

Activism across borders: strategic brand approaches for multinational enterprises in Europe¹

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Abstract

Frame of the research. As multinational enterprises (MNEs) increasingly engage in roles beyond conventional business activities, their involvement in brand activism has become a focal point of interest. This development underlines the urgency for MNEs to address global challenges, positioning them as pivotal actors in the evolving corporate social responsibility and global activism narrative. In particular, the heterogeneous socio-political context of Europe, featuring varied levels of press freedom, regulatory frameworks, and cultural norms, presents a compelling case to explore the tension between local adaptation and global standardization in activist communications.

Purpose of the paper. This research explores the unexplored realm of brand activism from an international perspective, focusing on how MNEs either standardize or customize their activist communications to align with the diverse contexts within specific European markets. The primary purpose is to analyze MNEs' strategies to ensure that their activism effectively resonates across various European landscapes while assessing the balance between regional consistency and local relevance in their messaging. Furthermore, we examine how different degrees of press freedom can either amplify activist messaging or expose brands to heightened scrutiny. Additionally, the study considers the role of press freedom in shaping activist communications within these contexts.

Methodology. To address this purpose, the research is divided into two studies employing a mixed-method approach to achieve this goal. Study 1 conducts a content analysis of social media communication from an activist brand across several European countries. Study 2 performs a semiotic analysis to understand whether the communication is adapted or standardized to different local contexts. Considering the study's purpose, an activist brand in multiple countries was selected for the analysis as the research setting.

Results. This multicounty case study reveals how an MNE conducts brand activism across various European countries, adapting its communication by showing significant variation in activist commitment levels across these markets. The analysis highlights the MNE's strategic adjustments to resonate with diverse regional audiences, indicating a tailored approach to brand activism within the European context. Furthermore, the study examines how press freedom influences these variations in commitment and communication.

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Research limitations. *The research offers valuable insights but is limited by focusing on a single MNE and using only Instagram for data analysis, concentrating solely on communication rather than exploring the MNE's practical actions. To enhance understanding, future studies could broaden their scope by incorporating a wider range of MNEs operating within different European countries, examining brand activism across diverse digital platforms, and delving into the tangible actions that accompany such activism. Moreover, investigating how evolving technologies like AI-driven sentiment analysis could shape or refine international activism strategies will provide a more nuanced outlook on global brand activism. Additionally, future studies should examine brand activism from a global perspective, not limited to Europe, by including countries with more challenging levels of democracy.*

Managerial implications. *This study offers relevant insights for MNEs who navigate the realm of brand activism within European markets. It underscores the critical need for thoughtful decision-making when choosing between standardizing or adapting activist communications. In particular, adopting universal environmental campaigns may safeguard global coherence, but addressing sensitive socio-political issues (e.g., LGBTQIA+ rights, migration) often demands local tailoring to respect cultural and moral norms. These strategic considerations are vital not only for effectively engaging with diverse regional audiences but also for overcoming geographical and cultural barriers and enhancing legitimacy within their operational environments, particularly considering varying levels of press freedom across countries.*

Originality of the paper. *Although brand activism has attracted increasing scholarly and managerial attention, his research seems to be the first to explore brand activism within the European context by analysing how MNEs communicate their activism across diverse European countries. By linking the brand activism literature with international business frameworks and the concept of press freedom, this sets the stage for future research to delve deeper into how such activism is conceptualized and executed across different countries, considering varying levels of press freedom.*

Key words: *International brand activism; multinational enterprises; adaptation; standardization; brand communication; semiotic analysis; topic modeling.*

