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ENSURING BRAND ACTIVISM IN INTEGRATED MARKETING
COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS RESONATES WITH MILLENNIAL
CONSUMERS

by
Anna Hermann

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
May 2020

Approved by

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ABSTRACT

**Ensuring Brand Activism In Integrated Marketing Communication Campaigns Resonates
With Millennial Consumers
(under the direction of Professor Christina Sparks)**

The purpose of this thesis is to determine how consumers, specifically in the millennial generation, perceive brand activism. Additionally, the study will give recommendations to marketing and public relations professionals creating activist-minded marketing campaigns. As brand activism can be incredibly divisive and controversial, this research is essential in order to understand how best to resonate with, instead of alienate, millennial consumers. The aim of the thesis is to answer the following research questions: (1) How do millennial consumers perceive brands that engage in brand activism and (2) How can marketing and public relations professionals ensure brand activism resonates with millennial consumers?

To answer the research questions, the thesis will begin by offering a definition of the terms “brand” and “brand activism,” as well as additional relevant terms based upon the analyzing of existing definitions. To answer the first research question, an analysis of secondary research on the topic will be completed and the results of a survey administered by the researcher to millennials regarding their feelings on brand activism will be presented. Lastly, two sections of the thesis will be dedicated to answering the final question: case studies and interviews with business professionals. The insight gathered while conducting this research will allow the researcher to develop recommendations for business professionals creating activist-minded campaigns for corporate brands.

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INTRODUCTION

A 2017 television advertisement run by tech-lodging company Airbnb proclaims, “No matter who you are, where you're from, who you love, or who you worship, you deserve to belong. #WeAccept.” in response to an executive order by American President Donald Trump banning refugees and immigrants from Muslim nations (Graham, 2017). Former NFL star Colin Kaepernick tweets out his 2018 Nike campaign, a photo of his face with the words, “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything.” amidst controversy surrounding his decision to kneel during the National Anthem in protest of racial injustice and police brutality (Errigo, Maese, & Maske, 2018). Second-hand fashion reseller ThredUp releases a letter denouncing luxury fashion house Burberry for burning \$38 million of product and offering to resell the clothing with all profit going to an environmental protection organization. The letter goes viral with news placements in Forbes, WWD, and Fortune (Philipkoski, 2018).

These corporate actions, although provocative, are not groundbreaking nor innovative. Brands have been publicly aligning themselves with political, social, and cultural causes for years. Absolut Vodka has declared themselves the vodka of the LGBTQ+ community since 1981 (Edwards, 2011). Absolut’s consistent ties to advocacy aided the company in growing exponentially. The vodka company sold only 10,000 bottles in the 1980’s and has grown to become the leading premium vodka brand, selling 10.9 million bottles in 2017 (Edwards, 2011). During the Vietnam era, advertisements

advocating for peace frequented the airwaves and were placed next to the recent news in papers throughout America. In the 1970's, outdoor apparel giant Patagonia made activism an integral part of the brand – publicly advocating for environmental protection, fair trade, and strict labor standards. This approach to business has continued for Patagonia, making them one of the most “socially-conscious” brands in current times.

This practice, of corporate brands publicly taking a stance on a political, social, or cultural issues, is widely referred to as “brand activism” by both academics and business professionals. Although this activist-minded behavior has occurred in a select few brands for many years, brands publicly taking a stance on an issue has not been widespread in the past. In prior years, the majority of brands preferred to stay ambivalent, for fears of alienating potential consumers. However, since the early 2010's, this position of neutrality has shifted. Corporate brands are now developing their brand voice and engaging in brand activism by voicing opinions on the issues of today more than ever before.

In today's constantly shifting media landscape and incredibly polarized political climate, brands are choosing to take on the voice of an activist in hopes of sparking a dialogue about the issues consumers care about. Statistics display that 63% of baby boomers said they expect more than just a product from a brand. The younger the consumer, the more that expectation rises: 76% of Gen Xers, 84% of millennials and 87% of Gen Z say that they expect more from brands (Garrido, 2019). Additionally, recent research by public relations firm Edelman has shown that nearly 64% of consumers worldwide will buy or boycott a brand solely because of its position on a political or social issue (Daniel J. Edelman Holdings, Inc., 2018). Brands are using activism as a

way to engage with the public, stay relevant in the media, and build an emotional connection with their target consumers.

This rise of brand activism has not been met without scrutiny by the media and public, however. Many critics state that engaging in brand activism is far too risky to engage in; voicing an opinion can be controversial and alienate consumers (Fennelly, 2019). Traditionally, brands have attempted to portray an ideal – the ideal society, family, and home. Opponents of brand activism state that this should remain the norm; brands should not try to tackle real-life issues or they risk backlash. Critical journalists and marketing professionals have stated that brands are “trying to make their toilet paper save the world” and that brands are attempting to appeal only to the young, wealthy liberals who will “open their wallets” for the brand (Quart, 2017). The sincerity of a corporation’s engagement in brand activism is often doubted – is the brand genuinely trying to make an impact or just attempting to gain a higher profit?

Companies addressing particularly controversial issues in advertising that is not congruent with the perceived brand image or personality have often been met with public outrage. Consumers have been known to voice their distain of an activist-minded statement or campaign via social media, with many claiming that they will “never purchase another item” from the brand that has offended them. In 2016, retailer Target announced that the company would allow transgender customers to use whichever restroom with which they identify, regardless of biological sex. This statement spurred the social media hashtag #FlushTarget and provoked over one million consumers to sign a pledge to boycott the company (Halzack, 2016). Offline, numerous consumers protested outside Target locations. In response to the dissatisfaction, Target spent nearly

\$20 million putting single-stall restrooms in all of its stores (Halzack, 2016). When Pepsi's "Live for Now" advertising campaign starring model Kendall Jenner launched, the brand attempted to promote peace and unity with associations to the Black Lives Matter movement. The advertisement depicted a protest full of smiling, cheerful participants who encounter a police line. The situation is tense until Jenner, who leaves a photo shoot to join the protest, sees a police officer and hands him a Pepsi. The crowd erupts in cheers. Consumers viewing this commercial did not have a similar reaction; many criticized the advertisement for trivializing the importance and seriousness of the issues leading activists to protest (Smith, 2017). Outcry was heard throughout social media platforms. The inauthenticity of the scenario where Pepsi could resolve a protest peaceably. The Pepsi Cola Company quickly removed the advertisement and issued an apology.

Despite consumer criticism and controversy, it is apparent by the large number of activist-minded campaigns executed by corporate brands in recent years that brand activism is here to stay. Companies continue to spend millions of dollars on advertising and media placement to establish a brand personality that includes a social and political stance. Why? It establishes trust. 'I want to trust the brands that I interact with' is a top choice for why consumers would want companies to state their views. Furthermore, according to an article in Marketing Week, "Purpose is arguably the new brand currency. Telling a powerful story is the most effective way to create a deeper emotional connection with customers."

Statement of the Problem

As brands continue to their efforts to establish a deeper emotional connection with potential customers through activist-minded campaigns in the future, critical thinking and analysis by academics and business professionals is essential. Research must be undertaken in order to aid corporate brands in creating activist-minded campaigns. Research will allow brands to avoid controversy and public outrage. It is imperative that brands have a sound understanding of what today's consumers expect from a brand, and how best to reach these expectations. Research is necessary to help corporations engage in brand activism in a meaningful way with consumers, specifically millennials, appreciate.

Academics have written numerous critiques on the intersection of activism and marketing. Articles discussing the best practices of brand activism have been featured in highly regarded sources such as Forbes, AdWeek, and the Marketing Journal. Despite these existing resources, campaign execution often lacks evidence of responsible research and an understanding of brand activism best practices. Research must continue and grow to solve this disconnect. This disconnect is responsible for activist-minded campaigns that are controversial, spark criticism, and alienate consumers.

Need for the Study

By analyzing expectations and response of millennials to brand activation, brands can better gauge and use research to bridge the gap between academic ideologies and industry practices by answer the following questions: (1) How do millennial consumers perceive brands that engage in brand activism and (2) How can marketing and public

relations professionals ensure brand activism resonates with millennial consumers?

After analyzing secondary research and conducting primary research, recommendations to marketing professionals will be offered. Secondary research will provide a sound understanding of the current state of brand activism. Primary research will offer an understanding of industry trends and millennial consumers' perceptions. The recommendations that result will take into account both preexisting academic ideologies and current industry trends. The recommendations aim to be a source of knowledge for industry professionals; helping to provide them with guidelines for creating a successful activist-minded campaign that resonates with millennial consumers.

Figure 1 summarizes the components of the project, which will inform the recommendations given at the conclusion of the thesis.

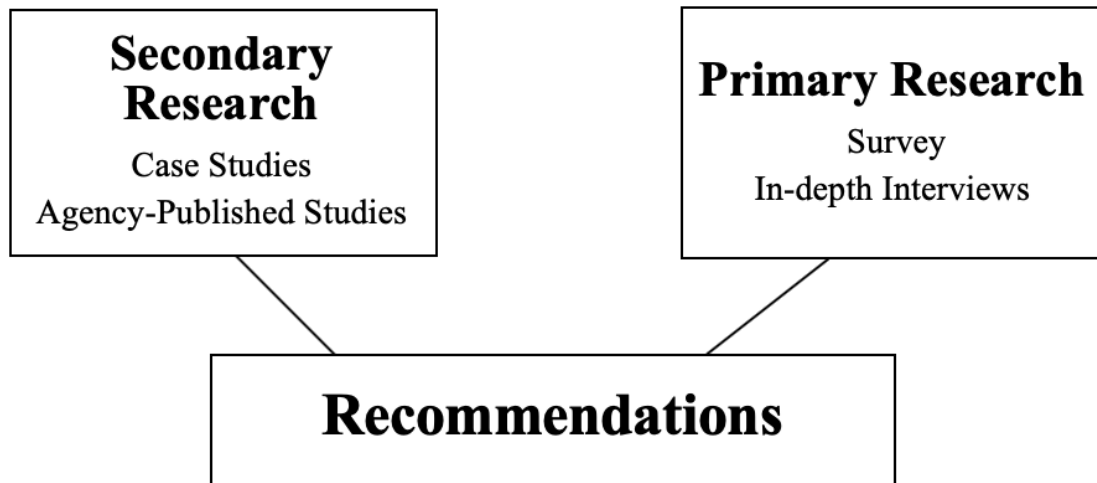


Figure 1.1: Research Model

CHAPTER ONE: DEFINING BRAND ACTIVISM AND RELEVANT TERMS

This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive definition of the term *brand activism*. As the term has only recently entered marketing vocabulary and gained wider use in the 2010's, it is essential that its meaning is articulated clearly and concisely. To complete research on this increasingly prevalent marketing practice and make valid conclusions, it is necessary to first develop a sound understanding of *brand activism* and other relevant terms used throughout the thesis.

Defining “Brand”

In order to define the term *brand activism*, the definition, history, and inherent characteristics of a *brand* must first be stated. Brands are a core concept of marketing, providing great value to corporations and consumers (Lovett, Peres, & Shachar, 2014). In Peter Bennett's "Dictionary of Marketing Terms," the academic defined the term brand as, "A brand is a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers (Bennett, 1988)." This definition has been widely used in academic research. Today, when the term *brand* is used, it typically conveys the origin of a product or service as well as the personality or value attached to the good. A brand is an intangible concept; thus, it can be difficult to define and grasp. To best understand the term, it is beneficial to first understand the evolution of the term.

During the industrial revolution, brands began to evolve into what they are today. As technology advanced and factories began to open, mass-produced goods became commonplace during the industrial revolution (Briciu & Briciu, 2016). However, the generic, mass-produced products being introduced had difficulty competing with locally made products consumers were accustomed to. In order to garner trust and familiarity, manufacturers began to brand the mass-produced goods with names and logos. Additionally, focus was placed on the quality of the product; manufacturers aimed to create products superior to the locally made offerings. During this time, many recognizable brands including Campbell Soup, Coca-Cola, Juicy Fruit gum, and Quaker Oats developed (Rajaram & Shelly, 2012). These brands grew into the extremely profitable businesses they presently are because of these decisions by manufacturers during the industrial revolution. The packaging featuring brand names allowed consumers to make a distinction between nearly identical products (Kastberg, 2010). When consumers purchased the product and had a positive experience with it due to the high quality, this left a lasting impression in their mind. This created an attachment to the brand name and, thus, lead to repeat customers (Kastberg, 2010).

Following the industrial revolution, contemporary branding theories and practices developed and came into use during the mid-20th century (Hampf & Lindberg-Repo, 2011). Throughout the industrial revolution, companies relied solely on the quality and features of their products to make a profit. However, as more companies started to appear with products of equivalent quality and competition stiffened in the mid-20th century, manufacturers could no longer rely solely on quality to sell their product. In order to continue making a profit, business leaders began to realize that their distinction

needed to go beyond a name or logo. Therefore, unique identities were developed and attached to brand names (McLaughlin, 2011). Marketers used these identities to create a certain perception of a brand name product (McLaughlin, 2011). This has continued into the present.

