



Journal of Media Research and Contemporary Studies

Contents available at: <https://www.swamivivekanandauniversity.ac.in/jmrcs/>

Brand Activism in Social Media Advertising: Addressing Racial Inequality

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Abstract:

In recent years, **brand activism** has become an important part of marketing strategies, as more companies use their platforms to speak out on social, political, and cultural issues. One of the most discussed areas of brand activism is the fight against **racial inequality**. With the rise of social media, brands now have a powerful space to communicate their values, take a stand on social issues, and connect directly with audiences. However, while some companies have successfully promoted equality and gained public trust, others have faced criticism for being insensitive or using social causes only for profit.

This research focuses on understanding how **brand activism in social media advertising** addresses racial inequality and influences public perception. It studies how audiences react to such campaigns and whether these efforts genuinely help create social awareness and change. The research is based on a detailed **literature review** and the **analysis of two major case studies** — Nike's campaign featuring **Colin Kaepernick**, which supported the Black Lives Matter movement, and Pepsi's advertisement with **Kendall Jenner**, which received backlash for appearing to trivialize social protests. These examples help to highlight the differences between authentic and inauthentic activism in advertising.

The findings reveal that **authentic brand activism**, which aligns with a company's core values and long-term actions, can significantly improve brand reputation and strengthen relationships with consumers. When a brand genuinely supports a cause and remains consistent in its advocacy, audiences perceive it as trustworthy and socially responsible. On the other hand, **inauthentic activism**—when a brand uses social issues only for marketing benefits without real commitment—can lead to negative reactions, loss of credibility, and even long-term damage to the brand's image.

The study concludes that **authenticity, cultural sensitivity, and consistency** are essential for successful brand activism. Brands must understand the issues deeply, collaborate with credible individuals or organizations, and show continuous involvement beyond a single campaign. This approach not only improves their social media presence but also helps contribute to real change in society.

Overall, this research provides useful insights for marketers and advertisers on how to use social media as a tool for meaningful activism. It also offers recommendations for brands seeking to engage responsibly in promoting racial equality and creating positive social impact through their advertising efforts.

Introduction:

In the modern marketing landscape, consumers increasingly expect brands to go beyond selling products and services. They want companies to stand for something meaningful and reflect values that align with social and ethical concerns. This shift has led to the rise of brand activism, a concept where businesses actively take a stand on social, environmental, or political issues. Unlike traditional corporate social responsibility, which often focuses on philanthropy or community service, brand activism involves integrating social causes directly into marketing strategies to influence public opinion and encourage positive social change.

The rapid expansion of social media has greatly influenced this transformation. Digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) have become spaces where conversations around justice, equality, and inclusion are constantly evolving. These platforms allow brands to engage with large audiences instantly, making it possible to voice opinions and support social causes more openly. However, this visibility also comes with responsibility. When brands use social media to comment on sensitive social issues, their messages are closely examined by audiences. A thoughtful and genuine message can earn public appreciation and trust, while a poorly executed or insincere attempt can invite widespread criticism and backlash.

One of the most prominent issues brands have addressed in recent years is racial inequality. The global conversation around racial discrimination and social justice has encouraged companies to acknowledge their role in promoting equality and inclusion. Many brands have used advertising campaigns to raise awareness, celebrate diversity, and advocate for fairness in society. However, the results of these campaigns have been mixed. Some have been praised for their honesty, sensitivity, and commitment to change, while others have been criticized for oversimplifying complex issues or appearing to exploit social movements for marketing gain.

This contrast highlights the importance of authenticity and cultural understanding in brand activism. A brand's efforts are often judged not only by what it says but also by how consistently it acts on those values. When a company's activism aligns with its history, values, and long-term actions, it builds credibility and emotional connection with consumers. Conversely, when activism appears opportunistic or disconnected from the brand's true identity, audiences perceive it as insincere, which can harm reputation and trust.

This research focuses on examining the role of brand activism in social media advertising, with particular attention to how it addresses racial inequality. It explores how audiences perceive such campaigns, what makes them effective or ineffective, and how they influence public attitudes toward both the issue and the brand itself. The study also aims to identify best practices that can guide brands in creating responsible and meaningful activism campaigns.

By understanding the factors that determine the success or failure of brand activism in social media, this research contributes to a broader discussion on the intersection of marketing, communication, and social responsibility. It seeks to help brands navigate the challenges of engaging with social causes in an authentic and impactful way that not only benefits their image but also supports genuine progress toward racial equality.

