# Brands Taking a Stand – Consumer responses to ads that tackle gender stereotypes

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**Abstract**

Today, more and more companies are following the example of purpose-led brands like Patagonia and Ben & Jerry's that are known for their value-driven communication and actions. By taking a public stand on relevant, but at the same time controversial sociopolitical issues, companies seek to enhance their brands' reputation; but they might achieve just the opposite (such as the backlash after Pepsi's infamous Kendall Jenner ad). Therefore, it is crucial to understand the factors that drive consumers' responses to activist campaigns. Contributing to the emerging research on brand activism, we analyze nearly 50,000 comments on five ads on YouTube that address gender-related issues. Our research shows that many users experience strong emotions, which drive attitude and behavior change – especially in case of disagreement. Gender identity threats and general dispositions to brand activism also evolve as influencing factors. However, a convincing storytelling can dampen these harmful effects.

## 1. Introduction

Taking a stance – this is the mission of a growing number of companies that engage in sociopolitical issues (Moormann, 2020). A recent study found that 64% of global consumers expect brands to represent their values and solve societal problems (Edelman, 2019). Especially younger consumers are looking for purpose-led brands that stand up for sociopolitical issues and incorporate ethical values into their business (Accenture, 2018). However, brand activism can also cause consumer resistance and public backlash (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020) and even negatively impact firm value (Bhagwat, Warren, Beck, and Watson, 2020). Therefore, brand activism comes with significant risks.

One social cause that has gained momentum is the fight against gender stereotypes and the promotion of gender equality. In the last decades, gender identities and roles have become more diverse and fluid, but remain contested (Neale, Robbie, and Martin, 2016). Still, in marketing and advertising stereotypical gender portrayals persist, even though studies have found at least a small shift towards non-traditional gender role representations (Grau & Zotos, 2016). Owning to its ubiquity, media and advertising do not only reflect dominant values in the society, but also shape consumer perceptions of gender roles in their lives. Moreover, gender portrayals affect consumer responses to ads and brands (Eisend, 2019).

But how can marketers contribute to modern gender roles and generate positive effects on brand equity and company success at the same time? As it is not unusual for any type of brand activism, also gender-related campaigns are fraught with risk and can provoke strong reactions from consumers. For example, the ad of razor brand Gillette about toxic masculinity became one of the most disliked videos on YouTube and has caused alienated consumers to boycott the brand, while receiving support from others (Dreyfuss, 2019).

Hence, it is imperative to understand the main antecedents of consumer responses to purpose-led campaigns in the context of gender roles and identities. Two research questions guide this study: How do gender-related ads differ in terms of ad, topic and source (i.e., company and brand) evaluations and stated emotional reactions? Second, to what extent do these evaluations and emotions lead to a change of consumers' attitudes and behaviors towards the brand? To answer our research questions, we analyzed nearly 50,000 YouTube-comments on five activist ads related to gender roles. In a mixed qualitative and quantitative design, we used the semi-automated text analytics software Caplena for data coding. Our research contributes to the literature on brand activism as well as on gender topics in marketing by analyzing authentic consumer feedback. Thereby, we add to the evolving

conceptual framework of brand activism from a consumer perspective. For managers, the research offers insights, which traps to avoid when designing purpose-led campaigns that address identity-relevant issues. At the same time, our analysis sheds light on what types of messages consumers appreciate in the rather contested area of gender.

**2. Brand activism and related concepts**

Brand activism is an emerging concept with yet to define clear conceptual boundaries. However, one commonly accepted characteristic is the public support of a partisan issue, which will typically cause polarized stakeholder reactions. Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020, p. 2) define brand activism as "the act of publicly taking a stand on divisive social or political issues by a brand or an individual associated with a brand" (for similar definitions see Bhagwat et al. (2020) and Moorman (2020)). The controversial nature of the issues addressed distinguishes brand activism from related concepts, such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), cause-related marketing or advocacy marketing. In a more holistic definition Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, and Kemper (2020, p. 446) conceptualize (authentic) brand activism "as a purpose- and values-driven strategy in which a brand adopts a non-neutral stance on institutionally contested sociopolitical issues, to create social change and marketing success". They also highlight the need for a clear value-based purpose, which is linked to a wider public interest and societal goals beyond immediate economic benefits. These values are not only expressed in the brand communication, but also by actively engaging in prosocial corporate and brand practice (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

**3. Theoretical framework and research overview**

*3.1 Consumer reactions to brand activism*

Research on brand activism is still scarce. To our best knowledge, Mukherjee and Althuizen's (2020) article presents the first scientific empirical study on consumer responses to brands taking a stand on controversial sociopolitical issues. Based on several studies, they provide evidence for an asymmetric effect of brand activism: In case of consumers' disagreement with a brand's stand, brand attitudes and related behaviors take a hit; on the contrary, brand activism has no (positive) effect on brand attitude if consumers support the brand's stand. The research also revealed brand identification as a mediator between consumer-brand disagreement and their responses and the 'distance' between the brand and

the source of the stand (e.g., official spokespersons vs. private opinion by CEO) as a moderator.

