

Empathy and Ethics in Brand Activism: Balancing Engagement and Responsibility

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Abstract:

The recent surge in corporate responses to social and political crises marks a pivotal shift in how brands perceive their societal roles. This study explores 'brand activism,' a phenomenon whereby brands engage in social advocacy through digital platforms, reflecting a strategic integration of social issues into their core identity and marketing practices. This proactive stance not only raises awareness and mobilizes support but also raises ethical concerns about the potential for brands to exploit social causes for commercial gain. Employing qualitative content analysis with a critical phenomenological approach, this research investigates how individuals navigate empathy-based representations within brand activism on digital platforms. Data from interviews with 37 young adults reveal that while brand activism can foster a sense of empowerment and moral alignment, it also risks superficial engagement and selective empathy. This study highlights the ethical considerations in brand activism and how digital media shapes moral reasoning in contemporary branding.

Keywords: Brand activism, Advertising, Persuasive communication, Branding, Empathy, Empirical Ethics, Empirically informed ethics, Normative Theory, Ethics, Ethics of communication,

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Introduction

The surge in corporate responses to recent social and political crises signals a significant shift in how brands understand their role and potential impact within society. In recent years, global brands have actively engaged with major events like the Black Lives Matter movement, the COVID-19 pandemic and the #MeToo movement through digital platforms, positioning themselves not merely as commercial entities, but as moral agents with a responsibility to contribute to societal well-being. This proactive engagement, termed 'brand activism,' reflects a strategic integration of social advocacy into the core of a brand's identity and digital marketing practices (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017, 2018; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). This shift is significant because it highlights the growing expectation for brands to take a stand on social issues and actively participate in shaping public discourse. Brand activism offers the potential to raise awareness, mobilize support and drive positive social change. However, this strategic use of morality raises questions about the ethical implications of such campaigns and the potential for brands to exploit social issues for commercial gain.

Brand activism, as defined by Vredenburg et al. (2020), is a purpose- and values-driven strategy where brands adopt a stance on contested socio-political issues, aiming to achieve both social change and marketing success. This approach embeds social commitment as an integral part of the brand's values and mission (Cian et al., 2018). The contentious nature of the addressed issues, often amplified through digital platforms, can evoke strong moral emotions in consumers, serving as a differentiator for brands (Wannow, 2023). However, this strategic use of morality raises questions about the potential for polarization and the broader impact of brand activism on society (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023). The inherent risk lies in the potential for selective engagement, where brands may prioritize causes (Bhagwat et al., 2020) that align with their target audience's values, potentially marginalizing less popular or controversial issues. This selectivity can be seen in the stark contrast between brand engagement during the war in Ukraine and the conflict in Gaza, where the latter received significantly less attention and support from Western brands. While the potential downsides for brands who misjudge public sentiment are clear, it remains unclear whether or under what circumstances this selective activism may contribute to further societal divisions by reinforcing existing biases and neglecting power dynamics.

Brand activism distinguishes itself from traditional corporate social responsibility (CSR) and cause-related marketing (CRM) by mobilizing consumers as active advocates, pushing brands to align their actions and values with broader social change goals. While consumers have historically contributed to brand image through co-creation (Arvidsson, 2006),

activism amplifies this participation through digital platforms, transforming them into collaborative partners in social advocacy (Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2020). However, this empowerment is not absolute, as marketers retain ultimate control over brand messaging, creating a tension between authentic activism and commercial interests (Khamis, 2021). This tension, coupled with questions about a brand's primary motivations in championing social issues (Banet-Weiser, 2018), has led to heightened consumer scrutiny. Through digital platforms, consumers actively evaluate the congruence between a brand's message and its actions, exercising their agency to make informed decisions and hold brands accountable (cfr. Verlegh, 2024).

In their pursuit of positive social change, activist brands often rely on moralizing narratives that emphasize feel-good stories and optimistic outcomes (Hopkins, 2017). This approach, while potentially engaging, tends to frame corporate initiatives in an overly simplistic light, highlighting positive impacts on social and environmental issues and creating a perception of heightened corporate responsibility (Zyglidopoulos et al., 2019; Crane & Glozer, 2016). However, by focusing primarily on positive aspects and offering simplified solutions, these narratives can inadvertently gloss over the complexities and deeper systemic roots of the problems they address. This can nurture a reductionist perspective that discourages critical analysis of underlying challenges (Scherer et al., 2013). Thus, a central paradox emerges: brand activism, while effectively raising awareness and generating a sense of empowerment, also risks encouraging a superficial engagement with social causes.

This evolution transforms branding into a medium for ethical consumption (Arvidsson & Peitersen, 2013); purchasing decisions are not only influenced by brand attributes but also by the degree of empathy and alignment with social and moral values a brand exudes (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Notable examples include Nike's advocacy for social justice and racial equality (Kiefer, 2020), Patagonia's push for environmental justice (Chang, 2021), and Starbucks' highlighting of transgender customers' experiences with self-expression (Christie, 2020). Within this framework, brands actively cultivate perceptions of empathy and shared morality, emphasizing themes such as equality, justice and freedom to establish a strong brand identity and foster moral dialogue with consumers (Sibai et al., 2021). This showcases the increasing importance of ethical considerations in contemporary branding. Brand activism, in this context, reframes consumption as a moral choice, influencing consumer decisions based on the alignment of personal values with brand values (cfr. Cammarota et al., 2024).

Digital media platforms serve as the central arena for brand activism, allowing brands to demonstrate their social and environmental commitments while forging deeper consumer relationships (Holt, 2016). This is achieved through a blend of entertainment and persuasive branded content in digital advertising (Hardy, 2022), alongside the empowerment of public discourse and collective action on social media (Gillespie, 2010). As a result, consumers have been transformed from passive recipients into active communicators (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016; Van Dijck & Poel, 2013), who create value through engagement, sharing, and advocating

for brands that reflect shared moral values. Marketers, recognizing this shift, increasingly employ empathic narratives (Wannow, 2023) to tap into the power of digital media for fostering participation and dialogue (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

The effectiveness of brand activism campaigns hinges on cultivating empathy – the ability to resonate with the experiences of others, especially those facing hardship or injustice. However, Western-headquartered brands may prioritize causes that resonate with their primary markets, potentially overshadowing urgent struggles faced in the Global South (Dutta, 2020; Shome, 2019). These regions may lack the visibility and resources to command attention in global digital spaces (Schoon et al., 2020). Power disparities can certainly shape the visibility of social causes through forms of selective empathy. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze not only the content of activism campaigns but also the potential for marginalizing less frequently heard voices. Brands must be aware of the power dynamics at play and responsive to consumer activism that seeks to hold them accountable (Klein, 2019). Ensuring the visibility of all voices and avoiding tokenistic gestures that may alienate their audiences is paramount.