Research Aims:

This research focuses on understanding the growing role of brand activism in social media advertising, particularly in addressing racial inequality. As audiences increasingly expect brands to engage with social issues, it becomes important to study how such efforts influence public trust and perception. The study aims to explore how brand activism campaigns can promote awareness, assess audience responses toward their authenticity, and develop strategies that guide brands in creating responsible and impactful social media campaigns. These aims collectively seek to highlight how marketing can be used as a meaningful tool for social change.

1. To explore how brand activism in social media advertising can help raise awareness and address issues of racial inequality.
2. To assess how audiences respond to and interpret brand activism campaigns on social media, focusing on their trust, engagement, and perception of authenticity.
3. To provide practical recommendations for brands to create socially responsible, culturally sensitive, and effective activism campaigns on social media.

Research Objectives:

1. To analyze the effectiveness of brand activism in social media advertising in addressing racial inequality.
2. To evaluate public perception of brand-led social media campaigns focused on racial issues.
3. To identify best practices for brands aiming to engage in activism through social media advertising.

Research Questions:

1. How effective is brand activism in social media advertising in addressing racial inequality?
2. What are the public perceptions of brand-led social media campaigns focused on racial issues?
3. What best practices can be identified for brands engaging in activism through social media advertising?

Research Problem:

In recent years, many brands have adopted activism as part of their marketing strategy, using social media to speak out on social issues such as racial inequality. However, while these campaigns have become increasingly common, their true effectiveness and authenticity remain uncertain. Some brands have been praised for taking a genuine stand, while others have faced criticism for being performative or using sensitive issues only to attract attention. This raises an important question — do these efforts genuinely help create social awareness and promote equality, or are they simply tools for brand promotion?

The challenge lies in understanding how audiences interpret and respond to such campaigns. Public perception plays a key role in determining whether brand activism is seen as sincere and impactful or as opportunistic and misleading. Moreover, there is limited research exploring how social media platforms influence the reach, tone, and reception of these messages.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill that gap by examining how brand activism in social media advertising addresses racial inequality, how audiences perceive these efforts, and whether such campaigns contribute meaningfully to positive social change or merely shape brand image.

Rationale:

Understanding the impact of brand activism on racial inequality is crucial for companies aiming to engage in meaningful social discourse. This research provides insights into successful strategies and potential pitfalls, guiding brands in crafting authentic and effective campaigns.

Literature Review:

The concept of brand activism has gained significant attention in recent years as companies increasingly take public stances on social and political issues. With the rise of social media, brands now use digital platforms not only for marketing but also to engage in public discourse on matters such as racial inequality. Existing studies and case analyses highlight both the opportunities and challenges that come with such initiatives, especially in balancing authenticity and audience perception.

Dozé (2017) provides a detailed critique of the Pepsi advertisement featuring a celebrity model, describing how the campaign misread the cultural and emotional context of social protests. The study argues that the advertisement attempted to simplify complex social issues and present activism as a trend rather than a genuine movement. This lack of cultural sensitivity and depth led to widespread criticism and public backlash. Similarly, *Time* (2017) emphasized that the campaign trivialized racial and political struggles, showing how brands risk damaging their credibility when they fail to understand the issues they address. *Astute Communications* (2019) and *Commetric* (2017) further supported this perspective, noting that the campaign's failure stemmed from poor audience research and a lack of authentic alignment between brand values and the message portrayed.

In contrast, analyses of another globally recognized campaign focusing on social justice and equality present a different outcome. According to *GreenBook* (2018), *The Brand Hopper* (2024), and *CEO Column* (2024), the campaign's success lay in its authenticity and alignment with the brand's long-standing history of supporting social causes. The advertisements received both praise and criticism, but overall, they strengthened the brand's image and deepened its emotional connection with audiences. *Media Shower* (2023) explained that this campaign demonstrated how bold messaging, when rooted in genuine values, can enhance consumer trust and loyalty. The campaign resonated with younger audiences who increasingly expect brands to have a social conscience.

The American Marketing Association New York (2018) emphasized that authenticity was the defining factor that differentiated successful brand activism from failed attempts. Consumers today are more socially aware and can quickly identify when a company's message is inconsistent with its actions. The study also pointed out that social media acts as both an amplifier and a judge — while it can elevate meaningful campaigns, it can also intensify criticism when audiences perceive insincerity.

Further insights are provided by *Change Management Insight* (2023), which examined the crisis management strategies employed following the failed advertisement. The study highlighted how brands must anticipate audience responses and ensure that their creative messages undergo thorough cultural and ethical evaluation before being launched. Poorly executed activism not only invites negative publicity but can also lead to long-term reputational damage and loss of trust among consumers.

