Research Article

Open Access

CrossMark

# How brand involvement influences consumer reactions to controversial and noncontroversial issues

## Abstract

Recent events have raised concerns about the impact on brands that engage in controversial issues. Yet, less attention has been paid to how brands navigate noncontroversial matters. This study explores the effects of brand involvement in both contentious and neutral contexts. From a marketing perspective, we investigate how consumers perceive brands based on cognitive processing, emotions, personal experiences, and cultural backgrounds. Cognitive processing plays a key role in helping consumers understand and interpret brand messages, while emotions and cultural values shape their views on controversial topics. Social interactions and peer influence further shape these perceptions.

Through an experimental study, we analyze how different levels of controversy and brand presence affect consumers' perceptions of both the issue and the brand itself. Our findings show that consumers view branded content on controversial topics as more likely to trigger irritation. Moreover, brand presence amplifies the disturbance caused by controversial topics, while noncontroversial topics seem more unsettling when no brand is involved.

This research offers insights into how brand presence influences consumer perceptions in both controversial and neutral contexts, providing guidance for brands as they navigate these complex environments.

**Keywords:** brand activism, brand authenticity, controversy, consumers perception, activism

**Fabio Shimabukuro Sandes**
Marketing Department, ESDES Business School – Université Catholique de Lyon - UCLy, Portugal

**Correspondence:** Fabio Shimabukuro Sandes, Marketing Department, ESDES Business School – Université Catholique de Lyon - UCLy, Portugal, Email fsandes@gmail.com

## Introduction

The most recent definition of Marketing includes "society at large" as one of the main stakeholders for Marketing (AMA, 2022), and it is a role that Marketing must fulfill to help societies improve over time.[1,2] However, recent cases such as Nike's Kaepernick and Gillette's antitoxic masculinity campaigns[3,4] suggest that consumers may react negatively when there is an incongruence of values between what the brand stands for and consumers' values.

One would expect less controversial topics (i.e., environmental concerns) to lead to a less turbulent discussion and impact than more controversial topics (i.e., gender identity, LGBTQIA+). However, this difference needs to be addressed in the literature, and this is the focus of this study. What the authors mean by controversy needs to be clarified, as their definition does not specifically define the specific characteristics of controversy and if it only needs to be a little controversy to classify as brand activism.

We begin by briefly reviewing the literature on the main concepts of brand activism and different levels of controversy. Then we present the results of one experimental study we conducted to test how different levels of controversy may lead to different outcomes in consumers' perception of brands investing in activist choices in the market. Our results show that consumers often expect brands to take a stand on controversial topics, and

## Literature review

Vredenburg et al.[4] offer a definition of brand activism that sets it apart from Cause Marketing, Corporate Social Marketing, and Advocacy Advertising. Brand activism occurs when companies take a clear stance on controversial issues like racism, gender equality, and LGBTQIA+ rights, which often leads to mixed reactions from consumers. The proposed framework suggests that consumer responses vary, ranging from delight to outrage, depending on how aligned the brand's values are with those of its audience.

Two aspects of this definition need further exploration in marketing literature. The first is how to define what makes a topic controversial. The second is whether different levels of controversy exist and how those levels may impact a brand's outcomes when it takes a stand on these issues.

### The definition of controversy

Controversy is a complex concept, influenced by multiple perspectives. Camicia[5] argues that controversy is often defined by hegemonic ideology, which shapes the norms that guide both consumers and society. However, from a marketing perspective, it's crucial to understand controversy from the consumer's viewpoint since their perception is key to assessing how polarizing an issue may be. This study adopts a subjective view, where individual beliefs, values, attitudes, experiences, and cultural contexts shape the way consumers perceive controversial topics.[6–8]

The subjectivity of consumer perception means that their cognitive processes, emotions, and personal experiences heavily influence how they interpret controversy. For example, Alsaad[9] found that consumers tend to act in accordance with their subjective norms, particularly when they strongly identify with ethical concerns.

Understanding how consumers process messages is essential when analyzing their perception of controversy. Kitchen et al.[10] propose a model for how consumers elaborate on messages. Marketing tactics like catchy slogans help streamline these cognitive processes. An example is McDonald's "I'm Lovin' It" campaign, which used a simple, memorable phrase to engage consumers.

Emotions are another critical factor in understanding consumer responses to controversial topics. Controversial issues often evoke strong emotions like anger, empathy, or excitement, which influence how individuals perceive and evaluate both the issue and the brand. Schindler et al.[11] examined the role of emotions in aesthetic consumption, highlighting how brands like Nike use emotionally charged campaigns like "Dream Crazier" to build deeper connections with their audience.