1. Introduction

In today's European marketplace, multinational enterprises (MNEs) are increasingly leveraging brand activism as a strategic approach to differentiate themselves and address social issues across various countries and cultural contexts. This strategy has not only transformed the role of businesses in society but also positioned them as pivotal political actors on the international stage (Podnar and Golob, 2024; Ocelík *et al.*, 2023; Moorman, 2020). Recent instances of brand activism include Microsoft and McDonald's in 2022, both taking a stand against the Ukraine-Russia conflict. In 2023, Stella McCartney voiced opposition to women's violence; Gucci stood against domestic violence; Versace supported the LGBTQIA+ community; and Starbucks expressed solidarity with Palestine. These examples showcase the varied approaches through which brands actively participate in social and political issues, reflecting an increasing inclination of MNEs towards activism. However, the debate on the dual role of MNEs

as significant contributors to global issues and potential solutions architects (Zucchella *et al.*, 2023; Kolk *et al.*, 2010) is ongoing. Brand activism adds complexity to this topic, both by raising questions about the democratic legitimacy of the phenomenon and by subjecting the authenticity of these actions to scrutiny. This is particularly true in diverse European regulatory environments, where companies face different legal and cultural entry barriers, and where varying degrees of press freedom may either intensify public scrutiny or limit the impact of activist messaging (Reporters Without Borders, 2023).

Recent studies have begun to uncover how consumers respond to brand activism across different geopolitical contexts. Livas *et al.* (2023) analyzed consumer sentiment towards activist brands in two countries, revealing variations in public reception. Similarly, Hydock, Paharia, and Blair (2020) along with Mukherjee and Althuisen (2020) conducted experiments to assess the impact of brand activism on consumers in a wide range of countries, including the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), and France (Verlegh, 2024).

In the brand activism field, only Livas *et al.* (2023) analyzed the issue of communication standardization and adaptation, focusing on Greece and the UK from a consumer perspective. This dilemma may be particularly critical in contexts such as Europe, which consists of highly heterogeneous countries (Barnard and De Vries, 2019), facing significant challenges (e.g., nearby geopolitical conflicts, immigration, declining birth rates), and witnessing in recent years the rise of populist governments and difficulties in press freedom (Wannow *et al.*, 2024).

Considering MNEs inherent limitations and challenges, especially in the European context, it is crucial to understand *whether* and *how* companies perform their activist communication in different countries. This represents a significant gap in the current brand activism literature (Saracevic and Schlegelmilch, 2024). Moreover, questions persist about how heightened scrutiny in open media environments might expose brands to reputational damage if accusations of “performative activism” arise, whereas more restrictive press environments might dampen the brand’s reach or even lead to censorship. Therefore, to address the dilemma of standardization or adaptation, the present study focuses on MNEs operating within the European context.

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What is the extent of brands’ commitment to activist communication in European countries?

RQ2: How do brands adapt or standardize activist communication across different European markets?

Beyond these specific questions, we also ask: “How can MNEs ensure that their activist stance aligns with global brand identity while authentically addressing diverse local socio-political realities?” This study represents a pioneering effort to analyze brand activism from a European perspective, aiming to guide MNEs in addressing grand challenges while pursuing their business objectives. The present research makes relevant theoretical contributions and provides business insights on multiple

fronts. Firstly, it lays the foundation for a new avenue of inquiry within brand activism from an international perspective. Secondly, it sheds light on how MNEs can effectively respond to escalating social expectations by adopting an activist strategy to enhance appreciation and acceptance in foreign European markets. Thirdly, the study delves into the adaptation or standardization of activist strategies across diverse markets, particularly from a communication standpoint, offering intriguing insights. Lastly, the research highlights the varying intensity of activism in European countries, recognizing the additional complexities posed by social, political, and cultural factors and the implications of different levels of press freedom.

