Public Relations Review 52 (2026) 102652

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Public Relations Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pubrev

"My body, my choice": Discursive brandjacking and the strategic reframing of protest language

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Discursive Brandjacking
Activist Discourse
Strategic Framing
Ideological Appropriation
Movement Legitimacy

ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the strategic appropriation—or brandjacking—of feminist rhetoric by the COVID-19 antivax movement in Australia and New Zealand. Specifically, it explores how the slogan "My body, my choice," historically rooted in reproductive rights activism, was co-opted to oppose vaccination mandates during the pandemic. Based on a social-constructivist approach and framing theory, the study employs ethnographic observation combined with an analysis of media discourse to investigate how language functions as a vehicle for ideological contestation. Findings suggest that the antivax movement's use of the slogan was not incidental but a calculated form of discursive brandjacking that leveraged the feminist movement's social capital to construct legitimacy, foster group identity, and broaden its mainstream appeal. It is argued that the adoption of familiar feminist rhetoric provided rhetorical coherence and moral cover for the antivax movement. Such appropriation undermines long-standing social justice struggles by reframing collective advocacy as individual resistance. It is proposed that brandjacking should be re-conceptualized beyond commercial and advertising contexts to highlight the vulnerability of progressive messaging to ideological subversion. To counter such destabilization, communicators and activists must develop a greater awareness of the strategic repurposing of emotionally resonant language by non-progressive movements.

1. Introduction

Globally, vaccination mandates were introduced to mitigate the spread and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In countries such as Australia and New Zealand, these mandates inadvertently amplified the visibility of the so-called antivax protest movement, prompting many to consider and debate the merits and societal role of vaccinations for the first time ever in their lives.

As voices of discontent grew louder, the COVID-19 antivax movement strategically appropriated the language of progressive activism. Central to this was the hijacking of the feminist slogan "my body, my choice," a phrase globally associated with reproductive rights and bodily autonomy. By deploying this familiar rhetoric—rooted in struggles for social justice—the movement sought to gain attention, legitimacy, and group cohesion. What emerged was a form of rhetorical opportunism that helped unify an otherwise disparate coalition of individuals under a common banner of individual rights and resistance.

This paper positions this act as an example of *brandjacking*, a concept typically associated with commercial marketing contexts (Langley, 2016), in which an external actor exploits a brand's symbolic capital to advance their own, often conflicting, agenda. However, here it is argued that the concept can equally be applied in the context of social movements where an organization, brand, or group, hijacks a movement's brand equity to promote their own—frequently contrary—purposes, with far-reaching implications for social justice.

This paper does not intend to debate the merits of vaccination policy. Instead, it interrogates how language is strategically mobilized by non-progressive movements to reframe ideological boundaries. This is positioned as a critical issue for public relations, which scholars have noted is not a neutral practice but a contested space where power, ideology, and legitimacy are continuously negotiated (Curtin & Gaither, 2007; Edwards, 2011; Motion, 2005). As such, public relations—like society—is shaped by ongoing struggles over meaning, reputation, and symbolic authority. Drawing on social constructivism and framing

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2025.102652
Received 6 May 2025; Received in revised form 4 November 2025; Accepted 18 November 2025
Available online 22 November 2025

theory, the paper introduces *discursive brandjacking* as a strategic communication tactic; one that exposes the vulnerability of progressive movements to rhetorical appropriation. This phenomenon challenges dominant assumptions in public relations scholarship that equate activism with inherently prosocial or progressive aims (Ciszek, 2017; Grunig, 1989; Munshi-Kurian et al., 2019). Instead, it demonstrates how traditional public relations tools, such as framing, slogan adoption, and narrative alignment, can be deployed to erode or reframe the objectives of rights-based advocacy. The case study of the antivax movement's appropriation of "my body, my choice" illustrates how language designed to empower can be repurposed to advance anti-collectivist or populist agendas, raising questions about how protest movements are conceptualized within public relations theory and practice.

2. Brandjacking: an overview

2.1. The origins of brandjacking

Brandjacking describes the unauthorized appropriation of a brand's identity, including its name, imagery or symbolic capital, by external actors for strategic gain (Munk, 2024; Thota, 2020). Although developed in commercial marketing, the concept also captures how social movements can exploit another group's (or organization's) credibility and emotional resonance to influence perception or co-opt authority. In this context, the "brand" is the feminist slogan *"my body, my choice"* and its symbolic capital accumulated through decades of reproductive rights activism. Brandjacking can thus be understood as the leveraging of social capital: the symbolic resources, networks and recognition collectively built over time and mobilized by others (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Here, feminist activists generated this capital through sustained campaigning, which the antivax movement later appropriated via the slogan's familiarity and legitimacy.

Traditionally, brandjacking has been examined through the lens of consumer marketing and digital activism (Langley, 2016; Wipperfürth, 2006) but it has been less commonly used to explore social movements. Thota (2020) framed it as a form of anti-commercial parody that introduces dimensions of truth, mockery, and offensiveness, typically deployed by competitors or activist groups to challenge dominant narratives. However, this conceptualization remains embedded in advertising logic. Extending the scope, it is argued here that brandjacking is equally relevant in the realm of social and political movements, particularly when groups with opposing values co-opt the identity and language of progressive causes for ideological rivalry.

