

## **A Tale of Two ‘Ideologies’: Differences in Consumer Response to Brand Activism**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Political ideology has been shown to influence consumer behavior across various domains such as recycling intentions, message appeals, brand attachment, and willingness to pay. In the marketplace, brand activism is becoming more common, with brands taking sides on a controversial socio-political issue. In a series of three studies, we examine whether consumers' brand attitudes and willingness to pay for the brand is influenced by brand activism and whether this effect is moderated by consumers' political ideology. Further, we examine whether the issue type (pro-liberal versus pro-conservative) and type of activism (authentic, absent, slacktivism) interact with political ideology to drive distinct consumer brand response. Importantly, we establish both affective as well as cognitive routes as potential drivers of these effects. Theoretical and managerial implications of the findings are also discussed.

Political ideology is a set of beliefs, opinions, values (Jost 2006; Jost, Nosek, and Gosling 2008) and the proper order of society (Erikson and Tedin 2003). Research in the last decade has demonstrated the significant impact of political ideology on individual judgment and decisions across a variety of domains (Jost 2017), from collectivism (Janoff-Bulman 2009), cognitive processing style (Jost 2017), empathy (Hasson et al. 2018), self-responsibility in problem solving (Jost et al. 2008; Everett et al. 2020), to health-promotion behaviors (Chan 2019).

More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has further shone a spotlight on these differences and the growing gap between conservatives and liberals in their threat perceptions of the virus (Nowlan and Zane 2020) which can lead to non-trivial differences in health outcomes such as COVID-19 infections and fatalities (Gollwitzer et al. 2020). Given the increased divergence on this factor, political identity has become one of the most salient individual identities in the current environment (Iyengar and Krupenkin, 2018; Van Bavel and Pereira, 2018).

### **Political Ideology and Consumer Response**

Differences in political ideology manifest among consumers in the marketplace as well (Crockett and Wallendorf 2004; Jost 2017). Jost (2017) highlights that ideological differences impact persuasion and cognitive processing, motivation, consumer choice and customer satisfaction, among others. Political conservatism has also been linked to stronger brand attachment and willingness to pay for premium brands (Chan and Ilicic 2019). This is related to findings that show that political conservatism (vs. liberalism) leads to consumer preference for products that can signal their superiority (vs. uniqueness) (Ordabayeva and Fernandes 2018). Conservative (vs. liberal) consumers are also less likely to report complaints and more likely to accept proposed resolution by firms, when dissatisfied (Jung et al. 2017).

## **Brand Activism and Political Ideology**

In recent times, brands have become more active in controversial socio-political discourse (Sen and Morwitz 1996), a phenomenon called ‘brand activism’ (Moorman 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Unlike cause-related marketing or corporate social responsibility activities, an essential aspect of brand activism is its innate divisiveness with the potential to alienate customers and even employees (Sen and Morwitz 1996; Bhagwat et al. 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Regardless of the potential risks, senior management seems to be increasingly supportive of brand activism with 47% of marketing leaders supporting it (Moorman 2020). In 2018, Nike courted controversy with their campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick (Avery and Pauwels 2019) which quickly divided consumers. Gillette and Costco have similarly faced consumer backlash in response to their brand activism activities (Vredenburg et al. 2020).

Recent academic research also suggests that activism can hurt brands with the brand losing consumers opposed to the issue and non-significant gains from those supporting the issue (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020). In fact, more than 45% of liberal and 29% of conservative American consumers reported boycotting a product for a political reason (Jost, Langer, and Singh 2017). Together with the fact that negative consumer response to brand activism generates immense commentary in traditional as well as social media, it could be considered an unsuccessful marketing tactic. However, market data suggest the opposite. For example, Nike’s stock actually outperformed the S&P 500 in the aftermath of the controversy (Avery and Pauwels 2019). More recently, Hydock et al. (2020) show that firms with a large (vs. small) market share (e.g., NIKE) are more (vs. less) likely to lose consumers (both conservative as well as liberal) by engaging in activism. This is similar to Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020)’s Study 3,

where no differences emerged among consumers' responses to brand activism, based on the match between their political ideology and the issue (p. 781). Overall, given the nascency of this literature and the contradictory findings, it is imperative to gain a better understanding of this emerging phenomenon and consumer response to it.

The current research thus seeks to not only examine the effect of brand activism on consumers' brand attitudes and willingness to pay (WTP) but also explore whether consumers' political ideology moderates this effect. This is important given that most of brand activism involves partisan issues where conservatives and liberals are on the opposite end of the spectrum (Moorman 2020). As discussed earlier, conservatives (vs. liberals) favor self-responsibility and personal control in solving problems (Eidelman et al. 2012; Jost 2017; Everett et al. 2020) and are less willing to help others (Hasson et al. 2018). Further, they exhibit greater compliance with social order and authority figures with a desire to upholding existing systems (Jung et al. 2017) whereas liberals favor active interventions in the interest of social justice (Janoff-Bulman 2009). Thus, one could argue that conservatives would oppose brand activism as it can be viewed as intervention in societal order that disrupts the status-quo and challenges authority. However, will this hold when the issue at hand is pro-conservative in nature? That is, whether the issue at hand is left- or right-leaning in nature? We address this question in our research.

