



Taking A Stand: Consumer Perceptions Of Brand Activism And Its Impact On Brand Loyalty Among Gen Z And Millennials

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ABSTRACT

Brand activism has become a significant strategy for companies seeking to engage socially conscious consumers, particularly among Generation Z and Millennials. This study investigates how consumers' perceptions of brand activism influence brand loyalty, focusing on the mediating roles of brand attitude and brand trust. Guided by the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the research analyzes the effects of perceived issue novelty, controversy, argument quality, authenticity, and motives on brand evaluation. A quantitative approach was employed, collecting data through an online survey of Indonesian consumers familiar with a brand activism campaign. The analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling with Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS). Results show that perceived argument quality and authenticity significantly influence brand trust, which in turn enhances brand loyalty. The findings suggest that building trust through clear, authentic messaging is key to successful brand activism. This study offers valuable insights for marketers in crafting campaigns that resonate with socially aware audiences and foster long-term consumer relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Consumers today expect brands to take a public stance on important social and political issues. This expectation is especially high among Generation Z and Millennials, who value brands that align with their beliefs and demonstrate social responsibility. As a result, political brand activism has become a growing strategy, particularly during global crises. However, when brands engage in sensitive political conflicts, such as the Israel-Palestine issue, their actions can trigger strong emotional responses, both supportive and critical.

This study investigates how Indonesian consumers, particularly those from younger generations, respond to a local brand's political activism during the Israel-Palestine conflict. The brand initially faced criticism for appearing neutral or misaligned, which later led to a strategic

shift through a donation campaign supporting Palestinian humanitarian causes. This context provides a timely and relevant case to examine how consumers perceive a brand's motives, the authenticity of its message, and the quality of its arguments.

By applying the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), this research explores how consumers form trust and attitudes when evaluating politically charged activism. The study focuses on variables such as issue novelty, controversy, argument quality, authenticity, and motives, and how these influence brand trust and loyalty. The findings aim to provide deeper understanding of political brand activism in emerging markets and offer practical guidance for brands navigating global social tensions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand Activism in the Context of Local Beauty Brands

Brand activism refers to a company's deliberate efforts to take a stand on sociopolitical issues that transcend their immediate economic interests (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). This evolution represents a shift from traditional profit-centered communication toward purpose-driven engagement aligned with consumer values and beliefs. Brand activism encompasses areas such as environmental sustainability, social justice, human rights, and political conflict. Although traditionally associated with multinational corporations, local beauty brands are increasingly engaging in activism to resonate with socially conscious consumers.

Unlike cause-related marketing, which often aims for short-term promotional gains, brand activism is rooted in long-term ideological alignment (Moorman, 2020). Scholars argue that effective brand activism can enhance consumer trust and loyalty when perceived as authentic and congruent with a brand's core identity (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Nevertheless, activism may also incite backlash if it is seen as opportunistic or disingenuous (Bhagwat et al., 2020). The risk is amplified when activism pertains to controversial or polarizing issues, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

For local beauty brands, activism presents both reputational opportunities and strategic risks. These brands often operate in culturally sensitive markets where consumer responses are influenced by religious, political, and social values. As such, understanding consumer interpretations of brand activism in humanitarian contexts is crucial for assessing its implications on brand equity.

Theoretical Framework and Key Variables

Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), serves as a foundational framework to understand how individuals process persuasive messages. ELM distinguishes between two routes of persuasion: the central route, involving high cognitive engagement with the message content, and the peripheral route, which relies on cues such as source credibility or emotional appeal.

In the realm of brand activism, ELM is useful for explaining how consumers process activism messages. Consumers who perceive an issue as personally relevant are more likely to engage through the central route (Chang, 2020). In contrast, messages that are less personally relevant are often processed peripherally. Factors such as message quality and issue novelty are pivotal for encouraging central route processing (Cho et al., 2019). When a local beauty brand addresses an emotionally charged and socially significant issue, such as the Palestinian conflict, consumers may evaluate the message deeply, considering argument quality, consistency, and brand motives.

Perceived Issue Novelty and Controversy

Perceived issue novelty is the extent to which consumers view the issue raised by the brand as new or previously unaddressed (Winterich et al., 2019). Novel issues tend to attract attention and stimulate cognitive engagement, promoting central route processing within the ELM framework. A local beauty brand publicly addressing a global issue such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may be seen as novel and courageous, drawing consumer interest.

H1: Perceived issue novelty has a positive effect on brand attitude.