2.2. Brandjacking and the commodification of feminism

Corporations are no strangers to brandjacking, with non-profit and activist organizations frequently engaging in *culture jamming*, the subversive parody of brand messages to disrupt dominant narratives and prompt critical reflection. In environmental activism, Greenpeace's spoof campaigns against Shell (Hill, 2012; Murray, 2019) and Nestlé (2010) co-opted brand imagery to raise awareness about climate change and unsustainable palm oil use (The Guardian, 2017; Kilvert, 2018). Equally, feminist activists have employed culture jamming to contest harmful representations of bodies and sexuality, as seen in the *Pink Loves Consent* campaign where the collective FORCE spoofed Victoria's Secret's "Pink" line to challenge how its branding normalized rape culture and undermined women's sexual agency (Madden et al., 2018). By mimicking the brand's imagery and slogans, the campaign provoked debate about consent and exposed how corporate messaging can reinforce problematic attitudes.

Culture jamming also resonates with scholarship on the commodification of feminism, which highlights how feminist slogans and symbols are increasingly detached from their activist origins and circulated in popular and commercial culture. As Banet-Weiser (2018) noted, "popular feminism" may achieve broad visibility through this circulation, but its political force is often weakened in the process. This wider availability makes such symbols vulnerable to appropriation beyond progressive contexts.

2.3. Discursive brandjacking and populism

Increasingly, prosocial movements themselves have become targets of brandjacking by antisocial or non-progressive groups. Prosocial movements—driven by values such as empathy, social justice, and cooperation—are increasingly confronted by movements that promote division, reject inclusivity, and disrupt social cohesion. This trend is particularly evident in the current climate of "crisis of grievance" (Edelman Trust Institute, 2025).

Recent scholarship (Benton & Peterka-Benton, 2020; Knüpfer et al., 2022) has drawn attention to the hijacking of progressive campaigns, such as #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and climate activism, by what Benton and Peterka-Benton (2020) described as "hate groups." These actors co-opt the visibility and moral influence of progressive messaging to further their own causes, often at odds with the original agenda or values (Munk, 2024). While such appropriation may generate publicity, it also risks eroding the symbolic and political capital of the original movement. The implications for social movements are arguably more profound than for commercial brands, as such hijacking undermines hard-won, often decades long, progress on human rights, equality and social justice. Corporations, for example, can seek restitution in courts for the hijacking of their brand, but social movements do not have similar avenues for redress.

Benton and Peterka-Benton's (2020) concept of "hatejacking" offers a useful entry point for understanding the effects on social movements, but it remains limited to overt extremism and hate speech. In contrast, Knüpfer et al. (2022) introduced the term "discursive brandjacking" to capture more subtle forms of ideological appropriation. Their study examined the *120 Decibels* campaign, a far-right initiative launched by the Austrian Identitarian Movement (AIM) and framed as a women's rights campaign. While it adopted feminist rhetoric about sexual violence, its underlying aim was to promote anti-immigration narratives by depicting migrant men as the primary threat to women's safety. Knüpfer et al. concluded that rather than solely "agenda surfing," that is, the (opportunistic) attachment of preferred topics to wider social debates and/or previously established agendas, AIM embarked on a calculated, carefully planned and executed strategic campaign to not only subsume preferred elements and issues of an existing social action and justice movement, but to purposely disrupt and undermine progressive rights.

Knüpfer et al. (2022) work highlights the intersection between populism and strategic communication. To date, this intersection between populist rhetoric and strategic communication has been largely overlooked in public relations theory. Rather than indiscriminately appropriating slogans, populist actors selectively adopt language with pre-existing moral or ideological resonance, repacking it to serve reactionary goals. This echoes Kohler and Koinig's (2023) findings on science-related populism, in which a deep distrust of elites fuels the appropriation of progressive slogans to legitimize anti-scientific or conspiratorial views. The repurposing of familiar language—framed as the voice of "ordinary people" against expert elites—helps shield such movements from scrutiny, making their narratives appear grounded in mainstream cultural and political values even when their goals diverge radically.

Building on this understanding of strategic message selection and appropriation, Van De Velde (2022) provided a useful framework for categorizing protest messages based on their function and intended audience, shaping public perceptions. She argued that protest writings are directed at multiple audiences and, as a result, convey different types of messages. Van De Velde (2022) identified three primary categories: demands, proclamations, and mobilization messages. *Demands* are typically aimed at authorities and are characterized by directness,

clarity, and consensus. These messages often take the form of refusals or political claims, appearing on banners and signs to articulate specific grievances or calls for action. *Proclamations*, in contrast, address a broader audience, including bystanders and media consumers. These messages employ wordplay, metaphors, or ideological statements to challenge dominant narratives, encourage solidarity, or position the movement's cause within a larger social or political discourse. Finally, *mobilization* messages are primarily intended for internal audiences, reinforcing group cohesion and commitment. These messages tend to be emotionally charged, chantable, and affirm the movement's purpose, fostering a sense of belonging and resilience among participants.