Values, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds also shape how consumers interpret controversial issues. Hassan et al.[12] demonstrated that cultural values play a key role in filtering how consumers process marketing messages. The Body Shop's long-standing opposition to animal testing appeals to consumers' ethical values, reinforcing its brand identity in a crowded market.

Finally, social interactions and group dynamics influence consumer perceptions of controversy. Social norms, peer pressure, and group conformity often shape how individuals align with specific viewpoints. Studies by Johnstone & Hopper[13] and Huang et al.[14] show that peer influence can shape consumer behavior and likely extends to how consumers perceive controversial issues.

At last, when defining consumer perceptions of controversy, it is important to consider factors such as subjectivity, cognitive processing, emotional responses, cultural norms, peer influence, and underlying values. These elements shape how consumers perceive, interpret, and respond to brand messages.

## Range of topics that may be controversial in marketing

In marketing, many topics can spark controversy, requiring brands to navigate complex social dynamics and ethical boundaries. This section explores eight key areas of potential controversy, each accompanied by real-world examples that illustrate how brands handle these sensitive matters.

a) **Ethical considerations:** Ethics in marketing span issues like deceptive advertising, data privacy, targeting vulnerable populations, and promoting harmful products or services. Brands must carefully consider these factors, especially when marketing to children, individuals with dependencies, or those with privacy concerns. One prominent example is Spotify's "Embrace People's Weirdness" campaign, which humorously highlighted unusual user behaviors based on their streaming habits. Although lighthearted, the campaign sparked debate about how companies use personal data, highlighting the broader concern of privacy exploitation in marketing.

b) **Social responsibility:** A significant focus of modern marketing involves how companies address social and environmental issues, including sustainability, diversity, and corporate social responsibility (CSR). TOMS Shoes' "One for One" campaign, in which the company donates one pair of shoes for every purchase, is a notable example. This initiative raised awareness about global poverty while allowing consumers to participate in social good. However, it also sparked discussions on the long-term sustainability of such efforts, as some critics questioned the effectiveness of one-time donations in addressing systemic issues like poverty.

c) **Cultural sensitivity:** Cultural representation in marketing demands careful attention to avoid appropriation, stereotyping, or offensive portrayals. An excellent example is Nike's "Juntas Imparables" campaign, which skillfully depicted Mexican and Latin American cultures while promoting women's empowerment. This campaign resonated strongly with its target audience, respecting cultural values and avoiding common pitfalls such as stereotyping or misrepresentation. The positive reception illustrates how cultural sensitivity can foster stronger connections with diverse audiences.

d) **Gender and Sexuality:** Marketing that perpetuates or challenges gender norms and sexuality often sparks debate, particularly regarding inclusivity and representation. Diesel's "Francesca" campaign, which told the story of a trans woman's journey and her transformation into a nun, exemplifies how brands can navigate these topics sensitively. By focusing on Francesca's personal journey, Diesel addressed gender transition in a thoughtful and inclusive manner, reflecting broader societal conversations about gender identity and religious acceptance.

e) **Body image and beauty standards:** The impact of marketing on body image and self-esteem has been widely discussed, especially in campaigns that promote unrealistic beauty standards. Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign offers an alternative by encouraging a more authentic view of beauty. The campaign's focus on women of different ages, shapes, and ethnicities challenged traditional beauty standards and helped shift public discourse toward a more inclusive understanding of self-image. This approach also sparked broader industry conversations about how brands can promote healthier and more diverse representations of beauty.

f) **Political and social activism:** When brands engage with political or social movements, they take on both risk and responsibility. Airbnb's "We Accept" campaign, launched in response to changing U.S. immigration policies, is a notable example of corporate activism. Airbnb highlighted its commitment to inclusivity by featuring diverse individuals and promoting acceptance. However, such stances often polarize audiences, forcing brands to weigh the potential benefits against the risks of alienating segments of their customer base.

g) **Greenwashing and sustainability claims:** Companies increasingly emphasize sustainability in their marketing efforts, but there is a risk of greenwashing—making misleading claims about environmental responsibility. H&M's "Conscious Collection" faced criticism for promoting sustainable fashion while still encouraging high levels of consumption. To counter this, H&M introduced the "Bring It On" campaign, focusing on recycling used clothing. While these initiatives aim to reduce waste, they also raise questions about the overall impact of fast fashion on sustainability.

h) **Targeting children and vulnerable populations:** Marketing to children raises ethical concerns, particularly regarding manipulative advertising tactics or the promotion of unhealthy products. McDonald's "Happy Meal" campaign, which now includes healthier food options and educational components about exercise, demonstrates how brands can adapt to these concerns. McDonald's has responded to growing criticism by aligning its marketing with public health objectives, making its campaigns more socially responsible while still appealing to younger audiences.