In their conceptual paper, Vredenburg et al. (2020) focus on another source characteristic, namely the established brand reputation and culture. According to their framework, companies with a history of purpose-driven, sociopolitical practices (e.g., Ben & Jerry's, TOMS) face a lower risk of receiving negative reactions for brand activism compared to companies with a low level of prior prosocial engagement. As a second crucial factor they integrate the level of congruency between the activist topic and the brand (e.g., mission, products, attributes) into their framework. To create very positive reactions, such as consumer delight, they suggest selecting moderately incongruent causes. Highly congruent causes are not surprising enough to generate much interest and positive reactions beyond mild satisfaction, whereas completely incongruent topics will likely result in consumer outrage.

*3.2 Consumer reactions to gender portrayals in advertising*

Since gender portrayals are widely used in advertising, marketing communication significantly contributes to the development of gender identities of consumers. Gender identity has been defined as the extent to which one identifies with being masculine or feminine (Deaux, 1985). It is commonly viewed as a core dimension of one's social identity due to the constant reinforcement of gender roles in mass media and social interactions (Neale et al., 2016). Since brands and products serve as identity signals, consumers can shape their gender identity through their consumption choices (Sirgy, 1982).

The persisting use and activation of stereotypical gender roles in advertising can have negative effects, e.g., on women's body satisfaction and self-confidence as well as on self-development and careers (Eisend, 2019), but also on mental and physical health of males (Gentry & Harrison, 2010). Despite some progress, stereotypes do still exist in advertising (e.g., Grau & Zotos, 2016). However, consumer pressure, regulations, as well as an increasing number of female creative directors have triggered positive change towards an inclusive representation of gender in marketing communication. For example, so-called 'femvertising' focuses on empowering women and diminishing stigma for gender inequalities (Åkestam, Rosengren, and Dahlen, 2017). Advertisers are using a similar rhetoric for messages targeting men, by embracing their roles as caregivers and depicting males as more gentle, supportive, and loving (Baxter, Kulczynski, and Ilicic, 2016).

Gender portrayals in advertisements can cause diverse consumer reactions depending on several factors (e.g., Eisend, 2019). Especially the influence of (in)congruence of gender

portrayals with individual gender identities and gender role expectations has been investigated. Different patterns for males and females have been identified: While women prefer non- or counter-stereotypical gender portrayals, the opposite seems to be true for men (e.g., Eisend, Plagemann, and Sollwedel, 2014). Men have been found to be more susceptible to gender identity threats triggering behaviors such as derogation of women and exhibiting extreme masculine behaviors and attitudes (Harrison & Michelson, 2019). Thus, the (in)congruency of gender portrayals in advertisements with consumer gender identities can have a major impact on brand attitudes and behaviors.

## 4. Data collection and method

To add to a better understanding of consumer reactions in this topical domain and guide future campaign development, we conducted a qualitative analysis of nearly 50,000 user comments on video ads, which were selected based on the following criteria: (1) Integration of gender issues into the brands' corporate purpose; (2) varying degrees of success with the ads, to be able to derive success factors; (3) message that challenges rigid or harmful gender roles and/or identities and (4) > 500 viewer comments on YouTube. All brands further belong to a single industry (FMCG) for reasons of internal validity. The final sample consisted of two ads from Procter & Gamble (P&G) ('Always' and 'Gillette') and three ads from its major competitor Unilever ('Axe', 'Dove' and 'Dove Men+Care'). A short summary of the video ads and corresponding key metrics is given in Table 1.

Given that Gillette's video had more than 456,500 comments, we drew a random sample of 25,000 comments. Comments associated with the remaining ads were fully included into the study. The data collection process thereby resulted in a corpus of 77,865 comments. The extracted data was screened afterwards to identify content irrelevant to the area of this research study. Similar to Feng, Chen, and He (2019), comments were further excluded from the initial sample if they consisted of replies, numbers, links, unrecognizable characters, resembled spam, or were posted by the brands themselves. This resulted in a final dataset containing 48,259 comments in English language, from 41,692 unique users.