Arguably, existing theories of brandjacking underestimate the strategic sophistication and discursive power of its application within social movements. While Knüpfer et al. (2022) provided a valuable foundation, their focus was primarily on digital discourse. This paper broadens the lens to include offline activist activity, such as public protests and media representation, revealing how slogans like "My body, my choice"—originally grounded in feminist and reproductive rights—have been hijacked by the antivax movement in the wake of COVID-19. Here, framing theory offers a useful lens, as it highlights how movements select and emphasize certain aspects of reality in ways that make particular interpretations more salient (Entman, 1993). Through the strategic reframing of "my body, my choice," the antivax movement shifted a feminist slogan of bodily autonomy into an individualist claim of liberty. Such discursive brandjacking not only reframes established narratives but actively undermines decades of advocacy for bodily autonomy and social justice. Understanding these strategies is critical for communicators and social movement leaders seeking to protect the integrity of their messages in an increasingly contested discursive landscape. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research question: How did the COVID-19 antivax movement in Australia and New Zealand co-opt the feminist slogan "my body, my choice" to construct legitimacy, mobilize supporters, and challenge public health measures?

3. The case: "my body, my choice"

A central driver of the reproductive rights movement has been the unequal distribution of power, opportunity, and bodily autonomy, prompting individuals to reclaim their human right to control their fertility and reproductive choices (Amnesty International n.d.b). Since at least the 1960s, the slogan "my body, my choice" has featured prominently in the movement's messaging in the United States and globally (Lanphier, 2021). At its core, the slogan asserts that bodily ownership confers decision-making power over one's physical self, particularly in relation to reproductive health. Its clarity and emotional resonance have contributed to its high recognizability and adoption beyond its original context.

Philosophically, the slogan is rooted in the concepts of sovereignty and self-ownership (Woolard, 2022), which go back to Enlightenment-era liberalism and early capitalism—particularly the idea that individuals hold property rights over their own bodies. This view positions each person as an autonomous, self-governing agent, entitled to exercise control over their physical self so long as it does not cause harm to others (Quigley, 2018).

Today, "my body, my choice" functions as a shorthand for bodily autonomy, particularly in the context of abortion rights. It symbolizes resistance to external interference, especially from the state or other institutions, in personal reproductive decisions. The 2023-overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by the United States Supreme Court has reignited public discourse around the slogan's original meaning and the decades of activism it represents. In contrast, abortion has only recently been decriminalized across both Australia and New Zealand, and not without struggle. In New Zealand, the Abortion Legislation Act 2020 removed abortion from the Crimes Act after decades of feminist campaigning. In Australia the process was only completed in 2024, when Western Australia—the site of one of the protests examined here—became the final state to remove abortion from its criminal code. These developments highlight that decriminalization has been gradual, hard-fought and politically contested, leaving reproductive rights vulnerable even in liberal democracies.

Against this backdrop, the appropriation of "my body, my choice" by non-progressive movements carries significant implications. As one of the reproductive rights movement's most powerful linguistic and symbolic assets, its co-option risks diluting its meaning and undermining the decades-long struggle for gender equality and reproductive justice. The rhetorical force of this appropriation lies in its invocation of the legitimate principle of bodily autonomy, but recontextualized in opposition to vaccination mandates.

In a broader context, Amnesty International (n.d.a) extended the framing of "my body, my rights" to emphasize universal human rights principles, and specifically the right to make decisions about one's body free from "fear, violence, or discrimination." This framing encompasses not only abortion access but also issues such as underage marriage, sexual autonomy, and access to contraception, reinforcing the deep ethical and legal foundations of bodily autonomy.

4. The antivax movement

While the COVID-19 pandemic significantly amplified the visibility of the so-called "antivax" movement, opposition to vaccination is far from new. Framing vaccine resistance as a matter of civil rights has a long history (Colgrove & Samuel, 2022). In fact, early expressions of antivaccine sentiment date back to the 18th century, such as Reverend Edmund Massey's 1722 sermon in England, in which he preached that disease was God's way of testing humankind and that accepting vaccines was akin to accepting the devil into one's life (Massey, 1722).

The rapid development and deployment of COVID-19 vaccines—combined with novel manufacturing technologies and uncertainty about their long-term efficacy—rekindled widespread public debate. For many, this marked the first time they had seriously questioned the brand or manufacturing standards of vaccines, comparing brands like Pfizer, Moderna, and AstraZeneca with unprecedented scrutiny. Individuals who had previously accepted routine immunizations without hesitation began to express concerns over vaccine safety, side effects, and the pace of regulatory approval.