In today's modern age of marketing, all brands inherently possess several characteristics creating unique identities used to distinguish a product or service (Kapferer, 1998). The identity is a consistent visual and demonstrative projection of a brand (de Chernatony, 2006). Previous research has been completed with the aim of conceptualizing the elements of a brand's unique identity. In 1996, Jean-Noel Kapferer published the "Brand Identity Prism." The prism, which has been widely supported by marketing academics and professionals, works as a visual to provide an understanding of the six elements of a brand's identity and how they relate to one another. Consumers desire to be inspired by and have an emotional connection with brands they choose to purchase from and interact with (Kapferer, 1998). Kapferer states that together the six elements allow brands to build a strong identity, communicate effectively, and be easily remembered (Lombard, 2018). The Brand Identity Prism is displayed in Figure 2.1.

The Brand Identity Prism identifies six elements of a brand identity: (1) physique, (2) personality, (3) culture, (4) relationship, (5) self-image, and (6) reflection (Kapferer, 1998). The prism places the elements in relation to each other based upon two dimensions of their position between the sender (business) versus the recipient (consumer); and the externalization (outward expression of a brand) versus internalization (inward expression of a brand) (Pich & Dean, 2015). A brand must weave

all six aspects of the prism into a whole in order to create a clear, concise, and effective identity that will connect with consumers (Pich & Dean, 2015).

BRAND IDENTITY PRISM

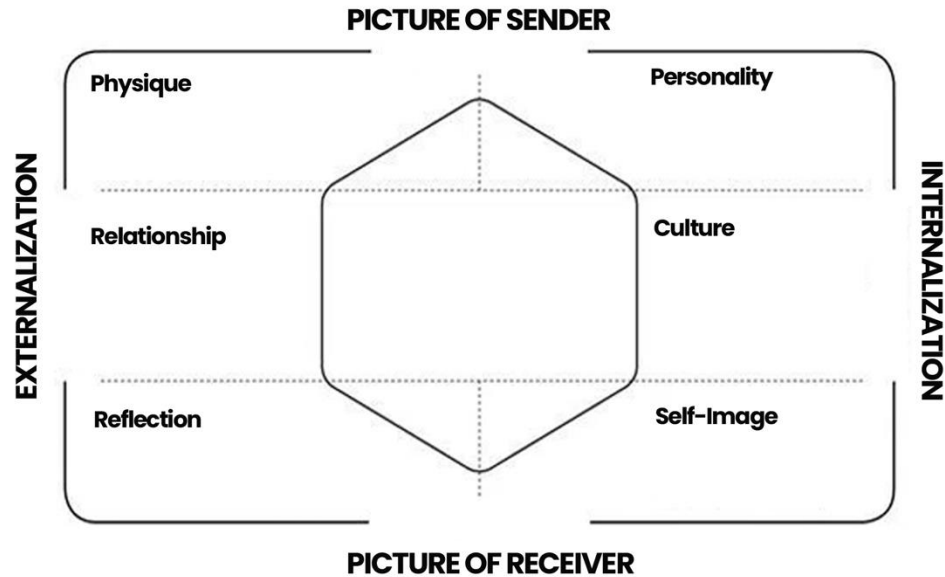


Figure 2.1: Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism. (Kapferer, 1998)

The physique element of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism is considered to be the physical characteristics and specifications of a brand that are evoked in the mind of the consumer when they hear the name of the brand (de Chernatony, 2006). The physique is the clearest visual representation of a brand's identity; the physique refers to salient, objective physical qualities. The physique aspect is comprised of the brand's logo, colors, packaging, and product look and feel (Lombard, 2018). This element is an external visual representation of the brand determined by and coming from the business. These visual cues are incredibly important, as they allow a consumer to quickly and easily identify a brand.

The personality aspect refers to the human characteristics projected by a brand; every strong brand has a set of human-like personality attributes that come to the mind of the consumer (Pich & Dean, 2015). This personality is determined by how the brand communicates with the public. To convey personality, brands develop a distinctive style of copywriting, tone, and design (Lombard, 2018). The way in which a brand speaks about their products or services brings life to the brand. This personality is created by the brand and internalized, making it fall closer to the picture of sender and internalization areas of the prism.

Culture is the value system and principles from which a brand bases its behavior (Kapferer, 1998). These values lay a foundation for the brand (Pich & Dean, 2015). Values motivate business decisions and behaviors. Oftentimes, the culture of a brand is determined by the brand's founders and employees (Lombard, 2018). The values the founders and employees collectively place emphasis on are reflected in the brand's products or services. Next, the relationship element of the prism refers to the external bond between the brand and its consumer (de Chernatony, 2006). A strong relationship is developed and maintained through positive interactions and shared values (Pich & Dean, 2015). An enduring relationship is based upon trust. Consumers will have a greater sense of loyalty to a brand it trusts and has developed a relationship with through consistently positive interactions (Pich & Dean, 2015).

Self-image on the Brand Identity Prism refers to the way in which a consumer perceives themselves (Lombard, 2018). Self-image is the way in which a consumer internally identifies themselves – this can comprise of their likes and dislikes, behaviors, beliefs, and demographics (Pich & Dean, 2015). Brands must have a sound

understanding of how their target consumer sees themselves in order to discover how the brand can best incorporate it into their own identity (Kapferer, 1998).

Although the self-image and reflection elements of the Brand Identity Prism may sound similar, the two differ in a significant way: self-image refers to the way in which a consumer sees themselves, while reflection refers to how a brand sees its target consumer (Lombard, 2018). Reflection is a set of beliefs the brand has about the target consumer (de Chernatony, 2006). The reflection of the target consumer is what a brand often features in their marketing materials, advertisements, and communications (Lombard, 2018). The self-image dimension is an internal expression by the consumer, while the reflection is an external expression of the consumer.

Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism allows brands to identify and refine areas of their brand they need to strengthen (Lombard, 2018). The prism works to provide professionals and academics an understanding of the elements of brand identity, in hopes that this information will encourage brands to better resonate with their consumer. All six elements provide an evaluation of cohesiveness for a brand (de Chernatony, 2006). Each of the six elements should work together to form a consistent, recognizable identity (de Chernatony, 2006). Without a strong identity grounded in all six elements of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism, a brand quickly becomes a product – easy to replace, obsolete over time, and based on functionality solely. A strong identity allows a brand to understand and connect with consumers, which is critical to the success of a brand (Kapferer, 1998).

Defining “Brand Activism”

Now that the meaning, history, and elements of the term *brand* have been deliberated using prior literature and Kapferer’s Brand Identity Prism, the definition of *brand activism* can be comprehended. As stated in the introduction, brand activism is defined as the practice of a corporate brand publicly taking a stance on a social, political, or cultural issue.

This public declaration of beliefs and association with issues or causes is a subset of corporate social responsibility. Corporate social responsibility, referred to as CSR, is defined as “companies operating in a way that is conscious of its impact on social, economic, and environmental aspects of society (Chen, 2019).” Corporate social responsibility has become a large focus of many corporations in recent years; billions of dollars have been poured into CSR activities with the intention of benefitting society (Becchetti, Ciciretti, Hasan, & Kobeissi, 2012). There are many ways in which corporations implement CSR and operate in a conscientious manner (Carroll, 1979). Carroll’s 1979 CSR Model breaks corporate social responsibility into four broad categories: (1) the economical responsibilities of organizations to be profitable, (2) the legal responsibilities of organizations to follow all laws, (3) the ethical responsibilities of organizations to do what is ethically right, and (4) the philanthropic responsibilities of companies to engage in activities that benefit society and causes (Carroll, 1979). The first two categories pertain to the internal responsibilities of a corporation, whereas the latter two categories focus of the external activities of a corporation in relation to ethics and philanthropy (Clemensen, 2017).

Brand activism is one specific action done by corporations in hopes of partially fulfilling the responsibilities of the ethical and philanthropic categories of CSR, making brand activism a subset of corporate social responsibility (Clemensen, 2017). Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines *activism* as “a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue (“Activism”, 2017).” Corporations voice an opinion on an issue or endorse a cause (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). Brands engaging in activism then encourage consumers to adopt a stance and participate in behavior that will create change (Clemensen, 2017). Brand activism is driven by a fundamental concern for the biggest problems facing society (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). Brands can engage in activism regarding different broad types of causes or issues (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). Throughout this thesis, the following are the three broad types of activism: social, political, and cultural activism.

Although social, political, and cultural issues and causes are often interconnected, the three types of activism have differentiation points (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). According to Philip Kotler and Christian Sarkar, leading brand activism researchers, social brand activism encompasses areas of equality – gender, LGBT, race, or age. Social activism also includes societal and community issues such as environmental effects and sustainability, domestic violence, and poverty. Political brand activism is a corporate brand’s response to a controversial political topic (Clemensen, 2017). Political brand activism focuses on enacting change with specific political policies, agencies, or representatives (Clemensen, 2017). Activism regarding gun policy, discrimination laws, or immigration laws can be classified as political activism. Cultural brand activism is defined as the set of actions challenging the common beliefs of society. For example, a

brand challenges cultural norms when the brand launches a campaign surrounding religious tolerance, beauty standards, or technology privacy practices.

Brand activism in any of the three categories detailed give brands the opportunity to communicate their identity and connect with consumers (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017).

Brand activism is a reflection of the values a brand places emphasis on. The values of a brand make up the culture element of Kapferer's Brand Identity Model; therefore, these values strongly contribute to the identity of a brand (Kapferer, 1998). In a world of sensationalized media, a heavily polarized political climate, and constant sharing on social media, consumers desire brands to remain constant and provide them with a consistent, reliable identity (Clemensen, 2017). This unique identity allows consumers to form an emotional connection with a brand. Consumers desire the brands they purchase from to not only provide quality services or products, but also to form this connection with consumers (Kapferer, 1998).

The rise of technology, specifically social media, has provided brands the opportunity to communicate their unique identity and form an emotional connection with their target consumer (Benner, 2018). Social media has greatly contributed to the increased prevalence of brand activism (Benner, 2018). Social networks have created an outlet for brands and consumers alike to share their opinions and thoughts (Vogels, 2019). Consumers discuss relevant events and situations impacting their lives and the world as a whole (Vogels, 2019). This, along with the typical news sources, allows brands to discover culture trends. Social media gives brands insight into the issues their target consumers care about. With the prominence of social media, companies have been forced to give the consumer power to inspire change and educate brands – if a large

social movement occurs that many target consumers are engaging with, brands see the opportunity to inject themselves and connect with consumers (Benner, 2018). Therefore, the opinions and thoughts of consumers shared via social media certainly play a role in the increasing prevalence of brand activism.

However, as discussed in the introduction, although social media can be a space for sharing, learning, and gaining the attention of new consumers, it can also be detrimental for brands engaging in brand activism if the activism does not resonate with a large amount of their target market (Smith, 2017). Social media gives users the power to share both positive and negative opinions (Smith, 2017). As quickly as a campaign can be reacted to for being positive, consumers can react just as quickly to share their negative opinions (Smith, 2017). Social media amplifies situations; a brand can be very heavily judged for their stance or reaction to public opinion (Smith, 2017). Brand activism can be quite controversial. However, corporations view brand activism as a proactive and engaging way in which they can build their brand identity, inspire consumers, and incite change (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017).

Defining “Millennials”

The focus of this thesis is on millennial consumers and their perception of brand activism. Among researchers, a singular delineation of the range of millennial birth years has not yet emerged. Pew Research Center, a leading nonpartisan fact tank, defines millennials as “anyone born between 1981 and 1996.” YPulse, a research firm specializing in youth culture, considers millennials to be born between the years 1982 and 2004 (YPulse, 2018). In addition, researchers Regina Luttrell and Karen McGrath also

define millennials as those born between 1982 and 2004 in their book *The Millennial Mindset: Unraveling Fact From Fiction* (Luttrell & McGrath, 2016). Throughout this thesis the researcher defines millennials as those born anytime between the years 1985 and 2001, as this range of years falls within typical parameters set by academics. Additionally, consumers born between 1985 and 2001 were the most available to the researcher for primary research purposes.

Although there is not a consensus among researchers regarding the exact range of millennial birth years, researchers do agree that members of the millennial generation have several shared experiences which have shaped their worldview, values, and behaviors (DiMock, 2019). It is insightful to understand the context of millennials' upbringing and overall identity to effectively communicate and engage with members of this generational group (Luttrell & McGrath, 2016). Historical events and shared experiences in regard to politics, technology, and economics have impacted how millennials make decisions with regard to their career, life, and consumption (Luttrell & McGrath, 2016). The rapid technological advancement, economic turmoil, and growing political polarization during millennials' formative years played an integral role in forming the identity of the millennial generation (DiMock, 2019).

