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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A lifecycle perspective of brand activism: emergence, evolution and renewal

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Abstract

Over the past decade, brand activism has risen to prominence, catalysed by Nike's 'Dream Crazy' campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick, which was a watershed moment in brands' engagement with sociopolitical issues. As the practice moved from fringe to mainstream in the marketplace, its meaning and capacity to function as an authentic point-of-difference and driver of transformation have been debated at length. Brand activism research has developed robustly, including Daniel Korschun's influential scholarship and editorial leadership, which foregrounded marketing's role in political engagement. Key themes include definitional foundations, authenticity, consumer factors (e.g., political identity), and firm factors (e.g., financial performance). This body of work has become substantive enough to warrant significant consolidation and mapping studies. What is missing, however, is a processual perspective that would provide theorisation of how the field has grown, diffused and matured, and at times, lost force. Accordingly, we advance a lifecycle perspective of brand activism, mapping scholarship across several stages: emergence; contestation; normalisation; and backlash. Post-backlash, we conceive three possible pathways forward for the field: plateau, decline and renewal. We conclude by outlining a future research agenda, envisioning a hopeful and resilient renewal of brand activism.

Keywords Brand activism · Lifecycle perspective · Corporate political activism · Social change · Backlash

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1 Introduction

Brand activism has proliferated in the past decade, both in scholarship and implementation as a marketing strategy. The confluence of global permacrisis (Anisimova et al., 2025), public polarisation (Braga et al., 2024) and crowded marketplaces (Vredenburg et al., 2020) has paved the way for brands to become political actors to convey a moral stance, carve out a differentiated position or both (Korschun et al., 2020). From Nike's 'Dream Crazy' campaign and Gillette's 'The Best Men Can Be' campaigns, which served as catalytic exemplars, to the more recent rollback of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programs in the United States, brand activism has moved from the margins to the mainstream in academic and managerial spheres.

A significant body of scholarship has developed around corporate political activism (Korschun et al., 2019), particularly brand activism. What constitutes brand activism has been expanded, diversified and contested over time (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023; Kapitan et al., 2022; Kumar et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2024; Mirzaei et al., 2022). The establishment of construct domain and clear delineation from related concepts (e.g., CSR; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020) evolved alongside themes of authenticity (Ahmad et al., 2022; Mirzaei et al., 2022); transformative potential (Moorman, 2020); critique (Rhodes, 2022; Sobande, 2019); controversy (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020); opposition (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022); consumers' identities (Garg & Saluja, 2022; Hydock et al., 2020); firm performance (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020); and new approaches (Spry et al., 2026). Rather than appearing fully formed, brand activism has taken shape through successive meanings, practices and outcomes, and these patterns invite closer attention to this flourishing field, as well as to the future of this strategy.

Numerous studies have already been published to consolidate and map the terrain of the field including systematic literature reviews (Cammarota et al., 2023) and integrative frameworks (Pimentel et al., 2024). What is missing is a processual framework of the brand activism field. Limited reflexive attention has been paid to how the field itself has grown and diffused (and at times, lost force or been re-politicised), where it currently stands and how it might progress, especially in light of global social, political and economic conditions and their implications for marketing practice and consumer culture. While inflection points in the brand activism field's evolution have been studied on their own, they have not been assembled, making it difficult to explain shifts in how brand activism has been conceived, enacted and challenged. It also means there is an absence of a framework to situate new studies on brand activism within the broader trajectory.

Against this background, we advance a lifecycle perspective of brand activism. Specifically, we conceptualise brand activism as a field of practice and scholarship (recognising that these co-evolve reciprocally) that moves through phases of emergence; contestation; normalisation; and backlash, which reflect distinct dominant characteristics, theories, exemplars and concerns. It furthermore highlights points of both transition and significant inflection rather than assuming linear progress or decline. We employ and blend informed frameworking (Heinonen & Gruen, 2024); revising, delineating and integrating (MacInnis, 2011); and theory synthesis (Jaakkola, 2020) as the conceptual methodology. This type of conceptual work permits

theory development in the spirit of this special issue and the vision and innovation that Daniel Korschun brought to his research – including on corporate activism. Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to bring a new lens and adopt a lifecycle view of brand activism. The current reality is that brand activism seems to be reaching maturity, facing three possible post-backlash pathways (plateau, decline and renewal), and we conclude the paper envisioning a hopeful and resilient renewal of brand activism. We outline the key contributions below.

First, the brand activism lifecycle lends historical sensitivity to the field, by organising assumptions, ideas and practices to show how these have emerged and evolved in response to social, political and cultural factors as well as the state of academic research. Although the stages may co-exist and overlap, the framework anchors the lifecycle of brand activism by situating conceptualisation and implementation across the field, to create coherence. Second, this paper represents a reflexive exercise about the brand activism field itself. Plotting a lifecycle encourages high-level reflection on how the academic field has been shaped by not only empirical results, but also rigorous (re)conceptualisation and theoretical foundations, as well as wider macro-social contexts and institutional incentives. Finally, a lifecycle crucially provides a platform for persuasive calls to reorient, extend or transform brand activism as a field, especially when it is at a crossroads with both renewal and decline being likely pathways forward.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we briefly outline the conceptual methodology employed before mapping each phase of the brand activism lifecycle. The current, post-backlash phase of the lifecycle identifies three distinct possible futures for brand activism, which we present as a detailed future research agenda. The paper closes with a general discussion of research implications.

2 Conceptual methodology

We adopted a conceptual approach aligned with the seminal methodological works of Heinonen and Gruen (2024), MacInnis (2011) and Jaakkola (2020). Alongside these, we utilised prior conceptual studies to inform the design, development and evaluation of our conceptual methodology and resulting framework (e.g., Burgess et al., 2023; Yap & Lim, 2024). First, utilising an informed frameworking mode of theorising (Heinonen & Gruen, 2024), we sought to develop new, structured conceptual frameworks through selective but insightful integration of prior work. This was deemed feasible owing to the substantial body of brand activism scholarship, while also supporting the aim of developing a new model (i.e., a lifecycle perspective). Rather than deriving categories a priori, an iterative and abductive process was followed, moving between two sources of knowledge (i.e., literature and illustrative exemplars) and the emergent conceptual framework (Jaakkola, 2020). We drew from a broad range of literature including brand activism (e.g., Malik et al., 2025; Vredenburg et al., 2020) and adjacent streams that provided complementary perspectives on how activist efforts emerge, evolve and are evaluated, detailed below.