Globally, equitable access to vaccines is recognized as a fundamental human right, essential to achieving improved public health outcomes (United Nations, 2020). Throughout the pandemic, global efforts emphasized not only scientific progress but also principles of social justice. Wealthier nations pledged support for vaccine distribution through mechanisms such as COVAX, but access often remained uneven and delayed due to bilateral deals and slow dose-sharing (Usher, 2021). These collective efforts were also met with resistance. Although some argued that mandatory vaccination policies could align with human rights frameworks, even constitute an obligation by states and territories to protect vulnerable populations (King et al., 2022), others viewed such mandates as overreach, infringing on individual freedoms.

This perceived infringement gave rise to a surge in anti-vaccine and anti-mandate protests worldwide. Protesters frequently framed their opposition using the rhetoric of human rights and personal liberty, arguing that mandatory vaccination programs *violate* human rights (Landler, 2023). Notably, many appropriated established language from progressive movements, such as slogans traditionally associated with bodily autonomy, to assert their position. In this context, the antivax movement's strategic adoption of human rights discourse exemplified what can best be defined as brandjacking, namely the co-option of socially legitimate messaging to serve a contrasting, and often oppositional, agenda (Landler, 2023).

This context provides the backdrop for addressing the study's research question, which examines how the slogan "my body, my choice" was co-opted by the antivax movement to construct legitimacy,

mobilize supporters, and challenge public health measures.

5. Methodology

To address the research question, this study employed a social-constructivist approach and framing theory to critically examine how the antivax movement in Australia and New Zealand strategically framed its opposition to COVID-19 mandates. Rather than assessing the merits of vaccination programs, this research focuses on how language, slogans, and narrative techniques were deployed by antivax groups to construct legitimacy, mobilize supporters, and challenge public health measures.

Social constructivism is an interpretivist approach that views knowledge as emerging from "the interaction of social and mental functions" through which individuals construct "a world of experience through cognitive processes" (Boyland, 2019, p. 30). It assumes that the beliefs and meanings people create fundamentally shape their realities (Neuman, 2011). Because each individual constructs meaning differently, the method is inherently subjective.

In this study, the researchers sought to minimize potential bias by practicing analytical bracketing (Boyland, 2019), which involved acknowledging preconceived ideas, underlying assumptions and prior knowledge about events as they unfolded (McLeod, 2024). This process was reinforced by ongoing reflexivity (Buscatto, 2021; Gobo & Cellini, 2021) and regular topic-based discussions.

Methodologically, constructivism requires fluidity and an awareness that social realities are constructed differently by different actors (Boyland, 2019), including both researchers and the members of the social movement. As Boyland (2019) explained, constructivism encourages a way of thinking "whereby the researcher journeys with participants into a space of interpreted reality that is personal and individual" (p. 32).

Guided by this constructivist orientation, the study relied on multiple data sources to capture how the slogan "my body, my choice" circulated and was reframed across different contexts. The research design combined live ethnographic observation with digital observation of mediated protests to explore how meaning was constructed and contested.

On-site, non-participatory observation was conducted at two public protests in Perth in September and December 2021. During these events, the researcher observed protest dynamics, signage and interactions, taking photographs and reflective field notes to document the communicative features of the demonstrations. This was complemented by ongoing observation of related protests across Australia and New Zealand through livestreams, mainstream and alternative media coverage and social media content, including Twitter/X, Facebook and Instagram. Materials collected across these settings included photographs, screenshots, protest artefacts such as placards and images, and reflective observation notes. Continuous scanning of local and national news provided awareness of the evolving political climate and protest activity. Rather than relying on fixed search terms or defined timeframes, the research adopted an iterative and reflexive approach consistent with social-constructivist inquiry, allowing insights to emerge organically through repeated engagement with live and mediated protest contexts. This approach ensured that the analysis remained closely tied to the study's focus on discursive appropriation.

The analysis focused on the frames used by the antivax movement. As Entman (1993) observed, framing involves "selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communication text" (p. 52), thereby shaping how issues are understood while downplaying alternative perspectives. Similarly, Neuman (2011) stressed that framing influences not only *what* people think about an issue but also *how* they think about it. In this study, the repurposing of the long-established "my body, my choice" slogan from feminist and reproductive rights activism illustrates how framing was used to position resistance to COVID-19 mandates as a matter of personal liberty. In doing so, the movement leveraged the cultural capital and legitimacy of progressive activism while simultaneously rejecting the scientific consensus on vaccines. As Foster and Rathlin (2022) noted, language conveys meaning. Examining how slogans are framed provides insight into the ways social movements construct their purpose beyond initial assumptions and convenient umbrella labels.

Framing has been well researched within the news media, public relations and strategic communication contexts, as frames perform a crucial role in influencing public perception and individual behavior (e.g., Dan et al., 2019; Hallahan, 2011). Indeed, the role of framing extends beyond news media into public relations and strategic communication (Williams et al., 2022). In this study, framing provides the analytical framework for examining how antivax narratives constructed legitimacy and gained credibility by adopting pro-social messaging, thereby positioning themselves as a legitimate social stance rather than an extremist or conspiratorial movement.

