

Exploring ongoing brand activism discourse on Reddit: ‘The Only Rainbow That Matters’.

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Exploring ongoing brand activism discourse on Reddit: ‘The Only Rainbow That Matters’.

Brands taking sociopolitical stances reshape the consumer–corporation relationship. This practice, known as brand activism, moves beyond traditional marketing to include explicit messaging and actions. Because brand activism is partisan, it unfolds across opposing political camps, circulating through wider socio-political discourse rather than contained communities. Brand publics - fluid, independent collectives - capture this broader space where polarized groups intersect. This study connects brand activism and brand publics through a netnography of Skittles’ “The Only Rainbow That Matters” Pride campaign. We observed two discursive patterns: convergent discourse, which focuses on the core elements of the brand’s activism, and divergent discourse, which moves beyond the campaign and into adjacent or unrelated discussions.

Key Words: Brand Activism, Brand Public, Netnography.

Track: Social responsibility & Ethics.

1. Introduction

Brands increasingly engage in sociopolitical issues, reshaping the relationship between corporations and consumers (Ahmad et al., 2024). This phenomenon called *brand activism* extends beyond traditional marketing into value-driven campaigns addressing partisan issues (Ahmad et al., 2024; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022). While existing research often focuses on brand communities, this paper reframes brand activism through the lens of brand publics: fluid, decentralized, and rapidly shifting collectives that form around shared points of interest rather than stable identity (Ahmad et al., 2024; Arvidsson & Caliendo, 2016; Mirzaei et al., 2022; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). This conference paper provides a condensed account of a netnographic study examining discourse surrounding Skittles’ recurring “The Only Rainbow That Matters” Pride Month campaign. The study explores how brand-related sociopolitical discourse evolves on Reddit, identifying how conversations converge on or diverge from the brand and LGBTQ+ issues over time.

1.1 *Brand activism*

Brand activism entails public, value-driven stances that communicate where a company stands on contested social issues (Moorman, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2021). These efforts rely both on messaging (e.g., advertising, social media communication) and prosocial practices, tangible implementation that can be short term (donations) or long term (packaging changes) (Nalick et al., 2016; Warren, 2021). Skittles’ Pride Month campaign illustrates activist branding: monochrome packaging symbolically “gives up” the rainbow to spotlight Pride. Over time, the campaign evolved in response to public feedback, shifting from white to grey packaging and later incorporating artwork by LGBTQ+ creators. Through this evolution, Skittles signaled ongoing commitment while navigating criticism around rainbow capitalism, authenticity, and potential misinterpretation.

1.2 *Brand publics*

Brand publics differ from brand communities by being transient and affect-driven rather than identity-based (Arvidsson & Caliendo, 2016). Users in a brand public do not

necessarily share long-term commitment or interaction; instead, they engage through temporary, situational discourse shaped by online platforms. Reddit, decentralized, pseudonymous, and designed for open, user-driven conversation, provides an ideal setting for observing brand publics (Proferes et al., 2021). Discussions arise spontaneously, shift unpredictably, and often outlive the formal duration of a brand campaign. This fluidity allows examination of how brand activism resonates beyond brand-controlled communication.

Because brand activism concerns contested social issues, political discourse inevitably shapes brand publics (Hydock et al., 2020; Weber et al., 2021). Discussions around LGBTQ+ rights on Reddit often intersect with broader ideological tensions, including criticisms of corporate hypocrisy, accusations of “woke washing,” and emotional expressions of identity and resistance (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022). Political discussion on Reddit are frequently polarized and fragmented (Proferes et al., 2021). Users articulate personal stakes, question authenticity, express outrage, or use humour to negotiate identity (Canavan, 2025; Tressoldi et al., 2023). These dynamics contribute to the highly unstable nature of meaning-making in brand publics.

Research question: *What are the effects on public discourse when brand activism appropriates a social issue within a brand public?*

2. Methodology

A netnographic approach was employed, drawing on archival, interactive, and reflective data (Kozinets, 2010). The study focuses on Skittles’ recurring Pride Month campaign, “The Only Rainbow That Matters,” in which the brand temporarily removes its rainbow colouring and adopts monochromatic packaging to symbolically “give their rainbow to Prides.” The campaign is supported by social media messaging and a cause-related component, with purchases of the limited-edition packaging contributing donations to GLAAD, an LGBT charity.