These examples highlight the broad range of topics that can spark controversy in the marketing world. Brands must carefully consider their approach to these issues, as their decisions can significantly impact consumer perceptions and brand reputation. By addressing these topics thoughtfully and ethically, brands can engage with their audience in ways that align with societal expectations and values. Table 1 below summarizes the topics with market and brand examples.

**Table 1** Controversial topics in marketing

| Controversial topic | Brand example | Description | Why controversial (with citation) | Market example |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ethical Considerations | Spotify - "Embrace People's Weirdness" campaign | Sparked privacy debate over how companies use personal data. | Concerns about ethical use of consumer data and privacy exploitation.[15] | Facebook - Data privacy concerns after Cambridge Analytica scandal |
| Social Responsibility | TOMS Shoes - "One for One" campaign | Raised awareness on global poverty but questioned for sustainability. | Effectiveness and sustainability of one-time donations are often questioned.[16] | Ben & Jerry's - Advocacy for environmental and social justice issues |
| Cultural Sensitivity | Nike - "Juntas Imparables" campaign | Promoted women's empowerment while respecting cultural identity. | Risk of cultural appropriation or offensive portrayals.[17] | Pepsi - Criticized for cultural appropriation in Kendall Jenner ad |
| Gender and Sexuality | Diesel - "Francesca" campaign | Highlighted gender transition sensitively, sparking dialogue on inclusion. | Sensitivity around gender representation and inclusivity in marketing.[18] | Gillette - "The Best Men Can Be" campaign addressing toxic masculinity |
| Body Image and Beauty Standards | Dove - "Real Beauty" campaign | Challenged unrealistic beauty standards with a more authentic view. | Harm caused by unrealistic beauty standards in marketing.[19] | Aerie - "Aerie Real" campaign promoting unretouched images of women |
| Political and Social Activism | Airbnb - "We Accept" campaign | Advocated for inclusivity in response to immigration policies but polarized audiences. | Brands risk alienating consumers when engaging in political/social issues.[4] | Nike - Colin Kaepernick campaign supporting social justice, sparking controversy |
| Greenwashing and Sustainability Claims | H&M - "Conscious Collection" and "Bring It On" campaign | Faced criticism for greenwashing while promoting recycling efforts. | Risk of misleading claims about sustainability.[20] | Nestlé - Criticized for misleading sustainability claims on bottled water |
| Targeting Children and Vulnerable Populations | McDonald's - "Happy Meal" with healthier options | Responded to concerns about marketing unhealthy food to children. | Ethical concerns about manipulative marketing to vulnerable groups.[21] | YouTube - Criticism over targeting ads to children and using manipulative techniques |

## Brand activism and consumer perception

A key question arises: Do brands need to engage in controversial topics to be perceived as activist brands? And should they express their values on all societal matters, or focus specifically on controversial ones? These questions have gained increasing relevance as brands navigate the evolving expectations of modern consumers. Brands are no longer evaluated solely on their products or services; instead, their stances on social, political, and environmental issues have become integral to their identity. This shift is particularly pronounced with **Generation Z**, which has emerged as a dominant consumer demographic. According to Spitznagel,[22] Generation Z expects brands to play a positive role in addressing societal issues, often looking to them for leadership on matters like climate change, diversity, and social justice. For this generation, silence on key societal issues can be interpreted as complacency, while an active stance can strengthen a brand's relevance and connection to its audience.

However, the decision for brands to engage with controversial topics is not without risk. While taking a stand can build loyalty with like-minded consumers, it can also alienate other segments. The **Nike Colin Kaepernick campaign**, for example, generated both immense praise and backlash, illustrating the polarized reactions that can result when brands wade into divisive issues. This polarization highlights the delicate balance brands must strike between maintaining authenticity and managing potential backlash.

## Engaging in controversial vs. non-controversial issues

One of the challenges brands face is determining whether to engage only in controversial topics or to also champion non-controversial issues. Controversial topics—such as racial inequality, LGBTQ+ rights, and political activism—can amplify a brand's visibility and attract attention, but they come with heightened risks of alienation. On the other hand, non-controversial issues—such as charitable donations, general environmental awareness, or supporting community education—may have broader appeal but might not create the same level of engagement or differentiation in the marketplace.