The review and synthesis of literature was guided by the 3Es of Exposure, Expertise and Experience (Kraus et al., 2022). In practice, Exposure informed the breadth

of literatures considered, including research on brand activism (e.g., Mirzaei et al., 2022; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020), CSR and political CSR (Carroll, 1999; Wettstein & Baur, 2016), sociopolitical issues and movements (e.g., Saldanha et al., 2023), and legitimacy and moral evaluation (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Suchman, 1995). Expertise guided the selection and interpretation of key contributions within each domain (e.g., prioritising foundational and theoretically influential studies), while Experience shaped the integrative synthesis of insights across literature streams through a structured process of identifying unique contributions as well as comparing and aggregating recurring patterns both within and across literature streams. Here, brand activism literature largely provided insights into how firms engage with brand activism and their strategic positioning (Malik et al., 2025; Vredenburg et al., 2020). CSR and political CSR informed normative and institutional pressures on firm behaviour (Bhagwat et al., 2020); sociopolitical movements characterised how an issue emerges, escalates and diffuses (Saldanha et al., 2023); and legitimacy indicated how stakeholders evaluate firms through acceptance, endorsement and backlash (Bitektine & Haack, 2015).

These insights were first analysed within streams and then compared across streams to identify higher-order commonalities and achieve parsimony. Through this iterative comparison, three broad categories of recurring patterns were identified: (1) issue trajectory patterns (e.g., emergence, amplification, mainstreaming), (2) firm engagement patterns (e.g., reactive, strategic, performative, embedded), and (3) stakeholder evaluation patterns (e.g., scrutiny, acceptance, legitimacy, backlash). A methodological overview of the literature streams used, and the abstraction process can be viewed in Appendix 1. Ongoing discussion and comparison amongst the author team enabled the refinement, challenging and validation of these patterns. These pattern categories in turn were abstracted into two dimensions that captured key themes, tensions and transitions within the brand activism field: (1) diffusion and (2) acceptance. These form the two axes of the brand activism lifecycle presented in the next section.

Here, the diffusion axis does not denote discrete chronological periods or years, but rather captures the extent to which brand activism, as a field and practice, diffuses across organisational, market and societal actors. This reflects the widening visibility, circulation and uptake of brand activism within both scholarship and practice, while acknowledging the time lag between academia and practice. This dimension was informed by the sociopolitical movement literature, which consistently emphasises trajectories of issue emergence, amplification and saturation, and was reinforced by brand activism scholarship documenting increasing firm engagement as issues gain visibility. The second axis captures acceptance, which is informed by audience judgements of legitimacy and captures the broader extent to which brand activism is tolerated, supported or expected amongst relevant stakeholders and society. This dimension was primarily derived from legitimacy, brand activism and CSR literatures, which emphasise how firm actions are evaluated by stakeholders and institutions, ranging from scrutiny to endorsement, as well as potential backlash or contestation when expectations are violated or perceived as inauthentic.

Lifecycle stages were subsequently constructed by identifying distinct and stable configurations of diffusion and acceptance. A configuration was classified as a stage when it exhibited a consistent combination of: (1) level of brand activism dif-

fusion, (2) degree of societal acceptance, (3) dominant actor role (e.g., activist-led, firm-led, or institutionally driven), and (4) prevailing evaluative logic (e.g., scrutiny, endorsement, backlash). These criteria ensured that stages were not defined solely by position on the axes, but by coherent patterns of behaviour and evaluation observed across literature streams. Transition points between stages were identified where shifts occurred in either diffusion (e.g., an issue moving from niche to mainstream visibility) or acceptance (e.g., a shift in audience judgements of legitimacy from initial awareness to sophisticated critique), resulting in a reconfiguration of firm roles, stakeholder expectations and evaluative logics. This fulfilled the conceptual goals of this paper to *revise* static conceptions of brand activism by adopting a dynamic lens; to *delineate* key lifecycle stages and the inflection points that connect these; and to *integrate* studies of these movements into a unified framework (MacInnis, 2011). Ultimately, this theory synthesis (Jaakkola, 2020) led to the development of the lifecycle framework – allowing for a new view of the brand activism field that is built around diffusion and acceptance. In the next section, we present the stages of the brand activism lifecycle (see Fig. 1).

3 The brand activism lifecycle

Overall, we position the framework as mapping the broader development trajectory of the field of brand activism. As such, each of the stages unpacks the defining elements, contextual drivers, prevailing theories, and key examples within the scholarly literature and the managerial implementation. For conceptual clarity, the stages are analytically distinguished but, in practice, the evolution of brand activism likely involves overlap and recursion rather than being linear and one-directional.

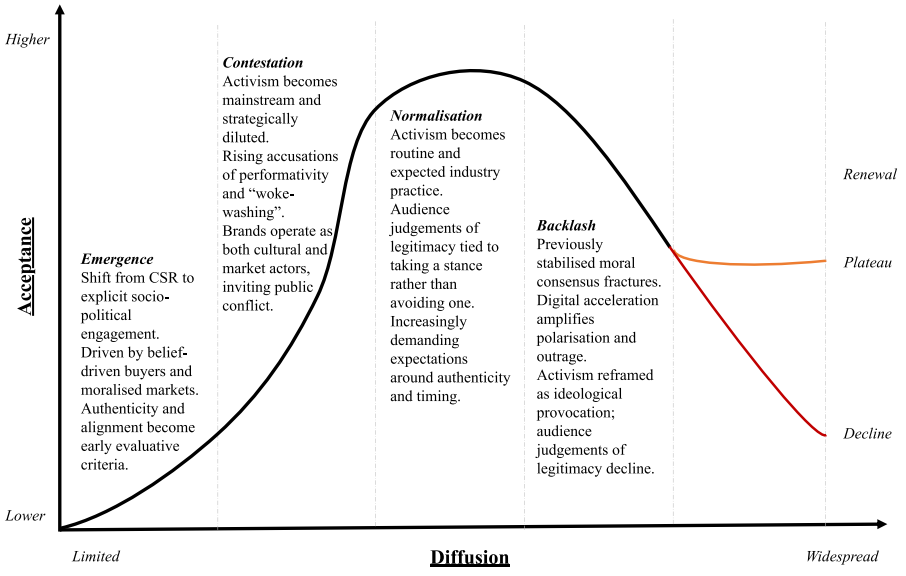


Fig. 1 The brand activism lifecycle

Moreover, later stages do not discretely replace earlier ones. For example, Blackout Tuesday, which we identify as a landmark brand activism event, shows contestation co-occurring with early mainstreaming of brand activism. We depict normalisation of brand activism as occurring after contestation, though acknowledge normalisation can itself intensify contestation rather than resolve it by provoking resistance and backlash from actors who perceive brand activism as a cultural or ideological threat.