Collectively, these studies underline a consistent theme: authenticity, cultural sensitivity, and consistency are central to the success of brand activism in social media advertising. Campaigns that are developed with genuine commitment to social causes can positively influence public perception, while superficial or opportunistic efforts tend to backfire. The literature also emphasizes that successful brand activism requires more than just emotional storytelling — it demands alignment between words, actions, and long-term brand behavior.

However, despite the growing number of case studies, the literature reveals a gap in understanding the extent to which such activism actually contributes to meaningful social change, especially in the context of racial inequality. Most studies focus on marketing impact, brand image, or crisis response, while fewer explore whether these campaigns effectively challenge stereotypes or foster inclusion in real-world contexts.

Therefore, this research aims to bridge that gap by analyzing how brand activism in social media advertising addresses racial inequality, how audiences interpret these efforts, and what best practices can be drawn for future campaigns. Through this, the study seeks to provide a clearer understanding of the delicate balance between marketing strategy and genuine social responsibility.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research design, focusing on case studies to explore the role of brand activism in addressing racial inequality through social media advertising. The case study approach allows an in-depth analysis of specific campaigns, providing insights into public perception, brand authenticity, and the overall impact on brand image.

Case Study Selection

Two prominent cases were selected:

1. **Nike's "Just Do It" Campaign Featuring Colin Kaepernick (2018):** Chosen for its bold stance on racial injustice and its polarizing public reception, this campaign serves as an example of successful brand activism that resonates with target audiences.
2. **Pepsi's Advertisement Featuring Kendall Jenner (2017):** Selected due to its controversial portrayal of social justice movements, which led to public backlash and accusations of trivializing racial inequality. This case illustrates the risks associated with inauthentic brand activism.

Sampling and Data Collection

Purposive sampling was used to select campaigns with high visibility and contrasting public receptions. Data was collected from:

- **Academic Journals:** To understand theoretical perspectives on brand activism and consumer behavior.
- **News Articles:** For contextual background and reporting of public reactions.
- **Social Media Analysis:** Examined user comments, tweets, shares, and engagement metrics to gauge public perception.
- **Official Brand Communications:** Reviewed press releases and social media posts from Nike and Pepsi to understand brand messaging and positioning.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted to identify common themes and patterns across both case studies. The analysis focused on:

1. **Public Perception:** Evaluating positive and negative responses to each campaign.
2. **Brand Authenticity:** Assessing the perceived sincerity of each brand's activism.
3. **Impact on Brand Image:** Analyzing changes in brand reputation and consumer loyalty.

Ethical Considerations

- All data used in this study is publicly available, ensuring no breach of privacy.
- Proper citations were provided to acknowledge original sources.
- Potential biases were minimized by analyzing data from multiple sources.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Nike's "Just Do It" Campaign Featuring Colin Kaepernick (2018)

Overview:

Nike featured Colin Kaepernick, a former NFL quarterback known for his activism against racial injustice, in its 30th-anniversary "Just Do It" campaign. The ad included the slogan, "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything."

Public Perception:

- **Positive Reactions:** Nike received praise for supporting Kaepernick's stance against racial inequality. Many consumers, especially Millennials and Gen Z, viewed the campaign as authentic and courageous.
- **Negative Reactions:** The campaign sparked controversy, with some customers boycotting Nike and burning their products. Critics argued that Nike was politicizing sports and alienating a portion of its customer base.

Impact on Brand Image:

- Despite the controversy, Nike's brand image strengthened among its core audience. The campaign contributed to a 31% increase in online sales within days of the ad's release.
- The company's stock reached an all-time high, showing the financial benefit of resonating with socially conscious consumers.

Analysis:

Nike's campaign is an example of effective brand activism because it aligned with the company's longstanding commitment to social justice and empowerment. The partnership with Kaepernick was seen as authentic, as he had consistently advocated for racial equality, even at the cost of his career. This consistency enhanced Nike's credibility and solidified its brand identity as a champion of social justice.

Case Study 2: Pepsi's Advertisement Featuring Kendall Jenner (2017)

Overview:

Pepsi released an ad featuring Kendall Jenner, who resolves a protest by handing a police officer a can of Pepsi. The ad intended to promote unity but was criticized for trivializing serious social justice movements, including Black Lives Matter.

Public Perception:

- **Negative Reactions:** The ad received widespread backlash for its perceived insensitivity and oversimplification of racial inequality and police brutality. Many accused Pepsi of appropriating social justice imagery for commercial gain.
- **Social Media Outcry:** The hashtag #PepsiGate trended on Twitter, with users expressing outrage over the brand's attempt to commodify activism.