**Brand activism**, as defined by Vredenburg et al.,[4] refers to when brands take explicit positions on divisive social issues. This differs from more traditional forms of cause marketing or corporate social responsibility (CSR) because it often involves brands taking sides on polarized issues. Authenticity plays a critical role in how these efforts are perceived. Consumers, especially those from **Generation Z** and **Millennials**, are highly attuned to the distinction between genuine activism and "woke-washing"—a term used to describe superficial or opportunistic efforts by brands to appear socially conscious without substantive action.[4]

For brands, the key challenge lies in determining when their engagement will be perceived as authentic versus performative. Authenticity is often judged by how well a brand's activism aligns with its core values, history, and actions. A brand like **Patagonia**,

which has long championed environmental causes, is seen as credible when it takes a stand on climate change, because these actions are deeply embedded in its identity. Conversely, brands with little history of engagement in a particular area may struggle to convince consumers of their authenticity if they suddenly engage in activism without a clear connection to their values or business practices.

## Balancing authenticity and image

This research seeks to answer critical questions: How can brands determine when to engage in a specific issue, and what makes consumers perceive a brand as authentic when taking a stand? Our study explores how brand authenticity and image are affected by activism on both highly controversial and less controversial topics. These constructs—authenticity and image—are crucial to understanding the broader discussion around brand activism in the literature. Authenticity is essential because it influences how consumers perceive the sincerity of a brand's actions. A lack of authenticity can lead to consumer skepticism and harm brand trust.

**Brand image**, on the other hand, encompasses how a brand is perceived based on its messaging, values, and actions. Activism can either enhance or undermine brand image, depending on how well it resonates with the brand's target audience. When consumers perceive that a brand is taking a stand in line with its core identity, the brand's image is likely to benefit. However, if activism appears forced or disconnected from the brand's usual messaging, it can erode consumer trust.

In this work, we aim to shed light on how brands can navigate the complex terrain of social issues, balancing the need for authenticity with the potential risks of taking a stand. We recognize that not all activism needs to center around controversy. For instance, **Ben & Jerry's**, a brand known for its strong social mission, frequently engages in both controversial and non-controversial activism, ranging from climate justice to supporting small farmers. This flexibility demonstrates that brand activism does not always have to be divisive; it can be a sustained and strategic effort to promote a variety of causes, depending on what aligns with the brand's values.

## The role of consumer expectations

Generation Z's heightened awareness of global issues has made them more discerning in their expectations of brands. This cohort values inclusivity, sustainability, and social justice, and they are quick to hold brands accountable for their actions.[22] Therefore, brands that fail to address key societal issues may risk being labeled as out of touch. For example, the pressure on companies to take meaningful action during movements like **Black Lives Matter** demonstrates how quickly silence or vague statements can damage a brand's reputation.

Yet, while consumers may expect brands to engage in societal issues, there is also a growing concern over the performative nature of some brand activism efforts. To navigate this, brands must ensure their actions are backed by tangible commitments. As research suggests, brands must integrate their activism into their operations, business practices, and long-term strategies.[4] For instance, **Levi's**, which has taken a strong stance on sustainability, goes beyond marketing campaigns by investing in sustainable production processes and ethical labor practices. This integration ensures that their activism resonates with consumers as a genuine commitment rather than a marketing ploy.

Brands are increasingly expected to engage with societal issues, especially by younger generations. However, the decision to take a stand—whether on controversial or non-controversial matters—requires careful consideration. Brands must weigh the risks and benefits, ensuring that their actions align with their core values and that their activism is perceived as authentic. This research aims to offer insights into how brands can engage meaningfully with social issues while maintaining both authenticity and a positive brand image. By examining the interplay between these factors, we hope to provide a roadmap for brands looking to navigate both turbulent and calm waters in the modern marketplace.

## Brand authenticity and its role in marketing

Brand authenticity has been extensively explored in the literature[23–25] as a valuable framework for understanding how brands engage meaningfully with their audience. Brand authenticity refers to a brand's genuineness, transparency, and credibility in its interactions with consumers and stakeholders.[23] It emphasizes the alignment between a brand's identity, values, and actions, which fosters trust and reliability among its consumers. In an increasingly competitive marketplace, authenticity becomes even more crucial[25] as consumers seek deeper connections with the brands they support. Authenticity is not simply a marketing tactic; it involves a brand's core values, purpose, and relationships. Brands that are authentic consistently stay true to their essence, delivering on their promises and maintaining their values, even when market trends shift or challenges arise.