3.1 Emergence

Overall, this period marked a fundamental reorientation of the marketing–society relationship, as corporations came to be judged not only by economic performance or CSR efforts, but by their willingness to take principled stands on divisive issues (Korschun et al., 2019). This was a departure from traditional CSR, which focused on philanthropy, compliance and reputation management (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020), and repositioned brands as cultural and political actors, with consumers expecting transparency about companies' values and moral commitments (Moorman, 2020). Sarkar and Kotler (2018) were one of the first to formally define brand activism, as corporate efforts to influence social, political, economic, or environmental change. Their framework captured a move beyond purpose-driven marketing toward direct engagement with politically charged, value-laden debates. A key feature is the visibility of companies publicly pledging support or opposition to specific causes through activist-style tactics such as solidarity statements, issue-focused campaigns, public pledges, and partnerships with advocacy groups. These practices blurred the line between corporate communication and social movements, enabling brands to newly shape public discourse and mobilise stakeholders.

Brand activism emerged from converging marketplace, political and cultural forces rather than a sudden strategic choice (Korschun, 2021). Rising political polarisation, the visibility of social movements through digital media and declining trust in governments and institutions reshaped expectations about who should address societal problems. From the mid-2010s onward, movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), climate crisis, LGBTQIA+ rights, immigration rights, and gender equality placed growing pressure on brands to articulate values and demonstrate leadership, positioning companies as alternative moral authorities with the capacity to drive change (Korschun et al., 2020). Industry insights were pivotal in revealing and quantifying this shift. Edelman's, 2017 Earned Brand study identified the "belief-driven buyer," who increasingly rewarded or punished brands based on sociopolitical stances. Accenture's 2018 Global Consumer Pulse further showed that expectations for corporate engagement on issues of sustainability, equity and transparency were widespread, especially among younger consumers, signalling a mainstream "values revolution". Collectively, these insights revealed a structural realignment: moral and political alignment became central to brand legitimacy and competitiveness, making activism an embedded feature of the marketplace rather than a symbolic marketing add-on (Korschun et al., 2020).

Several landmark events crystallised brand activism by illustrating both its strategic potential and political risk. Patagonia became a benchmark of authentic activism through consistent alignment between values, operations and advocacy, notably

suing the U.S. government in 2017 over national monument reductions after famously challenging consumerism through its 2011 "Don't Buy This Jacket" campaign, positioning the brand as an environmental actor that prioritised principles over profit. Ben & Jerry's embedded activism relating to racial justice, climate action and fair trade into its organisational structure, products and communications. Its sustained, overtly political stance showed how activism can function as core to the brand identity rather than a periodic promotional tactic. Perhaps most notably, Nike's 2018 "Dream Crazy" campaign marked brand activism's entry into global commercial consciousness. By featuring Colin Kaepernick, who had become a polarising figure for kneeling during the U.S. national anthem to protest police brutality, Nike made an unambiguous political statement about racial injustice. These cases collectively revealed early defining dynamics, including heightened cultural influence, significant political risk, and the possibility of market reward when activism aligns with brand identity and audience expectations.

Early theorisation co-evolved with landmark events echoing the rhetoric of brand activism being a high risk, high reward strategy. A central concern was reputational backlash, especially in a polarised environment: firms taking positions misaligned with their investor or customer base could face negative market reactions, stock volatility or boycotts (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Another risk is the perception of hypocrisy, particularly when consumers detected misaligned brand messaging and practice ("woke-washing"), undermining trust and moral legitimacy (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Structural market risks also became apparent. Activism could benefit challenger or niche brands by differentiating them but posed greater danger for mass-market firms, who faced higher exposure to audience alienation (Hydock et al., 2020). Early research on brand activism was shaped by several theories and concepts. Influential perspectives came from authenticity (Beverland, 2005; Holt, 2002) and brand–cause alignment theory (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006) which emphasised that public responses to corporate activism would depend on the perceived consistency between a brand's rhetoric and its internal practices. Vredenburg et al. (2020) originally conceptualised activism along a spectrum from genuine, value-driven engagement to superficial "woke-washing," establishing alignment of message, practice, purpose, and values as the central criterion for authenticity. Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 2010) and political CSR (Wettstein & Baur, 2016) framed activism as part of a broader evolution of firms' responsibilities. Companies were understood not only as economic actors, but as emergent political agents expected to participate in public deliberation and take moral stances (Korschun & Smith, 2018). This lens helped scholars articulate why stakeholders increasingly demanded visible corporate engagement with non-commercial issues.

Signalling theory (Spence, 1978) also informed financial and reputational consequences of brand activism. Researchers such as Bhagwat et al. (2020) treated activism as a signal conveying information about a firm's values, leadership or strategic direction. This, along with social identity and self–brand congruence (Sirgy, 1986; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) theories, explained observed marketplace patterns, showing that consumer responses depend not only on how closely a brand's stance aligns with their personal values, but also on how well that stance fits the brand's established identity. Together, these theoretical frameworks offered the conceptual foundation

for rooting brand activism simultaneously in moral legitimacy, political responsibility, strategic signalling, and identity-driven consumer judgment. However, as brand activism moved from early exploration, it increasingly encountered divergent stakeholder reactions, setting the stage for contestation.

3.2 Contestation

The question of whether brands can and do adopt activism was normatively reframed to instead ask whether brands *should* act politically. As a nonmarket strategy that entails political and social leverage (e.g., Guha & Korschun, 2024), the audience for brand activism extends beyond politicians and regulators to employees, consumers and the public at large. Owing to a capitalist vehicle such as a brand or corporation being employed for purposes that are originally the remit of public institutions (Rhodes, 2022), critical perspectives questioned the "branding of brand activism" whereby pledges of allyship represent efforts towards reputational management rather than social justice (Sobande, 2021).

Interrogation of motives and authenticity grew alongside the knowledge and sophistication consumers brought to evaluations of brand activism. Authenticity went beyond alignment of messaging and practice, and criteria became multi-faceted – for instance, including social context independence, inclusion, sacrifice, practice, fit, and motivation (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Work around the role of corporations in social and political arenas also emerged. Brand activism was conceived as "free speech boundary work" (Sibai et al., 2021) whereby market actors negotiate to construct, challenge and revise the parameters of acceptable speech and actions by brands, the authenticity of which is judged by the brand's moral competency. The uptick in brand activism, albeit heavily contested, pushed the field towards the first signs of strategic dilution. Where brand activism had been treated as a meaningful point-of-difference (Vredenburg et al., 2020), it was quickly moving to a point-of-parity where social causes were at risk of being flattened or commodified (Sobande, 2019).

Several contextual forces were at play to take brand activism from a novel "solution" to contested terrain. Social media platforms, while not the cause for contestation, provide a network and infrastructure for publicly opining and debating brand activism (Sibai et al., 2021), where consumer responses can be unpredictable (Guha & Korschun, 2024) and uncivil (Batista et al., 2022). Brands were operating as agents in ideological struggles against the background of a culture war, in which socially conservative and progressive factions are pitted against each other (Peattie, 2024). Political expression had become a feature of the marketplace, reproducing and entrenching the polarisation in the public at large (Weber et al., 2021). Contestation was driven by early evidence of backlash (e.g., Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020) and counter-movements (e.g., Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022).