Throughout their life, millennials have been surrounded by constant technology advances and innovation (DiMock, 2019). Luttrell and McGrath state, "Technology, it could be argued, may be the single most influential component in the life of a Millennial (Luttrell & McGrath, 2016)." Throughout the millennials' formative years, the digital revolution took hold (DiMock, 2019). Technological change has occurred at an exponential rate throughout the lifetime of millennials (DiMock, 2019). Millennials

witnessed the transformation of video consumption multiple times; from VHS to DVD and, then again, the transformation to streaming services (DiMock, 2019). Millennials looked on as bulky home desktop computers became portable, thin laptops, which then became tablets. Millennials were often the early adapters of cell phones, which then quickly turned into smartphones connected to the all-powerful internet. The slow speed of a dial-up connection turned into the high speed of a broadband connection, transmitted wirelessly. The rapid technology advances and rise of the internet is thought of by many academics and researchers as the most defining innovation to shape millennials (DiMock, 2019).

Millennials came of age during the internet explosion (DiMock, 2019). Even the oldest members of the millennial generation had access to the internet in high school (Qualtrics; Accel, 2016). Since the advent of the internet, the technology has exponentially grown. Millennials have been the generation group to quickly and enthusiastically adapt to technology advances (Vogels, 2019). A 2019 Pew Research Center study reports that nearly 100 percent of American millennials say they use the internet (Vogels, 2019). The internet has provided users with virtually instant access to information (Luttrell & McGrath, 2016). Smartphones – which nine-out-of-ten millennials own – have provided this unlimited amount of information nearly anywhere, at any time (Vogels, 2019). Along with providing accessibility to information, the internet has led to the development of social media. In 2019, 83 percent of millennials said they use some form of social media (Vogels, 2019). Social media has allowed millennials the ability to expand their network beyond simply the people they physically encounter (Luttrell & McGrath, 2016). Millennials have embraced this ability to connect

with others of differing opinions and backgrounds. Millennials use the internet and social media to learn about the current events of the world, express themselves, connect with others, and expand their worldview.

Beyond technological advances, a majority of millennials have vivid memories of the various economic recessions in America during the early part of their lifetime; the Early 1990's recession, the Early 2000's recession, and the Great Recession of 2008. These economic downturns had a large impact on their childhood and young adult life. During the formative years of millennials, their families were often faced with financial uncertainty (DiMock, 2019). Millennials' parents often faced the possibility of job layoffs and home foreclosures (DiMock, 2019). During the millennials' young adulthood, they often entered the workforce in tough economic conditions (DiMock, 2019). In a 2011 study conducted by Pew Research Center, in the midst of the Great Recession, the research center reported that the share of young adults ages 18 to 24 employed at the time (54 percent) was its lowest since the government began collecting that data in 1948 (Pew Research Center, 2012). This economic turmoil inspired millennials to be conscientious of their purchasing decisions and deeply value their family, communities, and social networks (Vogels, 2019).

Politics, often tied heavily with economics, is another generation-shaping consideration. The majority of millennials were between the ages of five and 20 when the terrorist attacks of 9/11 occurred; many millennials had the ability to comprehend the historical significance of the event and its impact on the politics of America (DiMock, 2019). Millennials grew up during the resulting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which further differentiated the stances of the parties and contributed to the intense political

polarization of the current political environment (DiMock, 2019). The contrasting views and policies of President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama further shaped the political perspective of millennials (DiMock, 2019). Many millennials were between 12 and 27 during the 2008 presidential election, where the power of the youth vote was realized and contributed to the election of the first black president (DiMock, 2019). The political climate millennials were exposed to from a young age contributed to their concerned nature and unwavering opinions.

Understanding the context of the events and circumstances under which the millennial generation has been defined allow the characteristics of millennials to be further comprehended. As stated, millennials highly value self-expression and connection, which has been fueled by the rise of technology – specifically the internet and social media – throughout their formative years (Luttrell & McGrath, 2016). Millennials are the most racially and ethnically diverse generation ever. One third of millennials belong to a minority group (Luttrell & McGrath, 2016). Many millennials have experienced diversity in their own lives or through social media and are more tolerant of differences than previous generations (Vogels, 2019). As millennials grew up in times of economic turmoil, they have placed an emphasis on their family and social network. They are conscientious of how they spend their money – they desire to be informed about the company they are purchasing from (DiMock, 2019). Millennials came of age in an important political time for America; the wars in the Middle East, as well as the growing divide between America’s political parties, shaped their political perspectives and empowered them to hold firm beliefs and opinions (DiMock, 2019). The makeup of the millennial generation, as well as the historical events contributing to their

identity, has instilled in this generation an attitude that their opinion matters and that they have the ability to change the world in positive ways (Luttrell & McGrath, 2016).

Now that the general personality of the millennial generation has been established, it is important to note the significance of the generation, and clearly state why they have been chosen as the focus demographic of this research project. Millennials are an informed and opinionated group – shaped by the technological, political, and economic circumstances during their youth. Millennials’ shared experience leading to their values, tolerance of diversity, and concern for society make them a group that is likely to be responsive to brand activism. Perhaps most importantly, the millennial generation will have great purchasing power in the coming years. The 84.8 million millennials in the United States have \$2.5 trillion spending power in 2020 (YPulse, 2018). As millennials begin to inherit the wealth of baby boomers and advance in their careers, this spending power will continue to increase (YPulse, 2018). Millennial preferences have the power to make or break companies and, even, entire industries (DiMock, 2019). Hence, it is essential millennial consumers are understood and marketed toward in a meaningful way. In the proceeding chapter, millennials’ perception of brand activism will be presented.

CHAPTER TWO: MILLENNIALS' PERCEPTION OF BRAND ACTIVISM

The goal of this chapter is to answer the first research question of this thesis: how do millennial consumers perceive brands that engage in brand activism? It is evident that brand activism is a prevalent marketing practice. However, it is essential to first determine if brand activism truly resonates with consumers. Do millennial consumers care if a brand of soda, athletic apparel, razors, or another apolitical product makes a statement about an issue? If so, how does that affect the way consumers perceive the brand? To answer these questions, secondary research was analyzed and primary research in the form of a survey was conducted. To give marketers the most effective recommendations, it is essential to learn how millennials perceive brands that engage in brand activism.

Numerous research studies have been published by well-respected academics and communications agencies. The research conducted and published by industry-leading agencies and academics was completed with the goal of expanding the limits of marketing knowledge; the research published is not company specific, hence it is appropriate to analyze in order to get an understanding of broad consumer feelings and industry trends. Findings from these studies are often cited in both academic and industry articles discussing brand activism. Therefore, it is insightful and relevant to analyze existing sources.

In 2018, Edelman released their Earned Brand study. The communications agency's research team conducted a survey of over 8,000 consumers throughout eight markets. Consumers of all demographics participated. Although the study centered on earned media, multiple questions regarding the perception of brand activism among consumers were asked. Researchers found that nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of consumers will buy or boycott a brand based upon its position on a social or political issue. A larger number of belief-driven buyers exist than ever before; 69 percent of consumers aged 18 – 34 report as being a belief-driven buyer. Additionally, a majority of consumers of all income levels identify as belief-driven when making a purchasing decision. 62 percent of both low- and middle-income consumers and 69 percent of high-income consumers identify as belief-driven (Daniel J. Edelman Holdings, Inc., 2018).

YPulse, a marketing research firm specializing in examining youth culture, also asserts that consumers are conscious of the values and associations of a brand. The firm's 2018 study "Causes to Crises" focused on the feelings of Gen Z and Millennial consumers. The survey found that "more young shoppers are putting their money where their morals are (YPulse, 2018)," with 72 percent of 13-36-year-olds indicating that they believe brands have a responsibility to take a stance on social issues (YPulse, 2018). Furthermore, the survey results showed that when brands do stand up for causes, 78 percent of millennials and Gen Z feel more positively towards that brand, and 20 percent are more motivated to purchase (YPulse, 2018).

Additionally, the 2015 Millennial CSR study conducted by Cone Communications further supports that brand activism resonates with millennial consumers. The online survey of 1,003 consumers aged 18 – 34 provided an incredibly

comprehensive view of how millennials perceive the values, CSR efforts, and associations of a corporate brand. The study asserts that millennials reward brands they deem socially responsible; from buying products associated with a cause they care about to using their online networks to amplify social and environmental messages.

Millennials are much more fervent in their support of corporate social and environmental efforts than members of other generations. The survey revealed that more than nine-in-10 millennials would switch to purchasing a product or service from a brand that is associated with a cause. According to the survey data, millennials are more willing to:

- Purchase a product with a social or environmental benefit (87 percent vs. 83 percent U.S. average)
- Tell friends and family about the CSR efforts, values, and associations of a brand (82 percent vs. 72 percent U.S. average)
- Voice opinions to a company about its CSR efforts and associations to a cause or issue (70 percent vs. 60 percent U.S. average)
- Volunteer for a cause supported by a company they trust (74 percent vs. 56 percent U.S. average)
- Pay more for a product from a socially responsible company (70 percent vs. 66 percent U.S. average)

Additionally, the 2015 Millennial CSR study found that millennials use social media to engage with and learn about a brand's values and associations with issues and causes. The study states that millennials view social media as their "megaphone" to amplify the issues they are passionate about by sharing their thoughts and opinions with

their social networks. A large number of millennials, 33 percent, utilize social media to learn more about specific companies and issues. 38 percent of millennials share positive information about companies and issues they care about. Interestingly, 26 percent of millennials admit to sharing negative information about companies and issues they care about. The 2015 Cone Communications Millennial CSR Study further displays that millennials are truly passionate about the issues of today and expect brands to be passionate as well.

Although surveys are very insightful, this method of research is not the only to consider while analyzing secondary sources. Daniel Korschun, of the LeBow College of Business at Drexel University, and a team of his colleagues from Clemson University and Drexel University conducted a series of controlled experiments to better understand the reaction of consumers to brands' taking a stance on a societal issue (Korschun, 2017). Korschun proposed that it is more dangerous for a brand to remain silent than to take a stand on an issue (Korschun, 2017). Marketing academics propose that consumers today form relationships with brands based not only on the quality of products, but also on a set of behavioral expectations (Korschun, 2017). When brands begin conducting themselves inconsistently, consumers doubt their relationship with the brand (Korschun, 2017).

To test this idea's relevancy with activist-minded statements, Korschun and his team exposed study participants to various statements about a pharmacy chain shortly before participants entered. Several participants read a statement in which the company indicated it was guided by a set of values, researchers noted this as "values-oriented". Other participants read a statement asserting the chain adapts whatever values market

conditions dictate, which the researchers described as “results-oriented.” These statements established participants’ expectations of the brand (Korschun, 2017).

Participants then read a short article reporting that the company had either just taken a stand on proposed gun control legislation or had refrained from making a statement. If the brand had hypothetically taken a stance, the side of the issue taken was randomized. Participants then entered the pharmacy and shopped. After shopping, participants reported their in-store experience and whether or not they had purchased any items that they had not planned to purchase before entering the store. The researchers used the amount of money spent on unplanned purchases to determine the impact of the activist-minded stance on the customer-company relationship (Korschun, 2017).

No matter what stance - liberal or conservative - the brand took, unplanned purchases remained consistent at 18 percent. However, when examining unplanned purchases based upon the expectations set, values-oriented or results-oriented, the results were more pointed. For a values-oriented brand, 24 percent of participants made an unplanned purchase when the brand took a stance and only 9 percent made an unplanned purchase when the brand abstained from taking a stance. For a results-oriented brand, the effects were reversed. When a results-oriented brand refrained from taking a stance, 26 percent of participants made an unplanned purchase. However, when the results-oriented brand chose to take a stance, only 13 percent of participants made an unplanned purchase (Korschun, 2017).

The key takeaway from Korschun’s experiment is that consumers place incredible importance on how a brand presents its values. If a brand presents itself in a values-driven manner, which is increasingly prevalent today, consumers expect brands to remain

engaged with and vocalize these values. Korschun states, “Consumers find it hypocritical for a company that claims to be ‘guided by core values’ to then withhold its position on a political issue... Reinforcing expectations may forge trust and enhance relationships with customers (Korschun, 2017).”

The findings of these agencies and academics assert that consumers, particularly millennials, are passionate about the issues of the world today; millennials truly notice and care about the values and associations of a brand. Young consumers not only expect brands to have values – they also expect brands to vocalize these values and consider the values while making business decisions. Richard Edelman of Edelman states, “Brands are now being pushed to go beyond their classic business interests to become advocates. It is a new relationship between company and consumer, where purchase is premised on the brand’s willingness to live its values, act with purpose, and if necessary, make the leap into activism (Daniel J. Edelman Holdings, Inc., 2018).”

Consumer Perception of Brand Activism Survey

By looking at the previous literature and studies completed regarding brand activism, this thesis hopes to use some of the findings of previous researchers to better understand and predict how consumers perceive brand activism. To verify the findings of secondary sources, the thesis researcher conducted a survey titled “Consumers’ Perception of Brand Activism.” The goal of the survey was to discover millennials’ feelings toward brand activism. The 17-question survey was created using Qualtrics and distributed to the researcher’s network via social media and e-mail. The survey received 165 total responses. The researcher filtered the survey report to display only responses in

which participants fully completed the survey and indicated that they were born between 1985-2001. Additionally, the respondent must have indicated their gender as either male or female, not other or prefer not to answer. Lastly, the researcher filtered results based upon political leanings – only respondents who answered conservative, moderate, or liberal, not prefer not to answer, were displayed. Of the 165 total responses, 111 participants met these criteria.