The interplay between brand activism, digital platforms, and the selectivity of empathy raises critical questions about the tension between visibility and invisibility of social causes in these brand campaigns. Similarly, the design of social media algorithms (Scalvini, 2023a) often reinforces echo chambers, leading to similarity-based empathy that may inadvertently limit understanding of those who are truly different (Bakir & McStay, 2020; Sujon, 2022). This limitation is particularly troubling when brands attempt to leverage empathy for activism, as it risks undermining the very goals of fostering connection and driving positive change. On one hand, brand activism brings certain social issues to the forefront, using social media and advertising for awareness. On the other hand, this visibility is often selective and unfinished, masking the systemic conditions that necessitate activism (Crane & Glozer, 2016). This investigation should prioritize understanding the public's participation in these processes, the ways empathy is articulated through digital media, and the ethical responsibilities held by marketers.

This concern highlights a significant research gap in the intersection of selective empathy and moral visibility within the context of brand activism and digital communication (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022). While morality (Sibai et al., 2021) and empathy (Wannow, 2023) have been explored individually, their interplay, especially regarding how brands leverage empathy for visibility and marketability, remains under-researched. This gap is particularly relevant as brand activism often simplifies complex social issues into marketable narratives, potentially obscuring deeper inequalities and corporate complicity (Sobande, 2024). Furthermore, the role of digital platforms in shaping moral discourse (Neumann & Rhodes, 2023; Maris et al., 2024) and the ethical implications of brands' engagement (Fletcher-Brown, 2024) in these spaces are also under-explored. Therefore, further scrutiny is needed on how empathy-based campaigns influence moral action (Chouliaraki, 2013, 2016) and how digital platforms shape empathetic responses (Voorveld et al., 2018). This research contributes to our

understanding of the dynamics of empathy in brand activism, informing ethical considerations for marketers and refining normative theories of communication and persuasion related to social responsibility.

The research questions this article answers are: first, how does the public navigate and reconcile the nuances of empathy-based representations within the context of brand activism campaigns on digital platforms? Second, what ethical responsibilities do marketers and advertisers hold when utilizing empathy-based representations in brand activism campaigns on digital platforms? By examining these questions, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing theoretical debate on how new communication technologies influence moral reasoning, building on existing scholarship on morality in social media (Neumann & Rhodes, 2023). Brand activism, as a digitally mediated phenomenon, serves as a compelling case study for understanding how the complexities of empathy are both leveraged and potentially distorted in the pursuit of commercial interests and social advocacy.

The study utilizes qualitative content analysis with a critical phenomenological lens to investigate how individuals empathize and interact with others, emphasizing the effect of brand activism narratives. Data were gathered from interviews with 37 young adults, which were then coded using Atlas.ti software. The anonymized transcripts have been shared on the Harvard Dataverse to promote transparent and open data practices.

Theoretical Framework: Empathy-Based Representation of the Other

Empathy, often defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others (Read, 2019), is a fundamental aspect of human nature; it fosters connection, relationships and community (Betzler, 2019; Slote, 2007). The concept of empathy originated from the German word *Einfühlung*, which translates to “projecting oneself into another context” (Jacob, 2011, p. 520). Initially used in the realm of aesthetics, the viewer was believed to project their feelings and reactions onto a work of art in order to appreciate it fully (Lanzoni, 2018, p. 76). The meaning of empathy was further developed by philosophers, such as David Hume and Adam Smith, who described an individual's capacity to understand and feel another's pain and perspective (Sugden, 2002). Hume famously wrote, "The minds of men are mirrors to each other," (Hume, 1978, p. 365) alluding to how individuals' thoughts and feelings can resonate in interaction with one another and be recreated on different levels of mediation.

Empathy has been widely considered a fundamental element of moral psychology since the 20th century, offering a lens through which people perceive the world. Empathy refers to a cognitive and affective state that is achieved through mental exercises such as "putting oneself in another's shoes," (Oxley, 2011, p. 3) whereby an individual experiences what it is like to think and feel as if they were the other person. The diverse approaches to empathy are mostly based on recognizing the other person (Hoffmann, 2000; Shoemaker, 2017), leading to varying opinions on whether empathy involves seeing the other as 'someone who is like me' or 'someone

who is like people in general.' Nevertheless, recent criticism has challenged this traditional view (Bloom, 2016). This becomes especially complex when people encounter media representations of a distant other (Boltanski, 1999; Silverstone, 2002) or when media aim to evoke certain emotions (Chouliaraki, 2008). Empathy is an individual's ability to resonate with others' emotions (Beztler, 2019; Davis, 1996; Hoffman, 2000; Overgaard, 2018) through language, visuals and sensory input; however, people frequently encounter mediated empathy that does not necessarily follow a mutual understanding (Read, 2019), making it challenging to see the world from the other's point of view (Matthiesen & Klitmøller, 2019; Slote, 2007).

Developing empathetic and sensitive representations of individuals and groups can be instrumental in inspiring moral action. Empathy-based representations can increase awareness and garner support for marginalized communities, drawing attention to their experiences and struggles, and promoting positive change. Humanitarian communication (Chouliaraki, 2013) leverages empathy-based representations to inspire action and motivate individuals to support vulnerable people. However, as Oxley (2011, p. 5) notes, "empathy is not intrinsically moral and does not always lead to moral thought or action." It is imperative that such representations are created with care and consideration, and not utilized as a tool for exploitation or insincere marketing purposes. Such representations must be grounded in a genuine desire to understand and address the needs of marginalized communities without any hidden agendas or self-serving motives.