### **Authentic Activism versus Slacktivism**

Another important factor in this discussion is the perceived authenticity of the brand engaged in socio-political activism (Vredenburg et al. 2020). That is, whether consumers see the brand as genuinely engaged in the issue, with purpose-driven activism or just engaging in 'slacktivism' or inauthentic brand activism, seen largely as an opportunistic involvement via marketing messages but not through brand purpose and values (Kristofferson, White, and Peloza

2014; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Critics and consumers alike, can disapprove of a brand for engaging in perceived slacktivism. In fact, when Nike participated in the Black Lives Matter movement, consumers were quick to point out the absence of substantive policies supporting the issue at the company level (Ritson 2020). So, an important issue in this context is to empirically assess how consumers respond to authentic activism versus slacktivism, and whether the effect is distinct for conservatives versus liberals.

### **Affective and Cognitive Drivers of Brand Activism and Political Ideology Effects**

*Affective route - Positive and negative emotions.* Prior research has shown that when dissatisfied with the brand or its performance, consumers can experience an array of negative emotions from anger, frustration, disappointment, to rage (Patterson, Brady, and McColl-Kennedy 2016), which can lead to negative WOM, brand boycott, and even brand sabotage (Kähr et al. 2016). In contrast, when consumers are highly satisfied with the brand's actions or performance, they can experience positive affect such as happiness and delight which can have implications for customer behavior and loyalty (Oliver, Rust, and Varki 1997; Schneider and Bowen 1999). In the context of value-based decisions by brands such as those involved in brand activism, recent research has shown that it can give rise to negative and/or positive emotions, depending on the firm's actions (Kirmani et al. 2017). For example, a firm's participation in green actions elicited positive emotion of gratitude whereas when it did not, consumers experienced negative emotions of contempt, anger, and disgust, leading to behavioral consequences such as negative WOM, complaint behaviors, and boycotting (Xie, Bagozzi, and Gronhaug 2015). In our context, we expect that when brand activism is based on an issue supported by the consumer, they will experience positive affect and vice-versa. We argue that

these emotions will then be implicated in driving consequent brand attitudes and willingness to pay for the brand.

*Cognitive route - Brand-value identification.* Consumers tend to be drawn to brands where the brand matches their self-view and allows them to express their values (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). This value congruity where the brand's values are aligned with the consumer's set of values (Johar and Sirgy 1991) has been shown to positively influence consumers' brand value identification and thereby, positive WOM, brand attitudes, and commitment (Tuškej, Golob, and Podnar 2013). Given that brand activism reflects the brand's values (Vredenburg et al. 2020), we argue that when consumers' values match brand values and they identify with them, consumers will be more likely to hold positive brand attitudes and willing to pay more for the brand. Further, since political ideology is intrinsically tied to an individual's value system, we argue that consumer brand-value identification could be the driving mechanism behind the interactive effect of brand activism and political ideology on consumer response to the brand engaging in socio-political activism.

In a series of three studies, we examine whether consumers' brand attitudes and willingness to pay for the brand is influenced by brand activism and whether this effect is moderated by consumers' political ideology (Study 1). Further, we study whether issue type (pro-liberal versus pro-conservative) (Study 2) and type of activism (authentic, absent, slacktivism) (Study 3) interact with political ideology to drive distinct consumer response. Finally, we test both affective (Studies 1-3) and cognitive (Study 3) routes as drivers of the effects. The brand activism scenarios and additional analyses for all studies are provided in the Web Appendix.

In doing so, we make three contributions. One, we contribute to the nascent literature on brand activism as well as the growing literature on political ideology and clarify their joint effect in the marketplace. Second, we establish several key moderators such as issue type (pro-liberal, pro-conservative) and authenticity of brand activism (authentic versus slacktivism). Moreover, we explicate the mediating mechanisms underlying the predicted effects; the affective route via positive and negative emotions (e.g., happiness, pride, anger) and the cognitive route through brand-value identification. Finally, our results have tractable and practical implications for brands, with clear guidelines on how to avoid the pitfalls of brand activism and leverage it effectively to garner consumer support.

## STUDY 1

The purpose of this study is to examine the interactive effect of brand activism and political ideology on consumers' attitudes towards the brand and willingness to pay for the brand. The study also seeks to examine the potential mediating role of positive and negative emotions such as happiness, sadness, and anger, in this relationship.

### Method

*Design and Procedure.* 252 US participants recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) ( $M_{age} = 37.05$  years, 42.6% females) completed the study in exchange for monetary compensation (US \$.70). The study employed a 2 (brand activism: present, absent) x (political ideology: continuous) between-subjects design. Participants were told that the study was being conducted to understand consumer attitudes toward a variety of topics including business and politics. Participants first read a news article about a fictitious clothing brand (see Web Appendix for details) where brand activism was manipulated such that those in the brand activism-present



condition read an article in which the brand came out in support of the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement while in the brand activism-absent condition, the brand remained silent on the issue.

*Brand Attitude and WTP.* Participants were then asked to report their willingness to buy the product (not at all willing (1), definitely willing (7)) as well as three items (bad/good, dislike/like, unfavorable/favorable;  $\alpha = .94$ ) on a 7-point scale to measure brand attitude (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020). The three items were averaged to form a brand attitude score for each participant.