6. Findings

Despite efforts to mitigate the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the introduction of vaccination mandates unintentionally provided momentum to the antivax movement's public profile. This movement, in turn, gave rise to the purported "freedom movement," which gained mainstream traction and attracted individuals who had never previously participated in public protests to express their discontentment with government-imposed mandate and restrictions (Askanius et al., 2024; Roy & Gandsman, 2023).

Although often portrayed in the media as a unified and coherent movement, the COVID-19 antivax community is more appropriately understood as a kaleidoscope of individuals and groups (Wolf & Theunissen, 2023). Social movements are rarely homogenous and presenting them as such is a reductive oversimplification (Van De Velde, 2022). A public protest held in Perth, Australia, in October 2021 illustrated this diversity, revealing the varied physical representations and slogans among protestors. The event, attended by approximately 2000 individuals in what is often referred to as the most isolated capital city in the world, featured a broad spectrum of participants. These included traditional anti-vaccination advocates, conspiracy theorists, religious groups, healthcare workers, FIFO (fly-in-fly-out) workers, tradespeople, union representatives, outlaw motorcycle gangs, right-wing groups, members of the secessionist movement, and others frustrated by prolonged restrictions and border closures. Despite these distinctions, the mainstream media, politicians, and social media collectively labelled them as "antivaxxers."

Chants and slogans reflected the movement's diversity. For instance, far-right groups invoked "Proud Boys," while other participants demanded "freedom" from recently imposed vaccine mandates. The phrase "my body, my choice"—traditionally associated with reproductive rights—emerged as a unifying slogan, despite its application to a vastly different context (ABC News, 2021b). In this protest setting, the slogan was used to demand unrestricted individual freedom, prioritizing personal agency over community responsibility. This re-contextualization exemplifies brandjacking: the appropriation of a feminist slogan and its symbolic capital to legitimize resistance against public health measures.

One researcher observed the protest firsthand, documenting what Wolf and Theunissen (2023) described as "an eclectic collective of individuals" (p. 2). The media's characterization of the COVID-19 antivax community as a singular movement stood in stark contrast to the reality on the ground. Attendees dressed in varied attire. Some were in casual wear, suggesting perhaps spontaneous participation in the rapidly organized event, while others were in professional uniforms, making their occupational affiliations as health or blue-collar workers evident. Sub-groups seized the opportunity to advance their own causes, displaying motorcycle gang insignia, waving red ensign flags associated with the sovereign citizen movement (McIntyre, 2021), and using slogans to align their unique perspectives with the broader protest.

Notably, a group of vegans, dressed in little more than G-strings and bras, held placards stating, "We are all animals with the same body parts" and "Their body, not yours," echoing the broader "my body, my choice" rhetoric. Such examples highlight how diverse groups within the protest drew on the recognizability of feminist language, extending its symbolic capital into unrelated causes—a hallmark of brandjacking.

At a time when most public events were cancelled due to COVID-19 restrictions, the protest likely drew participants seeking social engagement or a sense of community, contributing to the movement's increased visibility and inflated representation. Media interviews with attendees revealed that many were not opposed to vaccinations in general but objected to the COVID-19 mandates imposed just prior to the protest. Some refused to disclose their vaccination status, citing concerns over government overreach and individual rights. Others leveraged the protest's social capital to highlight unrelated grievances. A striking feature, however, was the adoption of feminist language, particularly "my body, my choice," which was repurposed to emphasize personal autonomy in medical decision-making rather than focusing on feminist or reproductive rights.

A similar pattern emerged in New Zealand, as reflected in an opinion piece discussing a 2021-protest in Hawkes Bay:

> What became apparent was the people who were there weren't conspiracy theorists. They weren't all "anti-vaxx," some were "anti-mandate." Some want to be vaccinated, but want an alternative to the Pfizer vaccine. Some protesters resent the process forced upon them, and have declined the vaccine on principle. (Cooper, 2021)

Like Australia, New Zealand protests drew a mix of participants with diverse motivations. On 3 October 2021, nationwide demonstrations under the banner of the "freedom movement" saw 1000 protesters gather outside Auckland's War Memorial Museum, including gang members, farmers, members of the Destiny Church, the elderly, and children (Hewitt, 2021). Protest visuals showcased an assortment of placards emphasizing freedom, including "#free 2 trade," "#free 2 gather," "#free 2 parent" and "#free 2 be me." Others displayed slogans such as "Ur body does not belong 2 ur employer, school, or government!" with "government" highlighted in red for emphasis, or "We are not your guinea pigs!" on t-shirts, caps or face masks—a critique of what protestors regarded as untested vaccinations.

By November 2021, smaller yet highly vocal protests targeted and disrupted the-then Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's regional visits (1News, 2021). In the small town of Whanganui, for example, demonstrators carried banners with messages like "When we trade freedom for safety, we lose both" and "Toot for freedom." Some messages extended beyond vaccination concerns, such as "3-waters nah" (referring to a controversial water infrastructure reform), accompanied by the Māori flag, which has long been recognized as a symbol of Māori sovereignty and self-determination. In Christchurch, placards reading "My body, my choice" and "Freedom 2 choose" reinforced the growing opposition to government-imposed mandates. Here again, brandjacking was evident in the recontextualization of feminist messaging to frame resistance as a matter of individual liberty.

