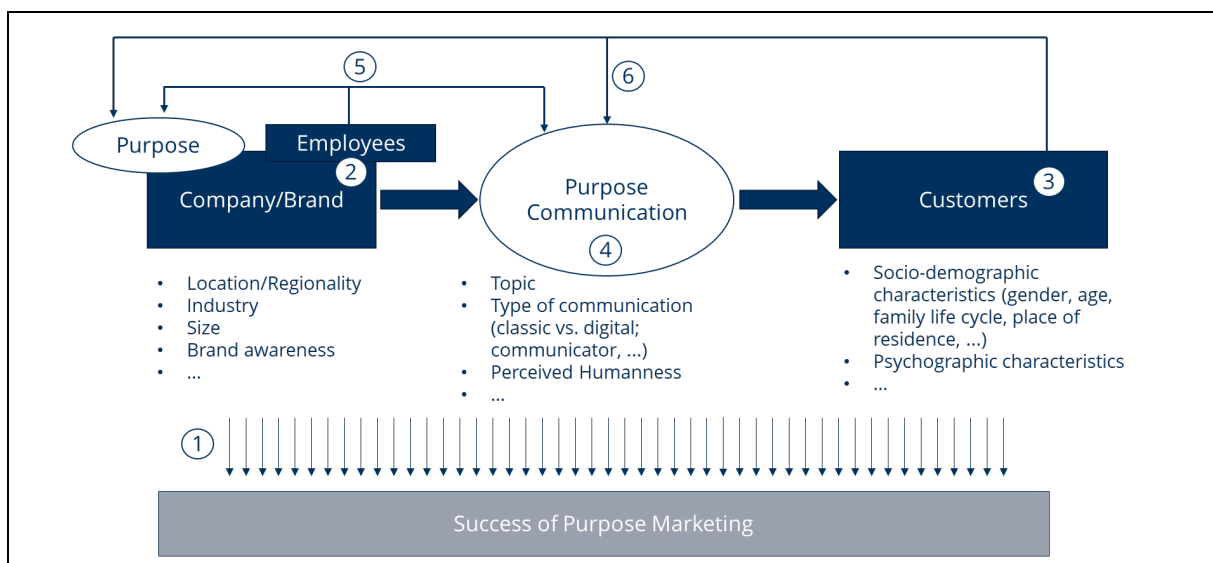

Figure 3: Summarizing overview.

The theses developed in this article – without any claim to completeness and (currently) only partially empirically verifiable – are intended to provide practitioners with a first orientation as to what they could or should pay attention to. When it comes to implementation, one of the challenges in practice will be to convey a (necessarily authentic) purpose in such a way that it is positively perceived or at least accepted, especially in the perception of presumably heterogeneous target groups. Or, if in doubt, to accept the possibility of losing customers (or other stakeholders such as employees) who reject it. There are also (successful) examples of this in practice, such as the Nike campaign mentioned above, in which some employees (and probably some customers) turned away because of the purpose marketing measure, but the company also retained and won over many others and probably emotionally bound them in the long term precisely because of the measure (see, e.g., Bruce & Jeromin, 2020).

In addition to the expected benefits for practice, the theses are a possible basis for a more in-depth scientific discussion of this relatively new area and (hopefully) a valuable basis for further scientific research. Our initial discussion on purpose marketing and brand activism from an application-oriented point of view should pave the way for interesting new research approaches to help guide practitioners in their purpose marketing/brand activism strategy.

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