*Emotion Measures.* Next, participants self-reported their emotions in response to the news article. Specifically, four emotions were measured on a 9-point scale, using 2 items each – happy (happy, glad;  $r = .76$ ), angry (angry, enraged;  $r = .76$ ), sad (sad, upset;  $r = .81$ ) and neutral (neutral, indifferent;  $r = .66$ ), which were aggregated to create emotion scores.

*Political Ideology.* We measured issue-based political ideology using the eight-item scale (Jung et al. 2017) where for each pair of statements, participants selected the option that was closer to their own view. Of the two statements, one reflected a liberal view (1) and the other reflected a conservative view (0). The eight statement pairs related to socioeconomic issues such as government regulation on business, social welfare reform, racial discrimination, homosexuality, and immigration. Responses were later averaged, ranging from 0 (chose conservative statements on all issues) to 1 (chose liberal statements on all issues). Jung et al. (2017) developed this measure by adopting items from 2014 PEW Research Center Political Polarization and Typology Survey. This measure is less US-centric than some of the other measures of political ideology (e.g., Nail et al. 2009; Kidwell et al. 2013) and hence, more generalizable across different population groups.

*Other Measure and Demographics.* After completing the political ideology measure, participants indicated their 'general attitudes toward brand activism' using 7-items ( $\alpha = .95$ ). Specifically, participants indicated their (1) attitude toward (i.e., dislike/like, bad/good, negative/positive), and (2) views about (inappropriate/appropriate, bad/good, unreasonable/reasonable and refrain from participating/always participate) brands engaging in socio-political issues, on a 7-point scale. These were averaged to form a composite score of general attitudes toward brand activism for each participant. Finally, demographic information regarding age, gender, education, ethnicity, and English fluency was collected. None of the demographic variables was significant and thus not discussed further.

## **Results and Discussion**

*Pretest.* We conducted a pretest of the brand activism scenarios (present, absent) with 95 participants ( $M_{age} = 38.32$ ; % female = 44.7%) and measured the extent to which participants felt the brand is serious about supporting the issue and taking concrete steps toward contributing to the issue (strongly agree (1), strongly disagree (7)). These items ( $\alpha = .73$ ) were averaged to form a composite score of brand activism. A one-way ANOVA showed that the mean was significantly higher in the activism present ( $M = 5.50$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) than the activism absent condition ( $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ) ( $F(1, 94) = 7.62$ ,  $p < .01$ ), thus establishing that the scenarios were successful in manipulating perceptions of brand activism.

*Brand Attitude.* A 2 (brand activism: present, absent) x continuous (political ideology: measured) Generalized Linear Model (GLM) revealed a significant main effect of brand activism ( $F(1,248) = 36.57$ ,  $p < .0001$ ) and a significant interaction between brand activism and political ideology ( $F(1, 248) = 50.76$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). To probe this interaction, we used the Johnson-Neyman technique to identify the range of political ideology for which the simple effects of brand

activism on attitudes were significant (see Figure 1). Specifically, this analysis revealed a significant negative effect of brand activism on brand attitudes for values of political ideology below .50 (BJN = -.39, 95% CI = -.78, -.00) and a significant positive effect for high values i.e., .67 (BJN = .35, 95% CI = .00, .71). Conditional effects showed that liberals (vs. conservatives) had more positive brand attitudes when the brand engaged in activism ( $\beta = .34$ , SE = .44,  $t(248) = 4.27$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). However, the effect reversed when the brand did not engage in activism ( $\beta = -.49$ , SE = .47,  $t(248) = -5.76$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). Across all studies, the willingness-to-pay measure yielded results similar to those for brand attitudes. These are detailed in the web appendix for studies 1-3.

*General attitudes toward brand activism<sup>1</sup>*. Analysis of general attitudes towards activism as a function of political ideology and brand activism revealed a significant main effect for both brand activism ( $F(1, 248) = 3.77$ ,  $p = .05$ ) and political ideology ( $F(1, 248) = 8.93$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Importantly, a significant interaction effect emerged ( $F(1, 248) = 9.24$ ,  $p < .01$ ). As seen in Figure 2, the Johnson-Neyman analysis revealed a significant positive effect only for high values of political ideology i.e., .62 (BJN = .39, 95% CI = .00,.78). Conditional effects showed that liberals (vs. conservatives) had more positive general attitudes in the activism present condition ( $\beta = .37$ , SE = .49,  $t(248) = 4.39$ ,  $p < .0001$ ) but this difference was attenuated in the activism absent condition ( $\beta = .00$ , SE = .52,  $t(248) = -.04$ ,  $p = .97$ ).