The New Zealand protests culminated in early 2022 with a globally reported demonstration outside the Parliament in Wellington, known as the Beehive. Protesters camped on the parliamentary grounds, displaying slogans ranging from "Freedom over fear" and "Leave our kids alone" to anti-racism messages and popular cultural references such as "One love Bob Marley."

These developments illustrated how COVID-19 vaccination mandates catalyzed a diverse and loosely connected "movement," which appropriated existing political rhetoric and social justice language to frame its resistance. By brandjacking and modifying the feminist slogan "my body, my choice," the antivax movement leveraged its accumulated symbolic capital to construct legitimacy and broaden its appeal across otherwise disparate constituencies. The convergence of disparate groups under a shared call for "freedom" emphasizes the complexity of modern protest movements, challenging simplistic media narratives that homogenize their composition and objectives.

7. Discussion

While brandjacking has typically been understood in the context of commercial brands (Langley, 2016), this study aims to demonstrate its applicability to social movements. In response to the global COVID-19 restrictions and vaccine mandates, the antivax movement hijacked the feminist slogan "my body, my choice" to protest government decisions, repurposing the slogan's symbolic power to support opposition to public health measures. This appropriation represents a clear case of brandjacking: hijacking an established feminist slogan and its accumulated symbolic capital to confer legitimacy on a new cause. By doing this, the movement undermined decades of advocacy for women's bodily autonomy and reframed a feminist demand for reproductive rights into a protest against collective responsibility, prioritizing personal agency and choice over obligations to the wider community. Crucially, this was a strategic communicative choice: by selecting a slogan with broad cultural recognition, protest organizers structured their messaging to maximize legitimacy and resonance, deliberately deploying frames to mobilize publics and to contest meaning.

Brandjacking emerged as a relatively low-cost strategy for the COVID-19 antivax movement, enabling its "members" to benefit from extant work and the accompanied recognition and reputation. By co-opting the social capital of an established feminist movement, the antivax attracted audiences and potential protesters through the slogan's familiarity and its universally recognized messaging. The feminist movement had built this capital over decades of reproductive rights campaigning, investing symbolic labor into making "my body, my choice" a powerful shorthand for bodily autonomy. By adopting the familiar slogan already imbued with strong emotional and cultural associations, the antivax movement appropriated existing recognition and mobilized it to reduce resistance among observers, creating a rhetorical bridge to reach new, potentially sympathetic audiences. In effect, the movement was leveraging collectively owned capital—generated by feminist activists but activated in this context through both protest participants and the resonance it held for bystanders—to strengthen its own legitimacy. This strategy echoed what Wolf and Theunissen (2023) described as the creation of "temporary momentum" (p. 6), though in this case the energy was directed toward conservative rather than progressive goals.

7.1. Public relations, activism and strategic meaning-making

This case extends contemporary public relations scholarship by demonstrating how legitimacy and framing, two of the field's core concerns, operate within protest discourse. Scholars have long described public relations as a space where power, ideology and meaning are negotiated (Curtin & Gaither, 2007; Edwards, 2011; Motion, 2005). Research on activism and identity (Ciszek, 2017; Munshi-Kurian et al., 2019) has tended to view activism as a communicative process aimed at progressive social change. The findings presented here challenge that assumption. The same strategic tools that enable activism, such as agenda building, framing and the mobilization of symbolic resources, can be redeployed by counter-progressive actors to contest public meaning. In this sense, discursive brandjacking can be understood as a public relations tactic of ideological inversion that illuminates how communication constructs, rather than simply reflects, legitimacy.

The visual co-option of this slogan became especially discernible when male protestors held placards at rallies in Australia and New Zealand that echoed the feminist phrasing "my body, my choice" in opposition to vaccine mandates (McLeod, 2021; The Australian, 2021). Indeed, a close analysis of anti-mandate and so called (pro-)freedom protest media coverage and ethnographic insights suggests that the co-option of the "my body, my choice" slogan—both in writing and as a

chant (ABC News, 2021a)—was a popular choice among protesters across Oceania and beyond, alongside explicit references to human rights, pro-choice advocacy ("Not Anti-Vax–Pro Choice") and bodily autonomy ("Hands off my body"). Because these messages frequently invoked human rights and bodily autonomy, they served to reframe the protest as a broader pro-choice cause. Seen through a public relations lens, this demonstrates how communication was not ad hoc, but strategically structured: the appropriation of activist language operated as a deliberate tactic to unify diverse actors, lend credibility, and challenge official narratives.