2. Literature review

2.1 The New Role of Multinational Enterprises in International Business Research

The emergence of MNEs as pivotal actors in addressing grand challenges carries significant implications for international business research (Ghauri *et al.*, 2021). Operating as global entities across diverse socio-political contexts, MNEs are increasingly acknowledged not only as economic entities but also as socio-political actors capable of influencing and being influenced by the grand challenges confronting societies worldwide (Kolk *et al.*, 2010; Ocelik *et al.*, 2023). These challenges, such as climate change, poverty, or geopolitical conflicts, transcend national borders, making them inherently multinational and necessitating a coordinated response that MNEs are uniquely positioned to provide (Bucley *et al.*, 2017). Engaging MNEs with grand challenges demands a reassessment of their roles and strategies. How MNEs create value, design cross-border operations, manage local employees, and formulate international strategies should now consider the complexity of these global issues. MNEs must navigate the complexities of local policies and institutional environments related to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adapting to multiple regulations, societal values, and stakeholder pressures. Operating within diverse environments presents challenges and opportunities, requiring MNEs to acquire new knowledge, establish local legitimacy, and access critical resources specific to each SDG (Van Zanten and Van Tulder, 2018). This means that MNEs should reconcile the need for a unified global approach to sustainability with the necessity of local adaptation. The transfer of socially responsible practices to subsidiaries is often complicated by differences in institutional contexts, creating a landscape where MNEs must be both globally coordinated and locally nuanced in their operations.

Thus, MNEs are at the intersection of economic, social, and political agendas, where their business activities are inherently linked to broader sustainability goals. The political dimensions of MNE activities further extend to their direct interactions with governments and other political entities (Ghauri *et al.*, 2021). In fact, MNEs can be agents of change, influencing policies through lobbying and alliances or, conversely, reacting to government regulations and initiatives.

From this perspective, digital platforms offer MNEs unprecedented opportunities to communicate their commitment to addressing grand challenges, engage with diverse stakeholders, and advocate for change (Nambisan, 2019). These platforms enable MNEs to narrate their sustainability journeys, showcase achievements, and discuss challenges, fostering transparent dialogue with a global community of informed and engaged employees, customers, and other stakeholders. By effectively leveraging digital communication, MNEs can strengthen their positions in foreign markets and address their significant global challenges. This technological shift presents vast opportunities for companies to implement marketing strategies that align with social and economic goals, contributing to collective social efforts.

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2.2 Brand Activism to Address Grand Socio-Political Challenges

Brand activism is a relatively novel marketing strategy that has rapidly garnered significant interest among scholars and brand managers, fundamentally changing the role of businesses in society (Podnar and Golob, 2024; Schmidt *et al.*, 2022), aimed to address both societal good and corporate interest. Stemming from the concept of corporate social responsibility, it evolves into a much stronger, complex, and impactful direction (Sarkar and Kotler, 2020), being defined as a purpose-driven strategy (Rohmanue and Jacobi, 2024) and an intersection between marketing and politics (Jung and Mittal, 2020).

Activist brands take public stances in support of or against controversial socio-political issues through statements and/or actions (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020; Moorman, 2020). The goal is to generate social change by firstly encouraging prosocial intentions, attitudes, and behaviors among individuals on these issues and, secondly, exerting pressure on institutions and policymakers to address these issues at a macro level (Eilert and Nappier Cherup, 2020; Den Hond and Bakker, 2007).

The activist strategy targets different stakeholders such as consumers, employees, investors, policymakers (Cammarota *et al.*, 2024), suppliers (Kapitan *et al.*, 2022), and other businesses. It should incorporate a comprehensive view of the supply chain (Kapitan *et al.*, 2022), addressing internal and external targets (Cavdar Aksoy *et al.*, 2023), and focusing on both the domestic and international markets. Activist actions find their fullest expression in the domestic market, but they are inherently linked to global issues and primarily operate in alignment with these.

The activist strategy has been born in response to an increasingly strong social demand from stakeholders, urging businesses to contribute beyond mere philanthropy and become true catalysts for societal well-being (Verlegh, 2024; Chu *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, this increasingly public role of businesses in addressing the global socio-political challenges of our time is also linked to a growing negative perception of institutions and governments (Weber *et al.*, 2023). From this perspective, consumers appear to have lost trust in institutions, stating that these actors cannot tackle significant challenges or are simply disinterested (Radanielina Hita and Grégoire, 2023). Consequently, in an increasingly vulnerable

and polarized society, with often inadequate and unprepared political leadership, businesses have quickly filled a void. Activist brands make their voices heard on these issues, expressing strong opinions, seeking support, issuing calls to action, participating in street protests with social movements or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and engaging in and promoting social initiatives (Lee *et al.*, 2024; Cammarota *et al.*, 2023).