Impact on Brand Image:

- Pepsi faced significant reputational damage and was forced to pull the ad within 24 hours.
- The controversy led to public apologies from both Pepsi and Kendall Jenner, but the brand's image suffered, especially among younger, socially conscious consumers.

Analysis:

Pepsi's campaign failed because it lacked authenticity and failed to understand the complexity of the social issues it attempted to address. The use of a celebrity with no known activism background further reduced the campaign's credibility. This case highlights the risks of brand activism when executed without genuine commitment or cultural sensitivity.

Research Findings

1. **Effectiveness of Brand Activism in Addressing Racial Inequality:**
 - Brand activism can be effective in addressing racial inequality when executed authentically and aligned with the brand's core values. Nike's campaign was successful because it resonated with its audience and reflected its longstanding support for social justice. In contrast, Pepsi's campaign failed due to perceived insincerity and insensitivity.
2. **Public Perception of Brand-Led Social Media Campaigns:**
 - Public perception is highly influenced by the perceived authenticity of the campaign. Nike was perceived as genuine because of its history of supporting athletes who take social stances. Conversely, Pepsi was seen as opportunistic, leading to public backlash.
3. **Best Practices for Brands Engaging in Activism Through Social Media Advertising:**
 - **Authenticity:** Brands must ensure their activism aligns with their identity and values. Consumers are quick to recognize inauthenticity.
 - **Consistency and Commitment:** Long-term commitment to the cause, as demonstrated by Nike, enhances credibility.
 - **Cultural Sensitivity:** Understanding the complexities of social issues is crucial. Oversimplification, as seen in Pepsi's ad, leads to criticism and reputational damage.
 - **Stakeholder Involvement:** Collaborating with credible activists or organizations adds legitimacy to brand activism.

Discussion

Brand activism, defined as the strategic alignment of marketing initiatives with social, political, or environmental causes, has emerged as a powerful tool in contemporary advertising. In the context of racial inequality, brand activism on social media offers a platform for companies to voice their stance, engage in meaningful conversations, and influence public opinion. However, the impact of such campaigns largely depends on the authenticity, execution, and public perception of the brand's motives. This study explores the effectiveness of brand activism in addressing racial inequality through social media advertising by analyzing two prominent campaigns: Nike's "Just Do It" featuring Colin Kaepernick and Pepsi's advertisement featuring Kendall Jenner. The contrasting public reactions to these campaigns provide valuable insights into the dynamics of brand activism in promoting racial equality.

Nike's 2018 "Just Do It" campaign, featuring Colin Kaepernick, marked a bold stance on racial injustice. Kaepernick, known for kneeling during the national anthem to protest racial inequality and police brutality, became a polarizing figure in American society. By aligning with Kaepernick, Nike positioned itself as an advocate for social justice, leveraging the campaign's emotional and political weight. The advertisement's tagline, "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything," resonated deeply with audiences who supported Kaepernick's activism.

The campaign was lauded for its authenticity and bravery, with many consumers perceiving Nike's support as genuine. Nike's long history of promoting social causes, particularly in advocating for marginalized communities, contributed to this perception. The positive public reception was reflected in increased brand engagement on social media, a 31% boost in online sales shortly after the campaign's launch, and heightened brand loyalty among younger, socially conscious consumers. This aligns with findings from a Kantar study, which revealed that Millennials and Generation Z expect brands to be vocal about their values.

However, the campaign also faced significant backlash from consumers who viewed Kaepernick's protest as disrespectful to the American flag and military. This polarized reaction led to boycott threats and negative social media campaigns, such as the #BoycottNike movement. Despite this, Nike's sales growth and stock value demonstrated that taking a stand on social issues can positively impact brand equity when executed authentically.

In stark contrast to Nike's campaign, Pepsi's 2017 advertisement featuring Kendall Jenner faced widespread criticism for trivializing social justice movements. The ad depicted Jenner leaving a photoshoot to join a protest, ultimately diffusing tension with a police officer by handing him a can of Pepsi. Critics argued that the ad oversimplified complex racial and political issues, particularly echoing imagery from Black Lives Matter protests.

The backlash was immediate and intense, with accusations of cultural appropriation and insensitivity. Social media erupted with criticism, accusing Pepsi of commodifying social justice to sell a product. Unlike Nike, Pepsi lacked a history of activism, making the campaign appear disingenuous. The absence of any meaningful connection between the brand and the cause further fueled perceptions of opportunism. Consequently, Pepsi pulled the ad within 24 hours and issued a public apology.