Several factors contribute to brand authenticity:

i. **Purpose and values:** A truly authentic brand operates with a clear purpose and a set of core values that guide all decisions and actions. This purpose transcends the pursuit of profit and reflects a genuine commitment to making a positive impact on society or improving the lives of customers. An example of this can be seen in Patagonia, a brand whose commitment to sustainability permeates every aspect of its marketing and communication strategies. Patagonia's core value of environmental responsibility is embedded in its product offerings, marketing campaigns, and corporate decisions, making sustainability central to its brand identity.

ii. **Consistency:** Consistency reinforces a brand's identity and builds trust with consumers. A brand must deliver a unified experience across all touchpoints, whether through messaging, visuals, customer service, or product quality. Apple exemplifies consistency by ensuring that all its products, services, and marketing communications align seamlessly. Whether a customer is using an iPhone, visiting an Apple store, or interacting with their marketing materials, the experience is consistently high-quality and integrated. Apple's approach reinforces consumer expectations, strengthening its brand loyalty.

iii. **Transparency:** Authentic brands are transparent in their communications and operations. They are open about their processes, ingredients, sourcing, and any other information that matters to consumers. Transparency fosters trust and reliability, especially in an era where consumers are adept at uncovering brand information online. Any inconsistencies or perceived dishonesty can quickly spread through social media, damaging a brand's reputation. A standout example of transparency is ISTO, a Portuguese brand that discloses all production and distribution costs, including sensitive information such as supplier details and profit margins. This radical transparency not only sets ISTO apart but also builds deep trust with its audience.

iv. **Customer-Centricity:** Authentic brands place their customers at the center of their operations, listening to feedback and continually improving products and services. They aim to

establish strong, lasting connections by actively engaging with their audience. Amazon is well-known for its customer-centered approach, offering a highly personalized experience, fast service, and continuous innovation in response to customer needs. Amazon's commitment to delivering convenience and exceptional customer service has made it a leader in customer satisfaction.

v.  **Storytelling:** Storytelling is a powerful tool that brands use to foster authenticity. It allows brands to communicate their values, origins, and personality in a compelling way, creating emotional connections with consumers. Authentic storytelling can resonate deeply with audiences, helping to solidify a brand's identity. Nike has mastered the art of storytelling through its "Just Do

It" tagline, which connects with consumers on both emotional and aspirational levels. Introduced in 1984, the tagline has been used to tell countless stories of perseverance, achievement, and personal empowerment, creating an enduring brand message.

vi.  **Adaptability:** While consistency is critical, brands must also evolve with changing market dynamics and consumer preferences. Authentic brands remain true to their core values but are flexible enough to innovate and adapt. Levi's is a prime example of adaptability. Its 501® jeans, introduced in 1890, have been marketed for over 100 years through various campaigns tailored to younger generations, demonstrating Levi's ability to stay relevant while maintaining its core identity (Table 2).

**Table 2** Authenticity factors, brand and market examples

| Authenticity factor | Brand example | Description | Why important (with citation) | Market example |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Purpose and Values | Patagonia - Sustainability embedded in its identity | Patagonia's purpose of environmental responsibility drives all aspects of its brand and actions. | Clear purpose and values build consumer trust and loyalty.[26] | Ben & Jerry's - Values-driven campaigns focusing on social justice issues. |
| Consistency | Apple - Consistent user experience across products and services | Apple ensures consistency in product quality, messaging, and customer experience, reinforcing consumer trust. | Consistency strengthens brand identity and meets consumer expectations.[27] | Coca-Cola - Consistency in branding across all advertising and product lines. |
| Transparency | ISTO - Radical transparency in production costs and supplier details | ISTO builds trust by disclosing all production costs and supplier details, ensuring radical transparency. | Transparency fosters credibility and prevents reputational damage.[28] | Everlane - Known for radical transparency in pricing and production processes. |
| Customer-Centricity | Amazon - Customer-centered approach with personalized service | Amazon focuses on customer satisfaction, providing personalized and innovative services. | Customer-centricity enhances loyalty and drives consumer satisfaction.[29] | Zappos - Focus on customer service as the foundation of its brand identity. |
| Storytelling | Nike - "Just Do It" tagline used in storytelling | Nike uses storytelling to create emotional and aspirational connections through its "Just Do It" message. | Storytelling helps create authentic brand narratives that resonate with consumers.[30] | Airbnb - Storytelling focused on creating a sense of belonging for travelers. |
| Adaptability | Levi's - Adaptability of the 501® product line for over 100 years | Levi's adapts its marketing to maintain relevance with younger generations while preserving its core identity. | Adaptability ensures relevance in changing markets without sacrificing core values.[31] | Netflix - Adaptability to changing market conditions while maintaining customer-centric services. |

To build authenticity, brands must establish genuine and unique relationships with their consumers. Consumers are more likely to trust, support, and advocate for brands that are perceived as authentic, as these brands are seen as reliable, credible, and aligned with their values. Authenticity is essential for brands that want to resonate with activist campaigns and drive meaningful consumer engagement. It is not enough for brands to simply advertise; they must live their values and integrate them into every aspect of their business. This approach enables them to create deeper, long-lasting connections with their audience.