However, although activism originates from the CSR construct, it distinctly differs in several aspects. First, CSR is confined to “doing well by doing good” (Varadarajan and Menon, 1988), aiming to take positive actions for society; in contrast, activism seeks to exert pressure, draw attention to a social issue, effect societal change, and modify individual and collective behaviors (Eilert and Nappier Cherup, 2020). Advocacy, in fact, is one of its defining elements, without which brand activism would lack purpose (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020). Second, CSR addresses less controversial issues where public opinion agrees (Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020); activism, by its nature, requires taking a stance on contentious and complex topics (Ahmad *et al.*, 2024), where public opinion is fragmented and in disagreement (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, brand activism often intersects with current socio-political debates that can amplify reputational risks if the public perceives the action as mere marketing or “woke washing.” For example, issues such as abortion, LGBTQ + marriages, major wars, modern slavery, sexual freedom, climate change, gun control, or police violence - topics that are controversial and complex. Third, CSR is usually not a risky strategy; it is a well-accepted and normalized action (Aboelenien and Nguyen, 2024), almost always eliciting positive responses from stakeholders, particularly consumers. In contrast, activism is an extremely risky strategy as it still generates negative, polarized, and unpredictable responses (Guha and Korschun, 2024; Bulmer *et al.*, 2024). These negative reactions can lead to significant boycotts against brands, causing substantial reputational damage and financial losses (Pasirayi *et al.*, 2023; Hydock *et al.*, 2020). The recent case of Bud Light (2023) serves as an illustrative example of brand activism’s risk by signaling that it must be implemented and managed with extreme caution. Moreover, anti-brand actions against activist brands are intensified by social media, sometimes even sparking firestorms against the brand (Muraro *et al.*, 2023; Pöyry and Laaksonen, 2022).

From this perspective, another distinguishing element is publicity; activism is a strategy that would make no sense without the communicative aspect (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020). By its nature, activism is an inherently public strategy that must be communicated through social media, mass media, public relations, events, or other visible means (Korschun, 2021). All of this accentuates both the risks and opportunities of the activist strategy.

Notwithstanding its complex outcomes and implementation modalities, brand activism’s potential to truly contribute to society is evident. Additionally, it is a strategy that can enhance or establish a stronger relationship with consumers or other stakeholders. It allows for premium positioning or repositioning in the market (Schmidt *et al.*, 2022), enabling companies to be seen as experts in socio-political issues. This strategy opens the doors to engaging in the socio-political debates about the big

challenges of our times and enables companies to enter a new market or strengthen their position in an existing market.

However, until around 2010, companies have typically sought to avoid entering the socio-political sphere and taking positions on controversial issues (Pimentel *et al.*, 2024). This action was considered too risky and polarizing, leading them to prefer ignoring non-business issues (Podnar and Golob, 2024) and maintaining neutrality to avoid getting entangled in sticky and complicated situations (Cammarota *et al.*, 2023).

In today's society, companies should account for another critical element, namely, neutrality is no longer a viable option. Choosing to remain silent on significant socio-political issues is increasingly perceived as a decision, often carrying greater risks and negative repercussions than a clear stance. Neutrality has transformed into a position, but it is frequently criticized by consumers, who now expect companies to use their influence and visibility to address the pressing challenges facing nations worldwide.

2.3 Local Press Freedom as a Political Barrier

Press freedom is pivotal in shaping brand activism across European markets, influencing how messages are communicated and received. Press freedom is defined as the autonomy of the media from political interference or censorship (Van Belle, 2000). According to the World Press Freedom Index (2023), there are significant disparities in European media environments. Greece, for instance, ranks 88th, indicating a restrictive environment, while Sweden (3rd) and Spain (30st) have more open media landscapes (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Such variations in media openness shape the ability of brands to effectively deliver activist messages, with higher press freedom generally allowing for more transparent and impactful communications.