Simultaneously, novelty can intersect with perceived controversy. Controversial issues are characterized by divergent public opinions or moral sensitivities (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Activism on such issues may lead to polarized responses, with some consumers supportive and others critical. High controversy can intensify scrutiny and raise expectations for authenticity (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Thus, the interplay between novelty and controversy is central to the effectiveness of activist messaging.

H2: Perceived issue controversy has a positive effect on brand attitude

Perceived Argument Quality

Argument quality refers to the perceived strength, logic, and evidence of a persuasive message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In brand activism, strong, coherent, and fact-based arguments are more likely to elicit favorable attitudes and enhance message credibility (Cho et al., 2019). When a local beauty brand makes a political statement, consumers assess the message's logic, coherence, and alignment with social values. Weak or vague messaging can foster skepticism or backlash, particularly when addressing emotionally charged topics. Conversely, messages with compelling arguments and actionable support can reinforce brand credibility.

H3a: Perceived argument quality has a positive effect on brand attitude.

H3b: Perceived argument quality has a positive effect on brand trust.

Perceived Authenticity

Authenticity, defined as the perceived sincerity, consistency, and alignment between brand values and activist stance, is a key determinant of successful brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Consumers assess authenticity based on prior brand behavior, message tone, and alignment with brand identity. A brand with no history of sociopolitical engagement may be viewed skeptically if it suddenly adopts an activist voice without clear rationale. On the other hand, consistent and value-driven communication strengthens trust and emotional bonds.

H4a: Perceived authenticity has a positive effect on brand attitude.

H4b: Perceived authenticity has a positive effect on brand trust.

Perceived Altruistic and Self-Interest Motives

Perceived motives altruistic versus self-interested shape consumer evaluations of activism. Altruistic motives are rooted in social responsibility, while self-interest motives stem from reputational or financial goals (Yoon et al., 2006). Consumers generally respond more favorably when activism appears driven by genuine concern for the cause rather than commercial gain (Bhagwat et al., 2020). For local beauty brands, often embedded in cultural and religious contexts, the distinction between altruistic and self-serving motives is particularly significant.

H5a: Perceived altruistic motives have a positive effect on brand attitude.

H5b: Perceived altruistic motives have a positive effect on brand trust

H6a: Perceived self-interest motives have a positive effect on brand attitude.

H6b: Perceived self-interest motives have a positive effect on brand trust.

Consumer Responses: Trust, Attitude, and Loyalty

Brand trust refers to consumers' belief that the brand is honest, reliable, and will act in their best interest (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Trust mediates the relationship between perceived brand activism and long-term consumer behavior. Brand attitude, the overall evaluative assessment of the brand (Keller, 1993), is also influenced by how activism is perceived. When consumers perceive a brand's activism as authentic, well-argued, and ethically motivated, both trust and positive brand attitudes are likely to increase (Moorman, 2020). These outcomes contribute to brand loyalty, defined as the consumer's intention to repurchase or support the brand over time. In the beauty sector where emotional connection and product involvement are high, brand loyalty is a critical outcome of successful activism.

H7: Brand trust has a positive effect on brand attitude.

H7: Brand attitude has a positive effect on brand loyalty.

H7: Brand trust has a positive effect on brand loyalty.

METHODS

This study proposes an integrated model adapted from the frameworks of Nguyen et al. (2022) and Atanga (2022). The model combines the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) with a brand activism perspective to analyze consumer responses toward brand's recent activism campaign in the context of the Israel– Hamas conflict. The objective is to examine the influence of seven independent variables on brand loyalty, with brand attitude and brand trust acting as mediating variables.

The seven independent variables are grouped into three main categories: (1) issue-related characteristics, which include *perceived issue novelty* and *perceived issue controversy* (Atanga, 2022); (2) message quality, comprising *perceived argument quality* and *perceived authenticity*; and (3) perceived motives of brand activism, namely *perceived altruistic motives* and *perceived self-interest motives* (Nguyen et al., 2022).

Sampling

This study employed a purposive sampling technique with the following inclusion criteria: (1) respondents must be consumers of the brand's products, and (2) they must possess knowledge or awareness of the brand's recent activism campaign. The target population consists of Generation Z and Millennial consumers in Indonesia. The unit of analysis is individual consumers. A sample size of 300 respondents was determined to be adequate for Structural Equation Modeling using the PLS approach (Hair et al., 2021). Respondents were drawn from diverse demographic backgrounds, including gender, age, residence, education, and occupation.