The survey consisted of two sections gathering the following types of information: participant demographics and participant feelings regarding brand activism. Six questions involved demographics and eleven questions involved the participants' feelings toward brand activism. The questions regarding perception of brand activism requested participants indicate how much they agreed with a statement using a seven-point scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree.' The findings are presented using the top 2 method – the percentages of the 'strongly agree' and 'agree' answers were combined and the percentages of the 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' were combined. A list detailing all seventeen survey questions can be found in Appendix A. The survey collected zero identifying information in accordance to the University of Mississippi Internal Review Board. Therefore, answers could not be linked to a specific participant. This was communicated to participants to ensure of their comfort and honesty.

Overall, millennials reported that they are tremendously passionate about social, political, and cultural issues. 74.78 percent of all respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement "I am passionate about a social issue or cause." When asked to indicate their agreeance with the same statement, but in the context of a political issue or

cause, 63.07 percent indicated they strongly agreed or agreed. Additionally, 64.86 percent stated they were passionate about a cultural issue or cause. These findings, displayed in Figure 3.1, come as no surprise, as previous research has displayed that millennials are a group of concerned, opinionated citizens.

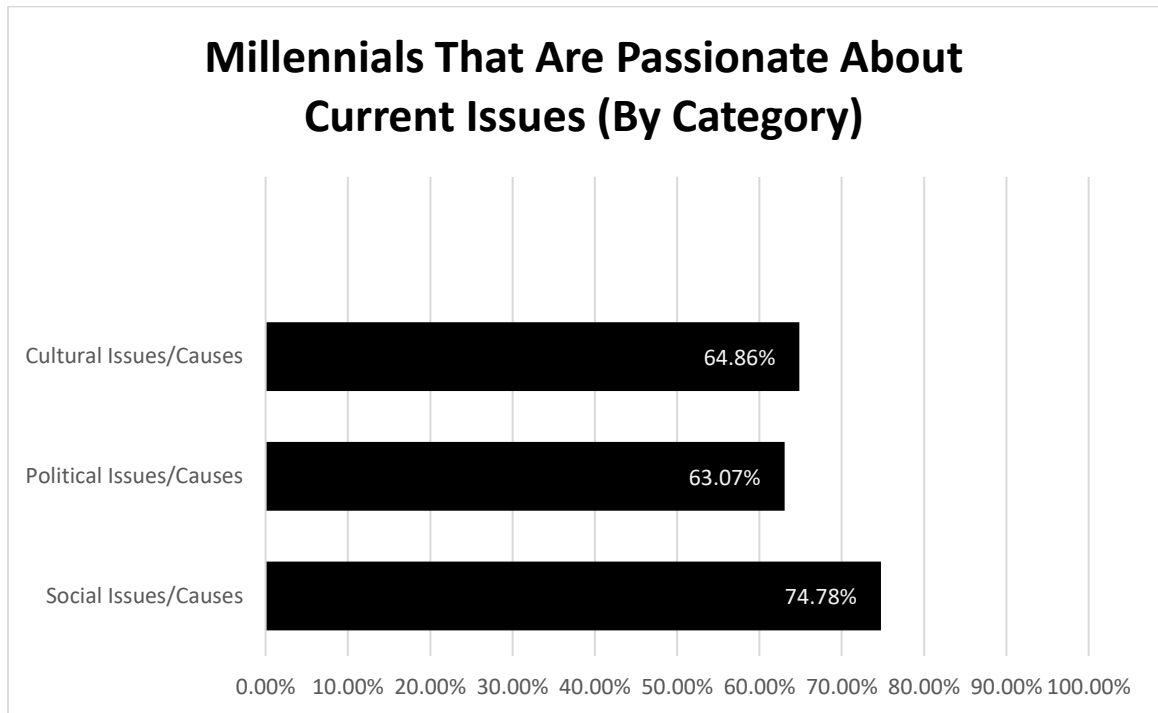


Figure 3.1: Millennials That Are Passionate About Current Issues. (Consumers’ Perception of Brand Activism, 2019)

Although respondents feel passionate about social, political, and cultural issues and causes, the survey findings indicate many are reluctant to believe that corporate brands should partake in brand activism. The results displayed millennials are not as overwhelmingly in agreement with the practice as secondary studies have suggested. Millennials are most hesitant regarding the intersection of corporate brands and politics; only 19.82 percent believe that brands should voice an opinion on a political issue or cause. 25.23 percent of millennials responded that they strongly disagree or disagree

with the statement, “I believe brands should publicly take a stance on a political issue or cause.” Nearly three in 10 millennials (27.03 percent) support a brand taking a stance on a social issue or cause. Interestingly, cultural issues appear to be a more appropriate topic for corporate brands to engage with – 36.03 percent of millennials indicated that they strongly agree or agree that brands should publicly take a stance on a cultural issue. Figure 3.2 displays these findings, graphically.

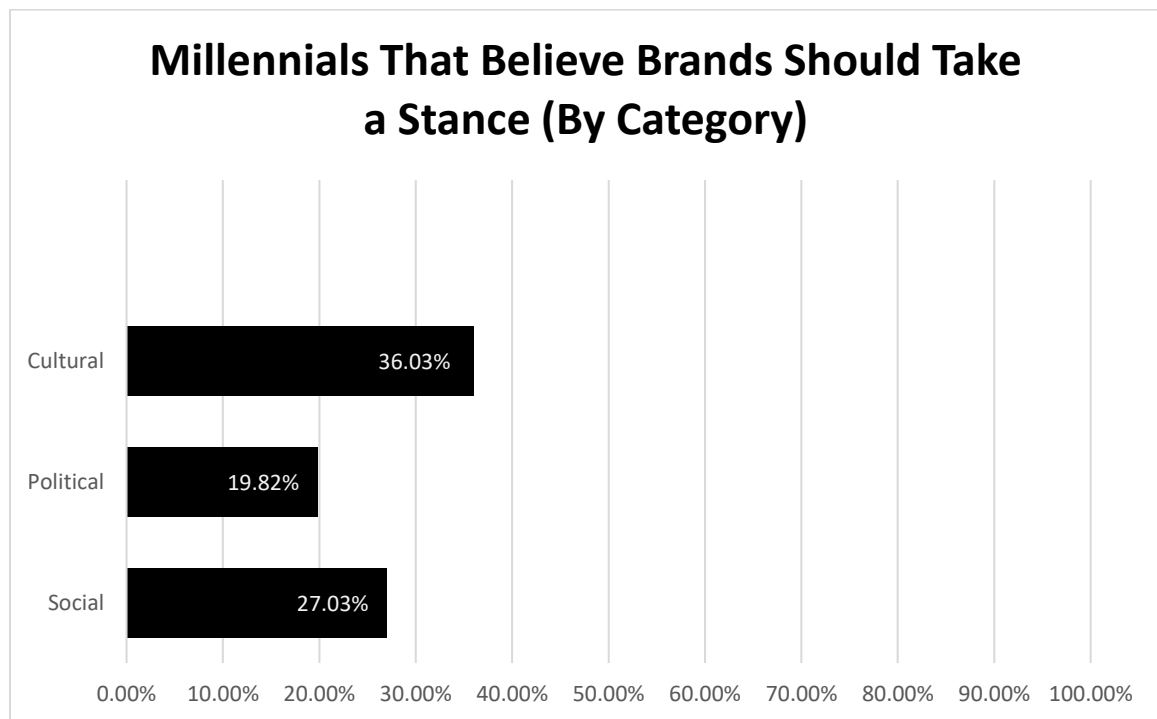


Figure 3.2: Millennials That Believe Brands Should Take a Stance. (Consumers’ Perception of Brand Activism, 2019)

Next, the researcher analyzed the survey data to discover how a brand’s associations and stances on issues impact millennials’ perception of brands. The secondary research presented at the start of the chapter proposes that brand activism typically makes a positive impact on brand perception, rather than negatively affecting perception. Interestingly, only 21.63 percent of respondents indicated that they

consciously consider the causes or issues a brand publicly supports when making a purchasing decision; 26.13 percent stated they do not consider the issues a brand supports when making a purchasing decision. Therefore, the survey revealed that a majority of millennials are less aware of the associations of a brand than prior research suggests.

Although only a small amount millennials state that they consider the issues a brand supports when making a buying decision, 28.83 percent of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that it is important to them that a brand has values they agree with. Additionally, 70.27 percent of millennials voiced that they strongly agree or agree with the statement that they are likely to think favorably of a brand that supports a cause or issue they agree with. Conversely, 22.52 percent of millennials responded that they are not likely to think unfavorably of a brand that supports a cause or issue they disagree with. Another statistic discovered while analyzing the survey was that nearly half – 45.94 percent – of millennials stated they are loyal to brands that take a stance on an issue or support a cause. From this information, it can be deduced that when millennial consumers take notice of a brand’s associations and values, typically through brand activism campaigns, they overwhelmingly prefer the issue or cause to align with their own values. However, if the cause or issue does not meet their set of values, nearly a quarter of millennials will not let that impact their overall perception of the brand.

Another noteworthy component of the survey to consider is how perception changed based upon the demographics of millennials. Although the survey asked multiple questions regarding several demographics of participants, such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status, the most interesting data was found when the questions pertaining to their perception of brand activism were filtered based upon how the participant

identified their political beliefs – liberal, moderate, or conservative. Therefore, these findings will be detailed.

When participants were asked to indicate their political ideology – liberal, moderate, or conservative – findings were relatively even. Participants most commonly indicated their political opinions were moderate, at 41.44 percent. 32.43 percent of respondents identified their political leanings as liberal, and 26.3 percent specified that their political ideals were more conservative. These findings are displayed graphically in Figure 5.3.

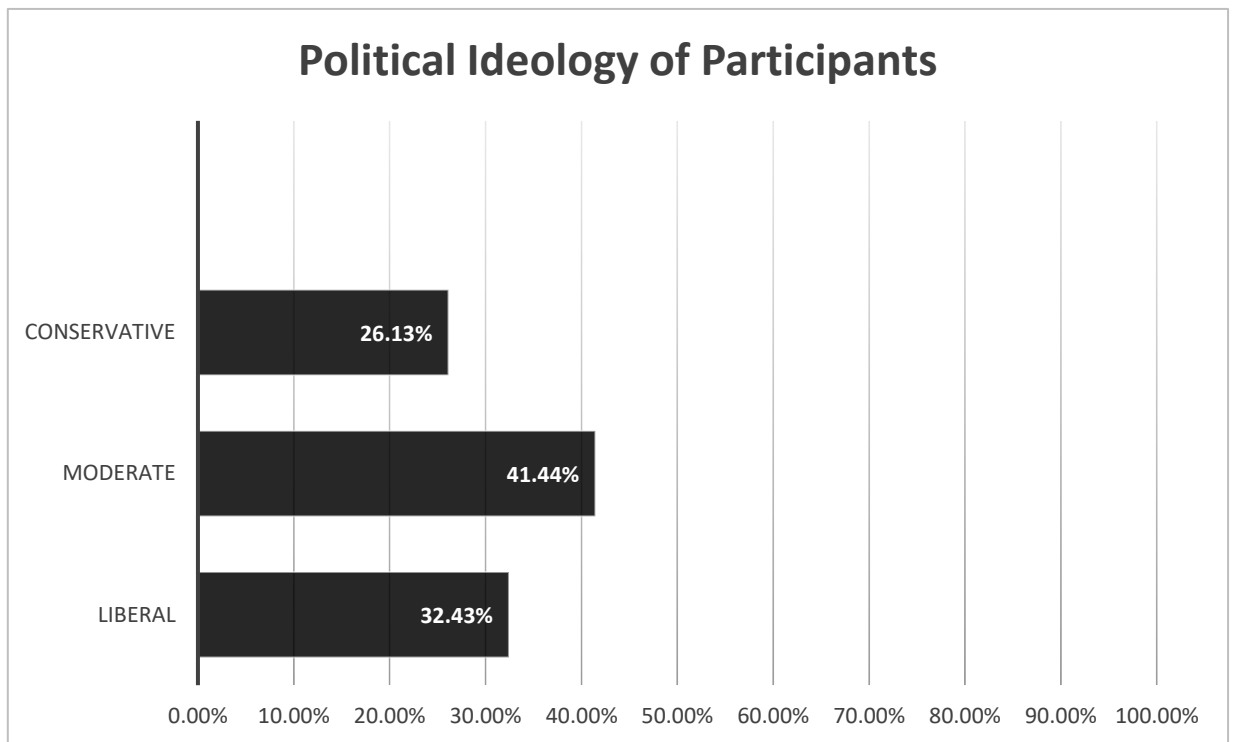


Figure 3.3: Political Ideology of Participants. (Consumers’ Perception of Brand Activism, 2019)

As millennials who participated in the survey had very evenly distributed political ideologies, meaning the percent of participants in each category only had a small variance of 15.31 percent, the general opinions of liberal, moderate, and conservative participants

are effectively communicated in the questions regarding their perception of brand activism.