7.2. Appealing to a wider audience

The proliferation of protest messaging via social and news media enables contemporary social movements to amplify their reach beyond physical gatherings. As Van De Velde (2022) reasoned, slogans are increasingly personalized and designed to engage diverse audiences. Though originally created for co-protesters, bystanders, and audiences of street protests (Branagan, 2007), such protest messages now have the potential to overcome geographical boundaries. Consequently, the visibility and size of what was originally an in-person protest becomes irrelevant if the impression of a large protest movement can be conveyed via social and mainstream media. In a contemporary world where social media is ubiquitous, protest placards and social media posts operate as mobile messages, often created for virality and memetic spread well beyond the immediate protest.

To interpret the patterns that emerged, we draw on Van De Velde's (2022) typology, which distinguishes between demands, proclamations, and mobilization messages. This framework helps clarify how the antivax movement communicated its agenda. Slogans such as "Ban the Mandates" and "End the Lockdowns" represented demand messages aimed at authorities. "Say No!" and "Join the Revolution" functioned as proclamations designed to recruit followers and confer legitimacy. Mobilization messages like "We are Voices for Freedom" and "My Body, My Choice" fostered internal solidarity while simultaneously appealing to wider audiences by evoking widely understood ideals of autonomy and empowerment.

The strategic reframing of "my body, my choice" arguably fulfilled all three functions: it demanded a rollback of mandates, appealed to a mass audience through shared values and reinforced in-group identity. The slogan's familiarity helped normalize the antivax agenda and increased its persuasiveness (Pullman, 2013), repurposing a feminist call for bodily agency into a vehicle for individualist, anti-collectivist sentiment. The protest data thus illustrates discursive brandjacking, where the symbolic capital of feminist language was recontextualized to make antivax and anti-mandate positions mainstream. In individualistic societies like Australia and New Zealand, appeals to liberty and personal rights carried particularly resonance, even when used by non-progressive movements. By adopting the slogan, the antivax movement exploited the global recognizability of a long-standing social justice campaign, reframing it to suit their own agenda and extend its reach. A consequence of this practice—whether intentional or not—was the weakening of the feminist movement's messaging and social capital.

This is a classic case of discursive brandjacking (Knüpfer et al., 2022), where slogans from social justice movements are strategically repurposed to serve conflicting agendas. Knüpfer et al.'s study of the *120 Decibels* campaign, for example, showed how right-wing actors appropriated the #MeToo hashtag to promote anti-immigrant messaging. While the antivax movement's hijacking of "my body, my choice" may have been less overtly disruptive, it nevertheless functioned as a form of agenda surfing—an opportunistic attachment to ongoing debates for rhetorical advantage. Whether opportunistic or intentional, this appropriation weakened the original movement's messages and social capital by reframing a core slogan to serve a non-progressive, self-interested agenda.

7.3. Broadening and shifting the frame

Rucht and Teune (2017) observed a growing trend in which far right groups adapt and imitate the actions, lifestyles and claims of liberal and left-wing activism. Munk (2024) cautioned that such strategies are an attempt to gain mainstream recognition for ultra-conservatist views that turn back the clock on, for example, gains in areas such as female empowerment. However, it is important to note that this strategy is not confined to the far-right. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement coopted #AllLivesMatter to maintain—and arguably reclaim—the focus on original BLM goals (Gallagher et al., 2019).

However, unlike movements that narrow existing frames (e.g., the anti-immigrant adaptation of #MeToo (Knüpfer et al.,.2022), the antivax movement broadened the feminist slogan to encompass *all* bodies and choices, reframing it from reproductive autonomy to total individual freedom. This shift had significant implications: in the context of a public health emergency, individual vaccine refusal and reframing "choice" to mean complete individual freedom affected not just the self but the wider community, undermining the social contract that underpins public health initiatives. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccinations were seen as a means to ensure the safety of a community, and particularly those who could, and likely would, be vulnerable to the virus. Thus, the antivax movement as it played out during the pandemic could not be seen as a righteous, prosocial movement. Unlike reproductive rights decisions, which primarily concern the individual (and their immediate circumstances), the decision not to be vaccinated during a pandemic carries much broader social consequences. Refusal allows the virus to circulate and spread, disproportionately endangering vulnerable communities and undermining the collective safeguards on which public health depends.

By ignoring the distinction between negative freedom (freedom from constraint) and positive freedom (freedom enabled through collective safeguards), the antivax movement rejected reasonable restrictions intended to protect vulnerable populations. Ironically, it was these restrictions that enabled relative freedoms in Australia and New Zealand during much of the pandemic, including the ability to go to work, meet friends, socialize, and travel within their respective countries. These were freedoms many other countries could not enjoy.

Ultimately, the COVID-19 antivax movement's strategic appropriation of "my body, my choice" provided a deceptively familiar entry point into a movement that prioritized individual rights over collective wellbeing. This co-option diluted the slogan's feminist origins, replacing solidarity with self-interest and distorting its message of empowerment. As a case of brandjacking, this demonstrates how activist slogans can be stripped of their original meaning and strategically redeployed to serve conflicting agendas. By leveraging widely recognized language, the movement eased the mainstreaming of fringe and even extreme ideologies, including those linked to sovereign citizen movement and anti-government conspiracy theories.