Empathy-based representations in brand activism have the potential to cultivate compassion towards marginalized or disadvantaged communities, challenging stereotypes and promoting acceptance of diverse perspectives and experiences (Daykin, 2022). They can contribute to building a more inclusive and diverse society by fostering respect and sensitivity towards different groups. In the fields of media and entertainment, representations based on empathy have been shown to be effective in enhancing awareness and understanding of the experiences of marginalized groups (Thevenin, 2022). In advertising, such representations should promote brands in a manner that is respectful and sensitive, but also beneficial to society by endorsing values of diversity and inclusivity. Digital platforms, therefore, not only mediate the expression of empathy but also the authenticity and inauthenticity of social connections (Guignon, 2004).

Similarity-based empathy and Other-directed empathy

Marketers have long utilized empathy as a communicative strategy to build deeper, more emotional bonds with their audience (Harmeling et al., 2017; Hutchins & Rodriguez, 2018). Similarly, brand activism employs empathy to encourage public engagement and action (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2021, p. 4). This is especially useful for brand activism because empathy allows consumers to connect with the social issues that are being championed on a deeper, more personal level. When individuals feel a brand understands their values and concerns, they

are more likely to trust the brand's messaging and support its initiatives. However, the concept of empathy is not monolithic. There exist distinct forms of empathy, each with its own mechanisms, motivations and potential consequences.

The following conceptual framework aims to delineate two key types of empathy—other-directed and similarity-based—and explore their implications for the representation and understanding of the Other (Davis, 1996; Overgaard, 2018).

Other-directed empathy involves recognizing and responding to the emotions of others, while similarity-based empathy is rooted in the tendency to feel more empathy for those who are perceived as similar to oneself (Gallagher, 2012, p. 372). These types of empathy have different implications for moral action. Other-directed empathy may motivate individuals to act in response to the needs and feelings of others, particularly those who are marginalized or vulnerable (Chouliaraki, 2006). In contrast, similarity-based empathy may lead to a narrower focus on the experiences and needs of those who are similar to oneself, potentially excluding others and hindering efforts to address broader social issues (Hoffman, 2000, p. 294). The impact of these different types of empathy on moral action highlights the importance of understanding the complexities of empathy and its role in shaping our responses to others.

While empathy in brand activism may be pragmatic from a business standpoint (Kotler & Lee, 2005), it raises significant ethical concerns (Banerjee, 2008). By prioritizing 'safe' and broadly appealing causes, brands risk engaging with social justice issues in a fragmented and superficial manner (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). A selective approach to empathy is characterized by a focus on issues and groups that align with a brand's target audience and values, while neglecting more controversial topics that may not resonate as easily. It is also important to acknowledge that digital affective publics significantly impact the expression and experience of empathy (Papacharissi, 2015) and may not always provide a comprehensive or accurate portrayal of the Other. This limitation can restrict how the public is able to establish a real connection with the Other, and may reinforce a narrow, depoliticized conception of solidarity (Chouliaraki, 2013; Turkle, 2011). Ethically, this implies that our attempts to empathize may be biased or incomplete, potentially leading to misunderstandings or inadequate responses to the suffering of others.

Empathy exhibits a paradoxical nature when we attempt to comprehend someone else's pain through our own emotions (Leake, 2011; Paul, 2021). While empathy allows us to come closer to the experiences of others and make them relatable, we cannot fully know what someone else is feeling. This is because our own emotions and experiences act as filters through which we interpret the feelings of others. Resonance, in the context of empathy, goes beyond simply mirroring another's emotions (Couburn, 2011: p. 310). It serves an epistemic function (Oxley, 2012: 48), leveraging our affective experience of information processing to understand the nuances and complexities of someone else's feelings. By experiencing these emotions ourselves, we gain insights into the other person's perspective that were previously inaccessible. In essence, our emotional resonance acts as a bridge, allowing us to access and

interpret the deeper emotional meanings behind their experiences. Therefore, resonance can help us connect with others and understand their experiences, but it is also limited by our own subjectivities.

We rely on our own internal emotional landscape to understand and relate to the emotions of others, a process known as emotional resonance. As Oxley (2011: p. 54) notes, "empathy is guided and limited by the extent of the resonance with another's emotion; if one does not resonate completely, it is likely because he does not believe the emotion is justified." This means that our capacity for empathy is inherently shaped by our unique emotional experiences, our cultural background and even our current social status (cfr. McDonnell et al., 2017). Consequently, while empathy ideally bridges the gap between the Self and Other (Sartre, 1943), it can also be reduced to a superficial projection of one's own feelings rather than true engagement with the experiences of those who are different. In a digital world, this 'projected' empathy has abundant opportunities to flourish.

Algorithms and personalized content feeds often reinforce similarity-based empathy, where individuals primarily connect with those whose experiences mirror their own (Scalvini, 2023a). This limits their understanding and potential response to the experiences of those who live fundamentally different lives. From a phenomenological perspective, true empathy involves direct engagement with the emotions of the Other, making sense of their experiences even if they differ from our own (Zahavi, 2014: p. 152). It is an intentional act within a shared context – a form of knowledge, not simply emotional mirroring. Focusing solely on those similar to us hinders this knowledge acquisition, potentially perpetuating divisions rather than fostering understanding. Therefore, the major problem with similarity-based empathy is its inherent assumption that the Other experiences the world in the same way, using similarity as the sole reference point (Scalvini, 2023a). This can lead to a normative understanding of social issues, potentially overlooking the unique perspectives and experiences of marginalized groups, and ultimately hindering genuine empathy and understanding.

To summarize this section, I have revisited the theoretical debate around the use of empathy. The positive argument, or other-directed empathy, assumes that individuals are inherently capable of understanding and experiencing the emotions of others. The counter argument, or similarity-based empathy, suggests that people are more likely to empathize with individuals who are similar to themselves. However, both positions have limitations that hinder the establishment of an ethical bond between the viewer and the Other. In the case of similarity-based empathy, the emphasis on similarity can lead to a restrictive and exclusive form of empathy that only extends to those who are like-minded and similarly situated in society. This can result in a lack of understanding and compassion for those who are different and can reinforce existing prejudices and stereotypes. Similarly, other-directed empathy promotes a more inclusive and expansive form of empathy, however it can still be limited by the capacity of the viewer to truly understand and experience the emotions of the Other. This is particularly

true in the case of digitally mediated experiences, wherein the viewer's empathetic capacity is dependent on how the Other is represented through the interaction with digital platforms.