As displayed in the general discussion regarding the survey results, a majority of all respondents responded that they are passionate about a social issue. When further looking at how respondents with specific political ideologies replied, findings displayed that liberals overwhelmingly felt the strongest passion for social issues. Nearly all liberal participants indicated that they are passionate about social issues, with 94.45 percent stating they strongly agree or agree with the statement “I am passionate about a social issue or cause.” The survey results also suggested that the majority of both moderate and conservative consumers possessed a passion for social issues - 69.56 percent of moderates and 58.62 percent of conservatives.

Although most liberals, moderates, and conservatives possess a passion for social issues, all three groups are less likely to feel as though brands should make a statement regarding a social issue or cause. In fact, 27.59 percent of conservatives disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “I believe brands should publicly take a stance on a social issue/cause.” Although 47.23 percent of liberal consumers feel that brands should take a stance on social issues, that percentage is roughly half of the 94.45 percent who indicated that they are passionate about social issues. Overall, a low percentage of respondents, regardless of political affiliation, feel that companies should take a stance on social issues.

The largest group of consumers who stated they are passionate about political issues are, again, liberals at 94.45 percent. However, nearly half of moderates and

conservatives - 47.83 percent of moderates and 47.83 percent of conservatives - feel passionate about political issues or causes.

Even though 94.45 percent of liberals feel passionate about political issues, less than half, 47.23%, are in strong agreeance or agreeance that brands should practice activism concerning political issues. Even fewer moderates and conservatives want brands to take a side on political issues with 8.70% and 3.45% strongly agreeing or agreeing with the statement, "I believe a brand should take a stance on a political issue or cause." 37.93 percent of conservatives actually disagree or strongly disagree with the statement.

Staying on trend, the answers of respondents, again, indicate that liberal consumers are the largest group in agreeance with the statement, "I am passionate about a cultural issue or cause." at 83.33 percent. 58.70 percent of moderate consumers are passionate about cultural issues or causes; 51.72 percent of conservative respondents indicated that they possess a passion for cultural issues.

Many consumers who consider themselves liberal feel that brands should practice cultural activism with 52.78 percent in agreeance or strong agreeance. Of those considering themselves moderates, 32.61 percent strongly agreed or agreed that brands should take a stance on cultural issues. Even fewer conservatives strongly agreed or agreed at 20.69 percent.

The pattern displays that liberal consumers are much more likely to claim that they are passionate about causes and issues of all kinds and expect brands to take a stance and voice opinions. A lesser, although still significant, number of moderate consumers and conservative consumers are passionate about causes and issues. However, moderates

and conservatives are much less likely to think that brands should publicly take a stance on an issue. This pattern remains present when the results of questions regarding consumer's purchasing decisions, perception, and loyalty are analyzed.

The findings of the question regarding the importance of a brand's values on consumer perception widely varied depending on the consumer's political ideology. 47.22 percent of liberal respondents indicated that they find it important that a brand's values align with their own. Only 2.78 percent stated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed that a brand's values should support with their own. Moderate consumers were evenly split about the significance they place on a brand's values: 21.74 agreed or strongly agreed and 19.57 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that a brand's values were important to them. Conservatives, however, differed from the other two groups in that they were more likely to disagree than agree that a brand's values should align with their own – 20.69 percent disagreed and 17.24 percent agreed.

Millennials across all political ideologies were very likely to think favorably of a brand that supports a cause or issue that the consumer agrees with. Interestingly, nearly four-in-ten conservatives stated that they were likely to think unfavorably of a brand that champions for causes they disagree with. Liberals, on the other hand felt much more strongly. Six-in-ten liberals stated that they would think unfavorably of a brand that endorsed a cause or issue they disagreed with.

Although liberal, moderate, and conservative participants reported that they have very strong opinions impacting their perception of various brands, results displayed that this did not play into their purchasing decision as much as expected. Only 10.35 percent of conservatives and 15.22 percent of moderates stated that they consider the issues or

causes a brand publicly supports when making a buying decision. Liberals stated that they considered it a bit more, with 38.89 percent stating they agree or strongly agree with the statement, “I consider the causes/issues a brand publicly supports when I make a buying decision.”

Understanding the correlation between consumer perception and their political identity is incredibly beneficial. Brands can use this information to better judge how a campaign will resonate with their target consumer. The survey findings display that liberal consumers are much more concerned with the causes and associations that a brand publicly supports. Liberal consumers are more encouraging and receptive of brand activism, as the survey found that they are the group most likely state that they believe a brand should engage in social, political, and cultural activism. Additionally, liberals are the most likely to judge a brand based upon the brand’s values and public associations and allow that to impact their purchasing decision. Although moderates and conservatives notice brand activism, they do not encourage the practice as much as liberal consumers. In fact, conservatives are a bit indifferent about brand activism; they aren’t likely to let the causes and associations of a brand affect whether they think positively or negatively of a brand, and they typically do not consider the brand’s prior associations when making a purchasing decision.

The findings from the “Consumers’ Perception of Brand Activism” survey reveal that, overall, millennials are passionate yet cautious. This information is beneficial to marketing professionals in several ways. Firstly, it is significant to be assured that, collectively, millennials genuine show concern for issues and causes. Millennials champion for the existence of a compassionate world in which difference is understood,

embraced, and respected. A large majority of all millennials indicated that they have passion for social, political, and cultural issues. Despite this passion, millennial consumers in general are cautious about brand activism. This is not surprising, given that many issues or causes conflict with the opinions of others. It should also be noted that respondents gave somewhat conflicting information – for example, they displayed strong opinions regarding whether or not a brand should engage in brand activism but also admitted that they often do not consider the associations of a brand when making a purchasing decision. This further displays consumer’s conscious thoughtfulness and internal conflictions regarding brand activism.

The survey did not display any findings with such overwhelming statistics as many of the secondary studies and surveys provided. However, the Consumer Perception of Brand Activism Survey did still indicate that most millennials are open to hearing brands publicly take a stance on a cause or issue, especially liberal consumers. After considering both secondary studies and surveys, as well as conducting primary research in the form of a survey, the answer of the first research question can be answered. Millennial consumers do have opinions about the causes and issues a brand chooses to publicly support. Brand activism does impact brand perception, both positively and negatively. Brand activism has the potential to greatly resonate with consumers, as 70.27 percent of millennials are likely to think favorably of a brand that supports a cause or issue they agree with. In the upcoming chapters, the researcher seeks to understand how to ensure brand activism inspires positive brand perception among millennial consumers.

CHAPTER THREE: ACTIVIST-MINDED CAMPAIGN STUDIES

Thus far, this thesis has examined a range of academic literature, prior research conducted by leading marketing agencies and academics, and presented the researcher's survey to answer this question: how do millennial consumers perceive brands that engage in brand activism? After concluding that millennial consumers truly desire companies to be vocal in their opinions, the remainder of the thesis aims to answer the second research question: how can marketing and public relations professionals ensure brand activism resonates with millennial consumers? To answer this question, it is essential to first understand what brands have done to enact brand activism. In this chapter, the researcher presents an analysis of two recent activist-minded campaigns.

In choosing the two campaigns to analyze, the researcher looked for campaigns meeting a few criteria. Firstly, the brand must have been established and widely known; their brand identity prior to the campaign must have been fully developed and understood by consumers. Secondly, the researcher wanted to look at campaigns that received a great deal of attention, regardless of if that attention was positive or negative. Thirdly, the researcher hoped to look at two campaigns that took a stance on different issues to get an understanding of how marketing professionals have delivered activist-minded campaigns in two different contexts. Additionally, as the focus of this thesis is on millennials, the campaign must have been targeted toward this consumer group. Lastly, the last criterion was that the campaign must have been delivered to consumers in a multimedia manner – some type of combination of earned, owned, or paid media must

have been used. After considering all criteria, Gillette's "The Best Men Can Be" campaign and Airbnb's "#WeAccept" campaign were the campaigns chosen to be analyzed.

Gillette's 2019 campaign "The Best Men Can Be" challenged sexism and the common depiction of masculinity (Dreyfuss, 2019). The campaign, launched by the world's leading men's grooming brand, received a large amount of attention throughout the industry and public upon its release (Dreyfuss, 2019). Although Gillette is used by men of all ages, the millennial male is a large group of consumers for the brand; millennials were the target for "The Best Men Can Be (Topping, Lyons, & Weaver, 2019)." The brand voiced their opinion on a social issue at a time when sexism was highly relevant among consumers and media (Dreyfuss, 2019). Finally, the campaign met the multimedia criterion, as Gillette launched the campaign on both paid and owned media.

Airbnb's #WeAccept campaign also met all criterion and was selected as a brand activism campaign to analyze. Airbnb launched the #WeAccept campaign in February of 2017 during the Super Bowl, football and advertising's biggest day of the year. Additionally, the company developed social media content for the campaign. #WeAccept garnered the attention of many, making it one of the advertisements that stood out amongst the plethora of high-quality campaigns launched during the Super Bowl.

To analyze the effectiveness of the two campaigns presented, the researcher used Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism, which was detailed in chapter one. The model acts as a framework to discover firstly, Gillette and Airbnb's existing brand identity, and secondly, how the activist-minded campaign either contributes to or diminishes this preexisting

overall identity of the brand. Below, the metrics for evaluation of how the campaigns contribute to the six elements of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism are described.

Physique

To evaluate how the brand activism contributes to the brand's physique, the researcher considers how and when the physical product, logos, and colors are presented in the activist-minded campaign.

Personality

The personality of the brand is very telling of the brand's identity. The personality is the way in which the brand delivers and communicates their message. While considering the personality of the campaign, the researcher asks: what is the tone of the brand activism campaign? How is the copywriting presented? Does the personality of the campaign align with the typical personality presented by the brand?

Culture

The culture of a brand is perhaps the most heavily considered element when creating an activist-minded campaign. Brand activist campaigns contribute to and communicate the culture of a brand. When considering culture, the researcher seeks to discover what values the brand displayed in the campaign. Additionally, the researcher asked: does the campaign align with the values historically displayed? As more companies are taking a stance on issues, consumers are becoming increasingly critical of the validity of those stances in relation to the company's actual values. Does the brand have the ability to connect to the issue or cause chosen in a relevant and distinctive way?

Relationship

To evaluate how the campaign impacted the relationship element of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism, the researcher discovered what the previous relationship with consumers was like. In addition, the researcher hoped to discover if the brand built trust with consumers by launching the campaign. Did the brand launch initiatives and give consumers a way to get involved or is this blatantly a one-off message to benefit the brand? Did the brand consult with knowledgeable individuals or organizations involved with the issue or cause?

Self-image

In looking at self-image, the researcher hoped to discover if the campaign aligned with the consumers' self-perception; if the consumers identify with the cause or issue presented. To discover this, the researcher asked: who is the typical consumer of the brand? What are their values? Does the consumer care about the issue/cause chosen?

Reflection

Lastly, the researcher used reflection to analyze the campaigns. In using this element, the researcher considered how the brand thought the campaign would connect with consumers versus the actual reaction from consumers. This was discovered by analyzing media coverage and social media listening.

For each case study, a synopsis of the campaign will be provided. The brand's pre-existing brand identity prism will be presented to provide a basis to understand how the campaign impacted the six elements of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism. Then, the six elements are used to evaluate how the campaign contributed to the pre-existing brand

identity. Following this evaluation, the researcher provides a short summary of what should be learned from each campaign.

“The Best Men Can Be” by Gillette

Gillette is a leading maker of men’s grooming products – razors, shaving cream, and deodorant. The company is globally known by the public as a high-quality, dependable provider of these men’s personal care products (Gogarty, 2019). Forbes values the brand at \$16.6 billion, placing them at number 37 on the media outlet’s list of the world’s most valuable brands in 2019 (Forbes, 2019).

In early 2019, Gillette made headlines for its use of social brand activism; the brand hoped to redefine its prior messaging and take a new, inclusive direction (Gogarty, 2019). For over 30 years, the Gillette Company successfully reinforced the high quality of its products using the slogan “The Best a Man Can Get.” Launched by the brand in 1989, Gillette also used this memorable slogan to promote the characteristics of superior American masculinity (Iqbal, 2019). The slogan paired with the visuals used in the brand’s advertisements – typically a strong man playing a sport or a handsome man kissing a woman – suggested that those type of men were the model of masculinity and would sell men’s grooming products (Dreyfuss, 2019). The slogan made a lasting impression on men as it conveyed a two-fold meaning; firstly, Gillette’s razors provided men with the best shave and, secondly, the slogan reinforced the then-common belief that muscular, strong men are the ideal depiction of masculinity (Iqbal, 2019).