8. Implications and conclusion

At the heart of the antivax movement was a rhetorical emphasis on individual rights and personal freedoms, particularly a refusal to comply with what were perceived as state-imposed violations of bodily autonomy. By appropriating the feminist slogan "my body, my choice," protestors drew on the emotional resonance and symbolic legitimacy of a long-established social justice movement to frame their cause as morally justified. Despite its ideological diversity, the movement was able to construct a coherent identity that warranted public and political recognition through the strategic repurposing of familiar language. Our data showed this process at work in both placards and chants at protests in Australia and New Zealand, where the feminist slogan was recontextualized as a unifying call against vaccination mandates. These observations illustrate discursive brandjacking in practice, making visible how a recognizable activist "brand" can be strategically redeployed in a

different ideological project. These findings demonstrate that public relations encompasses both progressive *and* regressive uses of strategic communication. Understanding discursive brandjacking therefore contributes to theory on legitimacy building, framing and counter-public communication.

This appropriation served two key functions: it unified a fragmented coalition under a recognizable message and transferred social capital from progressive advocacy to a movement frequently aligned with populist, anti-collectivist agendas. More than simply mimicry, the use of feminist language activated the *deontic power* of the slogan, framing bodily autonomy not only as permissible but as a moral imperative in resisting public health mandates. In this way, the antivax movement reframed reproductive rights language to oppose collective responsibility in favor of individual sovereignty. Arguably, the adoption of the "my body, my choice" slogan to resist COVID-19 vaccine mandates also contributed to the wider normalization of all antivaccine sentiment. This is evident in both the movement's heightened visibility and in policy shifts such as the recent decision in Florida to eliminate childhood vaccine mandates (CBS News, 2025).

This paper challenges the common assumption in public relations and activist scholarship that protest movements are inherently progressive or prosocial. As this study illustrates, rhetorical strategies commonly associated with social justice can be redeployed to undermine these same causes. The co-option of progressive language is not merely a branding issue; it reshapes public discourse and potentially disrupts social cohesion. There is an urgent need for public relations scholars and practitioners to critically examine and recognize how language—including the symbolic power embedded in slogans and strategic messages—operates not only as a persuasive tool, but as a mechanism through which ideologies are contested, redefined, and legitimized. In fact, these rhetorical shifts may signal broader changes in societal values and the growing influence of populist sentiment.

Language is never an empty container, devoid of meaning. It is a powerful tool in social movements, shaping public perception and framing a movement's legitimacy. As Jensen (2015) noted, language can serve "to naturalize particular worldviews, while obscuring others" (p. 570). This ability of language arguably becomes contentious when slogans that represent hard-earned rights are used in a way that distorts, undermines and ultimately hijacks their original meaning.

The concept of discursive brandjacking (Knüpfer et al., 2022) provides a useful lens for understanding how slogans, values, and credibility can be hijacked to legitimize opposing agendas. Even when such appropriation does not overtly reject the original cause, it dilutes the meaning and paves the way for mainstream acceptance of fringe or contradictory ideologies. In this case, the shift redirected a slogan rooted in feminist and collective health advocacy to justify vaccine refusal and individualist resistance, thereby undermining decades of progress for women's rights. The protest data thus demonstrates how discursive brandjacking can transform not only the meaning of a slogan but also its political orientation.

While this study is grounded in the context of COVID-19 antivax activism in Australia and New Zealand, its implications are globally relevant. The appropriation of rights-based rhetoric to resist public health measures has emerged across various national contexts, reflecting a broader pattern in which populist movements weaponize liberal democratic discourse to serve their own causes. Comparable examples, such as the right-wing *120 Decibels* campaign's hijacking of the #MeToo hashtag (Knüpfer et al., 2022) suggest that this phenomenon is neither new nor spontaneous. Often, it is fueled by misinformation, algorithmic amplification, and coordinated online mobilization.

These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of activist communication, particularly the way in which slogans function as ideological vessels. Their familiarity lends legitimacy, but this familiarity also renders them vulnerable to reappropriation. Public relations, as a field deeply engaged in the crafting and circulation of language, plays a central role in this dynamic. Practitioners may develop campaigns that draw on activist language or defend causes targeted by rhetorical hijacking. As such, public relations does not merely operate in contested spaces; it helps construct and redefine them.

Public relations is a profession deeply embedded in the negotiation of meaning, power, and legitimacy. The strategic use of language carries both influence and responsibility. Slogans like "my body, my choice" remain powerful not only because of their rhetorical simplicity, but because of their symbolic weight. As they are recast across ideological lines, public relations practitioners and scholars must remain attentive to how their work may reinforce or challenge such shifts. Protecting the integrity of public communication requires not only rhetorical skill, but ethical reflection on the broader societal impacts of language appropriation in an increasingly polarized world.

Recognizing discursive brandjacking as a strategic communication process enables public relations scholars and practitioners to understand how the same rhetorical tools that build legitimacy for social justice may also be used to undermine it.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the authors used ChatGPT Pro in order to assist with generating keywords, key highlights and the abstract. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors have nothing to declare.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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