*Emotion Effects*. A 2 (brand activism: present, absent) x continuous (political ideology: measured) GLM revealed a significant interaction between brand activism and political ideology

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<sup>1</sup> Correlation between political ideology and general attitudes is  $r=.18^{**}$  ( $p<.01$ ) and  $r=.22^{**}$  ( $p < .01$ ; Study 2). We also conducted the analysis for brand attitudes and WTP after controlling for general attitudes toward brand activism. Our results showed that in both analyses, the interaction effect of brand activism and political ideology remained significant ( $p < .0001$ ). These findings are similarly replicated in Study 2.

for happiness ( $F(1, 248) = 56.10, p < .0001$ ), anger ( $F(1, 248) = 5.11, p < .05$ ), and sadness ( $F(1, 248) = 6.20, p = .01$ ) scores. The Johnson-Neyman technique demonstrated that the presence (vs. absence) of activism had a significant negative effect on happiness for conservatives (values  $< .48$ ) (BJN =  $-.64$ , 95% CI =  $-1.27, -.00$ ), and a positive effect for liberals (values  $> .64$ ) (BJN =  $.56$ , 95% CI =  $.00, 1.12$ ). Anger and sadness effects were not significant. For full results, see Table 1.

*Moderated mediation.* To assess whether emotions mediated the observed effects, we used Hayes' (2016) Process model 8 (5000 resamples) to conduct a moderated mediation analysis with brand activism as the focal predictor, political ideology as the moderator, brand attitudes as the dependent variable and happiness, sadness, and anger, as parallel mediators. Results revealed that the index of moderated mediation was significant only for happiness ( $I = 3.41, SE = .54, 95\% CI = 2.40, 4.53$ ). At both, low (i.e., conservatives) ( $\beta = -.66, SE = .18, 95\% CI = -1.02, -.33$ ) and high (i.e., liberals) levels ( $\beta = 1.47, SE = .24, 95\% CI = 1.01, 1.96$ ) of political ideology, the effect of brand activism on attitudes was mediated only by happiness. These results provide initial evidence that liberals (vs. conservatives) feel happier and therefore respond more favorably toward the brand when it engages in activism (vs. not) (see Table 2).

*Discussion.* This study confirms our predictions that brand activism and political ideology have a significant effect on individuals' brand attitudes and willingness to pay for the brand. Further, we find that participants' feelings of happiness mediate this interactive effect on the dependent variables. Given prior research which has focused on negative emotions in customer experiences (Sen et al. 2001; Patterson et al. 2016) in explaining their response to negatively perceived brand actions, our results suggest that consumer response to brand activism

is not mediated by them and might instead have unique pathways. We further explore potential mediating mechanisms in Studies 2-3.

## STUDY 2

Findings from Study 1 confirmed our prediction that conservatives view brand engagement in socio-political issues as inappropriate. However, it can be argued that because the activism issue used in Study 1 is left leaning, the findings might not apply to right leaning issues. Thus, Study 2 seeks to not only generalize the findings of Study 1 to another issue (immigration) but also extend them by examining brand activism using both, a pro-liberal and a pro-conservative take on this issue. Further, given that positive (happiness) rather than negative emotion emerged as a mediator of the findings, Study 2 will examine other potentially relevant positive emotions in this context such as pride and gratitude, along with happiness, to get a more nuanced understanding of the underlying mechanisms.

### Method

*Design and Procedure.* 317 US participants from MTurk ( $M_{age} = 40.77$  years, 41.6% females) completed this study in exchange for monetary compensation (US \$.70). The study implemented a 3 (brand activism: pro-conservative, pro-liberal, control) x 2 (political ideology: conservative vs. liberal) between-subjects design. Participants first self-reported their political ideology as a choice among liberal, conservative, and independent/ neither. Those selecting the 'independent/ neither' option were screened out while a quota was implemented to get an equivalent distribution across liberals and conservatives (see Hydock et al. 2020). Thus, we not only utilize a different activism issue (immigrants-focused vs. nationalistic hiring policy) in this study (vs. Study 1), but also a different measure of political ideology, thus testing the robustness

and generalizability of our results. Except for the political ideology measure and the addition of the pro-conservative activism condition, the procedure for this study was identical to that used in Study 1. As before, brand activism was manipulated through news articles. We first provided background information about the brand across all scenarios, “Adventurer first started its operations in 1983 by manufacturing and selling climbing gear but has since expanded into other categories like sports and athletic apparel, outdoor and camping equipment as well as sleeping bags and backpacks. It has now become a significant player in the outdoor gear and clothing industry worldwide.” Following this, participants were randomly assigned to one of the three brand activism conditions where those in the brand activism-conservative condition read an article about the clothing brand implementing a nationalistic hiring policy, those in the brand activism-liberal condition read about the brand implementing a pro-immigration hiring policy and finally, those in the control condition read about the brand maintaining silence on the immigration issue.

*Measures.* This study used the same measures as those in Study 1 with the following exceptions. In addition to self-reporting felt emotions of happiness (happy, glad;  $r = .82$ ) and sadness (sad, upset;  $r = .82$ ), participants also reported on pride (proud, satisfied;  $r = .84$ ) and gratitude (grateful, thankful;  $r = .87$ ). The relevant items were aggregated to create emotion scores for happiness, sadness, pride, and gratitude. Further, participants’ political ideology was recorded as either conservative (0) or liberal (1).