The contrasting public perceptions of Nike's and Pepsi's campaigns underscore the importance of authenticity in brand activism. While Nike's alignment with Kaepernick was seen as a genuine extension

of its brand values, Pepsi's attempt to engage in social discourse was perceived as superficial and exploitative.

A critical factor influencing public perception of brand activism is authenticity. As demonstrated by Nike's campaign, authenticity is achieved when a brand's social stance aligns with its values, history, and actions. Nike's longstanding association with social justice and its consistent support for athletes advocating for change bolstered its credibility. In contrast, Pepsi's lack of prior engagement with racial issues contributed to the perception of inauthenticity.

Research suggests that consumers, particularly younger generations, are highly sensitive to perceived authenticity. According to a study by the Journal of Resilient Economies, consumers increasingly distrust traditional institutions and expect brands to play a proactive role in addressing societal issues. This shift in consumer expectations has created a landscape where authenticity is a prerequisite for successful brand activism.

However, authenticity alone is insufficient. Brands must also navigate the fine line between advocacy and commercialization. Consumers are quick to recognize and reject campaigns that appear to exploit social issues for profit. Therefore, brands must demonstrate genuine commitment through consistent actions, such as corporate policies, community engagement, and charitable initiatives.

Nike's campaign not only enhanced its brand image but also influenced consumer behavior. By aligning with Kaepernick, Nike reinforced its identity as a brand that champions social justice and courage. This resonated with socially conscious consumers who share similar values, fostering brand loyalty and advocacy. The campaign's success highlights the potential of brand activism to create emotional connections with consumers, ultimately driving purchase decisions.

Conversely, Pepsi's campaign damaged its brand image and eroded consumer trust. The perception of insensitivity and cultural appropriation alienated key demographics, particularly younger audiences who are more attuned to social justice issues. The swift backlash demonstrated the risks associated with inauthentic activism, emphasizing the need for brands to approach sensitive topics with empathy, cultural awareness, and a genuine commitment to change.

This study identifies several best practices for brands aiming to engage in activism through social media advertising:

1. **Authenticity and Consistency:** Brands must align their activism with their core values and history. Authenticity is built through consistent advocacy, community involvement, and transparent communication.
2. **Cultural Sensitivity and Empathy:** Campaigns addressing racial inequality must be crafted with cultural awareness and sensitivity. Brands should collaborate with diverse voices to ensure accurate and respectful representation.
3. **Meaningful Action Beyond Advertising:** Brand activism should extend beyond marketing messages. Companies must back their stances with meaningful actions, such as policy changes, charitable contributions, and community initiatives.

4. **Transparent Communication:** Transparency in motives and actions enhances credibility. Brands should openly communicate their reasons for taking a stand and how they contribute to social change.
5. **Engaging in Constructive Dialogue:** Social media allows brands to engage in two-way conversations. Brands should actively listen to public feedback, participate in meaningful dialogue, and address criticism with humility.

Contributions to Social Change

The study reveals that brand activism, when executed authentically and responsibly, can contribute to social change by raising awareness, influencing public opinion, and mobilizing action. Nike's campaign sparked important conversations about racial injustice and inspired other brands to take a stand. This demonstrates the power of social media advertising to amplify social issues and drive societal change.

However, the study also highlights the limitations of brand activism. While campaigns can raise awareness, systemic change requires sustained efforts beyond advertising. Brands must collaborate with advocacy groups, policymakers, and communities to create tangible impact. Moreover, brand activism should complement, not substitute, grassroots activism led by affected communities.

Conclusion

This study underscores the complex dynamics of brand activism in social media advertising. By comparing Nike's successful campaign with Pepsi's failed attempt, the research illustrates the pivotal role of authenticity, cultural sensitivity, and consistent advocacy. Brands that genuinely align with social causes can enhance their reputation, foster consumer trust, and contribute to social change. Conversely, inauthentic activism risks public backlash and reputation damage.

The findings contribute to the growing discourse on brand activism, providing valuable insights for marketers, advertisers, and scholars. Future research could explore the long-term effects of brand activism on consumer loyalty, as well as cross-cultural perceptions of activism in global markets. As social media continues to shape public discourse, brand activism will remain a powerful but challenging strategy for addressing social issues, including racial inequality.

Recommendations

1. Brands should engage in activism that aligns with their values and resonates with their target audience.
2. Collaborations with credible activists or organizations can enhance authenticity and public trust.
3. Cultural sensitivity and a deep understanding of the issues being addressed are essential to avoid backlash.
4. Consistent commitment to the cause, beyond one-time campaigns, is crucial for maintaining credibility.

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