In this regard, Stetka (2012) emphasizes that media ownership in some Southern and Eastern European countries is often concentrated among business elites with political ties, creating an environment where journalistic autonomy is limited. This concentration leads to restrictions on media freedom and reduced diversity in public discourse. The term highlights the intertwining of media, politics, and business interests, which creates additional challenges for brands engaging in activism. In these contexts, activist messages may face censorship, biased reporting, or limited distribution due to the vested interests of media owners. Additionally, Kenny (2019) argued how populist governments often seek to control media narratives, leading to further erosion of press freedom. This erosion, particularly in environments where governments view independent media as a threat, limits brands' avenues for openly communicating their activism. In such situations, brands often turn to digital media as alternative platforms to bypass restrictions and connect with audiences. However, the success of these digital strategies also depends on the degree of digital media freedom and public access to independent sources (Li *et al.*, 2021). Thus, for MNEs' communication strategies, their activism should be tailored to local media conditions and the specific challenges posed by different levels of press freedom. Balancing advocacy

with an understanding of local media dynamics is crucial for engaging stakeholders and effectively communicating their stance on social issues. It also introduces a paradox: while high press freedom may enable more extensive brand activism, it opens brands up to intensive scrutiny and potential backlash if the authenticity of their activism is questioned.

2.4 Balancing Adaptation and Standardization: The Dilemma for MNEs

The activist strategy may foster MNEs to increase and mitigate the “liability of foreignness” a key issue for companies operating abroad, by establishing legitimacy within host countries (Del Bosco and Misani, 2016; Resciniti and Matarazzo, 2012). As corporations expand internationally, they face growing expectations to adopt sustainable practices that align with their target markets’ environmental and social needs (Kawai *et al.*, 2018). A central aspect of international strategy is deciding whether to standardize or adapt brand activism communication and initiatives. This decision may be influenced by social, political, cultural, and economic elements - known as distance dimensions (Kraus *et al.*, 2015) - and is particularly important when addressing controversial socio-political issues.

One crucial factor in this adaptation-standardization dilemma is press freedom, which varies significantly across countries and can directly affect the visibility and reception of a brand’s activist message. For instance, in markets with higher press freedom, such as Sweden, brands may have more flexibility to communicate openly and gain media attention. Instead, in environments with restricted press freedom, like Greece, brand messages may be more tightly controlled or face reporting bias (Li *et al.*, 2021). Brands should assess how these media conditions shape their potential to advocate for social causes effectively and how to balance transparency with potential risks. When deciding between adaptation and standardization, MNEs should consider whether their activist messaging aligns with each country’s unique cultural, legal, and political contexts (Pimental *et al.*, 2024). Adaptation allows brands to tailor their activism to local nuances, which may enhance the effectiveness and acceptance of their efforts. This approach is particularly beneficial in countries where sensitive issues like political control, religious norms, or censorship significantly shape public discourse. On the other hand, standardization emphasizes a consistent approach across markets, focusing on brand coherence and simplicity (Resciniti and Fortuna, 2012). However, this uniformity can be challenging in diverse environments where activist topics are perceived differently. For instance, while issues such as sexism, LGBTQIA + rights, and economic inequality are viewed as “woke” topics in some contexts (Rhodes, 2022), other markets may see them through the lens of local socio-political or religious norms, making a standardized approach less effective. The degree of press freedom further complicates this choice, as it can amplify or constrain brand messaging.

Moreover, authentic brand activism often relies on strong and sometimes provocative communication to engage audiences and drive social change (Cammarota *et al.*, 2023). While an incisive tone of voice may be effective in certain markets (Verlegh, 2024), MNEs should remain mindful of how

their messaging will be received across different international contexts, considering cultural differences and media landscapes. Any mismatch might provoke accusations of “performative allyship,” harming both brand credibility and long-term stakeholder relationships. Therefore, the choice between adaptation and standardization carries significant implications, as brand activism inherently involves risk (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020). When executed effectively, brand activism can serve as a “winning formula” for MNEs, allowing them to establish a foothold in foreign markets while addressing social good.