## **Results and Discussion**

*Brand Attitude.* The three items measuring brand attitude ( $\alpha = .96$ ) were averaged to form a brand attitude score for each participant. A GLM analysis with attitudes as the dependent variable and brand activism and political ideology as independent variables, revealed a

significant main effect of political ideology ( $F(1,312) = 24.63, p < .0001$ ) and a significant interaction between brand activism and political ideology ( $F(2, 312) = 40.80, p < .0001$ ). Probing this interaction (see Figure 3) via contrast analysis revealed that attitudes toward the brand were significantly more positive for liberals ( $M = 5.61$ ) compared to conservatives ( $M = 4.48; t(312) = 4.15, p < .0001$ ) in the pro-liberal activism condition, as in Study 1. Interestingly, this pattern of means reversed in the pro-conservative activism condition ( $M_{liberal} = 3.80$  vs.  $M_{conservative} = 6.08; t(312) = -8.34, p < .0001$ ). Replicating Study 1's results, conservatives (vs. liberals) had more positive attitudes toward the brand in the control or activism absent condition ( $M_{conservative} = 5.87$  vs.  $M_{liberal} = 4.68; t(312) = 4.39, p < .0001$ ).

*General attitudes toward brand activism.* Analysis of general attitudes toward activism as a function of political ideology and brand activism found a significant main effect of political ideology ( $F(1, 311) = 5.78, p = .02$ ) and a significant interactive effect of brand activism and political ideology ( $F(2, 311) = 11.77, p < .0001$ ) (see Figure 4). Although liberals show a more positive attitude towards activism compared to conservatives ( $M_{liberals} = 4.93$  vs.  $M_{conservatives} = 4.49; t(311) = 2.40, p = .02$ ), in general, this effect is qualified by the type of activism (pro-liberal, pro-conservative, control) the brand engages in. Specifically, liberals (vs. conservatives) exhibit more positive attitudes when the brand engaged in pro-liberal activism ( $M_{liberals} = 5.43$  vs.  $M_{conservatives} = 4.24; t(311) = 3.82, p < .001$ ) or did not engage in activism ( $M_{liberals} = 4.86$  vs.  $M_{conservatives} = 3.95; t(311) = 2.90, p < .01$ ). However, this pattern reversed when the brand engaged in pro-conservative activism ( $M_{liberals} = 4.51$  vs.  $M_{conservatives} = 5.31; t(311) = -2.54, p = .01$ ). This analysis highlights a key insight regarding consumer attitudes toward brand activism and raises the possibility of hypocrisy in attitudes such that liberals hold positive attitudes toward the brand and toward activism, but not when it engages in pro-conservative activism. Similarly,

conservatives are supportive of brand activism when the brand espouses a pro-conservative issue, but not when it is a pro-liberal issue<sup>2</sup>. Thus, this finding provides an important caveat to our current understanding of consumer response to brand activism and clarifies that because brand activism typically focuses on pro-liberal issues, the impression that liberals might be more likely to be in favor of brand activism might be inaccurate and that it really depends on whether the issue is left or right leaning.

*Emotion Effects.* A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant interactive effect of brand activism and political ideology on happiness ( $F(2, 311) = 20.84, p < .0001$ ), pride ( $F(2, 311) = 21.10, p < .0001$ ), sadness ( $F(2, 311) = 11.81, p < .0001$ ) and gratitude ( $F(2, 311) = 14.47, p < .0001$ ). Importantly, when the brand engaged in pro-liberal activism, liberals (vs. conservatives) report greater levels of happiness ( $M_{liberals} = 4.73$  vs.  $M_{conservatives} = 3.92; t(311) = 1.74, p = .08$ ), but lower levels of sadness ( $M_{liberals} = 1.46$  vs.  $M_{conservatives} = 3.27; t(311) = -3.90, p = .0001$ ). However, this pattern reversed in the pro-conservative activism and control (activism absent) conditions with liberals (vs. conservatives) experiencing lower levels of happiness, pride, and gratitude (all comparisons significant at  $p < .0001$ ) but greater levels of sadness (pro-conservative activism only:  $p < .01$ ). Details are presented in Table 3.

*Moderated mediation.* Next, we used Process model 8 (5000 resamples) to conduct a moderated mediation analysis with brand activism as the predictor, political ideology as the moderator, brand attitude as the dependent variable, and happiness, pride, sadness, and gratitude as parallel mediators. Results showed that both happiness and pride significantly mediated the interactive effect of brand activism and political ideology on brand attitudes ( $I = .28, SE = .12$ ,

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<sup>2</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight.



95% CI = [.10, .54] and  $I = .50$ ,  $SE = .17$ , 95% CI [.21, .87], respectively). Specifically, liberals (conservatives) were more (less) happy and proud when the brand engaged in pro-liberal activism (vs. pro-conservative activism or no activism) and this led them to respond more (less) favorably toward the brand. See Tables 4-5 for details.

*Discussion.* This study replicated and extended the findings from Study 1 in important ways. Specifically, it found a significant interactive effect of brand activism and political ideology on consumer brand response. Contrary to expectations, we find that the effects hold for both pro-conservative as well as pro-liberal issues. That is, when the activism issue is liberal leaning, self-identified liberals support the brand and vice-versa. Existing literature would suggest that conservatives (Janoff-Bulman 2009; Eidelman et al. 2012; Jung et al. 2017) should prefer brands to not partake in the socio-political discourse and instead focus on their primary objective, production of goods and services. However, our findings suggest that this depends on the issue in question. Further, we tested several positive emotions such as happiness, pride, and gratitude, that are particularly relevant to consumer-brand interactions (Ahuvia et al. 2018; Septianto and Garg 2021), as mediators in this study and found that self-reported feelings of happiness and pride mediated the interactive effect of brand activism and political ideology.