Gillette’s “The Best a Man Can Get” shaped the brand’s manly identity that resonated with consumers (Iqbal, 2019). Gillette was able to charge a premium price for

their products and gain market share (Taylor, 2019). However, as times shifted, Gillette began to lose its prominence (Topping, Lyons, & Weaver, 2019). Low-priced competitors stressing convenience entered the market, forcing Gillette to drop the price of their products by 15 percent (Taylor, 2019). In addition, the ideal model of masculinity began to evolve, as younger consumers placed high value on acceptance and women's equality (Dreyfuss, 2019). These factors contributed to Gillette's market share drop from 70 percent to 50 percent during the 2010's (Taylor, 2019). In response, the brand launched its "The Best Men Can Be" campaign (Taylor, 2019). Gillette took a stance on toxic masculinity and gender equality in hopes that the brand could attract consumers, specifically younger consumers, and regain some of their lost market share (Topping, Lyons, & Weaver, 2019).

Gillette debuted this new campaign, "The Best Men Can Be," in early 2019 (Dreyfuss, 2019). The company launched the campaign by releasing the narrative advertisement "We Believe in The Best In Men." The advertisement, which Gillette touts as a film, makes a large statement in just one minute and 45 seconds (Topping, Lyons, & Weaver, 2019). Initially, the viewers hear the narrator use the terms bullying, me too movement, sexual harassment and toxic masculinity. Quickly, the ad segues to a Gillette graphic with the narrator asking, "Is this the best a man can get?" The advertisement shows examples of men displaying toxic behaviors; bullying, violence, and sexual harassment. These behaviors are excused. However, the advertisement transitions, with the narrator stating, "But something finally changed." as news coverage of recent sexual harassment lawsuits is shown. Men are then displayed holding other men accountable for their poor behavior. The final voiceover concludes with the

following: “We believe in the best in men: To say the right thing, to act the right way. Some already are in ways big and small. But some is not enough. Because the boys of today will become the men of tomorrow.” To conclude the advertisement, the words “The best a man can get. It’s only by challenging ourselves to do more that we can get closer to our best.” appear. The brand then prompts viewers to visit the campaign website, and the Gillette logo flashes to end the advertisement.

To analyze Gillette’s “The Best Men Can Be” campaign, the researcher used the previously explained elements of Kapferer’s Brand Identity Prism as a framework.

Figure 4.1 depicts Gillette’s brand identity prior to the launch of “The Best Men Can Be.”

BRAND IDENTITY PRISM

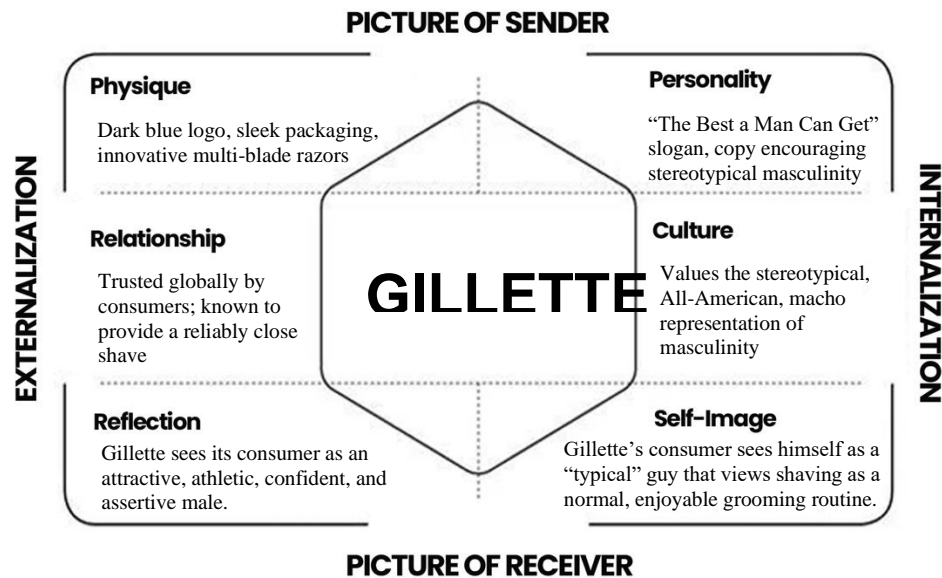


Figure 4.1: Gillette’s Pre-existing Brand Identity Prism

Physique

In previous advertising campaigns, Gillette heavily focused on displaying the product in use to promote its innovative features, reliable shave, and overall benefits. However, the “The Best Men Can Be” campaign took a new direction by telling a story rather than displaying the use of the product or focusing on product innovation. In the new ad, the Gillette logo was only briefly shown and there was not a single instance of a man being shown using Gillette products. In fact, no Gillette product was featured at all in the advertisement. The lack of product promotion in the campaign displays that Gillette’s focus was on communicating their message. Gillette aimed to no longer identify itself as a tool for a man’s use, and instead, as a set of values all men can live by (Topping, Lyons, & Weaver, 2019).

Personality

When considering the delivery, tone, and language of “The Best Men Can Be” it is evident that Gillette took a new approach than the brand typically does. As discussed, Gillette campaigns traditionally have influenced the consumer to identify their grooming products as symbols of status, strength, and accomplishment (Gogarty, 2019). In comparison, “The Best Men Can Be” communicates messages of responsibility, respect, and compassion (Gogarty, 2019).

By comparing the language between the old slogan, “The Best A Man Can Get” and the new campaign slogan, “The Best Men Can Be” one can clearly see how changing a few words can drastically transform the message a brand conveys to consumers (Clemens, 2019). The original campaign slogan used the singular term man,

whereas “The Best Men Can Be” used the plural term men. The change in this one noun is the difference between a consumer thinking about a traditional, more singular idea of masculinity versus a broader more pluralistic view of masculinity (Clemens, 2019). The plural usage also evokes a sense of a community and challenges all men to take responsibility and hold one another accountable (Clemens, 2019). Additionally, changing the verb “get” to the verb “be” shifts Gillette’s message about masculinity (Clemens, 2019). The term “get” considers a man’s best as something that is received while “be” conveys a man’s best as something that a man is continuously forming and working toward (Clemens, 2019).

Culture

Gillette placed an emphasis on their image, story and values. They confronted the idea of toxic masculinity, a timely national question. This issue is relevant to the Gillette consumer, as males are the focus of conversations regarding toxic masculinity. As the campaign launched, the American Psychological Association released findings that conforming to traditional stereotypes of masculinity can be linked to negative health effects such as substance abuse, cardiovascular disease, and early mortality (Hess, 2019). This study indicates that Gillette’s decision to release a campaign confronting machismo was very relevant and timely (Hess, 2019).

Although “The Best a Man Can Be” tries to break down the timely and relevant issue of toxic masculinity, the brand’s historically displayed values were in conflict with this messaging. Gillette previously valued and promoted strong, manly, attractive men; the brand encouraged men to be assertive, confident, and abide by the common

masculinity ideals. The new values displayed in “The Best Men Can Be’ did not align with these previous values.

Relationship

Kirk Olson, VP of Trend Sights at Horizon Media, stated, “If it’s not immediately understandable to the consumer, brands risk looking like their [consumer responsibility] effort is more of a marketing tactic than a genuine commitment springing from the brand’s own mission (Clemensen, 2017).” If a brand does not commit to supporting their chosen cause or issue, the decision will severely hurt the identity and trustworthiness of a brand.

The importance of this element was forgotten by Gillette when they chose to deliver their campaign messaging in the manner they did. Although well-intentioned and in support of a noble cause, the brand did not consider how they had previously built the relationship they had with consumers. Many Gillette consumers fit the previously popularized ideal of masculinity that the brand had featured in campaigns. When “The Best Men Can Be” launched, those consumers felt attacked. They felt as though Gillette was telling them that they were inadequate. Many critics felt as though they were being stereotyped as toxic, sexist males lacking compassion. Many Gillette consumers lost their trust in the brand. Therefore, the relationship between Gillette and many of the brand’s consumers was severely weakened.

Self-image

As stated in when evaluating how the campaign impacted the relationship element, the typical Gillette consumer sees himself as a strong masculine man. This is a

direct result of the previous advertising efforts of Gillette; the brand featured conventionally attractive, macho males in their prior campaigns. As “The Best Men Can Be” encouraged a very different projection of masculinity, it did not align with the self-image of consumers. In fact, many felt very ostracized by the campaign (Lofgren, 2019)

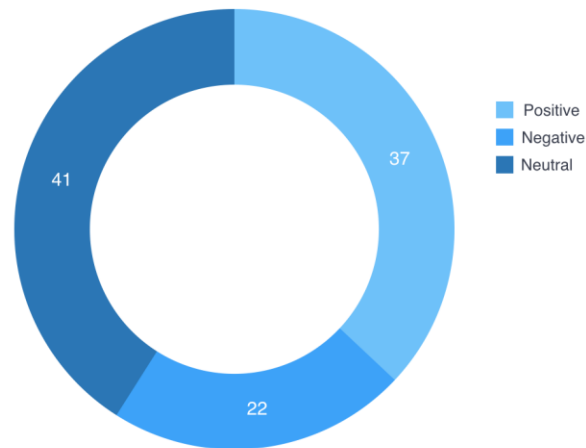
Reflection

Gillette leadership explained their decision of creating this campaign, goals of the campaign, and how they truly planned to tackle the issue of toxic masculinity. In an interview with CNBC, North American Director Pankaj Bhalia stated, “We wanted to take a step back and take a fresh look at what it means to be “the best” and how we continue to portray those ideals in a modern way. ... Men everywhere are already working to rewrite the rules on what it looks like to be ‘the best’ and how a culture can come together to make it happen (Hess, 2019).” Gillette saw their consumers as a group of men working to “rewrite the rules” of masculinity. Gillette was hopeful that the campaign would connect with their consumers, who are consistently working to better themselves.

However, many consumers did not react in the way Gillette was expecting. There was quite an intense backlash regarding the ad. According to Forbes, the reaction to the “We Believe In the Best In Men” was overwhelmingly negative, with comments on the brand’s YouTube channel running negative by a 10 to 1 margin (Taylor, 2019). The YouTube video also had half a million more dislikes than likes as of January 24, 2019 (Lofgren, 2019). Many thought the ad was insulting to men and full of stereotypes (Taylor, 2019). Most dangerous for Gillette was the many men who threatened to never buy Gillette products again (Taylor, 2019). For example, Emmy award winning actor

James Wood accused Gillette of “jumping on the, ‘men are horrible’ campaign” and pledged to boycott its products (Topping, Lyons, & Weaver, 2019). The controversy of the ad can be understood by looking at the following chart from NewsWhip, which analyzed the data surrounding the campaign. In Figure 4.2, it is clear that negative and positive sentiment was nearly the same. This backlash and controversy display a severe discord in the reflection element of Gillette’s brand identity.

Sentiment of Top 100 Web Articles About Gillette Ad



*Source: NewsWhip Spike from January 10th - January 22nd 2019 only. Data accurate as of Jan. 22nd.



Figure 4.2: Sentiment of Top 100 Web Articles About Gillette Ad (Lofgren, 2019).

Lessons from Gillette’s “The Best Men Can Be”

From Gillette’s “The Best Men Can Be” marketers can learn what not to do when creating their own activist-minded campaigns. The campaign was not successful, as Reuter’s announced “P&G reported a net loss of about \$5.24 billion, or \$2.12 per share, for the quarter ended June 30 (2019), due to an \$8 billion non-cash writedown of Gillette (Richa Naidu, 2019).” This means that Proctor and Gamble, the owners of Gillette,

lessened the value of Gillette by \$8 billion. Overall, the reason for the negative response Gillette's campaign received was the dissatisfying consideration of their existing relationship, self-image, and reflection elements of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism. Although fighting toxic masculinity is a noble cause that is relevant to male consumers, the way in which Gillette chose to deliver the message was demeaning toward their specific consumers. Gillette alienated their consumer. Additionally, Gillette did not provide a plan to make a true impact or any concrete evidence of making a true change surrounding the issue. Gillette did not consider their existing brand identity as a whole while designing this campaign, which led to the failure of the campaign. From this, marketing professionals should learn that they must conduct comprehensive research to understand the minds of their consumers, otherwise brand activism will become controversial and have negative effects on a brand.

#WeAccept by Airbnb

At a value of \$31 billion, Airbnb is one of the most successful peer-to-peer services specializing in housing accommodations. Airbnb acts as a marketplace for hosts to rent out a residential property to guests for a short-term stay nearly anywhere in the world. In addition, the service allows locals to provide unique experiences to visitors. The company has created a service that can cater to consumers of all types: high-end spenders, those on a tight travel budget, and everyone in between (What Airbnb Teaches Us About Having a Strong Brand Identity, n.d.). The company has hosted over 160 million guests in more than 65,000 cities and 191 countries (What Airbnb Teaches Us About Having a Strong Brand Identity, n.d.).

