

Impact Case Study

Brand Activism

Introduction



In 2018, Nike released its 'Dream Crazy' advertisement featuring Colin Kaepernick, the American footballer who knelt during the US National Anthem in protest of racial injustice and police brutality. Kaepernick's inclusion and the ad's tagline – "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything" – were controversial and public reaction to the ad campaign was deeply divided. Some people called for a boycott of Nike's products.

Background



Dr Amanda Spry, Senior Lecturer in Marketing, and member of the Centre for Organisations and Social Change (COSC), was fascinated by the campaign, which was notably different from other socially oriented marketing activities at the time, and its consequences.

"Nike are arguably as much in the business of marketing as they are sporting apparel, and this ad was polarising in a way that we do not see with traditionally favoured Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) marketing," says Dr Spry. "This made the ad a high-risk, high-reward marketing move for Nike."

Intrigued by the risky strategy and what Nike's motivations were in creating it, Dr Spry, with a team of academics, began to research the strategies of 'brand activism'.

The Research



The Brand Activism project was motivated by questions of how genuine Nike was in taking a stance on the very partisan issue of athletes kneeling during the anthem, and what the company was doing behind the scenes to advance racial equality.

The key questions the project aimed to understand were:

- What is brand activism and how is it different to traditional socially-oriented marketing efforts to date?
- How can we distinguish authentic brand activism (where a brand's actions, purpose and values back up its messaging on a partisan issue) from woke washing (where a brand is virtue signalling by promoting themselves as being concerned with issues of social justice but fails to establish a record of accompanying practice, purpose and values)?
- What are the brand and social outcomes of brand activism?

Overview of the impact



This project built awareness and understanding of brand activism as an emergent strategy, and examined how media and industry activities achieved effective reach beyond academia to external stakeholders. This created new opportunities for activities that facilitate impact.

For example, the Starburst Insights Industry Event was attended by researchers, insights specialists, marketers and key decision-makers from a variety of organisations including MECCA, Carman's, Nandos, Who Gives A Crap, Sportsbet, NAB, and the Department of Transport & Planning (VIC). The topic resonated strongly with attendees, stimulating valuable discussions and the desire for further research collaborations.



After the initial research was completed, Dr Spry and her research team continued to investigate and communicate issues surrounding brand activism, including:

- introducing a new process called ‘transformative branding’ to show how branding can drive positive market and societal level change (and so pursuing both business and social goals)
- examining how firms enact business-to-business (B2B) brand activism within their supply chains by taking actions in relation to channel partners (e.g., firing professional services agencies, ceasing advertising spending with media outlets) based on the firm’s avowed purpose and values
- investigating how brand activism is being adopted in the not-for-profit sector and how donors respond.

Project outcomes



Reports

- *Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing?*

The Journal of Public Policy & Marketing recognised this as the most cited paper of 2022

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0743915620947359>

- *Transformative Branding: A Dynamic Capability To Challenge The Dominant Social Paradigm.*
The Journal of Macromarketing recognised this paper as the 5th most cited in 2022.
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/02761467211043074>
- *Strategic B2B brand activism: Building conscientious purpose for social impact*
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0019850122002176>
- *From warmth to warrior: impacts of non-profit brand activism on brand bravery, brand hypocrisy and brand equity*
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41262-023-00319-8>

Media

The Conversation

- <https://theconversation.com/au>
- Woke washing: what happens when marketing communications don’t match corporate practice.
- Brand activism is moving up the supply chain — corporate accountability or commercial censorship?
- Consumers are wise to ‘woke washing’ – but truly ‘transformative branding’ can still make a difference.

- When charities engage in ‘brand activism’, research shows they must demonstrate bravery to attract donations.
- Should businesses consult shareholders before taking a stand on social issues?

Other media

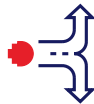
- ANALYSIS - Rebranding calls are getting louder, Ads News, Amanda Spry and Jessica Vredenburg, 27 January 2021.

Dr Spry also provided brand activism commentary with ABC Breakfast Radio, Channel 10 News, Nine News, SBS News, Financial Times, B&T, Sydney Morning Herald, Joy Drive Radio Show, and the Herald Sun.

Presentations

Dr Spry presented *Taking a stand: Brands as activists and agents of change* at the Starburst Insights Industry Event in Melbourne in 2022.

Next Steps



Dr Spry says that “we continue to build and disseminate knowledge of brand activism by exploring new partnerships, grants, journal articles and a book. We hope to collaborate with external stakeholders to better understand the barriers to implementing brand activism and transformative branding as well as the solutions they enact, by learning from – and with – those at the coalface of these strategies.”

She adds, “Pressing questions also exist around the dark sides of brand activism, and a new project to investigate unintended consequences, such as marketplace exclusion and risks to consumer wellbeing, is underway.”

COSC Research Theme

This work falls outside a specific COSC research theme but it examines how transformative social change can be advanced through organisations for the inclusion and wellbeing of all.