The campaign’s iterative nature provides a valuable opportunity to examine how brand activism evolves in response to consumer discourse. For instance, early iterations

of the monochromatic packaging prompted online commentary and memes suggesting that the black-and-white design resembled “white pride” messaging. In subsequent years, Skittles modified the packaging, clarifying the text to “LGBT Pride” and incorporating grey tones to mitigate misinterpretation. This dynamic adaptation allows us to observe how visual communication strategies and consumer-generated responses interact over time, offering insight into how discourse surrounding brand activism develops and potentially influences perceived polarization. The study analyzed 1,163 Reddit threads and more than 35,000 comments across 20 subreddits between 2016 and 2024 (Table 1). These ranged from LGBTQ+ spaces to political forums, humour-based communities, and general discussion subreddits.

r/	ADporn	Brandnewsentance	Greentext	Mademesmile	ShitliberalsSay
Threads	2	28	12	16	2
Comments	13	234	500	293	32
Replies	40	274	1189	304	53
Total	55	536	1701	613	87
r/	Amlbeingtoosensitive	Candy	Insanepeoplefacebook	Memes	Snacking
Threads	1	200	1	140	34
Comments	4	5863	52	616	735
Replies	3	2502	82	492	334
Total	8	8565	135	1248	1103
r/	Asexual	Confidentlyincorrect	LGBTeens	MildlyInfuriating	Teenagers
Threads	1	2	200	200	200
Comments	9	14	593	3297	6117
Replies	6	32	489	2622	2162
Total	16	48	1282	6119	8479
t/	Asexuality	Gay	LGBTMemes	Outoftheloop	LGBT
Threads	2	7	7	8	100
Comments	24	29	53	35	2601
Replies	17	35	38	187	2185
Total	43	71	98	230	4886
Grand total	Threads: 1,163	Comments: 21,114	Replies: 13,246	n= 35,523	

Table 1: Breakdown of subreddits used for study and the number of threads, comments and replies used.

The temporal nature of data revealed heightened discussion during late 2023–2024, influenced by wider corporate activism controversies (e.g., the Bud Light–Mulaney incident) and growing political polarization around LGBTQ+ issues. Reddit’s long-form posting style made visible not only direct responses to the campaign but also broader ideological debates. Analysis followed an iterative thematic process, refining

codes into higher-order themes centered on convergent and divergent discourse (Morgan & Nica, 2020; Parmentier & Fischer, 2015) (Figure 1).

3. Findings

We identified a distinctive pattern of both convergence and divergence in discourse, reflecting the fluid nature of brand publics. From these dynamics, six sub-themes emerged: three forms of convergence—community convergence, issue convergence, and brand convergence—and three forms of divergence—ideological divergence, discursive divergence, and brand divergence. Within the transient environment of Reddit, a thread beginning with Skittles’ engagement in LGBTQA+ activism may therefore converge into deeper connections or diverge into adjacent socio-political discussions or away from both the brand and the issue entirely (Figure 1).

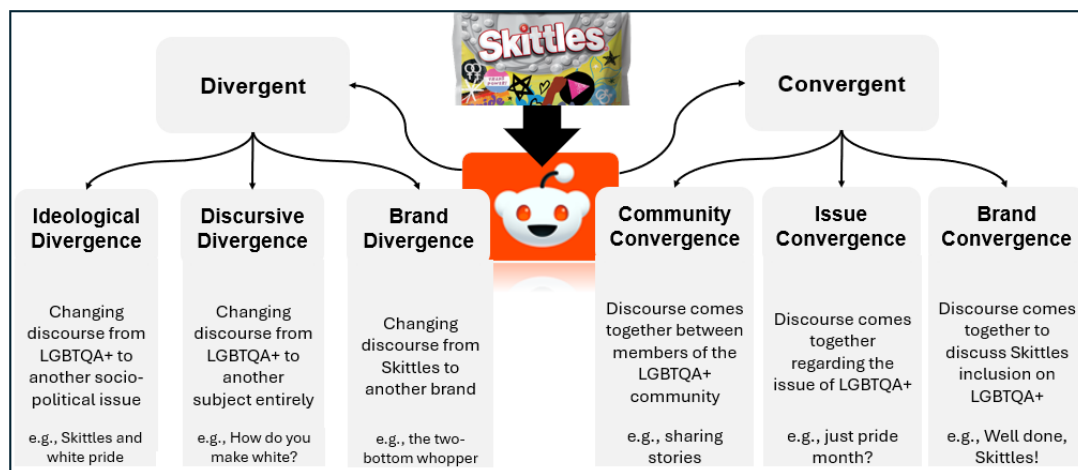


Figure 1: Presentation of higher order themes

3.1 Convergent discourse

We define convergent discourse as communication that stays within the boundaries of the original topic, centring on the core aspects of the brand’s activism. Within the netnography, we identified three primary areas of convergence: the LGBTQA+ community, the contested issue itself, and the brand. Firstly, the LGBTQA+ community and its relationship to the brand/product emerged as a major focus. For example, in a thread detached from the Skittles campaign, a user joked, “*How has no one*

noticed I'm gay yet? I eat Skittles, and they still think I'm straight like WTF?!" (u/Cocaimeth on r/Teenagers). This symbolic connection between LGBTQA+ identity and Skittles extends into community slang, where *"titty skittles"* is used by some trans women to refer to estrogen (u/IPotatoyoufour on r/Brandnewsentence).