In this regard, MNEs should understand local attitudes and opinions toward socio-political issues to successfully pursue brand activism internationally. They should also assess the opportunities and challenges of varying levels of press freedom and media dynamics. Finally, the strategic decision to adapt or standardize brand activism messaging should align with the company’s reputation, goals, and current marketing best practices.

However, according to Saracevic and Schlegelmilch (2024), while the current literature focuses primarily on domestic market impact and corporate outcomes, there is a notable gap in understanding the global implications of brand activism across different media and political environments.

3. Methodology

Based on the study’s objectives, we employed a single-case study method, which is well-suited for examining specific, unique, remarkable, or revealing cases to develop or advance relevant theory (Yin, 2017). This approach facilitates an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Zarestky, 2023; Ninci *et al.*, 2020), which is particularly valuable when exploring new corporate phenomena (Yin, 2017), such as brand activism from an international perspective.

We selected Ben and Jerry’s as our research setting primarily because it is globally recognized as an activist brand, making it an “information-rich” case (Siggelkow, 2007) that can illustrate broader patterns. In addition, while Ben and Jerry’s is indeed known for its explicit and historical commitments to social causes, potentially making it more activist than other brands, this distinctiveness allows us to capture the complexity and operational details of multi-country activism.

Given its global recognition as an activist brand, we chose Ben and Jerry’s as research setting. Ben and Jerry’s is well-known as an activist leader (Cammarota *et al.*, 2024) and performs activist communication in several countries. The brand recruits its activist managers from diverse backgrounds such as NGOs, global development, and other humanistic fields, bring a wealth of experience and a deep understanding of local and global social issues. Their expertise should ensure that the brand’s activism aligns with local regulations, cultural sensitivities, and social norms, significantly enhancing its efforts’ effectiveness and local relevance. We analyzed Ben and Jerry’s activist communication on social media platforms, providing marketers with unique insights through web data scraping and

analysis (Marino *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, the single-case study approach allows for an in-depth exploration of complex phenomena that might be oversimplified through broader approaches (Siggelkow, 2007). Since its inception, Ben and Jerry's has uniquely addressed various social causes with a consistent commitment that stands out in the corporate world. This consistency allows us to maintain "the brand itself" as a constant variable, enabling a more focused and comprehensive analysis of the intensity and nature of activism across different causes and national contexts. By isolating these variables, our study avoids potential interferences from factors that might affect the purity of the analysis, thus providing a clearer picture of how brand activism can differ by cause and region. Ben and Jerry's global presence, with several country-specific social media profiles, presents a unique opportunity to analyze how messages are tailored to diverse cultural contexts. This aspect of the brand's communication strategy is critical for understanding how MNEs manage the complexity of global brand activism while addressing local sensitivities.

As a result, our methodology features two complementary components, a text network analysis (Study 1) to quantify the extent of brand activism and a semiotic analysis (Study 2) to delve into the communicative nuances. By integrating the findings from these two approaches, we aimed to achieve triangulation (Yin, 2017), cross-validating quantitative insights with the deeper interpretive perspective gained from semiotics.

3.1 Brand's Country Profiles Selection

In addition to the thoughtful selection of the activist brand as the research setting for understanding our study's objectives, we also carefully evaluated which geographical region to focus on for this initial exploration of brand activism from an international perspective. Following this, based on the World Press Freedom Index (2023), we carefully selected the specific countries within the region to be included in our analysis.