Several notable theories and concepts informed critique. Brand activism became influenced by cultural branding theory (e.g., Holt, 2002), alongside acknowledgement that brands were operating in the dual roles of cultural actor and market players (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023). Tenets of stakeholder theory remained implicit as brands moved into contested socio-cultural domains where different stakeholder groups have conflicting expectations. Institutional theory, including specific con-

cepts of legitimacy and institutional work, provided necessary logics and language to grapple with normative boundaries and appropriate actions (Burgess et al., 2023; Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Kapitan et al., 2022). Moral foundations theory also appeared to explain how moral tensions can be activated when a brand violates shared moral expectations (Lee et al., 2024; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Overall, while strategic brand management perspectives persisted, brand activism was increasingly viewed and critiqued through the lens of consumer culture and critical organisational theories (e.g., Rhodes, 2022; Sibai et al., 2021).

Blackout Tuesday in June 2020, when thousands of brands joined individuals in posting a single black tile on Instagram to signal solidarity with the BLM social movement, is an inflection-point case of contestation. As a brand activism event, Blackout Tuesday was unprecedented in scale, but it was largely reduced to slacktivism. For scholars, practitioners and the everyday consumer, it raised questions about the political efficacy of brand activism, especially once it became widely known that algorithmic models were burying important information about the BLM social movement under high-arousal content. This was not dissimilar to the flood of #MeToo corporate statements of so-called support for women and survivors of sexual assault and sexual harassment, often while their own internal cultures perpetrated these very problems. These examples spotlight the disagreement over the appropriateness, authenticity and effectiveness of brands' participation in these movements, despite the widespread adoption of brand activism. Parallel academic studies were pivotal in activating tensions around brand activism and how it represents capitalism creeping into democratic life (Rhodes, 2022) and it flattens political complexity in promotional messaging (Sobande, 2019). Deeper theorisation of authenticity and its diagnostic attributes (e.g., Mirzaei et al., 2022) equally became an emphasis.

Brand activism had always been regarded as a risky strategy (e.g., Bhagwat et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020), but in this stage, cancel culture and other counter-discourses erupted as mechanisms of marketplace policing. Thus a paradox emerged where brands were expected to adopt stances on partisan issues, while at the same time ensuring not to offend or outrage segments of their target market who may object to the brands' stance or to brands becoming political in the first place (Saldanha et al., 2023). Pöyry and Laaksonen (2022) elucidate "socio-political anti-brand activism", which captures consumers' contestation of brand activism, exhibiting how consumers that are alienated by a cause might consequently target the brand with criticism and hostility. Beyond critiques of individual or isolated brand missteps, market actor engagement with political issues has been called nothing more than the cultivation of "a conflict market" - using algorithmic logic and capitalist vehicles for monetisation purposes (Ulver, 2022). Rhodes (2022) further cautions that "woke capitalism" extends the power and reach of capitalism in problematic ways, while Sobande (2021) conveys sustained cynicism for brand activism's intent. Ongoing contestation gave way to normalisation, as brands and stakeholders attempted to stabilise and codify activist practices.

3.3 Normalisation

This stage is marked by normalisation, in which brand activism diffused from a small group of early adopters to a broad range of organisations, with normative pressure increasingly becoming the primary driver of adoption, such that taking a sociopolitical stance became a standard corporate expectation rather than a strategic differentiator (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). Critically, this field-level normalisation did not mean that activism was uniformly endorsed across stakeholder groups; it remained contested among certain audiences even as it became routine practice at the corporate level. Rather, normalisation refers to the increasing familiarity and mainstream presence of brand activism. This period followed the wave of corporate responses to the racial justice movements of 2020, shifting away from previous periods where taking a stance was considered risky (Moorman, 2020) and controversial (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Hence, brand activism became a core corporate strategy, with risks for organisations if they remained silent or neutral on topical partisan debates rather than taking a stand. Consequently, the distinctiveness and benefits previously afforded to brands that took an early stance may have declined for later adopters (Burgess et al., 2023; Silver et al., 2021). Earlier work in brand activism predominantly focused on brands supporting a sociopolitical issue through external messaging (e.g., social media posts; Biraghi et al., 2020), whereas this normalisation phase saw a heightened expectation of substantive organisational action and alignment between stated commitments and internal practices (Bakhtiari, 2022; Korschun, 2021).

Around this time, practices that may have initially been interpreted as polarising began to intersect more closely with consumers' expectations (Bakhtiari, 2022). Consumers, employees, investors and other stakeholders increasingly used brand activism to understand the brand's values and intentions (Korschun, 2021). This highlighted the growing attention towards the alignment of the brand's internal practices and its external messaging (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Sansome et al., 2024). A landmark shift was the rise of the "Pull Up or Shut Up" movement, as brands that spoke against racial injustice were expected to disclose data on the representation of BIPOC employees, particularly in leadership roles. As Korschun (2021) noted, when brands take public stands, they inevitably invite more scrutiny of their internal procedures, making alignment between stated values and internal practices a critical evaluation piece for consumers.

As proposed in earlier studies drawing upon institutional theory, practices that were initially contested became normalised and integrated into routine activity as they diffused throughout the marketplace (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020). The swift rise in brands taking up sociopolitical positions contributed to the normalisation of activism, transforming it from an expression of ideological risk to a normative feature of the marketing environment (Kapitan et al., 2022). Klostermann et al. (2022) show that consumer reactions became less volatile when multiple brands adopt similar stances, illustrating how the perceived risks of activism diminish as it becomes normalised. Thus, what was previously viewed as a calculated risk (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Moorman, 2020), became a routine component of corporate practice.

As brand activism became normalised, it shifted from a source of competitive differentiation (Vredenburg et al., 2020) to a prerequisite for maintaining stakeholder legitimacy (Kapitan et al., 2022). This shift is reflected in the literature, which moved from debating whether brands should engage in activism (e.g., Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020) to examining how activism is enacted and communicated. Studies explored the effectiveness of different communication strategies, such as sarcasm (Batista et al., 2022) and co-branding (Smith et al., 2021), as well as the role of social media monitoring in assessing both activist approaches and the risks of action versus silence (Guha & Korschun, 2024). Research also expanded beyond advertising to include financial commitments to social causes (Ahmad et al., 2022) and internal practices such as employee wellbeing (Keränen & Olkkonen, 2022). These examples illustrate how the normalisation of activism reshaped not only expectations of whether to participate, but also how activism should be performed and evaluated.