Research Design

Interviews were conducted between 2021 and 2022 with 37 young adults who had been working or studying in the Netherlands for 1 to 2 years. It is noteworthy that between October 2021 and February 2022, the Netherlands observed a stringent lockdown, mandating remote work. Consequently, some interviewees were in their home countries during their respective interviews. The interviewees (n=37) were recruited through a snowballing technique. Interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 25 and were predominantly European (n=54,05%), North American (n=18, 91%) and Asian (n=16,21%). The age of participants reflects the Gen Z demographic, predominantly individuals aged between 20 and 25 years. Of these interviewees, 53.3% identified as male (n=20), 40% as female (n=15), and 6.7% opted not to specify their gender (n=2). The interview protocol aimed to gauge their perceptions and responses toward brand activism, with a focus on their interactions with brands endorsing social issues. Interviewees, within this dataset, analyze common portrayals of Gen Z and share their own perspectives on these attributes.

Semi-structured interviews, guided by a pre-written protocol (see Appendix 1), lasted 45-60 minutes. This design allowed for in-depth exploration of participant perspectives while ensuring consistency across interviews. Saturation, the point where additional interviews ceased to yield significantly new insights, was operationalized to align with the research questions (Saunders, 2018, p. 1983). Interviewees were initially asked to define their understanding of brand activism through open-ended questions. This established a baseline for interpreting their subsequent responses. Additionally, the use of specific brand campaigns from Nike, Gillette and Libresse as prompts helped ground the discussion, providing common reference points while allowing for variation in how interviewees interpreted the campaigns' intentions and effectiveness. Analysis revealed patterns in how participants interpreted empathy-based representations, highlighting potential areas of shared or divergent understanding. Furthermore, analyzing responses within the context of specific campaigns provided a deeper understanding of how interviewees perceive the intersection of commercial brands and social advocacy, including their assessments of authenticity and ethicality.

Employing Atlas.ti for data management and coding, this research utilized qualitative content analysis with a critical phenomenological lens (Magri & McQueen, 2023). The analysis was deductively guided by two categories: Similarity-Based Empathy and Other-Directed Empathy (Davis, 1996). This approach, grounded in critical phenomenology (Alcoff & Potter, 1993), explores how lived experience is shaped by power structures, social identities and dominant narratives. The analysis revealed how participants learned to perceive and recognize others, both conforming to and resisting prevailing social structures (Weiss et al., 2019).

Additionally, it explored how participants resist and challenge marketing narratives (Alcoff, 1991; Moustakas, 2023), uncovering the subtle ways power and identity influence interpersonal recognition. This is particularly relevant to ethics, as brands often navigate these dynamics when leveraging empathy (Sibai et al., 2021). Digital platforms further complicate these processes, as they can amplify or distort intersubjective experiences and shape how empathy is expressed and perceived (Cummings et al., 2022; Foxman et al., 2021). Thus, integrating critical phenomenology and qualitative content analysis provides a nuanced understanding of how individuals reflect on empathy-based representations.

[Table 1]

To ensure the robustness of the coding process, a tripartite methodology was employed as suggested by Long et al. (2006). The initial phase entailed an assessment of the dataset to identify instances of the two distinct forms of empathy: other-directed and similarity-based. The subsequent phase involved a detailed examination of the data to ascertain the interviewees' interpretations of empathy. The concluding phase was dedicated to the extraction of concrete examples and occurrences that exemplify the previously identified sub-categories of empathy (see Table 1). To mitigate the risk of divergent understandings of activist brand campaigns between researcher and participants, the analytical process focused closely on contextual cues within the interviews. This included examining the language interviewees used and their references to specific campaigns.

As a researcher and an early millennial, my personal observations of the evolving landscape of brand activism since the 2017 Superbowl, particularly its rapid globalization through social media, have significantly shaped this research. Witnessing this phenomenon firsthand sparked my interest in understanding how consumers across cultures perceive and engage with brand activism. Initially, I conducted a pilot study with my students to refine the research design and interview questions. This pilot study is not included in the final dataset. Subsequently, I employed a snowball sampling strategy to expand the research and include a larger sample of international individuals residing in the Netherlands, with interviews conducted between 2021 and 2022. Therefore, this methodological approach, while rigorous, inherently introduces certain limitations.

The sample of international individuals residing in the Netherlands may not be fully representative of the global consumer base, as their unique identities, lived experiences, and specific cultural context likely shape their perceptions of activist brand campaigns. Therefore, while this study offers valuable insights, it is crucial to acknowledge that these findings are situated within a particular context and may not be generalizable to other populations. Future research should strive for greater diversity in participant backgrounds and employ an intersectional lens to fully comprehend how individual experiences, social identities, and power structures shape the interpretation and evaluation of empathy within brand activism.

Moreover, I acknowledge that understanding and experiencing empathy is not universal, and different groups or neurotypes may respond differently to brand activism campaigns. While this study was unable to fully explore these nuances due to word count limitations, future research could delve into these variations to offer a more comprehensive understanding of empathy's role in consumer responses. This future research could specifically examine the factors that influence the degree to which a campaign is perceived as emotionally resonant, including personal values, life experiences, cultural context and the brand's perceived authenticity. Additionally, exploring differences and similarities within demographic responses could provide valuable insights into how various groups connect with and evaluate brand activism efforts.

In order to promote a culture of open scientific inquiry and acknowledge the situated nature of qualitative research, this study prioritizes open data practices. The anonymized interview transcripts have been deposited on Harvard Dataverse (Scalvini, 2023b) in Refi-QDA format. This decision reflects my own positionality as a researcher committed to transparency, accountability and recognition that interpretations are shaped by an individual's background and perspective. Sharing data facilitates critical scrutiny, potentially reducing research bias, while also encouraging diverse analyses and interpretations of the same dataset. Ultimately, this open approach aims to maximize the value of the interviewees' contributions and foster a more collaborative, inclusive research landscape within qualitative fields.