Europe was chosen as the research setting for this study for diverse reasons. First, it is an area with highly heterogeneous countries from a social, cultural, and economic perspective (Barnard and De Vries, 2019). This diversity allows for comparative analyses, identifying countries that are similar at a macro level but exhibit significant social differences from a micro view. Second, in recent years, Europe has witnessed the rise of populist governments (Wannow *et al.*, 2024) and reduced freedom of speech and information (Siim *et al.*, 2019). Third, Europe has faced significant challenges for years, such as immigration, climate change, and geopolitical conflicts. Fourth, governments frequently attempt to counter social and environmental activism (Mireanu, 2014). Fifth, ongoing conflicts that the global community is closely monitoring, such as those between Russia and Ukraine and Israel and Palestine (D'Arco *et al.*, 2023), are geographically close to European countries, making them acutely felt within this issue. Additionally, in this regard, Europe has historically been the battleground for major world wars fought on its soil. Finally, Europe is often referred to as a "mirror" of the United States, meaning that trends, movements, ideas, or crises that originate in the U.S. (Halperin, 2018; Moro, 2011) frequently

manifest shortly thereafter in Europe. This is also true for brand activism, which originated and developed in the U.S. with deep roots (Cammarota *et al.*, 2023), but in recent years, it has become a widely practised, criticized, and debated phenomenon in Europe.

Therefore, Europe's diverse socio-political landscape makes it an ideal setting for exploring how brand activism varies across different countries. Specifically, to capture this diversity, we focused our analysis on three of Ben and Jerry's country-specific profiles, selecting them based on two main criteria: the level of press freedom in each country and the current volume of posts on the brand's Instagram profile. These criteria ensured a varied representation of European environments while providing enough content to examine the brand's communication strategies over time. Given the heterogeneity of press freedom rankings, we selected countries representing different extremes and a middle ground. Precisely, *Sweden*, ranked third in press freedom, was chosen to represent a highly open media landscape, as other top-ranking countries lacked active Ben and Jerry's profiles. *Spain*, ranked 30, was selected as a mid-tier country, providing a more balanced perspective on press openness. Lastly, *Greece*, ranked 88th, represents the lower end of the European press freedom spectrum. This selection enables us to examine how Ben and Jerry's tailors its activism strategies in countries with different levels of media freedom and distinct socio-political contexts.

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3.2 Study 1

Study 1 explores the extent of activist communication on Ben and Jerry's Instagram profiles in Sweden, Spain, and Greece. Through a text network analysis of activist posts, the study seeks to reveal the brand's level of commitment to activism within various European contexts, as well as the degree of dedication to each specific issue to address the RQ1. *What is the extent of brands' commitment to activist communication in European countries?*

3.2.1 Data Collection

Instagram was selected as the focal social media platform due to its strong emphasis on visual and textual storytelling, making it an ideal site for analyzing brand communication (Berger and Milkman, 2020). The data collection covered the period from 2016 to 2024, offering a longitudinal view of the brand's communication strategies across different socio-political environments.

Using Apify, a web scraping tool that allows for automated data collection from Instagram's public profiles (Cammarota *et al.*, 2024), we extracted all public posts from the official Ben and Jerry's Instagram accounts in Sweden, Spain, and Greece. This comprehensive dataset was compiled over several sessions to ensure data completeness and was further checked for missing data or discrepancies in order to verify its robustness and reliability (Boegershausen *et al.*, 2022). The collected posts provide a full representation of the brand's social media activities and activism-related communication over the studied years, which is crucial for analyzing the

brand's content evolution and tone adjustments in response to the different socio-political landscapes of each country.

3.2.2 Data Pre-Processing

The pre-processing phase ensures that the textual data accurately reflects the brand's activism communication. We aimed to isolate posts that specifically addressed activist issues promoted by Ben and Jerry's. To achieve this, we first examined the global and country-specific sections of the brand's official website, focusing on their "activism" and "values" sections. By analyzing the themes presented—such as climate justice, social equity, LGBTQ+ rights, and various other social causes—we identified core topics that consistently represented the brand's activist stance.