Normalisation became evident across industries and geographies. Initiatives that had previously appeared revolutionary (e.g., racial justice, gender equity) became integrated into standard corporate practices. For instance, Sephora's campaigns celebrating Black history and the implementation of staff training on unconscious bias and cultural sensitivity no longer represented a significant departure from standard corporate expectations. Similarly, Nike's ongoing advocacy for racial justice, which initially prompted calls for boycotts, increasingly became recognised as a central aspect of its corporate identity. As more brands adopted diversity and inclusion practices, these measures became standardised across industries. This was also evident in Australia, where airlines such as Qantas introduced gender-neutral uniforms and the use of pronouns on name tags, reflecting changes that were rapidly becoming the norm across sectors.

This stage introduced new risks too. As fatigue with corporate expressions of sociopolitical activism increased, symbolic gestures such as temporary logo changes during Pride Month and vague or non-substantive diversity commitments became subject to greater scrutiny, particularly regarding whether brands' internal practices meaningfully aligned with their public positions (Wulf et al., 2022). Expectations for authenticity and transparency intensified, with consumers evaluating the brand's disclosure to assess the alignment between the sociopolitical stance that it espouses and its specific external and internal practices (Sansome et al., 2024). Consumers evaluated how proactive brands were in taking a stance and how transparently they communicated their support for or opposition to sociopolitical issues (Nam et al., 2023; Sansome et al., 2024). Additionally, practitioners and academics turned to understanding consumer variables that influence perception of and response to brand activism. Prior research demonstrates that differences in consumers' political ideologies (Garg & Saluja, 2022) and levels of brand identification significantly shape how activism efforts are interpreted and evaluated (Haupt et al., 2023). Thus, despite the normalisation of brand activism, considering these individual differences and intensifying societal polarisation (Korschun, 2021), meant that strong reactions and opposition to brand activism was not eliminated or reduced.

3.4 Backlash

The backlash stage marks an inflection point whereby conditions that enabled brand activism's normalisation became destabilised. Changes to political leadership, the co-optation of activist narratives by political actors and the intensification of socio-political discourse on digital platforms collectively renewed struggle around social causes (Demsar et al., 2023; Sands & Ferraro, 2025). Sociopolitical issues that had reached mainstream concern (though underlying inequalities remained unresolved e.g., environmental sustainability) were once again re-politicised, reverting to being partisan (Eichert & Luedicke, 2022). The moral legitimacy that once fortified brands was now regarded with suspicion: virtue was perceived as wokeness (Berthon et al., 2023), exacerbating fatigue and cynicism towards brand activism (Sibai et al., 2021).

In this stage, brand activism dialogue was reconfigured in online spaces due to utilisation of social media as the chief activist tool (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023). Social media platforms have the propensity to accelerate cycles of backlash to brand activism and amplify harmful perceptions of the brand's authenticity (Kumar et al., 2025). A culture of online outrage, organised boycotts and coordinated campaigns of disinformation have a pronounced capacity to turn acts of allyship into reputational crises for brands (Cohen et al., 2025; Demsar et al., 2023). Consequently, questioning and the erosion of moral legitimacy becomes characteristic of this phase of the brand activism lifecycle. While claims of opportunism, tokenism and performativity also surfaced in earlier stages, moralistic messaging that once signalled genuine conviction now appears hollow or self-serving, reflecting scepticism, the routinisation of activist expression and the reinterpretation amid rising counter-activism and conservative backlash (Birkner & Donk, 2020; Lizzi et al., 2025; Warren, 2022; Zhao et al., 2025).

Wider theoretical discussions from institutional theory and moral psychology underpin this stage of brand activism, particularly notions of backlash, re-politicisation and the perceptual reframing of moralised messages (Sands & Ferraro, 2025). Sociopolitical issues that were briefly considered mainstream are reconstituted through polarised ideological lenses, reflecting a process of re-politicisation (Ulver, 2022). Individuals frame moral messages through their partisan identities, whereby the same language can elicit positive sentiment in one group and outrage in another (Feinberg & Willer, 2015). For example, campaigns promoting gender inclusivity or racial equity have been reinterpreted within an anti-woke rhetoric, where social justice is redefined as political extremism (Warren, 2022). As sociopolitical issue alignment becomes normalised, the signalling effect of moral commitment is diminished. When every brand raises its hand to contribute to inclusivity or sustainability, messages lose potency and appeal. As formerly radical ideals become normalised and accepted, whether through corporate policy or public discourse, opposition is mobilised against perceived moral overreach, arguing that virtue has become coercive or elitist (Hashmi et al., 2025; Schmitt & McGuigan, 2025).

Theoretically, this stage triggered a re-examination of the conditions under which audience judgements of legitimacy are granted and withdrawn, challenging assumptions regarding the stability of normative consensus in brand activism scholarship. Here, brands face heightened risk as their corporate campaigns are interpreted as

ideological provocation rather than moral credence. Several landmark moments exemplify how presumed 'accepted' brand activism can be reinterpreted as contested political positioning. For example, Bud Light and Target's 2023 respective campaigns celebrating LGBTQIA+ visibility triggered politically conservative backlash and adverse economic effects for the brands (e.g., Gerrath et al., 2025). Campaigns seeking to advance DEI, especially in the U.S. states of Florida and Texas, illustrate how moral consensus can shatter under altered political conditions. In Australia, brands expressing support for the 2023 Indigenous Voice to Parliament referendum faced boycott threats and accusations of being disconnected from mainstream Australian sentiment. These instances demonstrate how quickly presumed "safe" brand activism can be reinterpreted as contested political positioning.

The salient dangers of backlash are twofold: a legitimacy crisis and moral fatigue. In a legitimacy crisis, stakeholders lose confidence in the genuineness and efficacy of brand activism, perceiving self-interest motivations and limited social benefit (Malik et al., 2025). This aligns with Suchman's (1995) statement of the fragility of moral legitimacy and Bitektine and Haack's (2015) discussion of its performative instability. When moral legitimacy wanes, authenticity is scrutinised more intensely and often doubted. Moral fatigue follows. Audiences tire of constant moral appeals and begin to withdraw from brand narratives of virtue (Brokalaki, 2025; Cherrier, 2007). Overexposure to moral messaging develops into scepticism and resentment, eroding the persuasive ability of brand activism in the marketplace of meaning (Vollero et al., 2020; Warren, 2022).