Secondly, the contested issue—LGBTQA+ rights—encompassed both political and community-based discussions. Users engaged with brand involvement, policy debates, and personal questions. For instance, one user wrote, *"So, I've been having dreams that are making me question my sexuality, and I could use some help."* (u/Poseyinabox28 on r/LGBTeens), using a brand-adjacent discussion space to seek advice. Lastly, users focused directly on the brand. Threads included both praise and critique. Responding to Figure 5 on r/Adporn, u/Rednex96 commented, *"Might just be me but I found it really tough to read the arching text. Good concept though,"* illustrating the evaluative orientation common on Reddit. We now define each of the three convergence sub-categories.

Community convergence involved users sharing identity-affirming humour, personal stories, and supportive dialogue within LGBTQ+ spaces. Skittles often functioned as a light-hearted symbolic marker of identity. Humour reinforced community solidarity and reclaimed negative stereotypes.

Issue convergence occurred when discussions shifted away from Skittles and focused more heavily on LGBTQ+ rights, corporate authenticity, and critiques of rainbow capitalism. Users debated whether seasonal support was meaningful, questioned inconsistencies in corporate values, and reflected on structural discrimination. Here, the brand receded as broader social discourse took precedence.

Brand convergence brought Skittles to the centre of discussion. Users evaluated the brand's inclusivity, critiqued design choices or messaging clarity, and assessed whether the campaign could be misinterpreted. Engagement remained tied to Skittles' political positioning.

3.2 Divergent discourse

Not all discourse remained centred on the intended issue or focal brand. Divergent discourse refers to communication that moves beyond the original topic, branching into adjacent or unrelated discussions. As with convergence, we first identify the areas from which discourse diverged: ideology, brand, and the discursive frame itself. Firstly, ideological divergence occurred when discussions about LGBTQA+ issues prompted reflection on other socio-political topics, such as race. For example, Reddit-user-3670 on r/greentext criticised the campaign by stating, *“Skittles make ‘pride skittles’ by removing the coloured ones, making it whites only,”* which led to a debate about race and racism.

Secondly, brand divergence involved shifting away from Skittles toward other brands or questioning Skittles’ legitimacy as a political actor. In one example from r/Adporn, u/WretchedMoot wrote, *“Pepsi you see this? This is how you give to a cause rather than appropriating it to [sell] your products... Good thing Skittles got taste.”* Although framed in relation to Skittles, the thread expanded into critiques of other brands’ participation in “rainbow capitalism,” including Walmart and Converse. Lastly, we identified discursive divergence, in which discussions abandoned both the original ideology (LGBTQA+) and the brand (Skittles). For instance, a thread on r/awwwtf devolved into a debate about whether white is the absence or combination of colours, with u/classic_corgutte_528 remarking, *“Yeah, for light, try mixing all colors of paint and tell me if it's white.”* We now outline the three divergence sub-categories more clearly.

Ideological divergence involved conversations shifting from LGBTQ+ issues to other socio-political debates (e.g., BLM, Palestine, racial justice). Users sometimes compared levels of attention given to different causes, using Skittles as a springboard for broader political frustrations.

Brand divergence occurred when threads moved from Skittles to critiques of rainbow capitalism or comparisons with companies such as Nike, Bud Light, or Converse. In some cases, discussions shifted to unrelated product comparisons (e.g., cereal brands, sugar content).

Discursive divergence emerged when threads abandoned both the issue and the brand entirely, devolving into scientific debates, personal anecdotes, or off-topic humour. These shifts illustrate Reddit's fluid and unpredictable discursive environment.

4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that brand activism is never fully controllable within brand publics. Once messaging enters open digital spaces, discourse evolves unpredictably. Convergent discourse can support activism by reinforcing identity, stimulating political reflection, or generating collective critique that refines public understanding. Divergent discourse, however, illustrates how campaigns risk dilution, misinterpretation, or derailment as discussion expands beyond intended frames. This study extends brand activism literature by examining post-campaign discourse and demonstrating the long-term effects of online discussion. It also advances understanding of brand publics by highlighting how political affect humour and how ideological tension shape collective meaning-making over time.

5. Future Research

Future studies could explore other sociopolitical issues, compare platforms (e.g., TikTok, X, Instagram), or involve interactive netnographic engagement with users. Further exploration of "explicit interpretation" defined as instances where users misread campaign elements due to political or cultural framing, may offer insight into how partisan contexts shape meaning-making in brand publics.

6. Conclusion

This study reveals the dynamic interplay between convergent and divergent discourse within brand publics surrounding Skittles' Pride campaign. Brand activism generates extended, unpredictable public conversations that may reinforce, reshape, or undermine the brand's intended message. Understanding these dynamics is essential for brands navigating sociopolitical engagement in online environments where narrative control is inherently limited.

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