By prioritizing authenticity, brands can differentiate themselves in a crowded marketplace, strengthen consumer loyalty, and build lasting brand equity. Authenticity is no longer optional in today's consumer-driven landscape—it is a necessity for brands aiming to foster trust, loyalty, and advocacy.

## Methodology

We conducted a study employing a 2 (brand x no brand) x 2 (controversial high x low controversial) design, where participants were randomly assigned to different scenarios. Our objective was to manipulate high controversy by using gender equality and gender issues as the topic of manipulation in the study.

This commercial explicitly expresses Gillette's stance against toxic masculinity, which generated significant consumer backlash. In the brand-high controversy condition, we utilized Gillette's "The Best a man can be" commercial (https://bit.ly/exp1Brand) as the brand-related stimulus. On the other hand, in the high controversy, no brand condition, we employed the commercial for the #PowerlessQueen movement (https://bit.ly/expNoBrand). This commercial juxtaposes the game of Chess, where the Queen holds significant power, with the unfortunate reality that women in India lack power, facing

**Citation:** Sandes FS. How brand involvement influences consumer reactions to controversial and noncontroversial issues. *J Textile Eng Fashion Technol.* 2024;10(5):204–211. DOI: 10.15406/jteft.2024.10.00389

discrimination and limited access to education and independent careers. The message conveyed is that society suffers when women lack power.

We focused on sustainable and socially responsible production issues for the low controversial scenarios. In the brand condition, we presented H&M's "Bring It On" commercial (https://bit.ly/explowcontrov), encouraging consumers to return their used items for reutilization, reducing their environmental impact. As for the no-brand condition, we showcased the "2 Euro T-shirt" commercial (https://bit.ly/expnoncontrov2), emphasizing that consumers, aware of the unethical production practices behind cheap clothing, opt not to purchase them. The duration of each commercial ranged from 93 to 118 seconds, and participants were randomly assigned to one of the conditions, watching one of the commercials at the beginning of the experiment.

Gen Z consumers are recognized for their critical perspective on the role of brands in society,[32] often expecting brands to take a stance on relevant social issues. We recruited respondents from undergraduate courses, resulting in a sample predominantly composed of Gen Z consumers with an average age of around 21 years. Participants were asked to provide their perceptions of brands before and after watching the video, including the brands featured in the experiment. Additionally, to account for potential covariates, participants responded to scales assessing ecological behavior, gender issues, and regulatory focus.

## Results and discussion

We collected 192 responses, of which seven were incomplete, and four did not pass the attention check, leaving us with 181 valid responses. The respondents were predominantly women (67.4%), with a mean age of 22 years. Notably, 91.7% of the participants belonged to Generation Z (166 respondents aged 18-26).

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the main effects of brand presence and the nature of the topic (controversial or noncontroversial) and the interaction effect between these variables on participants' ratings of "it bothers people." The results revealed a statistically significant interaction effect ($p < 0.001$) between consumers' perceptions of controversy and brand involvement. In the No Brand condition, participants rated the noncontroversial topic as moderately bothersome (M = 4.7). However, in the Brand condition, participants rated the same noncontroversial topic as significantly more bothersome, suggesting a higher perceived level of controversy in the presence of a brand.

### Theoretical contributions

The statistically significant interaction effect between consumers' perception of controversy and brand involvement suggests that the presence of a brand intensifies the perception of a noncontroversial topic. From a **theoretical perspective**, this outcome aligns with the **cue theory** in consumer behavior, which posits that consumers use contextual cues—such as the presence of a brand—to form judgments about stimuli.[33] When a brand is introduced, it may act as a cue that triggers associations or pre-existing beliefs related to the brand's values, image, or historical behavior. This can heighten consumer sensitivity to topics that might otherwise be perceived as neutral.

The **elaboration likelihood model**[34] also provides insight into this phenomenon. Brand presence could shift consumers from a peripheral route of processing (where they may passively receive information) to a more central route, where they actively engage with the message due to the brand's involvement. This deeper processing could increase the likelihood that consumers perceive a noncontroversial topic as bothersome, as they become more critically aware of the brand's stance and the implications of its involvement.