Data Analysis: Understanding Empathy-Based Representations

This examination revealed two principal strategies accounted by interviewees when engaging with activist brand campaigns on digital platforms. Each strategy offers a distinct pathway for cultivating moral competency and inspiring action. Importantly, the individual's subjective experience plays a role, with digital platforms shaping the narrative and context within which empathy is communicated and understood. The first strategy harnesses an empathetic approach that seeks to align the audience's experiences with those depicted, thereby fostering a bond through shared values and common ground. The second strategy alternatively endeavors to broaden the moral scope by encouraging the public to extend their empathetic reach to encompass those whose experiences differ markedly from their own. These distinct narrative mechanisms are instrumental in nurturing moral competency and spurring action, with each narrative uniquely tailoring its ethical engagement to resonate effectively with its intended audience.

Mirrored Values: The Role of Similarity-Based Empathy

Interviewees consistently emphasized the importance of similarity-based empathy, connecting with brands that align with their personal values, beliefs, and experiences. This

connection, often fostered through shared narratives, creates emotional resonance that solidifies brand loyalty and encourages advocacy. This suggests that complete alignment between a brand's message and a consumer's values is crucial for sustained engagement, yet this emphasis on personal resonance may inadvertently foster a self-centered consumption model that prioritizes individual identification over collective action.

Nevertheless, this sense of personal alignment remains a powerful driver of consumer behavior. One interviewee affirmed this, stating that they "would always choose Nike" due to aligning values and social messaging (Interview 1: 72). This connection is more than just preference; it becomes an integral part of the consumer's identity. As one participant succinctly put it, "People consume products or brands that mirror their own set of values, and therefore a brand should adopt the values of their target audience" (Interview 32: 179). This emotional resonance is amplified when brand narratives mirror consumers' realities, transforming the brand from a mere product into a symbol of the individual's values and worldview.

This sense of connection and shared values fostered by similarity-based empathy is further amplified by the interactive nature of digital platforms. These platforms enable consumers to participate actively in the brand's narrative, moving beyond passive consumption to a more engaged role in co-creating the brand's identity. As one interviewee put it, "it fosters a sense of connection with the brand" (Interview 2: 109). This connection creates a more tangible sense of participation, as it is not just about passive consumption but active engagement, further enhancing the feeling that the brand and the individual consumer are sharing similar sentiments and values.

This interactivity on digital platforms allows consumers to become part of the brand's activist narrative, enriching a sense of community and shared values. This strengthens similarity-based empathy by uniting brands and consumers through common causes. However, the interviewee's remark that trust is built upon shared values underscores the importance of authenticity. This indicates the potential fragility of such connections—if brands fail to uphold these shared values, the sense of community and trust can quickly erode, and may lead to consumer backlash. Therefore, brands must ensure their activism aligns with their actions consistently, ensuring ongoing genuine engagement rather than superficial gestures.

Interviewees' desire for brands to "mirror their own set of values" (Interview 32: 179) reveals an expectation for genuine commitment often unmet by performative activism aimed at attracting consumers rather than enacting change. This exposes a tension between shared identity and superficial engagement, where brands potentially leverage common ground to homogenize diverse experiences, thus diluting their social impact. Therefore, superficial engagement occurs when brands appear to align with consumers on shared values or identities but fail to engage these connections:

Because if you support what they support and you stand for the same things, you feel connected to them and like, you feel like you trust them and that's really important (Interview 23: line 289).

This alignment, while profound, might not reflect the complexities of true psychological congruence, risking the connection feeling meaningful but actually lacking in depth. The concern is that such connections might not always be based on genuine or deeply held values but on crafted marketing messages designed to elicit a quick emotional response. This notion is echoed in another excerpt (Interview 1), where a consumer's preference for Nike is primarily influenced by social media presence and brand visibility rather than a deep-seated loyalty based on shared values:

I play football so, if I think of football boots I need to buy, I first think about Nike. And I think, they're influencing this way up to me, but I've always had into consideration the other brands as well but, if I can choose, I would always choose Nike, personally. Like I've said, I follow that brand on Instagram and stuff, so it's obvious that I'll take that as a first option. But there's other brands that doesn't affect me at all; for example, McDonalds, I buy it when I'm hungry or, I don't know, I need fast food, and it's cheap and quick so I just buy it but, obviously not every day, maybe one a month or something. (Interview 1: line 72)

In this excerpt, the interviewee explicitly acknowledges Nike's influence on their choice of football boots, citing the brand's social messaging and their own personal identification with it as key factors. This reinforces the idea that when brand values align with an individual's personal interests and values, the impact of brand activism is amplified, creating a strong preference for that brand. However, the interviewee's indifference towards McDonald's social messaging demonstrates that this influence is not universal. This suggests that brand activism's effectiveness is context-dependent, relying on the degree to which consumers connect with both the brand itself and the specific product category. The interviewee's prioritization of convenience and price over social impact when it comes to fast food further highlights the nuanced nature of consumer decision-making.

A significant risk associated with similarity-based empathy is stereotyping. In striving to connect with a broad demographic, brands may resort to generalized narratives that ostensibly represent shared experiences or identities. This is evident in the statement "You can really see how every brand is striving for diversity... giving every single person...a similar voice" (Interview 11: 72). This acknowledgment of a "similar voice" reflects a growing awareness among consumers of the potential for brands to homogenize diverse experiences in their pursuit of broad appeal. However, as noted by an interviewee (Interview 11), efforts to provide "a similar voice" can result in homogenized representations that fail to acknowledge the true diversity within any demographic. This not only diminishes the brand's empathetic

outreach but can also alienate consumers who feel their unique experiences and identities are not genuinely represented or are being diluted in a generic “voice”. Stereotyping in empathetic marketing can evidently backfire, transforming what is meant to be an inclusive approach into a hollow tactic that overlooks individual consumer experiences.

Empathy fatigue, the desensitization to emotional appeals due to their overuse, is a growing concern in interviews. An interviewee (Interview 6) highlights the challenge of discerning authentic activism from marketing tactics, suggesting that the prevalence of various forms of activism makes it difficult to identify genuine efforts:

And so it's a constant kind of challenge to really perceive what is authentic and activism and what is really, you know, what is really activism in that sense because it has taken all sorts of shapes and forms. (Interview 6: line 133)

This empathy fatigue can lead to consumer skepticism and disengagement, especially when emotional appeals are perceived to be manipulative. While brand activism can strengthen the bond between brand and consumer, empathy fatigue can also alienate and even antagonize consumers who perceive their values to be misrepresented or exploited:

So, this could maybe be called ‘cause fatigue’. Because it’s also about getting bored and overwhelmed because you don’t know what brand to like anymore because they all advocate for something. So, you kind of don’t specifically link yourself to a brand because they are linked to a cause because at a certain point you think that there shall be a brand that is a voice for any type of cause. (Interview 17: line 200).