Established in 2008, the brand identity of Airbnb has evolved over time. However, the company has always placed an emphasis on promoting their community of guests and hosts (All About Airbnb, 2016). Human contact was always positioned as a key aspect of the Airbnb experience (All About Airbnb, 2016). In 2013 and 2014, Airbnb launched “Belong Anywhere,” a campaign focusing again on the inclusivity and community of the brand (All About Airbnb, 2016). In 2016 Airbnb established their “Community Commitment” as part of their “Live There” campaign. This commitment required all users to “treat everyone in the Airbnb community regardless of their race, religion, national origin, ethnicity, disability, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation or age with respect, and without judgment or bias (Airbnb, n.d.).” If users failed to meet the requirement, they would be removed from the platform (Airbnb, n.d.). This community commitment worked to remove any discrimination or bias from the platform (Airbnb, n.d.).

In response to the announcement of a U.S government travel ban in 2017, most notably on seven Muslim nations and misplaced refugees, the Airbnb message of acceptance was propelled (Graham, 2017). Airbnb used the occurrence to continue to align itself with diversity and inclusion (Graham, 2017). In an effort to drive the conversation and inspire action, Airbnb launched a global campaign called #WeAccept (Graham, 2017).

The #WeAccept campaign launched during the Super Bowl of 2017, followed with social media posts from Airbnb’s social platforms and the company’s CEO (Graham, 2017). The simple, 30 second advertisement conveyed a powerful message of acceptance (Graham, 2017). Portraits of people of various genders and ethnicities appear

on the screen. Above these portraits, the following copy appears, “We believe no matter who you are, where you’re from, who you love, or who you worship, we all belong. The world is more beautiful the more you accept.” Finally, #WeAccept appears on the screen with Airbnb’s logo placed underneath.

The ad never specifically mentioned the recent U.S. travel ban, but rather focused on the value of acknowledging and embracing ethnic and religious differences (Graham, 2017). Following the initial premiere of the advertisement, Airbnb CEO Brian Chesky wrote on Twitter, “No matter who you are, where you’re from, who you love, or who you worship, you deserve to belong (Graham, 2017).” As the brand was taking a stance on a controversial issue regarding both political policy and cultural acceptance, the activism communicated by Airbnb is a blend of political and cultural.

Since the inception of Airbnb, the brand has placed great focus on their users. The brand has developed an inclusive, welcoming identity among consumers. Figure 4.2 further details Airbnb’s pre-existing brand identity on Kapferer’s Brand Identity Prism.

BRAND IDENTITY PRISM

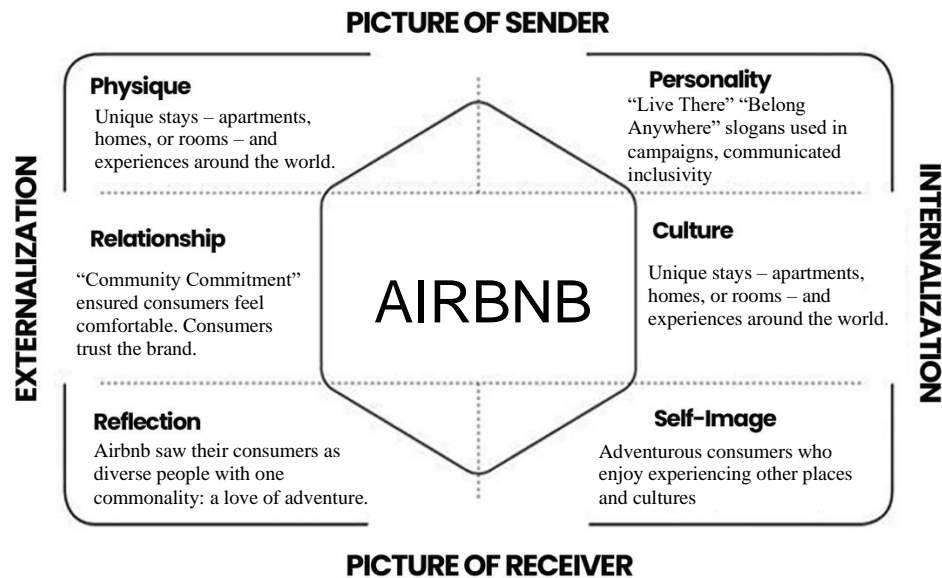


Figure 4.3: Airbnb’s Brand Identity Prism

Physique

The physical element of Airbnb is comprised of the brand’s unique accommodations and experiences. In prior campaigns, the brand typically highlighted the brand physique (All About Airbnb, 2016). Airbnb often used the wide array of accommodations they offer as the setting for their campaigns (All About Airbnb, 2016). The stays and experiences portrayed communicated the inviting and satisfactory experience Airbnb provides (Graham, 2017).

However, in the “We Accept” campaign the physique of Airbnb is not emphasized. The stays and experiences are not displayed; instead the diversity of the Airbnb consumer is focused on. Additionally, the Airbnb logo is not featured until the very end of the advertisement. These decisions remind the audience that although the

physical characteristics of the Airbnb stay is the central component of the brand, Airbnb's focus is on creating an inclusive environment for their consumers.

Personality

In prior campaigns, Airbnb used the slogans “Live There” and “Belong Anywhere.” Airbnb has always communicated messages of tolerance and acceptance. The language used in “#WeAccept” aligned with the tone and language of previous Airbnb campaigns. “We all belong” featured in the advertisement and “You deserve to belong” tweeted by CEO Brian Chesky, in particular, use a word frequently used by Airbnb: belong. Airbnb's entire brand personality revolves around a sense of belonging. The language used in #WeAccept supports the pre-existing brand personality, and overall brand identity, of Airbnb.

Culture

As stated, since the brand's inception their main concern has been to provide consumers with a valuable, positive travel experience. The company has always valued inclusion, diversity, and creating a “world of belonging.” Throughout all of their communication campaigns, these values have been portrayed – whether that be through diverse casting in commercials or the launching of their Community Commitment. The #WeAccept campaign promoted all of the ideals and values central to Airbnb throughout the company's history, using a very timely and relevant political and cultural issue to communicate their values. Because of Airbnb's pre-existing culture of acceptance, the campaign resonated with consumers.

Relationship

Airbnb's previous campaigns have focused on adventurous consumers, typically millennials, who want authentic travel experiences. Airbnb serves consumers of many races, genders, and nationalities. The #WeAccept campaign expanded upon that and emphasized that all people no matter race, religion, ethnicity, age should feel welcome to utilize their platform. Most importantly, Airbnb promoted acceptance in society for all.

Airbnb build trust within their community by creating their community commitment. This set of rules has displayed just how dedicated the brand is to guaranteeing that all users feel comfortable using Airbnb. Additionally, Airbnb strengthened the existing trust they have with consumers through the #WeAccept campaign by communicating tangible ways in which they were dedicated to helping refugees and all who are searching for a sense of belonging (Graham, 2017). Airbnb stated that they were planning to provide short term housing to 100,000 people in need – specifically focusing on refugees, disaster survivors, and relief workers (Graham, 2017). The brand also committed to contributing \$4 million over four years to the International Rescue Committee to “support the most critical needs of displaced populations globally (Graham, 2017).” These concrete ways the brand is planning on supporting the cause they chose to publicly take a stance on displays to consumers that Airbnb is trustworthy and committed to inclusivity.

Self-image

When a consumer uses Airbnb, they feel more connected to the world and the community in which they are exploring. Airbnb users view themselves as adventurous travelers who enjoy experiencing the beauty of other places and cultures. Airbnb has communicated their ideals of acceptance and inclusion with their community commitment each user must abide by. As such, it can be assumed that all Airbnb users are in agreement with Airbnb regarding their feelings of inclusion and acceptance.

As the #WeAccept campaign showcased the many different users of Airbnb, there was an accurate representation of nearly all Airbnb consumers. This representation, whether through gender, religion, or ethnicity, allows consumers to see themselves in the campaign. The campaign reassures all consumers that they will be accepted and welcomed by Airbnb.

Reflection

Airbnb believed their message of acceptance would resonate with consumers. Airbnb sees their consumers similarly to how the consumers see themselves: accommodating to and interested in other cultures. Therefore, all traditional media and social media coverage was positive for Airbnb. Consumers were moved by the Airbnb campaign. The Super Bowl is a very competitive space for advertising. However, Airbnb dominated its competitors and was one of the most talked about campaigns during the sporting event. On Twitter, #WeAccept was the most used advertiser hashtag used during the Super Bowl. Airbnb was mentioned in nearly 33,000 tweets in the first half of

the Super Bowl, more than any other advertiser (Shorty Awards, n.d.). Nearly all social media comments were positive.

On Facebook and Instagram, Airbnb content was shared over 90,000 times and received 500,000 likes (Shorty Awards, n.d.). There was a 13% increase in US and Canada site visitors the week following the Super Bowl (Shorty Awards, n.d.). The 30 second campaign video was posted on Facebook and viewed over 19 million times (Shorty Awards, n.d.). The video was shared 100,901 times, of that, 18,600 shares came from users in the conservative audience segmentation. (Shorty Awards, n.d.)

Public figures even voiced their approval of the campaign; Former Attorney General Eric Holder and former Secretary of State John Kerry both voiced their support of #WeAccept on Twitter (Graham, 2017). Additionally, multiple media outlets praised the campaign. Reaction to the campaign was 85 percent positive, according to Airbnb's internal tracker (Shorty Awards, n.d.). These results display that Airbnb understood their consumers and #WeAccept positively contributed to the reflection element of Airbnb's brand identity.

Lessons from Airbnb's #WeAccept

Airbnb's "#WeAccept" acts as an example of how brand activism can positively contribute to the identity of a brand. The campaign resonated with consumers and attracted widespread positive media and consumer attention. Airbnb had a great grasp of all six elements of their brand identity. The brand stayed true to its values; it was not unexpected for Airbnb to make a statement about acceptance and inclusivity, as those values have been important to the brand for years. Contributing most to the positive

outcome was the delivery of the message. Airbnb delivered a message regarding a controversial political and cultural issue in a non-divisive manner. The language of the campaign was positive; the brand focused on acceptance of all and did not mention the controversial issue in particular. Airbnb understood the self-image of their consumer and incorporated that in the advertisement by displaying a diverse set of people that nearly all consumers could see themselves in. Overall, #WeAccept was a large success because the brand evaluated and understood its identity and their communication aligned with and strengthened this identity.

CHAPTER FOUR: INSIGHT FROM MARKETING PROFESSIONALS

Case studies provide a sound example of industry practices in regard to activist-minded campaigns. By analyzing case studies, marketing professionals can learn what to implement and avoid while creating brand activism campaigns. Additionally, the researcher felt it would also be beneficial to conduct interviews. In an effort to better understand current industry practices, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with three marketing professionals with expertise in brand activism. These three interviews, along with the case studies, display industry trends in regard to brand activism.

The researcher provided the University of Mississippi's Internal Review Board information regarding the content of the questions, interview method, and recruiting procedures. The interview study was approved by the University of Mississippi Internal Review Board on October 30, 2019. Three interviews between January 25, 2020 and February 28, 2020 were conducted. The semi-structured interviews took place via phone. Participants were recruited via the researcher's network – specifically LinkedIn and mutual personal connections. The researcher asked questions aimed to discover the motivations behind creating activist-minded campaigns, the interviewee's personal feelings regarding brand activism, the interviewee's experience working on activist-related campaigns, and how professionals can ensure brand activism campaigns are well-received. Specific questions asked during the interviews can be found in Appendix B.

Although the number of interviewees is small, the prior relevant experiences and vast knowledge of the interviewees allowed them to provide accurate and relevant information. The high-quality information provided by the interviewees gives credibility to this chapter of the thesis. Figure 5.1 graphically displays the name of the interviewees along with their job title and company.

Name	Job Title	Company
Emily Caine	Senior Vice President and Senior Partner	FleishmanHillard
Julie Reif	Project Manager, Content and Community Partnerships	Google
Victoria Berry	Account Executive, PR & Influence	Ogilvy

Figure 5.1: Industry Professionals Interviewed

All three interview participants held interesting perspectives and contributed insightful thoughts regarding brand activism best practices. Each interviewees had prior experience with, interest in, and knowledge of brand activism. Major insights will be presented following the discussion of each interview.

Firstly, the researcher interviewed Mrs. Emily Caine. Caine is a Senior Vice President and Senior Partner of FleishmanHillard at the company’s world headquarter in St. Louis, Missouri. FleishmanHillard is a leading public relations and communications firm with worldwide offices. Mrs. Caine leads the corporate reputation management practice area of the St. Louis office. The interview took place on January 25, 2020.

In interviewing Mrs. Caine, the researcher hoped to discover the motivations of brands in creating activist-minded campaigns, which brands are best suited for this practice, and how professionals ensure these campaigns are well-received. Additionally, as Mrs. Caine has immense knowledge and experience in corporate reputation

management, the researcher hoped to learn how public relations professionals work to repair a reputation when an activist-minded campaign is controversial or poorly received.