Additionally, the presence of a well-established brand can increase the salience and credibility of the message, making consumers more receptive to perceiving even noncontroversial topics as controversial. The **halo effect** might also be at play, where the brand's reputation or its association with specific values influences how consumers interpret the topic.

### Managerial perspective

From a **managerial perspective**, these findings highlight critical considerations for marketers and advertisers. The fact that brand involvement can amplify the perceived controversy of a topic indicates that brands must tread carefully when aligning themselves with sensitive or even seemingly neutral topics. This underscores the importance of **brand alignment** with values that resonate with the target audience. When a brand chooses to enter a conversation, even if the topic appears noncontroversial, its involvement may shift consumer perceptions, increasing the perceived sensitivity of the issue.

Brands should, therefore, be aware of the **potential risks of brand involvement**. Marketers must carefully evaluate whether their brand has the credibility to participate in specific societal conversations. For example, a brand known for its activism, like **Patagonia**, may have greater leeway to engage in environmental or social debates because these align with its core identity and values. In contrast, a brand with no prior involvement in such areas may face skepticism or backlash if its involvement appears opportunistic or misaligned with its values.

The results from our study indicate that brands should actively engage in controversial matters, provided they align with the discussed topic. The extent to which this alignment influences consumers' perception of brand authenticity was also a critical factor in our analysis. The interaction between brand presence and controversial subjects (F=8.18, p=0.005) revealed that participants believed brands should take a stance on controversial topics, as their involvement was viewed favorably. However, the interaction did not reach statistical significance when participants were informed that their perception of brands improved after taking a stand (F=0.21, p=0.65). Interestingly, the data revealed an overall improved perception of brands across all scenarios when they took a stand on respective issues. This suggests that consumers generally appreciate brands that participate in societal debates, regardless of the controversy involved.

### Impact on brand-consumer relationships

The interaction between brand presence and controversial topics also significantly influenced the dependent variable related to consumer discomfort ($F_{(1,181)}= 18.75$, $p<0.001$). This indicates that controversial topics tend to be perceived as more disturbing when associated with a brand. Conversely, noncontroversial topics were considered more disturbing when no brand was involved. This finding implies that brand presence adds weight and complexity to a discussion, potentially elevating consumer sensitivity toward the topic.

Moreover, participants perceived that brands should involve themselves in controversial scenarios (F=5.56, p=0.019), even rating brands more favorably in noncontroversial situations. This result suggests that **brand authenticity** plays a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions, as consumers tend to reward brands that engage authentically with societal issues.

## Implications for future research and practice

The findings provide valuable insights into the **complex relationship between brand activism and consumer perceptions**. They suggest that brands can benefit from taking a stance on societal issues, but only when there is alignment between the brand's identity and the topic. Brands that stray from their core values risk being perceived as inauthentic, which can erode consumer trust and loyalty.

From a **theoretical standpoint**, these results reinforce the importance of further exploring how **brand authenticity** influences consumer perceptions in controversial contexts. Authenticity is increasingly seen as a pivotal construct in branding, especially as **Generation Z** and **Millennial** consumers place a premium on brands that act in line with their stated values.[35] Future research should examine the specific conditions under which brands should take a stand and the role that consumer identity and belief systems play in moderating these effects.

In terms of **managerial implications**, brands should consider adopting a **values-based marketing approach**, ensuring that their actions and messaging align with the values of their target audience. When considering whether to engage with controversial topics, brands should assess not only the potential impact on their image but also the broader cultural and social dynamics that could influence consumer reactions.

This study provides important insights into the interplay between brand presence, consumer perceptions, and controversial topics. It highlights the power of brand presence in shaping consumer attitudes and underscores the importance of authenticity in brand activism. Marketers should carefully consider the alignment between their brand's values and the topics they engage with, as this alignment is key to building trust and fostering long-term relationships with consumers. Moreover, future research should explore the broader psychological and cultural factors that influence how consumers perceive brands in controversial and noncontroversial contexts, providing further guidance for brands navigating complex societal debates.[36,37]

## Acknowledgments

## Funding

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

1. Sarkar C, Kotler P. *Brand activism: From purpose to action*. Idea Bite Press; 2020.

2. Sidibe M. Marketing Meets Mission. *Harvard Business Review*. 2020.

3. Kim JK, Overton H, Bhalla N, et al. Nike, Colin Kaepernick, and the politicization of sports: Examining perceived organizational motives and public responses. *Public Relations Review*. 2020;46(2).

4. Vredenburg J, Kapitan S, Spry A, et al. Brands taking a stand: authentic brand activism or woke washing? *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*. 2020;39(4):444–460.

5. Camicia SP. Deciding what is a controversial issue: A case study of social studies curriculum controversy. *Theory & Research in Social Education*. 2008;36(4):298-316.