### **STUDY 3**

The purpose of this study was to further explore how different aspects of brand activism might interact with political ideology to affect consumer response in the marketplace. Specifically, we examined whether consumers were able to distinguish and respond differentially to a brand engaging in lip service or ‘slacktivism’ versus one that was authentically contributing to a controversial socio-political issue, and whether political ideology influenced responses across these conditions. Further, while studies 1-2 established affective mediating routes, Study 3

tests whether an alternate cognitive mechanism is also implicated in driving the interactive effect of political ideology and brand activism on consumer response to the brand.

## **Method**

*Design and Procedure.* 489 US participants recruited from MTurk ( $M_{age} = 41.25$  years, 39.8% females) completed this study in exchange for monetary compensation (US \$.70). Five participants were excluded for failing the attention check, leading to a final sample of 484 participants. The study used a 3 (brand activism: present, absent, slacktivism) x political ideology (measured) between-subjects design.

As in Study 2, participants were randomly assigned to one of the three activism conditions and read the associated news article about a fictitious clothing brand (see Web Appendix). In the brand activism present condition, participants read an article in which the clothing brand had taken concrete steps including pledging a million dollars to support immigrant groups. In the activism absent condition, the brand chose to remain silent on immigration-related issues. Finally, in the slacktivism condition, the brand provided superficial support on the issue and was called out on it by critics.

*Measures.* Once they had read the article, participants completed the dependent variables measuring willing to pay for the brand as well as brand attitude ( $\alpha = .95$ ), as in studies 1 and 2. Next, we measured participants' brand-value identification using items adapted from an organizational value identification scale (Podnar 2004). Specifically, participants indicated the extent to which (1) they felt their values and the values of the brand were very similar and (2) the brand's actions were in line with their beliefs and values ( $r = .91$ ), on a 7-point scale (1=not at all; 7=definitely). Following the consumer brand-value identification measures, participants completed brand activism manipulation checks ( $r = .85$ ) and then indicated the extent to which

the brand (mentioned in the article) was engaging in slacktivism (not at all (1), definitely (7)). Finally, self-reported emotions – happiness (happy, glad;  $r = .87$ ), pride (proud, satisfied;  $r = .83$ ), gratitude (grateful, thankful;  $r = .90$ ), and sadness (sad, upset;  $r = .79$ ), political ideology measure (Jung et al. 2017), and demographics were collected.

## Results and Discussion

*Manipulation checks.* A one-way ANOVA with brand activism score as the dependent variable and brand activism as the independent variable showed that the main effect of brand activism was significant ( $F(2,481) = 121.73, p < .0001$ ). As expected, participants rated the activism scenario significantly higher on brand activism than both the slacktivism and activism absent conditions ( $M_{present} = 5.58$  vs.  $M_{slack} = 3.46; t(481) = -12.09, p < .0001$ ; vs.  $M_{absent} = 3.03; t(481) = -14.58, p < .0001$ ). Similarly, analysis on the slacktivism measure showed that the main effect of brand activism was significant ( $F(2,481) = 76.33, p < .0001$ ) with higher ratings in the slacktivism condition than in the other two ( $M_{slack} = 5.48$  vs.  $M_{present} = 3.67; t(481) = 8.67, p < .0001$ ; vs.  $M_{absent} = 2.99; t(481) = 11.98, p < .0001$ ).

*Brand attitude.* A 3 (brand activism: present, absent, slacktivism) x continuous (political ideology: measured) GLM with brand attitude as the dependent variable revealed a significant main effect of brand activism ( $F(1, 478) = 41.13.70, p < .0001$ ) and more importantly, a significant interaction between brand activism and political ideology ( $F(2, 478) = 54.04, p < .0001$ ). To understand this interaction, we used Hayes' Process model 1 with 5000 resamples. Given that brand activism is a multi-categorical independent variable, we used indicator coding (Hayes and Montoya 2017) where PROCESS created two dummy variables with the activism-absent condition as a reference group (coded 0 in both dummy variables). Thus, for the purpose of the analyses, activism-present dummy variable represented the activism-present versus the

activism-absent condition, and slacktivism dummy variable represented the slacktivism versus activism-absent condition, allowing us to compare both the activism-present and slacktivism conditions with activism-absent in the same model.

Conditional effects<sup>3</sup> revealed that while liberals had more positive attitudes toward the brand in the activism-present (vs. absent) condition, ( $M_{present} = 6.16$  vs.  $M_{absent} = 4.57$ ;  $b = 1.59$ ,  $SE = .21$ ,  $t = 7.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 95% CI = 1.16, 2.03), this effect reversed for the slacktivism (vs. activism-absent) comparison ( $M_{slack} = 3.99$  vs.  $M_{absent} = 4.57$ ;  $b = -.58$ ,  $SE = .22$ ,  $t = -2.68$ ,  $p = .01$ ; 95% CI = -1.01, -.16). Conservative participants, on the other hand, had lower attitudes when the brand engaged in activism (vs. absent) ( $M_{present} = 3.83$  vs.  $M_{absent} = 5.92$ ;  $b = -2.10$ ,  $SE = .25$ ,  $t = -8.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 95% CI = -2.57, -1.60) or in slacktivism (vs. absent) ( $M_{slack} = 4.40$  vs.  $M_{absent} = 5.92$ ;  $b = -1.52$ ,  $SE = .26$ ,  $t = -5.95$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 95% CI = -2.03, -1.02). These results (see Figure 5) highlight the downside of a brand engaging in slacktivism since both conservatives and liberals exhibit lower brand attitudes in this condition compared to the activism absent condition.