3.5 Post-backlash: reflection and renewal pathways

After the turbulence of backlash, brand activism faces a moral fork, where some stakeholders continue to recognise the significance of brand activism while others may oppose or resist this form of sociopolitical engagement, introducing fragmentation to the previously established patterns of brand activism acceptance and diffusion. Unlike prior stages, which trace a processual path of brand activism's development, here we outline a branching set of possible futures. We conceptualise three post-backlash pathways brand activism as a field could follow, whether circling backward into its origins, spiralling upward into renewal, or crashing under moral exhaustion. Here, the non-linearity of the field will be most evident. These pathways include: (1) *Plateau*: brand activism continues but stagnates, neither deepening nor collapsing but rather maintaining without moral advancement, (2) *Decline*: brand activism dissipates entirely as brands disengage amidst fatigue, fear or ideological fragmentation – marking the dissolution of activist commitments altogether, and (3) *Renewal*: brand activism is rebuilt in a period of recalibrating moral legitimacy through institutional reflexivity and adaptive learning and may be driven either by progressive imaginaries or by more conservative moral ideologies.

As these represent a branching set of possible futures, we have used examples to illustrate how the three pathways could manifest. A *plateau* could occur where brands maintain activism only by way of routine or predictable gestures as opposed to making substantive commitments or bold action. For example, Australian airline Qantas' expected participation in Mardi Gras 2026 would continue a traditional, highly

polished manner of participation that echoes its historical symbolic support for the LGBTQIA+ community but does not expand its commitments or take additional risks of activism. A *decline* could eventuate when brands disengage from activism commitments due to fatigue, fear or ideological fragmentation. Meta, Google and McDonald's illustrate this possibility, having each made significant cutbacks in their respective DEI programmes and public commitments following political and shareholder pressure in the U.S. In contrast, *renewal* represents an upward trajectory for a brand's engagement in activism. Several possible renewal avenues could manifest. First, 'purpose-aligned renewal' reflects brand commitment to its core social purpose, aligning internal structures and external actions accordingly, to strengthen brand activism efforts. For example, Ben and Jerry's recommits its corporate activism to align with justice-oriented advocacy, following the co-founder's 2025 resignation for a refusal to endorse Unilever's position regarding Palestine. Second, 'conservative renewal' illustrates a reorientation of activism toward more traditional social values. For instance, American Eagle's 2025 Good Genes campaign featuring actor Sydney Sweeney, emphasises traditional family values, aligning with right-leaning social norms. Lastly, 'unitive renewal' represents an attempt to bond stakeholders around shared social values, rather than aligning with polarising political positions. For instance, Dove's Real Beauty Redefined program of 2025, which challenges hegemonic beauty standards and advocates for inclusivity that transcends social and ideological divides. Together these examples elucidate how the plateau, decline and renewal trajectories could emerge from the reactions of brands to backlash.

Looking forward, the principal question pertains to institutional resilience – that is, the capacity of organisations to absorb moral shocks and emerge strengthened via adaptive legitimacy (Grimm et al., 2025). Prior work points to the conditions under which renewal becomes possible. Argyris and Schön (1978) provide foundations for understanding organisational learning as an iterative moral process, while Spry et al. (2021) speak to how renewal occurs through the coexistence and hybridisation of market-social logics. These perspectives highlight that renewal is neither automatic nor linear: it demands effortful engagement with moral plurality and institutional reflexivity (Harriott, 2025). Organisational learning, moral recalibration and the reconstruction of audience judgements of legitimacy, towards acceptance, would move brand activism toward renewal, rather than plateau or decline trajectories. Instead of retreating from backlash or continuing unchanged, brands must regard the backlash itself as a form of moral feedback of disconnection, overreach or superficiality taking place. In trending toward renewal, the focus is on learning from past mistakes and taking accountability for tensions that divided audiences, and as a means of restoring unity and trust (Demsar et al., 2023; Scalvini, 2024). A renewal pathway requires what we term moral (re)imagination, calling for revision of old stories and habits which reconnect actors to a shared moral vision after such efforts have been fractured or disrupted (Werhane, 2002). Thus, renewal will only be achieved through a capacity for critical self-reflection on previous actions, the ability to learn from times of moral conflict, and the ability to change while still holding on to core values.

To ensure a trend toward renewal, navigation of several risks is necessary. Brand activism faces a delicate balancing act. When brand activism mirrors the majority opinion in society, it is often dismissed as conforming or jumping on the bandwagon

(Mirzaei et al., 2022), whereas brand activism which runs counter to the mainstream has a chance of being perceived as bold and authentic (Saluja & Chan, 2025). Navigating this balance becomes increasingly difficult as competing stakeholder expectations conjure a permacrisis environment that intensifies scrutiny in the context of overlapping social, political and environmental disruptions (Anisimova et al., 2025). Brands with less resilience to these pressures are likely to revert to traditional, less risky, and more performative expressions of activism that focus more on protecting their reputations than on engaging in meaningful ways with their social environment. An additional risk is complete withdrawal from activism, allowing moral fatigue to eclipse the opportunity for learning. During renewal, the primary risk is not only reputational but structural: overlooking the temporal mechanisms underlying backlash or the systemic forces shaping moral friction prevents brands from undertaking the long-term ethical alignment required for rebuilding legitimacy. This aligns with research showing that moral failures, when unaddressed, can erode organisational conscience and inhibit the moral development necessary for resilient, conscientious branding (Biedenbach, 2025). Here, the moral fork becomes a site of potential regression rather than transformation. Institutional resilience and moral learning therefore determine whether brand activism transforms toward genuine renewal or reverts to its less accepted stages.

The moral fork is not an endpoint, but a positive opportunity for moral maturity – an attempt to realise more grounded, plural, reflexive internal policy (Lizzi et al., 2025; Warren, 2022). Building on Daniel Korschun's work, what is practically and academically critical in this stage is for brands to productively reflect on and renew their activism efforts to construct "resilient, sustainable, equitable, and democratic societies through business" (Italian Journal of Marketing, 2025). Instead of a maladaptive response to backlash, we encourage the field of brand activism to make a choice: between cynicism and regeneration, retreat and renewal. Embracing collaboration and reflexivity allows brand activism to evolve from a reactive moral spectacle into a sustained and dynamic moral practice. *Renewal*, then, is not merely a return to old ideals but a reimagining of the moral purpose, which acknowledges the cyclical and plural, and deeply human, character of moral legitimacy in contemporary culture (Demsar et al., 2023; Scalvini, 2024). By tracing the lifecycle to this point of reflection and renewal, we see both the potential for brand resilience and adaptive learning as well as the persistence of unresolved challenges in moral regeneration, which provides a springboard for future research into brand activism.