The concern extends to the efficacy of such activism, suggesting that even well-intentioned campaigns can be detrimental if not executed thoughtfully. Furthermore, the observation indicates a potential disconnect between online engagement and real-world impact. The interviewee suggest that consumers are becoming increasingly aware of and potentially desensitized to the overuse of emotional appeals in brand activism. In essence, while similarity-based empathy can forge a powerful connection between brand and consumer, it is a double-edged sword. Inauthentic or excessive appeals to shared values can have the opposite effect, eroding trust and leading to consumer disillusionment.

A similar ambivalence towards brand boycotts, potentially stemming from both empathy fatigue and superficial engagement further underscores the aspects of similarity-based empathy. When asked if they would boycott a brand, Interviewee 20 displayed a contextual approach:

If I love the products, I do not care about the [...] Well, it depends on how frequently I buy this product. If it's something that you just see and I like it and I buy it even if I know, for example, if the brand’s reputation is bad or its brand values doesn't match mine. But if it's about

something [...] For example - I use iPhone right I use Apple print in my values didn't match the values of these brand maybe I wouldn't buy iPhones but if I only buy one thing from these brands I don't care about their values or reputation or any other traits. (Interview 20: line 328)

Initially, the interviewee seems to disregard brand ethics if they "love the product," suggesting a primary focus on personal gratification through consumption. However, their subsequent qualifications reveal a nuanced relationship between brand values and consumer behavior. This nuance aligns with the notion of similarity-based empathy, where the perceived alignment with a brand's values contributes to feelings of connection and trust. This connection may override ethical concerns for less frequent or less personally significant purchases. However, for products perceived as essential or representing a significant investment (like the iPhone example), a misalignment in values can trigger a reevaluation of the relationship, demonstrating the fragility of this type of empathy when core values are compromised. Therefore, a saturation of empathetic messaging can desensitize consumers, making them less likely to respond to emotional appeals and more critical of the motives behind them.

To summarize, central to the essence of similarity-based empathy in brand activism is the profound human inclination to connect with what feels familiar and resonant, but this connection can be fraught with challenges. Brands may engage in superficial displays of shared values or rely on stereotypes, risking inauthenticity and misrepresentation. Moreover, the overuse of emotional appeals can lead to empathy fatigue, where consumers become desensitized and skeptical. This underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of how similarity-based empathy functions in the digital age, particularly the normative implications of how the Other is often interpreted and represented as merely similar, potentially perpetuating existing biases and hindering substantial social progress.

Emotional Resonance: The Role of Other-Directed Empathy

Other-directed empathy in marketing is a strategy where brands attempt to connect with their audience by understanding and acknowledging the unique emotions and experiences of individuals within the context of their broader community or social groups. This differs from similarity-based empathy, which focuses on shared experiences and values to foster a sense of 'we-ness' or belonging. Other-directed empathy recognizes the diversity of individual experiences while acknowledging the shared emotional landscape within specific groups. Echoing the sentiments of one interviewee, "I've watched the Nike 'Dream Crazier' ad frequently. It resonates with me because it doesn't focus on a single individual—it's about inclusion, featuring people with disabilities, women in sports, and others. It represents unity and the collective effort to elevate and embrace inclusiveness" (Interview 4:30). Such insights emphasize the emotional ties that brands can establish by engaging with the universal human capacity for empathy towards inclusiveness. The excerpt highlights how Nike created

campaigns that not only target selling products but also advocate for inclusivity, community values and social causes.

A key aspect of other-directed empathy is the increased awareness and concern for marginalized groups. Several interviewees expressed a strong desire to support these groups, often spurred by brand narratives that showcased their struggles. Their responses ranged from expressions of solidarity to calls for proactive advocacy. For instance, one interviewee remarked on Gillette's campaign, highlighting the brand's potential to "educate people about what they think is the right thing" (Interview 3: 71). However, this empathy-driven engagement can also create complications. While interviewees spoke of 'actionable empathy'—a desire to alleviate suffering—it also requires a sensitivity to cultural nuances and demands a commitment to understanding and respecting the cultural contexts in which a brand operates.

While brands seek to connect with diverse audiences, there is a risk of appropriating cultural elements without proper understanding or respect. An interviewee's (Interview 14) observation about differing values in Asian and European commercials exemplifies how brands must navigate cultural nuances carefully to avoid misrepresentation and ensure genuine emotional resonance:

I know for example in Asia [...] it's different values that are represented than for example in Europe because you know in Europe social issues are very eagerly tackled by companies but in Asia usually companies tend to stay away from social issues and instead want to promote things that are good within society. So, for example I know that [...] Givenchy [...] commercial that was very centered around family [...] collectivist nature of the society and supporting family and supporting the elders [...] Whereas [...] in Europe a Givenchy commercial would usually be about being, for example, individual [...] I feel like Asian brands would try to avoid brand activism. (Interview 14: line 176)

Interviewee responses revealed a nuanced understanding of how cultural context shapes the effectiveness of brand activism. This awareness extended to recognizing the variations in emotional resonance that different cultural values evoke. As brands incorporate diverse cultural elements into their campaigns, they risk commodifying or misrepresenting those cultures. Brands must navigate these cultural landscapes with sensitivity to avoid turning cultural symbols into mere marketing tools. This approach requires brands to navigate this delicately and avoid co-opting rich cultural symbols, otherwise possibly facing backlash from those who see their culture being misrepresented or exploited. This sensitivity to cultural nuances is crucial in global marketing and demands a commitment to understanding and respecting the cultural contexts in which a brand operates.