Data Collection

Data were collected via an online survey distributed through Google Forms and shared using digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter. The questionnaire instrument was divided into four sections: (1) screening criteria for respondent eligibility, (2) items measuring perceptions of the study variables, (3) questions regarding consumption patterns, and (4) demographic information. Prior to the main data collection, a pilot survey was conducted to assess content validity and construct reliability.

Measures

All variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Measurement items for perceived motives and perceived authenticity were adapted from Nguyen et al. (2022), while items for issue novelty and issue controversy were adapted from Atanga (2022). Other measurement items were developed based on relevant literature and adjusted to fit the local context.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4 software. This approach was selected due to its suitability for exploratory model testing and its robustness in handling non-normal data distributions. PLS-SEM also facilitates simultaneous analysis of complex relationships among latent variables while assessing measurement reliability and construct validity.

RESULTS

This study employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 4.0 to test the hypothesized relationships between perceived issue characteristics, brand authenticity, consumer motives, and brand outcomes. The analysis was conducted using bootstrapping technique with 5,000 subsamples at a 5% significance level, following recommendations by Hair et al. (2017). Path coefficients were evaluated using t-statistics and p-values, with significance determined at $p < 0.05$ and t-statistic > 1.645 .

The structural model evaluation encompassed R-square analysis, effect size (f-square) testing, and path coefficient analysis to determine the nature, magnitude, and significance of relationships between constructs in the hypothesized model.

Table 1 Path coefficients result

	T statistics	P Values
Perceived Issue Novelty > Brand attitude	2.137	0.033
Perceived issue Controversy > Brand attitude	0.512	0.609
Perceived argument quality > Brand attitude	1.875	0.061
Perceived argument quality > Brand trust	3.870	0.000
Perceived authenticity > Brand attitude	0.989	0.323
Perceived Authenticity -> Brand trust	8.744	0.000
Perceived altruistic motives > Brand attitude	0.994	0.320
Perceived Altruistic Motive > Brand trust	7.639	0.000
Perceived self interest motives > Brand attitude	3.536	0.000
Perceived self interest motives > Brand trust	3.450	0.001
Brand attitude. > Brand loyalty	2.422	0.015
Brand trust > Brand attitude	5.607	0.000
Brand trust -> Brand loyalty	4.072	0.000

Source: Data Processed, 2025

H1: Perceived Issue Novelty and Brand Attitude

The analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between perceived issue novelty and brand attitude ($\beta = 0.103$, $t = 2.137$, $p = 0.033$). This finding supports H1, indicating that consumers' perception of the novelty of the Palestine issue raised by the brand positively influences their attitude toward the brand. The result contradicts some previous findings (B. Atanga, 2022) but aligns with studies suggesting novelty can enhance consumer attention and brand differentiation (Dahl et al., 2003; Sung et al., 2016).

H2: Perceived Issue Controversy and Brand Attitude

Contrary to expectations, perceived issue controversy did not significantly influence brand attitude ($\beta = 0.019$, $t = 0.512$, $p = 0.609$). H2 is therefore rejected. This non-significant relationship suggests that the controversial nature of the Palestine issue does not directly translate into positive or negative brand attitudes among Indonesian consumers. The finding diverges from B. Atanga's (2022) research, potentially indicating that consumers engage in more complex reasoning processes when evaluating controversial brand activism rather than forming immediate attitudinal responses.

H3a: Perceived Argument Quality and Brand Attitude

The relationship between perceived argument quality and brand attitude was not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.099$, $t = 1.875$, $p = 0.061$). Although the t-statistic exceeded the threshold (1.645), the p-value (0.061) was above the conventional significance level (0.05), leading to the rejection of H3a. This suggests that argument quality alone may not be sufficient to directly influence brand attitudes, possibly indicating that consumers rely more on peripheral cues in attitude formation.

H3b: Perceived Argument Quality and Brand Trust

In contrast, perceived argument quality demonstrated a significant positive effect on brand trust ($\beta = 0.220$, $t = 3.870$, $p < 0.001$). H3b is supported, confirming that high-quality arguments in brand activism communications enhance consumer trust in the brand. This finding aligns with the Elaboration Likelihood Model, suggesting that quality arguments facilitate central route processing and stronger trust formation (Nguyen et al., 2022).

H4a: Perceived Authenticity and Brand Attitude

The hypothesized positive relationship between perceived authenticity and brand attitude was not supported ($\beta = 0.054$, $t = 0.989$, $p = 0.323$). H4a is rejected, indicating that perceived authenticity alone does not significantly influence brand attitudes. This unexpected finding suggests that authenticity may require additional supporting factors to translate into positive brand evaluations, possibly reflecting increased consumer skepticism toward corporate social initiatives.