Using a structuring content analysis (Kuckartz, 2016), we determined the main thematic (sub)categories in line with the research questions and the literature review (deductive approach). In an iterative process, the category system was steadily revised and new sub-categories were established (inductive approach). For our analysis, we employed the program Caplena, which supports the coding process with augmented intelligence (AI) based

on natural language processing (Caplena, 2019). After a certain number of manually coded reviews, the AI starts to suggest codes, which will be applied automatically as soon as a high accuracy rate is achieved. As a measure of intercoder reliability for categorical variables, Cohen's Kappa was calculated for each code. The resulting values ranged from 0.66 to 1.00, indicating good intercoder reliability (Cohen, 1960).

**Table 1**

*Short descriptions and key metrics for selected campaigns (September 6, 2020)*

| Brand: Title | Topic | #Views | #Comments | #Likes #Dislikes (Ratio) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Always: Always #LikeAGirl | Steoreotypical associations with 'acting like a girl' and negative effects on self-esteem | 68,544,886 | 41,617 | 321,976 36,131 (9:1) |
| Gillette: We Believe: The Best Men Can Be \| Gillette (Short Film) | Negative behavior of men such as sexism, bullying, or toxic masculinity and men's responsibility to step in and change | 34,280,814 | 456,566 | 813,857 1,642,290 (1:2) |
| Dove: Dove Real Beauty Sketches \| You're more beautiful than you think (3mins) | Negative self-perceptions of women | 69,003,709 | 9,955 | 172,643 4,712 (37:1) |
| Dove men+care: 2015 Commercial - #RealStrength Ad \| Dove Men+Care | Men as caring fathers | 7,215,140 | 590 | 6,336 985 (6:1) |
| Axe: is it ok for guys….AXE | Stereotypical male gender identities (e.g., 'unmale' hobbies,  interests and feelings) | 822,506 | 703 | 7,155 511 (14:1) |

## 5. Results

We categorized relevant variables into source-, issue- and ad-related evaluations, into emotions as well as into attitudinal and behavioral responses. The comments were overall more negative compared to the likes-dislikes ratio. Overall, user feedback most often included ad-related comments (74.2%), followed by emotions (56.8%) and issue-related comments (30.1%) as shown in Table 1.[1] The source evaluations (e.g., credibility) were only included in 6.2% of the comments on average. Notably, attitude and behavior changes were mentioned in nearly 20%, representing almost only negative reactions.

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[1] The percentages in the first paragraph are calculated as the average share across the selected ads to compensate for the varying sample sizes.

**Table 2**

*Aggregated analysis of user reviews[1]*

| Category<br>Direction (*most frequent codes*) | Average Share (%) | Highest share<br>(*% of total comments for respective ad*) |
|---|---|---|
| **Sentiment** | **93.0** | *Difference to 100% = neutral comments* |
| Positive | 38.8 | Dove (67.7); Dove Men+Care (62.4) |
| Negative | 54.2 | Gillette (83.8) |
| **Source Evaluation** | **6.2** | |
| Positive (*pos. brand repositioning*) | 0.6 | Axe (8.6), Dove (2.5) |
| Negative (*egoistic motive*) | 5.6 | Dove (11.1), Dove Men+Care (8.5), Axe (5.3) |
| **Issue Evaluation** | **30.1** | |
| Positive (*relevance, identification*) | 22.4 | Always (28.2); Dove Men+Care (27.9); Dove (26.5) |
| Negative (*rejection of feminism*) | 7.7 | Always (10.2); Axe (8.6) |
| **Ad Evaluation** | **74.2** | |
| Positive (*favorable ad attitude*) | 40.9 | Dove (63.7); Dove Men+Care (57.5) |
| Negative (*unfavorable ad attitude*) | 33.3 | Always (36.3); Gillette (32.5) |
| **Emotions** | **56.8** | |
| Positive (*enjoyment, gratefulness*) | 25.0 | Dove (65.8), Axe (60.1), Dove Men+Care (52.2) |
| Negative (*contempt*) | 31.0 | Gillette (62.1), Axe (20.1) |
| **Attitudinal & Behavioral Response / Change** | **19.6** | |
| Positive (*favorable image change*) | 0.9 | Axe (5.9) |
| Negative (*negative image change, brand switching/boycott*) | 18.7 | Gillette (31.6), Axe (4.5) |