Employing other-directed empathy can also lead to excluding diverse perspectives, especially when brands attempt to speak for or represent marginalized communities without fully involving them. While aiming to represent marginalized groups, brands may inadvertently

exclude diverse voices or oversimplify social problems. The ability to perceive and understand the emotional landscape of different cultures is a crucial component of other-directed empathy. However, in attempts to understand and represent experiences that are not inherently familiar, brands may fail to capture the full complexity of those experiences or assume to speak on behalf of those who experience firsthand, leading to campaigns that do not fully resonate or that inadvertently marginalize parts of the community they intend to support.

A significant risk highlighted in the interviews is the ethical misalignment between a brand's empathetic messaging and its corporate practices. This is particularly problematic when brands employ other-directed empathy, advocating for causes or groups with which they have no direct connection while their internal practices contradict their projected values. This misalignment can erode consumer trust, as evidenced by an interviewee's skepticism about the authenticity of some brands' efforts to create change:

The authenticity of trying to make a change is not there and it's difficult to measure nowadays. [...] But if they do not use the right platform or means to do so then that is both kind of detrimental for business but also the society. (Interview 6: line 133)

This disconnect not only undermines consumer confidence but can also harm the cause itself by instigating a sense of disillusionment and cynicism towards brand activism, as suggested by the interviewee's concern about the difficulty of measuring the impact of such campaigns. It underscores the importance of aligning a brand's internal practices with its external messaging to ensure the authenticity and effectiveness of its activism efforts.

Digital platforms play a critical role in amplifying or undermining the effectiveness of other-directed empathy. They enable brands to reach broad audiences and engage directly, offering a platform for advocacy and community building. Therefore, interviewees consider digital platforms to have emerged as powerful tools to amplify this sense of connection with brands: "Brands that are active online in some social issue... if they show a good point of view, they will gain the trust and loyalty of the people that share the same point of view" (Interview 19: line 181). However, one of the interviewees acknowledges a spectrum of engagement in online communities, suggesting that commitment to a cause is not uniform and can be heavily influenced by individual passion and dedication:

Internet does make us kind of feel like, well online social media presence makes us feel like we're actually being active and like we're actually supporting a cause, whereas it's like latent support, like you're just sitting at home and nothing's really happening. But I do think that there are some people who are very committed and depending on how passionate you are about the topic. (Interview 27: line 136)

This excerpt aptly illustrates the dual nature of social media within brand activism and online engagement. While digital platforms can facilitate connections and amplify voices, they

can also foster superficial participation that falls short of meaningful action. The interviewee's acknowledgement of "latent support" versus manifest support challenges simplistic views of online activism as inherently positive or negative. Instead, their words point to individual agency and passion in determining the authenticity and impact of online engagement. This nuanced perspective suggests that social media can be a powerful tool for social change, but only when individuals actively move beyond passive 'likes' and engage in meaningful ways with the causes they claim to support.

The emphasis on digital platforms attests to their indispensable role in shaping activist brand campaigns, underscoring the need for brands to leverage these tools responsibly and effectively in their pursuit of shared values and causes with their consumer base. Therefore, the choice of medium and method for activism is not neutral; it significantly influences the perception of authenticity and, by extension, the effectiveness of the activism itself. For brands, this choice of the 'right platform' is particularly fraught with implications for both their business and their societal impact. Missteps in how activism is pursued or communicated can lead to skepticism about the brand's motives and potentially undermine consumer engagement.

To summarize, other-directed empathy offers a powerful counter narrative to the often self-centered nature of consumer-brand relationships. When a brand's message resonates with an individual's capacity for empathy, it can forge deep connections and inspire moral action. This form of empathy empowers brands to advocate for marginalized groups, amplifying voices often overlooked in mainstream discourse. However, selective empathy can be a paradoxical aspect of brand activism: while it can highlight specific causes and inspire action, it can also inadvertently perpetuate inequalities by focusing on certain groups or issues while neglecting others.

Addressing the Digital Challenges Posed by Brand Activism

The first research question examines the role of empathy in consumer engagement with brand activism on digital platforms, particularly how the public interprets and responds to empathy-based appeals in brand-led campaigns. While research suggests that empathetic representations can be instrumental in inspiring moral action (Lanzoni, 2018), the process through which the public navigates and reconciles empathy-based representations in brand activism on digital platforms is intertwined with theoretical discussions and empirical observations about the nature of empathy.

Theoretical discussions often pivot on whether empathy necessitates recognizing the other as 'someone like me' or extends to understanding those who are fundamentally different (Hoffmann, 2000; Shoemaker, 2017). Emotional resonance, the process of aligning one's own emotions with those of another (Couburn, 2001; Oxeyl, 2012), plays a crucial role in this dichotomy, as it can both facilitate connection through shared experiences and be limited by individual biases. However, the success of emotional resonance relies on shared experiences

and mirrored values, often leading individuals to empathize more readily with those they perceive as similar to themselves. This tendency can inadvertently limit the scope of empathy, making it challenging to extend understanding to those with fundamentally different experiences.

While mirroring values relies on identifying shared experiences to foster connection, this can lead to superficial engagement if not grounded in a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives. This inherent bias towards the familiar underscores the limitations of relying solely on emotional resonance for genuine empathy and social change. The dichotomy between understanding the Other (Boltanski, 1999; Silverstone, 2002) as ‘someone like me’ versus recognizing fundamental differences is evident in the interviewees’ dual strategy of mirroring values and broadening moral scope by acknowledging the need to expand their understanding beyond their own experiences. Therefore, addressing complex social issues requires acknowledging and understanding diverse experiences. Relying solely on mirroring values can lead to forms of selective empathy, leaving systemic inequalities unaddressed.

This theoretical foundation is essential because activist brand campaigns utilize empathy-based representations, aiming to mirror values and evoke emotional resonance to foster empathy (Wannow, 2023) and drive social change (Cammarota et al., 2024; Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023; Verlegh, 2024). However, findings suggest that for an activist brand to achieve emotional resonance, two key conditions must be met. Firstly, the emotions of vulnerable individuals portrayed in the campaign must be intelligible and relatable to the audience within their cultural context. Secondly, there must be an initial, intuitive acceptance of those emotions, enabling resonance. This acceptance, however, can be influenced by pre-existing biases and cultural norms that vary across social groups, highlighting the potential for selective empathy towards certain causes over others. This variation should be explored in future research to uncover the diverse range of differences and similarities that can exist across different groups; for instance, while some individuals of a particular age group may find the actions of a brand to be emotionally resonant, others within the same age group may not.