H4b: Perceived Authenticity and Brand Trust

Perceived authenticity showed a strong positive relationship with brand trust ($\beta = 0.365$, $t = 8.744$, $p < 0.001$), strongly supporting H4b. The high t-statistic indicates that authenticity is a crucial determinant of brand trust, suggesting that consumers' perception of genuine commitment to social causes significantly enhances their trust in the brand.

H5a: Perceived Altruistic Motives and Brand Attitude

The relationship between perceived altruistic motives and brand attitude was not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.058$, $t = 0.994$, $p = 0.320$), leading to the rejection of H5a. This finding suggests that consumers' perception of altruistic intentions does not directly translate into improved brand attitudes, possibly due to increased skepticism about corporate social responsibility initiatives.

H5b: Perceived Altruistic Motives and Brand Trust

Perceived altruistic motives demonstrated a significant positive effect on brand trust ($\beta = 0.334$, $t = 7.639$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H5b. This indicates that when consumers perceive genuine altruistic intentions behind brand activism, their trust in the brand increases substantially.

H6a: Perceived Self-Interest Motives and Brand Attitude

Surprisingly, perceived self-interest motives showed a significant positive relationship with brand attitude ($\beta = 0.106$, $t = 3.536$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H6a. This counterintuitive finding suggests that consumers may accept commercial motives in brand activism when they perceive transparency and mutual benefit.

H6b: Perceived Self-Interest Motives and Brand Trust

Similarly, perceived self-interest motives positively influenced brand trust ($\beta = 0.130$, $t = 3.450$, $p = 0.001$), supporting H6b. This finding indicates that transparent commercial motives do not necessarily undermine trust when accompanied by genuine social impact.

H7: Brand Trust and Brand Attitude

Brand trust demonstrated a strong positive relationship with brand attitude ($\beta = 0.612$, $t = 5.607$, $p < 0.001$), strongly supporting H7. This substantial effect size indicates that trust serves as a crucial antecedent to positive brand attitudes, confirming the fundamental role of trust in brand relationship building.

H8: Brand Attitude and Brand Loyalty

Brand attitude positively influenced brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.318$, $t = 2.422$, $p = 0.015$), supporting H8. This finding confirms that positive brand attitudes resulting from brand activism contribute to enhanced consumer loyalty.

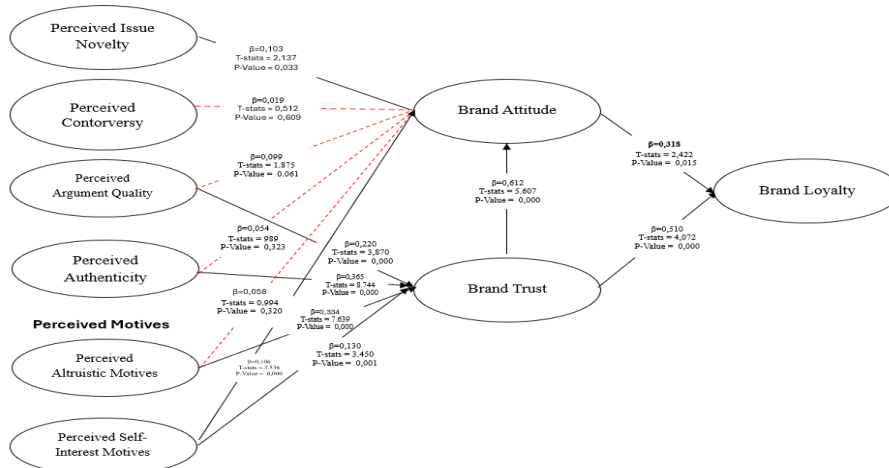
H9: Brand Trust and Brand Loyalty

Brand trust showed a significant positive effect on brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.510$, $t = 4.072$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H9. The substantial coefficient indicates that trust is a strong predictor of brand loyalty, emphasizing its critical role in maintaining long-term consumer relationships.

The rejected hypotheses (H2 and H3a, H4a, H5a) reveal that controversy perception, argument quality's direct effect on attitude, authenticity's direct effect on attitude, and altruistic motives' direct effect on attitude do not significantly influence brand attitudes in the context of brand activism. These findings suggest that the pathway from these constructs to brand outcomes may be more complex than initially hypothesized, potentially requiring mediating mechanisms or additional contextual factors.