4 Future research agenda

This section presents a future research agenda that highlights priority questions arising from the brand activism lifecycle (Table 1). To structure inquiry, we propose brand activism scholarship should advance along two interrelated dimensions: breadth and depth. Breadth extends inquiry across the entire lifecycle of brand activism and incorporates a wider range of viewpoints, while depth involves advancing theoretical understanding within specific lifecycle stages. With respect to breadth, there is a pressing need to move beyond the prevailing consumer-centred paradigms

Table 1 Future research agenda arising from the brand activism lifecycle

Future research focus	Lifecycle stage	Theoretical emphasis	Illustrative research questions
Breadth: Lifecycle-wide	Across stages	Consumer expectations and (dis)engagement; structural constraints across lifecycle; activism-enabling marketing capabilities; strategic response orientations; linear versus cyclical dynamics	• How do consumer expectations for brand activism shift and evolve as sociopolitical issues move through the lifecycle of brand activism? • How do consumers (dis)engage with a brand's activism as it moves through different stages? • How do legal, political and institutional pressures constrain or reshape brand activism? • What organisational and marketing capabilities enable brands to implement brand activism, including withstanding or productively engaging in contestation, backlash, or renewal? • How do firms decide whether to double down, adapt, depoliticise, or roll back activism, and under what conditions are these strategies each more effective?
Depth: Audience judgements and contestation	Contestation	Moral authority; de-legitimation and re-legitimation; consumer coping and well-being	• Under what circumstances does contestation serve as a legitimising force for new roles and strategies adopted by brands rather than a delegitimising one? • When does brand activism become de-centred from the firm during contestation? • What psychological or moral coping strategies do consumers use when their preferred brands are publicly contested? • What are the well-being effects for consumers and other brand actors (particularly internal stakeholders) of repeatedly navigating contestation and backlash?
Depth: Normalisation and saturation	Normalisation	Normalisation; legitimacy acquisition and maintenance; moral saturation and de-institutionalisation risks	• When brand activism transitions from a point-of-difference to a point-of-parity, how can brands generate meaningful societal impact while maintaining distinctiveness? • Can late brand activism adopters achieve comparable audience judgements of legitimacy to first movers? • When taking a stance becomes normative, under what circumstances can neutrality or silence be interpreted as a legitimate choice rather than avoidance or complicity? • At what point does saturation drive disillusionment, disengagement or de-institutionalisation?

Table 1 (continued)

Future research focus	Lifecycle stage	Theoretical emphasis	Illustrative research questions
Depth: Moral fragility and backlash	Backlash	Backlash dynamics; moral fatigue; politicisation of brands/markets; legitimacy erosion	• Do specific sociopolitical issues face differing types and degrees of backlash? • How do changing sociopolitical contexts shape the timing, intensity and forms of backlash? • How does public exhaustion with activist messaging accumulate over time, and what are the early indicators? • Does repeated political positioning reduce credibility, trigger disengagement or lead stakeholders to discount activist claims as routine or performative?
Depth: Reflection, renewal and moral regeneration	Post-backlash: Reflection and renewal pathways	Pendulation of brand activism; moral regeneration; legitimacy rebuilding; strategic silence	• What factors determine whether brands renew, maintain or abandon brand activism when faced with a moral fork? • How do brands practically rebuild audience judgements of legitimacy following backlash? • How can the legitimacy of brands be maintained when faced with public activism fatigue, and does fatigue vary by issue type or crisis intensity? • Can diffusing ownership of activism (e.g., through NGOs, communities, employees, or industry coalitions) support renewal and long-term sustainability? • When does silence regain legitimacy as a strategic or ethical choice, and when does it instead signal decline, recalibration or ethical restraint?

(e.g., Gerrath et al., 2025; Haupt et al., 2023; Nam et al., 2023). Although consumers remain a central audience (Korschun et al., 2019), they should not be treated as the sole constituent when seeking to understanding brand activism as an organisational or sociopolitical process (Berthon et al., 2023). Expanding methodological approaches, such as netnography, organisational ethnography, longitudinal case studies and archival analysis would enable richer insights into how activism unfolds. Comparative research across industries, political systems and cultural contexts (i.e., extending beyond Western-centric contexts; Kumar et al., 2025) would further strengthen the external validity and global relevance of brand activism knowledge. Longitudinal case studies are particularly well-suited to examine the processual model of brand activism we present. Empirical cases such as Nike's brand identity evolution following the Kaepernick campaign or Ben & Jerry's repeated reinvention of its justice-oriented positioning offer fertile sites for examining moral renewal, stakeholder

reconciliation and the distinction between regenerative and reactive activism (Eyada, 2020; Gaither et al., 2018).

In terms of depth, we focus on the contestation stage onwards, as subsequent cycles of brand activism are unlikely to return to emergence but instead re-enter through contestation. Limited attention has been paid to processes of de-legitimation and re-legitimation; how moral meanings are undone, reconstituted and sometimes weaponised in the public imagination; and how digital regimes may either dampen or accelerate these dynamics (Costa & Azevedo, 2023). Future research should therefore engage more directly with what could be conceived as the "moral pendulum" of brand activism, a belief regime that oscillates between progressive and regressive orientations under conditions of political rhetoric, moral saturation and digital amplification (Ginder & Johnson, 2026). Understanding this pendulation requires attention to the structural forces shaping the public's moral fatigue and outrage, as well as the conditions under which moral authority can be genuinely restored. The importance of backlash and renewal has also intensified amid rising politicisation, stakeholder fatigue and strategic uncertainty characterising contemporary brand activism (Demsar et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2024; Sands & Ferraro, 2025). Studying these stages enables the field to move beyond the question of whether brands *should* engage in activism toward a deeper understanding of how moral authority is contested, eroded and potentially restored under conditions of digital acceleration and shifting global sociopolitical and economic dynamics (Anisimova et al., 2025; Cohen et al., 2025; Grimm et al., 2025; Kumar et al., 2025).

Finally, the greater concentration of studies covering the stages of emergence, contestation and normalisation relative to backlash and post-backlash pathways partly reflects the temporal lag between real-world events and academic research design, data collection and publication processes, which can render scholarship retrospective rather than contemporaneous. More flexible and open-source publishing mechanisms, such as special issues, rapid review processes and editorial commentaries would enable timely scholarly engagement with sociopolitical environments.

5 General discussion

This paper advances brand activism scholarship by introducing a lifecycle perspective that brings historical sensitivity, conceptual coherence and reflexive depth to a field that has often been characterised by fragmentation and normative contestation. By organising the intellectual and practical shifts (recognising that these reciprocally co-evolve) in the field, the brand activism lifecycle demonstrates how conceptualisations and implementations of brand activism have emerged, stabilised and transformed in response to shifting social, political, cultural and academic conditions. In doing so, the lifecycle anchors brand activism as a dynamic field rather than a static phenomenon, positioning divergent theoretical approaches not as competing paradigms but as complementary or sequential contributions that offer insight at different moments in the field's evolution. Given this analytical purpose of the framework, its value is primarily as a heuristic device rather than a model of "clean" discrete, sequential stages. We acknowledge the inevitable co-existence of stages and

the recursive dynamics at play, positioning the brand activism lifecycle as broadly evolutionary rather than linear.