The distribution of codes varied largely across the campaigns with Gillette receiving by far the most negative feedback including aggressive or even hateful comments as well as negative reactions such as brand attitude changes and intentions to switch or boycott the brand. The (mainly male) users felt offended and expressed negative attitudes towards feminism and liberalism. Many users also commented on negative consequences for Gillette and expressed feelings of 'Schadenfreude' (malicious joy). The rejection of feminism, gender equality and liberalism also came up in the Always comments. Whereas one significant user group expressed contempt, also indicated by the wide use of swearwords (17% of all Gillette comments!), a similar number of users expressed feelings of joy and gratefulness. Overall, many users perceived the topic as highly relevant and the campaign as empowering. A similar

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[1] The percentages for positive versus negative codes do not add up to the percentages for the categories (e.g., ad evaluation), since we also used codes for answers with no clear polarity/sentiment.

pattern emerged for the Dove ad, even though it received a larger share of positive comments. Still, relatively more users voiced skepticism about the firm's motives implying egoistic motives and hypocritical behavior. In case of both Axe and Dove Men+Care, which created relatively less reach and engagement, users expressed their favorable attitude towards the topic – especially the consideration of men's issues – and their gratefulness. Even though both ads explicitly deal with male gender roles, a substantial number of users expressed their disapproval of feminism and gender equality. Across all ads, some users criticized brand activism per se with fewer users stating the opposite.

In addition, we used the dummy coded data (0/1 = code does not apply/applies) for running initial regression analyses. For this purpose, we summarized variables that represent codes belonging to the same category (see Table 2 for the categories) into aggregated variables. Since attitude and behavior changes represent the most crucial indicators for 'real' economic effects, we selected the respective variables (positive and negative attitudinal and behavioral responses/changes) as dependent variables. First, we measured the impact of source, issue and ad evaluation. In particular, positive source-related perceptions influence positive attitude and behavior changes (ß= .09), followed by favorable campaign- (ß=.05) and issue-related (ß=.03) evaluations.[3] However, the effect sizes are small. In case of negative responses, the most important antecedent (i.e., buffer) is the presence of positive ad perceptions (ß= -.24). Apart from positive source evaluations, all other variables have significant, but minor effects. Second, we used emotions as independent variables. According to our data, positive attitudinal and behavioral responses are particularly driven by feelings of gratefulness (ß= .11), whereas feelings of contempt (ß= .36), anger (ß= .16) and 'Schadenfreude' (ß= .10) lead to negative responses. Finally, the rejection of brand activism in general explains negative source (ß= .14), issue (ß= .20) and ad (ß= .12) evaluations as well as negative attitude and behavior changes (ß= .08). The effects of a pro-activism attitude are also significant, but only similarly strong for positive attitude and behavior changes (ß= .08).

## 6. Discussion

Three ads stood out in terms of reach and engagement (Always, Dove, Gillette). In case of Always and Gillette, this is likely related to the more controversial character of the ads. Dove achieved the best ad evaluation and the highest reach with a more positively received campaign. Our analysis also indicates that a convincing ad seems to attenuate negative

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[3]All reported beta coefficients are significant on 1%-level.

responses. Therefore, managers should emphasize creative ad messages and a professional campaign execution, when addressing contested issues. The two remaining ads framed 'manhood' in a non-offensive way, which caused overall more favorable responses. Since both campaigns did neither include very controversial topics nor compelling or unique storytelling, they did not spark as much discussions. The assumption that consumers expect brands to take a stand can be partly challenged based on our data, since there is a substantial number of comments that reject brand activism, in general (a lot more than comments in support of brand activism). More importantly, the negative disposition is related to unfavorable evaluations and consumer behavior changes.

In line with previous research, we found that males react stronger to threats to their gender identity and non-traditional gender portrayals. Users expressed strong negative emotions, which triggered heated discussions and harmful responses. Thus, brand activism related to gender roles – especially if they challenge traditional gender roles – is a risky strategy for brands targeting males. A significant number of males show strong reactions to ads for female brands, too. However, these responses are not as harmful, since males are not the target group of these brands. Taking a stand on divisive issues seems to fit female brands better – at least for the topic of gender roles, but potentially also for other topics such as sustainability, which have been shown to be more relevant to females (D'Souze & Taghian, 2017). This aspect has not received much attention in marketing science and practice yet.

Even though online customer comments offer a rich source of information in a natural environment, they cannot be understood as being representative for the brands' target group. Future research studies should use alternative research designs for the sake of higher representativeness. Similarly, alternative topics of brand activism need to be examined. Further, the role of emotions as mediators between source-, issue- and ad-related evaluations and outcomes on the level of brand attitudes and behaviors should be addressed by research.

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