6. Treise D, Weigold MF, Conna J, et al. Ethics in advertising: Ideological correlates of consumer perceptions. *Journal of Advertising*. 1994;23(3):59-69.

7. Gupta PB, Gould SJ. Consumers' perceptions of the ethics and acceptability of product placements in movies: Product category and individual differences. *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*. 1997;19(1):37–50.

8. Jennings PL, Mitchell MS, Hannah ST. The moral self: A review and integration of the literature. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. 2015;36(S1):S104-S168.

9. Alsaad AK. Ethical judgment, subjective norms, and ethical consumption: The moderating role of moral certainty. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*. 2021;59:102380.

10. Kitchen JP, Kerr G, E Schultz D, et al. The elaboration likelihood model: review, critique, and research agenda. *European Journal of Marketing*. 2014;48(11/12):2033-2050.

11. Schindler I, Hosoya G, Menninghaus W, et al. Measuring aesthetic emotions: A review of the literature and a new assessment tool. *PloS One*. 2017;12(6):e0178899.

12. Hassan SM, Rahman Z, Paul J. Consumer ethics: A review and research agenda. *Psychology & Marketing*. 2022;39(1):111-130.

13. Johnstone ML, Hooper S. Social influence and green consumption behavior: A need for greater government involvement. *Journal of Marketing Management*. 2016;32(9-10):827-855.

14. Huang Y, Wang L, Shi J. How attachment affects the strength of peer influence on adolescent consumer behavior. *Psychology & Marketing*. 2012;29(8):558-567.

15. Zuboff S. *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. PublicAffairs. 2019.

16. Santos FM. A positive theory of social entrepreneurship. *Journal of Business Ethics*. 2012;111(3):335-351.

17. Hooks B. Black looks: Race and representation. 2014.

18. Gill R, Gill RC. *Gender and the Media*. Polity. 2007.

19. Grabe S, Ward LM, Hyde JS. The role of the media in body image concerns among women: A meta-analysis of experimental and correlational studies. *Psychological Bulletin*. 2008;134(3):460-476.

20. Delmas MA, Burbano VC. The drivers of greenwashing. *California Management Review*. 2011;54(1):64-87.

21. Calvert SL. Children as consumers: Advertising and marketing. *The Future of Children*. 2008;18(1):205-234.

22. Spitznagel E. Generation Z is bigger than millennials, and they are out to change the world, NYpost.com, 2020.

23. Key TM, Keel AL, Czaplewski AJ, et al. Brand activism change agents: strategic storytelling for impact and authenticity. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*. 2021.

24. Sibai O, Mimoun L, Boukis A. Authenticating brand activism: Negotiating the boundaries of free speech to make a change. *Psychology and Marketing*. 2021;38(10):1651–1669.

25. Södergren J. Brand authenticity: 25 Years of research. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*. 2021;45(4):645-663.

26. Holt DB. *How brands become icons: The principles of cultural branding*. Harvard Business Review Press; 2004.

27. Kapferer JN. *The new strategic brand management: Advanced insights and strategic thinking*. Kogan Page Publishers; 2012.

28. Schmeltz L. Getting CSR communication fit: A study of strategically fitting cause, consumers, and company in corporate CSR communication. *Public Relations Review*. 2017;43(5):919-928.

29. Sheth JN, Sisodia RS, Sharma A. The antecedents and consequences of customer-centric marketing. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*. 2000;28(1):55-66.

30. Escalas JE. Narrative processing: Building consumer connections to brands. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*. 2004;14(1-2):168-180.

31. Aaker DA. *Brand portfolio strategy: Creating relevance, differentiation, energy, leverage, and clarity*. Free Press; 2004.

32. Rue P. Make way, millennials; here comes Gen Z. About Campus. 2018;23(3):5–12.

33. Spence MT, Brucks M. The moderating effects of problem characteristics on experts' and novices' judgments. *Journal of Marketing Research*. 1997;34(2):233-247.

34. Petty RE, Cacioppo JT. *Communication and persuasion: Central and peripheral routes to attitude change*. Springer. 1986.

35. Morhart FM, Malär L, Guèvremont A, et al. Brand authenticity: An integrative framework and measurement scale. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*. 2015;25(2):200-218.

36. Faircloth JB, Capella LM, Alford BL. The effect of brand attitude and brand image on brand equity. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*. 2001;9(3):61–75.

37. Ramesh K, Saha R, Goswami S, et al. Consumer's response to CSR activities: Mediating role of brand image and attitude. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*. 2019;26(2):377–387.