A central contribution of this work lies in its use of an informed frameworking mode of theorising (Heinonen & Gruen, 2024). Rather than proposing a decontextualised or prescriptive model, the lifecycle was developed through deep engagement with an extensive and diverse body of scholarship, allowing the framework to both synthesise and reinterpret existing work. By plotting a lifecycle of scholarship and practice, this paper also encourages high-level reflection on how academic knowledge production has been shaped not only by empirical phenomena, but also by (re)conceptualisation, dominant theoretical paradigms and macro-social contexts including political polarisation, digital media acceleration and shifting expectations of corporate moral authority. This reflexivity offers conceptual value by synthesising and reinterpreting bodies of work (Jaakkola, 2020), while also helping to distinguish substantive theoretical advancement from iterative relabelling. Following MacInnis (2011), this paper engages in revising brand activism as a dynamic and historically situated field rather than a collection of isolated constructs; delineating lifecycle stages connected by inflection points; and integrating disparate perspectives into a unified framework. This integration provides a more persuasive foundation for assessing the field's current crossroads, where trajectories of plateau, decline and renewal all appear plausible. By making visible how the field arrived at this juncture, the lifecycle does more than diagnose problems; it explains why they have emerged and how they might be addressed. The framework thus offers a pragmatic yet optimistic platform for reinvigorating brand activism scholarship and practice.

5.1 Theoretical implications

This research offers several important theoretical implications for brand activism. First, existing theories often implicitly assume linear progress such as increasing sophistication or acceptance of activism (e.g., Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020), whereas the lifecycle perspective foregrounds cyclical dynamics, including saturation, backlash and potential renewal. This emphasis on fluctuation and backlash aligns with evidence that stakeholder responses to sociopolitical brand engagement are inherently heterogeneous and unstable across time and issue domains (Korschun et al., 2019). This challenges dominant progressivist assumptions and invites theorising that treats decline and regression as theoretically meaningful.

Second, the lifecycle model advances theory development by repositioning fragmented streams of brand activism research as sequential and relational. Normative, instrumental and critical perspectives represented across the brand activism literatures (e.g. Cammarota & Branca, 2025; Mirzaei et al., 2022; Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2025) are not competing explanations of the same phenomenon but reflect different stages in the field's development and shifting moral regimes. This has implications for theory evaluation and accumulation: rather than asking which perspective is "correct," scholars are encouraged to ask when and under what conditions particular logics dominate, erode or re-emerge. This lifecycle repositioning supports more cumulative theorising and responds directly to calls for theory

integration and perspective-taking in politicised market contexts (Korschun, 2021; MacInnis, 2011).

Third, the framework extends theorisation of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) by embedding it within dynamic cycles rather than treating it as a relatively stable asset or binary condition. Building on the assertion that legitimacy is contingent on perceived motive alignment, issue ownership, and stakeholder moral identity (Korschun et al., 2019, 2020), the lifecycle perspective conceptualises moral legitimacy as something that is constructed, institutionalised, contested, fatigued, and potentially regenerated. This opens theoretical space for examining de-legitimation and re-legitimation as processes shaped by digital media, political polarisation, and cultural backlash, dynamics that are central to contemporary sociopolitical brand engagement (Korschun, 2021; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

Finally, the reflexive orientation of the lifecycle model contributes to meta-theorising about how academic fields evolve. The framework provides scholars with a tool for evaluating theoretical progress more rigorously, supporting more precise claims about stagnation, novelty, and transformation, and encouraging future research to engage in higher-order synthesis (e.g., Jaakkola, 2020). Consistent with Korschun's (2021) assertion that marketing scholarship must better theorise its role in politically contested environments, the lifecycle model has relevance beyond brand activism, offering a template for theorising moralised, politically contested market phenomena more broadly.

5.2 Managerial implications

For practitioners, the lifecycle perspective carries important implications for how brand activism is designed, implemented, evaluated, and sustained over time. Most notably, it cautions against treating activism as a one-off positioning tactic or a universally positive virtue signal. Instead, managers must recognise that activist initiatives are interpreted through the lens of the field's current stage, meaning that strategies effective during periods of moral ascendance may provoke scepticism or backlash during stages of saturation or decline. Timing, context and moral climate therefore become as critical as issue selection or message framing.

The lifecycle model also highlights the risks of moral overextension. As brand activism becomes normalised, repeated moral signalling without substantive evolution can contribute to outrage, fatigue and perceptions of opportunism. Managers should thus avoid routinising activism into formulaic campaigns and instead assess whether their interventions meaningfully contribute to social discourse or merely reiterate established positions. In certain stages, restraint, reflexivity and selective engagement may be more effective than visibility or volume.

This wider perspective further implies that managers should monitor not only stakeholder sentiment, but broader cultural and political signals that indicate shifts in moral regimes. Digital media dynamics, escalating political rhetoric and increasing polarisation can rapidly transform the meaning of activist stances, turning previously celebrated positions into flashpoints for contestation. Developing organisational capabilities for moral sensemaking, such as scenario planning, ethical risk assessment and internal debate becomes essential for navigating these transitions.

Appendix methodological summary of lifecycle framework development

Literature Stream	Why Included (Analytical Role)	Key Constructs Extracted	Pattern Category	Contribution to Framework	Exemplary Literature
Brand Activism	Captures firm-level engagement with sociopolitical issues	Activist branding, performative activism, strategic positioning	Firm engagement patterns	Informs lifecycle stage differentiation (how firms behave across stages) and diffusion patterns	Anisimova et al. (2025); Malik et al. (2025); Mirzaei et al. (2022); Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020); Vredenburg et al. (2020)
CSR	Captures normative expectations and institutional pressures	Responsibility, accountability, governance, stakeholder obligations	Institutional pressure patterns	Shapes early-stage conditions and acceptance expectations	Bhagwat et al. (2020); Carroll (1999); Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020); Kapitan et al. (2022); Wettstein and Baur (2016);
Socio-political Movements	Captures how issues emerge and evolve in society	Issue emergence, mobilisation, diffusion, mainstreaming	Issue trajectory patterns	Forms diffusion axis (X-axis)	Demsar et al. (2023); Esau et al. (2025); Kumar et al. (2025); Saldanha et al. (2023); Ulver (2022)
Institutional Legitimacy	Captures how firm actions are socially evaluated	Legitimacy, moral approval, scepticism, backlash	Stakeholder evaluation patterns	Forms acceptance axis (Y-axis) and stage transition triggers	Bhagwat et al. (2020); Bitektine and Haack (2015); Cohen et al. (2025); Grimm et al. (2025); Pöyry and Laaksonen (2022); Suchman (1995)

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