The next interview took place on February 14, 2020. The 45-minute phone interview was with Ms. Julie Reif, Project Manager of Content and Community Partnerships at Google. The researcher hoped to gain an understanding of how large companies navigate the controversial practice of brand activism. In addition, the researcher hoped to understand from Reif how established a brand must be before they implement an activist-minded campaign.

On February 28, 2020 the researcher interviewed Ms. Victoria Berry, who works as an Account Executive of Public Relations and Influence at the Ogilvy office in Chicago, Illinois. Berry has a passion for corporate social responsibility, stating “I am very passionate about supporting corporate social responsibility initiatives, increasing diversity in the creative workforce, and bridging the gap in social, educational and professional equity for minority communities.” She has had experience with creating multiple brand activism and corporate social responsibility related campaigns for her client Sergento Cheese, which are launching at in the upcoming future. The researcher hoped to get an understanding of Berry’s first-hand experience with brand activism.

From these experts, much insight regarding industry trends was gathered. The interviewees provided information regarding their personal and professional feelings toward brand activism, prior experiences with the practice, and suggestions for future brand activism campaigns. Four broad recommendations can be made using information gathered from the interviews. These four major recommendations are depicted in Figure 5.2. Below the graph, the recommendations are further developed and explained.



Figure 5.2: Four Major Recommendations from Marketing Professionals

Brands should have a strong pre-existing brand identity. Both Reif and Caine emphasized this throughout their interviews. The pair were in agreement that a new brand with a less established brand identity should stray away from brand activism. Brands must spend time developing a strong identity that can be recognized by consumers before taking a stance on a controversial issue. Caine stated that a strong reputation is “built over an extended period of time.” Brands still developing their identity may be defined by the one activist-minded campaign if they chose to engage in brand activism. According to both experts, this can hurt a brand’s identity in the long-term.

Reif stated that company size does not matter – as long as the brand has thoughtfully created a solid identity. Although Caine believes any brand is capable of making a statement, she advocated that brand activism should usually be reserved for

larger brands since those brands typically have a more recognizable identity. Reif did state that small brands should be concerned only about “making a ripple, not a wave. ... Small brands shouldn’t worry about changing the whole ecosystem don’t bite off more than you can chew.” Small brands can be successful if they realize their limitations and have worked hard to develop a strong identity.

If a brand strongly develops all six elements of their brand identity prism and remains consistent with that identity over time, they can consider engaging in brand activism. A strong identity alone does not guarantee a successful campaign, but a strong identity is an essential component of a brand considering activism, according to both Reif and Caine.

Research is essential. A brand must be dedicated to conducting research. Research ensures that a brand understands exactly who their consumers are and their expectations for the brand. Research allows brands to know the desires, demographics, and opinions of their consumers. This allows the brand to refine their identity and decide what type of cause or issue they should support. Research also provides brands the opportunity to target their message appropriately while creating a brand activism campaign.

Caine discussed the importance of FleishmanHillard’s TRUE Global Intelligence department. Caine stated that the research department informs agency creatives and strategists of culture trends and consumer insights. The research department spends time analyzing prior research. A great majority of their time is spent conducting primary research in the form of surveys and focus groups. Caine says the insights the TRUE Global Intelligence team provides allows employees to properly communicate messages to brands and consumers, as well as discover just how successful a campaign was. Caine

asserts that research is essential for any brand, especially one that is considering creating a brand activism campaign.

Authenticity is key. This was an insight all three experts stressed throughout their interviews. Selecting which causes or issues to align with should be a meticulous decision-making process based on the brand's identity. For example, Caine brought up a brand she has worked with in the past and is very familiar with, Panera Bread. Although not particularly controversial, the brand has previously taken a stance on food insecurity. This issue is relevant to their brand; therefore, it makes sense for Panera Bread to make a statement on the issue. Food instability is an issue Panera Bread can truly make an impact on, as the company is a large chain of restaurants. Panera Bread has authority on the subject and can truly make an impact. Panera aligning with the issue of food instability is authentic to their identity.

Additionally, Berry emphasized that the delivery of the activist message must be authentic to the brand identity. Additionally, the delivery must be created with consideration for all brand consumers. Although she couldn't share a great deal of information on the campaign of her client Sergento Cheese, she stated that her team had recently been working on a campaign surrounding the family unit. Sergento is a very family-oriented brand, and as Berry's team was creating a campaign, they realized that the brand may have been excluding different types of people in their prior communications. Collectively, Berry's team decided that more non-traditional family units need to be included in the activist-minded campaign. By choosing a relevant cause or issue that aligns with the brand's values, consumers feel as though the brand is being

authentic and truly wanting to communicate a positive message, said Berry. Consumers trust brands that are authentic to their identity.

Lastly, brands should provide long-term support to the issues and causes they publicly support. Brands should also communicate ways their consumers can get involved and encourage them to do so. Berry stated that the most difficult, yet essential, part of brand activism is “actually doing it, actually supporting the cause or issue.” Reif emphasized the importance of launching real, beneficial initiatives. She recommends brands display commitment to a cause or issue by launching an initiative pledging donations, in the form of money or time, to that cause or issue. Brands that do not attempt to enact change themselves, and instead only encourage consumers to donate money often look very insincere, she stated. A well-executed campaign with a thoughtful, positive message can quickly mean nothing if a consumer does not see the brand working to make meaningful contributions themselves. Therefore, creating an actionable plan for committing to the chosen cause or issue and communicating that plan to consumers is beneficial.

Overall, to create a meaningful, successful brand activism campaign, a brand must: have a well-developed brand identity with all six aspects of Kapferer’s Brand Identity Prism being understood, research their consumer, be authentic in their delivery and in choosing the cause or issue, and display a long-term, concrete commitment to the cause or issue.

CHAPTER FIVE: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this thesis the researcher aimed to answer the following two questions: (1) How do millennial consumers perceive brands that engage in brand activism and (2) How can marketing and public relations professionals ensure brand activism resonates with millennial consumers? To conclude this thesis, further recommendations - of best practices and areas for future research - as well as a summary of the answers of the two research questions will be provided.

In the second chapter, millennial perception of brand activism was discussed. From the secondary research analyzed and primary research conducted, the answer to the first research question was made. Millennial consumers are cognitive of a brand's association, although they may not consider associations too seriously when making a purchasing decision. Liberal millennials are much more likely to notice and engage with the activism of corporate brands than are conservative or moderate millennials. All consumers are very cautious of brand activism, as they are still unsure of a corporation's role in societal issues. This cautiousness of millennial consumers displays just how careful and thoughtful brands must be with their brand activism, and how important and beneficial studying the practice truly is. Although the researcher's primary research displayed that millennials may not be as enthusiastic or affected by brand activism as some secondary sources suggest, overall, when considering both the primary and

secondary research, it is evident that millennial brand perception is moderately impacted by brand activism.

When attempting to answer the second research question, “How can marketing and public relations professionals ensure brand activism resonates with millennial consumers?” the researcher analyzed prior activist-minded campaigns and spoke to industry professionals with experience and knowledge of brand activism. From this analysis of industry trends, the question was answered.

From looking at Gillette’s “The Best Men Can Be” and Airbnb’s “#WeAccept” campaigns, it can be learned that brands must have a great understanding of all six elements of their brand identity. Brands should remain consistent with their personality, culture, and relationship. Brands must have a solid understanding of their consumer to create campaigns that resonate. If pre-existing brand identity is ignored, controversy and backlash can result as displayed by Gillette. However, if the brand remains true to their prior values and understands their consumer, brand activism can be incredibly beneficial, as it was for Airbnb.

The interviews gave insight from communications experts. From these valuable interviews, four major recommendations were discovered. Brands must have a strong, consistent, well-developed brand identity that consumers recognize. Brands must dedicate time and resources to research. Research will provide the brand insight into the desires, opinions, and demographics of the brand’s target consumer. Brands must be authentic in their activism. The causes or issues brands choose to take a stance on must be relevant to the brand’s industry, consumer, and identity. In order to connect with consumers, the activism must be related to the brand. The delivery of the message must

remain authentic to the brand's pre-existing identity. If a brand is not authentic, it risks losing the trust of consumers. Finally, brands must take steps to truly enact change and make an impact on the cause or issue chosen. Brands can do this by connecting with a non-profit, pledging to donate money or time, or encouraging consumers to get involved. These steps must be done consistently over time. If a brand neglects to provide evidence of meaningful contribution, the activism will look as though it was just a superficial attempt to look compassionate.

Brand activism is a relevant and effective way to gain the attention of millennial consumers. It builds trust and loyalty among consumers and a brand when their social and political views are aligned. If a well-established brand researches the wants, needs, and demographics of their target consumer, displays a substantial commitment to the cause or issue, and remains authentic and true to their values, brand activism is a powerful practice for gaining the respect and endorsement of millennial consumers.

Although this thesis provides a satisfactory amount of information regarding brand activism's impact on millennial consumer and best practices, further research should be completed by future students and academics. Brand activism is not a trend; the marketing practice is here to stay. After reviewing and analyzing this research, academics could be prompted to further look at how demographics impact a millennial's perception or more specific tactics to increase success with brand activism. There is a plethora of specific research topics possible for further investigating brand activism - an analysis of cultural groups or regional segmentation within generational groups would be beneficial to the industry. It is only with further research on the intersection of corporations and activism that the practice will be fully understood. The researcher hopes that the

information presented in this thesis will be both useful to marketing professionals and inspire further learning and research by academics and professionals.

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APPENDIX A

Consumer Perception of Brand Activism Survey

The researcher created and administered a 17-question survey titled “Consumer Perception of Brand Activism.” The survey was intended to be completed by consumers above the age of 18. Questions regarding consumer demographics and feelings toward social, political, and cultural causes and issues were presented.

The survey was approved by the University of Mississippi Internal Review Board on October 30, 2019. On November 5, 2019 the survey opened and received 165 responses before closing on December 9, 2019.

The specific questions are listed below.

1. Select the statement that best describes you.
 - I was born before 1985.
 - I was born between 1985 - 1993.
 - I was born between 1994 - 2001.
 - I was born after 2001.
2. What gender do you identify as?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Other
 - Prefer not to answer
3. What best describes you?
 - White (Non-Hispanic)
 - White (Hispanic)
 - African American
 - American Indian or Alaska Native
 - Asian
 - Other
 - Prefer not to answer
4. What yearly household income best describes you? If your guardians file you as a dependent, please choose the range that best describes them.

- Less than \$10,000
 - \$10,000 - \$50,000
 - \$50,001 - \$100,000
 - \$100,001 – 150,000
 - Greater than \$150,001
5. What is your highest level of education completed?
- High School Diploma
 - Bachelor's Degree
 - Master's Degree
 - Doctorate
6. Your political beliefs tend to be more:
- Conservative
 - Moderate
 - Liberal
 - Prefer not to answer
7. I am passionate about a social issue/cause. (Environmental/sustainability, domestic violence, poverty, etc.).
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree Nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
8. I believe brands should publicly take a stance on a social issue/cause.
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree Nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
9. I am passionate about a political issue/cause. (Immigration policy, gun policy, discrimination prevention laws, etc.)
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree Nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree

- Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
10. I believe brands should publicly take a stance on a political issue/cause.
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree Nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
11. I am passionate about a cultural issue/cause. (Religious tolerance, standards of beauty, privacy with technology, etc.)
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree Nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
12. I believe brands should publicly take a stance on a cultural issue/cause.
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree Nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
13. It is important to me that a brand I purchase products or services from has values I agree with.
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree Nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
14. When a brand supports a cause/issue I support, I am likely to think favorably of the brand.
- Strongly Agree

- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Neither Agree Nor Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

15. When a brand supports a cause/issue I do not support, I am likely to think unfavorably of the brand.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Neither Agree Nor Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

16. I consider the causes/issues a brand publicly supports when I make a buying decision.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Neither Agree Nor Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

17. I am loyal to companies or brands that take a stand on an issue or charity.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Neither Agree Nor Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

APPENDIX B

Industry Professionals Interview Question Pool

1. Can you tell me about the cause efforts of your company/companies you create marketing campaigns for?
2. How have you contributed to creating a campaign commenting on social, political, or cultural causes?
3. Do you personally believe companies should be engaging in activist-minded campaigns and advertisements?
4. Why do you believe companies are interested in taking stances on social issues?
5. How do you think consumers view brands with a connection to a cause or a platform?
6. What type of consumers respond best to “activist” campaigns?
7. What type of brand do you believe is best suited to engage in “activist” campaigns?
8. Should a brand be well-established in order to engage in brand activism, or can brand activism make a brand relevant?
9. What are the biggest challenges to creating a campaign commenting on a social, political, or cultural issue?
10. How is the success of these campaigns measured?
11. What can marketing teams and brands do to ensure that activist-minded campaigns are well-received?

12. How do marketing teams communicate with the spokespeople of the social/political/cultural causes they attempt to represent in the campaign they create?
13. What is an example of a campaign that failed to properly communicate its activist message and was poorly received? What can we learn from this campaign?
14. If an activist campaign is poorly received, what do you believe should be done to regain consumer trust and support?