While empathy-based representations have the potential to enhance understanding and connection, the mediated nature of these representations on digital platforms can create challenges for genuine engagement. Interviewees expressed a clear tension between appreciating empathetic appeals and harboring distrust towards brands' underlying motives. This skepticism arises from concerns that brands may superficially employ empathy as a manipulative tool rather than demonstrating a genuine commitment to social causes (Sobande, 2021). The proliferation of brand activism in digital spaces further complicates this issue, making it difficult to distinguish between authentic efforts and performative gestures. This potential for disconnect between intended empathetic connections and audience perception highlights a critical tension within brand activism: the value of empathy may diminish if it fails to translate into meaningful action (Matthiesen & Klitmøller, 2019; Slote, 2007).

Furthermore, the selective use of empathy by brands, amplified by algorithms that curate content and prioritize specific narratives on digital platforms (Bucher, 2018), can significantly influence the visibility and prioritization of certain causes over others. While empathy-driven campaigns can evoke emotional responses and raise awareness of social issues, the ‘we’ feeling they foster, often boosted and curated by algorithms, may inadvertently hinder deeper understanding and engagement with diverse perspectives. This algorithmic pursuit of similarity can be seen as a form of retreat from the challenging yet enriching experience of differences, potentially leading to a “universal sameness” and reinforcing existing biases (Scalvini, 2023a: p. 2). The allure of a community of similarity, driven by algorithmic curation and shared values, lies in its promise of a “simulated diversity that can be consumed in place of social diversity” (Scalvini, 2023a: p. 10). However, this digitally constructed unity can mask the underlying power dynamics and systemic inequalities that perpetuate social injustice. By prioritizing a superficial sense of togetherness over genuine engagement with (and acceptance of) diverse perspectives, brand activism risks becoming a mere palliative measure, offering temporary relief from the discomfort of confronting difference without addressing the root causes of social issues.

The second research question is normative and aims to understand the ethical responsibilities of marketers and advertisers who employ empathy-based representations in activist brand campaigns, particularly when these campaigns do not serve as conduits for actively engaging participants in the transition from empathy to moral action.

Digital platforms offer brands the space and tools to elicit a more informed, reflective and action-oriented form of empathy (Ahmad et al., 2024). By thoughtfully engaging with social issues and centering marginalized voices, brands can bridge divides, challenge power imbalances and catalyze meaningful change (Sobande, 2024). However, empathy filtered through privilege can be problematic (Ahmed, 2004, p. 121). Well-intentioned campaigns may inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities if they lack a nuanced understanding of the issues at hand or fail to involve affected communities in their development (Costanza-Chock, 2020). This can result in superficial advocacy that exploits social issues for brand visibility rather than contributing to tangible solutions. Such campaigns may generate short-term engagement and a fleeting sense of solidarity, but they ultimately lack the substance required to create lasting change. It is, after all, quite paradoxical that brand activism, intended as a deliberate strategy to cultivate a more equitable and just society, functions within a capitalist framework that is frequently responsible for perpetuating those very inequalities (Fraser, 2022, p. 15).

Campaigns should provide factual information, encourage thoughtful deliberation, and empower audiences to take tangible steps towards positive change. By integrating empathy with reason and a commitment to actionable solutions, brand activism can transcend the limitations of empathic appeals and contribute to a more just and equitable society. Furthermore, advertisers seeking to promote social and ethical causes must be mindful of the nature of moral action and strive to cultivate an understanding of the problems they aim to

address that is close to the lived realities of the people they are representing. Digital platforms intensify this challenge as they can perpetuate moralizing discourses that reinforce conformism (Scalvini, 2023a); however, they also hold the potential to connect disparate groups for a more comprehensive and inclusive discussion on moral issues (Papacharissi, 2015). Evidently, digital platforms amplify this paradox of brand activism, providing both a stage for activism and a marketplace for consumerism (Banet-Weiser, 2018). This system must be leveraged for an ethical application of empathy that goes beyond simple acknowledgment on these platforms and prompts actions that reinforce the autonomy and voices of the impacted individuals (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Within this scope, morally driven action holds the potential to instigate systemic change (Nussbaum, 2001; Singer, 2018). Marketers face a moral imperative to transcend superficial claims of corporate responsibility, actively confronting the inextricable link between capitalist practices and societal inequities, and resolutely championing genuine social equality.

In conclusion, this article critically examines how activist brand campaigns shape empathy and moral action within digital platforms, advocating for a nuanced understanding that goes beyond simplistic assumptions about their impact. By distinguishing between other-directed and similarity-based empathy, the study highlights the diverse ways in which consumers engage with these campaigns. While acknowledging the potential of brand activism to raise awareness and foster connection, the research also underscores potential pitfalls, such as reinforcing existing biases and promoting superficial engagement with social causes. Ultimately, the article emphasizes the need for a critical approach to brand activism that considers both the positive and negative consequences of these campaigns.

Table 1

Table 1 – Code Book: categories applied in data analysis

Category	Operational Definition	Coding Instructions	Sub-Categories
Other-Directed Empathy	Other-directed empathy involves recognizing and responding to the emotions of others, particularly those who are marginalized or vulnerable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Interviewees talk about understanding or being moved by the emotions, needs, or situations of others, even if they don't have a direct personal connection or similarity to them. ● Interviewee mentions actions or feelings driven by the needs or feelings of others. ● Interviewee felt compelled to help or understand someone simply because they perceived them to be in need, vulnerable, or marginalized, without any self-centered motive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Recognizing emotions of others ● Feeling the need to respond or act ● Reference to marginalized or vulnerable individuals ● Situational descriptions of other-directed actions
Similarity-Based Empathy	Similarity-based empathy is rooted in the tendency to feel more empathy for those who are perceived as similar to oneself.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Interviewees express a heightened emotional connection or understanding towards someone because of shared experiences, backgrounds, traits, or characteristics. ● Interview may have felt more compelled to act or respond due to perceived similarities with the other person. ● Interviewee acknowledges or hints at a bias towards helping, understanding, or connecting with those they perceive as similar to themselves. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Shared experiences or backgrounds ● Heightened emotional connection due to similarities ● Biased actions or feelings towards similar individuals ● Recognizing oneself in others

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