*Emotion effects.* A 3 (brand activism: present, absent, slacktivism) x continuous (political ideology: measured) GLM revealed a significant interactive effect of brand activism and political ideology on happiness, sadness, pride, and gratitude ( $p < .0001$ ) (see Table 6 for full details). Conditional effects using Process model 1 (5000 resamples) revealed a pattern similar to that in Study 2 such that conservatives felt happier and prouder when the brand did not engage in activism (vs. absent or vs. slacktivism,  $p < .001$ ) while liberals experienced higher levels of happiness and pride when the brand engaged in activism (vs. absent;  $p < .001$ ). However, there was no difference in positive emotions when the brand engaged in slacktivism (vs. absent).

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<sup>3</sup> To aid with the interpretation of results, the means presented have been generated by the statistical software for the purpose of data visualization.

*Brand-value identification.* A 3 (brand activism: present, absent, slacktivism) x continuous (political ideology: measured) GLM with consumer brand-value identification score as the dependent variable revealed a significant main effect of brand activism ( $F(2, 478) = 47.37, p < .0001$ ) as well as a significant interaction between brand activism and political ideology ( $F(2, 478) = 68.70, p < .0001$ ) (Figure 6). Conditional effects showed that liberals identified with the brand's values more in the activism present (vs. absent) ( $M_{present} = 6.03$  vs.  $M_{absent} = 3.59; b = 2.44, SE = .26, t = 9.27, p < .001; 95\% CI = 1.92, 2.96$ ) comparison. However, this effect was not significant for slacktivism (vs. activism absent) ( $p = .32$ ). For conservatives, brand-value identification was lower in both the activism present (vs. absent) ( $M_{present} = 3.19$  vs.  $M_{absent} = 5.63; b = -2.45, SE = .29, t = -8.29, p < .001; 95\% CI = -3.02, -1.86$ ) and in the slacktivism (vs. absent) ( $M_{slack} = 4.19$  vs.  $M_{absent} = 5.63; b = -1.44, SE = .31, t = -4.72, p < .001; 95\% CI = -2.04, -.84$ ) contrasts.

*Moderated mediation.* We ran Process model 8 (5000 resamples) with brand activism as the predictor, political ideology as the moderating variable, brand attitudes as the dependent variable and composite scores for happiness, pride<sup>4</sup>, and brand-value identification as parallel mediators<sup>5</sup>. Mediation results showed that the indirect effect of activism-present (vs. absent) via pride and brand-value identification as parallel mediators was significant for both liberals (pride:  $b = .30, SE = .11, 95\% CI = .09, .52$ ; brand-value identification:  $b = 1.35, SE = .17, CI\% = 1.02, 1.69$ ) and conservatives (pride:  $b = -.27, SE = .11, 95\% CI = -.49, -.08$ ; brand-value identification:  $b = -1.35, SE = .18, 95\% CI = -1.71, -1.01$ ). However, the indirect effect of

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<sup>4</sup> Sadness, and gratitude were also included in the initial model but did not mediate the effects, replicating Study 2's results. For the sake of parsimony, they are thus not discussed further.

<sup>5</sup> Mediation with emotions and brand-value identification as serial mediators was also conducted but both, the indirect pathway from pride to brand-value identification and the reverse were significant indicating that the serial mediation is not theoretically sound.

slacktivism (vs. activism-absent) via pride and brand-value identification was significant only for conservatives (pride:  $b = -.23$ ,  $SE = .09$ , 95%  $CI = -.42, -.06$ ; brand-value identification:  $b = -.80$ ,  $SE = .18$ , 95%  $CI = -1.16, -.47$ ), and not for liberals (pride:  $b = -.06$ ,  $SE = .05$ , 95%  $CI = -.17, .01$ ; brand-value identification:  $b = -.14$ ,  $SE = .15$ , 95%  $CI = -.45, .15$ ). This shows that conservatives experienced more pride and greater brand-value identification which resulted in more favorable brand responses when the brand did not engage in activism (vs. activism present and slacktivism conditions). However, liberals experienced higher levels of pride and brand-value identification, and hence more favorable brand responses when the brand engaged in activism (vs. absent), with the difference being non-significant when the brand engaged in slacktivism (vs. absent). Full mediation results are provided in Tables 7-8.

*Discussion.* This study built on our findings from Studies 1 and 2. Importantly, it confirmed that when a brand engaged in merely lip-service with regards to a controversial socio-political issue ('slacktivism'), both conservative and liberal consumers were more likely to penalize the brand compared to when the brand chose to either clearly engage or not engage with the issue. Further, we provided greater clarity regarding the underlying drivers of this phenomenon. Specifically, we found both affective pride (but not happiness) and cognitive routes to be significant explanators for the interactive effect of political ideology and brand activism on consumer response.