The results indicate that trust serves as a more sensitive outcome variable than attitude for several antecedents, suggesting that building trust may be a more effective strategy for brands engaging in social activism than directly targeting attitude formation.

Figure 1 Research Model using bootstrapping



DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide mixed support for existing brand activism literature while revealing important contextual nuances in the Indonesian market. The significant positive relationship between perceived issue novelty and brand attitude ($\beta = 0.103$, $p = 0.033$) contrasts with B. Atanga's (2022) findings but aligns with consumer behavior research emphasizing novelty's role in brand differentiation (Dahl et al., 2003; Sung et al., 2016). This suggests that Indonesian consumers may respond favorably to brands that address previously unaddressed global issues, viewing such stances as innovative rather than opportunistic.

The strong support for trust-building mechanisms corroborates Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) emphasis on authenticity in brand activism. The significant relationships between perceived authenticity and brand trust ($\beta = 0.365$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived altruistic motives and brand trust ($\beta = 0.334$, $p < 0.001$) reinforce the literature's assertion that trust formation is central to successful activism campaigns. However, the non-significant direct effects of authenticity and altruistic motives on brand attitude challenge simplified models that assume direct attitude formation from these constructs. Contrary to much of the Western-centric brand activism literature that emphasizes controversy avoidance (Bhagwat et al., 2020), the non-significant effect of perceived issue controversy on brand attitude suggests that Indonesian consumers may be more tolerant of controversial positions when they align with cultural and religious values. This finding extends our understanding of brand activism effectiveness across different cultural contexts. The counterintuitive positive effects of perceived self-interest motives on both brand attitude ($\beta = 0.106$, $p < 0.001$) and brand trust ($\beta = 0.130$, $p = 0.001$) challenge the conventional wisdom that commercial motives undermine activism effectiveness (Yoon et al., 2006). This finding suggests a more nuanced consumer understanding of business realities in emerging markets. Several unexpected findings warrant deeper examination. The non-significant effect of perceived issue controversy on brand attitude may reflect the specific nature of the Palestine issue in Indonesia's predominantly Muslim context, where support for Palestinian causes enjoys broad social consensus rather than controversy. This cultural alignment may neutralize the typical polarizing effects of controversial activism observed in more diverse religious contexts.

The failure of perceived authenticity to directly influence brand attitude, despite its strong effect on trust, suggests that Indonesian consumers may employ different cognitive pathways when evaluating brand activism. Authenticity may serve as a prerequisite for trust formation rather than a direct driver of favorable attitudes, indicating that the Elaboration Likelihood Model's central and peripheral processing routes may operate differently in collectivist cultures where social proof and consensus matter more than individual attitude formation.

The non-significant direct effect of argument quality on brand attitude, while maintaining significance for trust, may reflect the emotional rather than rational nature of attitude formation in politically charged contexts. Indonesian consumers may prioritize emotional resonance and cultural alignment over logical argumentation when forming immediate brand attitudes, reserving analytical evaluation for trust assessments.

The positive effects of self-interest motives challenge Western assumptions about consumer cynicism toward commercial activism. In Indonesia's developing market context, consumers may appreciate transparency about business motivations and view mutual benefit scenarios as more sustainable than purely altruistic approaches, which may seem unrealistic or unsustainable.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Indonesian consumers respond to brand activism, specifically investigating a local beauty brand's solidarity campaign during the Israel-Palestine conflict. By

applying the Elaboration Likelihood Model framework, the research revealed important insights about the pathways through which activism influences consumer loyalty in emerging markets.

The findings demonstrate that trust formation, rather than direct attitude influence, serves as the primary mechanism through which brand activism achieves effectiveness. Perceived argument quality and authenticity emerged as the strongest predictors of brand trust, which subsequently drives both positive brand attitudes and consumer loyalty. This trust-centric pathway suggests that Indonesian consumers engage in careful evaluation of activism campaigns, prioritizing credibility and sincerity over immediate emotional appeals.

LIMITATION

The most significant limitation stems from the cross-sectional research design, which prevents definitive causal conclusions about how activism perceptions influence consumer loyalty. While the structural equation modeling suggests directional relationships, the possibility of reverse causality cannot be eliminated. Consumers with existing positive brand attitudes may retrospectively evaluate the activism campaign more favorably, artificially inflating the observed relationships between perceived authenticity, trust, and loyalty. This limitation directly impacts the study's ability to provide definitive guidance on whether investing in authentic activism messaging will causally improve consumer loyalty, as the relationships may partially reflect pre-existing consumer-brand relationships rather than activism-induced changes.

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