## **GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The current research examines the influence of political ideology on consumer response toward a brand engaging in brand activism. Our findings reveal that while liberal (vs. conservative) consumers had more positive brand attitudes (and higher WTP) for a brand

engaging in brand activism compared to when it was silent on the issues (Study 1), this effect depended on the issue type (pro-liberal vs. pro-conservative) such that when the issue was pro-conservative, conservative (vs. liberal) consumers were more likely to respond favorably towards the brand (Study 2). Findings from these studies also showed that general attitudes toward activism were conditional on the issue being supported such that liberals (vs. conservatives) reported more positive attitudes toward brand activism when the issue was liberal (vs. pro-conservative or control). We also examined the role of perceived authenticity of brand activism and found that engaging in inauthentic activism or slacktivism, is poorly received by both conservatives and liberals. Conservatives view it as they do brand activism while liberals view it as not doing anything at all (Study 3). Importantly, we show that both affective and cognitive factors mediate the effect of the interaction between political ideology and brand activism on brand attitudes and WTP. In particular, we find that the positive emotion of happiness instead of negative emotions (e.g., anger, sadness) that are typically focused on in consumers' negative brand experiences, mediates the effect (Study 1). Further, we show that pride (but not gratitude), in addition to happiness, is a significant mediator in this context (Study 2). Finally, we establish that when both cognitive and affective routes are accounted for, pride (affective) and brand-value identification (cognitive) act as parallel (and not serial) mediators of the interactive effect (Study 3).

### **Theoretical Implications**

While past work has looked at how consumers react to brand activism (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020), our research is one of the first to examine consumer response to this issue through the lens of political ideology. In doing so, we advance existing knowledge in two important ways. One, we contribute to brand activism and political ideology literatures by further

elucidating the far-reaching consequences of political ideology in the marketplace and highlighting that consumer attitudes towards activism for both liberals and conservatives is conditional on whether that activism is pro-liberal or pro-conservative. Importantly, we contribute to the emerging literature on brand activism by demonstrating the pitfalls of brands engaging in slacktivism, which is more harmful than the brand staying silent on the issue. Second, we establish key moderators such as issue type and brand activism authenticity while also establishing the dual (affective and cognitive) drivers of this phenomenon. We not only establish pride and brand value identification as parallel mediators, but also rule out negative emotions such as anger and sadness, as potential predictors of these effects. This is especially important given that prior research has focused on negative emotions to explain consumer response to negative brand experiences.

### **Managerial Implications**

Our research highlights several substantive implications for brands as well as consumers. While brands can ensure a more favorable response from consumers by engaging in activism based on the types of issues their target consumer supports (pro-liberal or pro-conservative); for example, brands targeting liberal consumers might want to support an issue that liberals view more favorably (e.g., BLM). However, brands need to first make sure that they are committed to the issue and that it reflects in their policies, not just in their marketing. This is because if brands are perceived as simply paying lip-service to an issue, it can backfire and hurt the brand more than if they did not engage in activism at all. Similarly, by understanding their own political leanings, consumers might be able to closely align with different brands and better understand their response to the increasing involvement of brands with socio-political issues in the society.

### **Limitations and Future Research**



One of the limitations of the current research is that we measure political ideology. Future research can consider whether manipulating political ideology in a lab or field setting could be feasible, especially in populations where consumers might not have very polarized or partisan views. This would lend greater internal validity to the findings. Additionally, the scenarios we use to manipulate brand activism are better suited for US participants and might not be directly generalizable to other countries or populations. Future research can address this by utilizing issues with greater global relevance such as climate change. Further, future research can explore how other factors (e.g., culture) might affect consumers response to brand activism. Finally, while our work clearly highlights the potential drawbacks of brands engaging in slacktivism, more work needs to be done to improve our understanding of other factors that might influence consumer response toward brands engaging various forms of activism. For example, it will be valuable to examine why and when people perceive brand interventions in socio-political issues as authentic versus inauthentic.

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## FIGURE CAPTIONS

**Figure 1.** Liberals (vs. conservatives) reported more positive attitudes when the brand engaged in activism (vs. not)

**Figure 2.** Liberals (vs. conservatives) had more positive general attitudes in the activism present condition but this difference got attenuated in the activism absent condition

**Figure 3.** Liberals (vs. conservatives) reported more positive attitudes in the pro-liberal activism (vs. pro-conservative activism and control) condition

**Figure 4.** Liberals (vs. conservatives) indicated more positive general attitudes in the pro-liberal activism and control (vs. pro-conservative activism) conditions

**Figure 5.** Liberals reported more positive attitudes in the activism-present (vs. absent) condition which reversed in the slacktivism (vs. absent) condition, while conservatives had less positive attitudes in the activism-present (vs. absent) as well as in the slacktivism (vs. absent) conditions

**Figure 6.** Liberals reported greater brand-value identification in the activism-present (vs. absent) condition which reversed in the slacktivism (vs. absent) condition, while conservatives had lower brand-value identification in the activism-present (vs. absent) as well as in the slacktivism (vs. absent) conditions