A dedicated dictionary for each activist topic was constructed by manually selecting key terms and phrases associated with these causes (Boegershausen *et al.*, 2022). Each topic dictionary included terms frequently used by the brand to describe the particular activist issue. For instance, climate justice terms would encompass "sustainability," "carbon footprint," "renewable," and other relevant expressions as employed in Ben and Jerry's communication. The creation of this dictionary was not limited to single keywords but also included contextually relevant word clusters and phrases to capture nuanced aspects of activism-related language. To refine these initial dictionaries and ensure their relevance and applicability to the specific Instagram profiles of Sweden, Spain, and Greece, we tailored the activist topic dictionaries to the linguistic and stylistic particularities of each country. A significant subset of data from each profile was manually selected to serve as a basis for this contextual refinement. This subset consisted of posts representative of the language style, tone, and cultural context used in the profile's communication around activism. This approach aligns with Berger and Milkman (2020), who emphasize the need for context-specific analysis when examining textual data, acknowledging the diverse cultural and linguistic nuances.

Each subset was processed using Python's Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK) library, which facilitated tokenization and linguistic analysis. Initially, the subset underwent cleaning to remove elements unrelated to the textual content, such as URLs, emojis, and hashtags, while preserving any culturally significant symbols or language that could indicate activist topics (Berger and Milkman, 2020). By retaining certain hashtags and emojis relevant to activism, we acknowledged their role in conveying tone, sentiment, and topic engagement, especially given Instagram's visual-textual hybrid nature. Next, the dictionaries were refined based on this profile-specific data. This refinement involved the addition of localized terminology, colloquialisms, and specific language patterns identified within each subset, ensuring that each country's final dictionary was tailored to the thematic scope of activism and the language style unique to each profile. For instance, phrases that capture environmental justice in Swedish might differ significantly in nuance or connotation from those used in Greek or Spanish. By tailoring the dictionaries in this way, we ensured that the classification of activist posts was precise and culturally

resonant, a process supported by best practices outlined by Packard and Berger (2024) on the importance of contextual influences on textual analysis.

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3.2.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis proceeded in two main phases to comprehensively understand the extent and nature of Ben and Jerry's activist communication across the selected country profiles. In the first phase, we assessed the frequency of activist posts for each profile by calculating the ratio of the total number of activist posts to the total number of posts made by the country-specific profile on Instagram. This quantitative measure allowed for a comparative understanding of the brand's emphasis on activism across Spain, Sweden, and Greece, shedding light on how Ben and Jerry's allocates its communication efforts between activism and other content. By comparing these frequencies, we could empirically examine how the brand prioritizes activism in different sociopolitical contexts, offering insights into potential country-level differences in brand engagement.

In the second phase, we analyzed the content of the activist posts using text network analysis to uncover thematic structures within the brand's communication. We employed InfraNodus software (<https://infranodus.com>) to carry out automatic text network analysis. This computational method allows for visualizing text as a network, where words become nodes and co-occurrences between them are represented by edges (D'Arco *et al.*, 2023). By representing text as a graph, text network analysis reveals relationships between words, enabling deeper insights into the structure of textual discourse. Unlike probability distribution-based approaches, such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), clustering through graph theory provides a way to visualize the interconnectedness of themes and key terms within the text, thus offering a more dynamic understanding of the relationships between different activist issues and their prominence across the brand's profiles (Feyissa and Zhang, 2023).

InfraNodus uses graph theory to identify clusters of thematically similar words, creating distinct thematic areas and subtopics within the activist posts (Paranyushkin, 2019). The visualization generated by InfraNodus helped us to identify influential keywords and uncover the relationships between different themes within the text. This method was particularly valuable in highlighting how Ben and Jerry's activist communication aligns with the sociopolitical context of each country's profile. Thematic clusters derived from the analysis provided insights into how the brand emphasizes certain issues in each country. For instance, the cluster analysis showed that in Spain, themes around legislative advocacy and migrant rights were more prominent, while in Sweden, the focus was on LGBTQ+ rights and social inclusion.

To ensure the accuracy of the analysis and account for cultural nuances, we conducted the text analysis in the original language of the posts-Spanish, Swedish, and Greek-allowing the analysis to reflect the linguistic subtleties unique to each profile. InfraNodus supports these languages natively, which facilitated an accurate and context-specific analysis of each country's textual

data. By maintaining the analysis in each country's native language, we were able to uncover more precise thematic connections that would have been obscured by translation. This capability of analyzing posts in multiple languages enhanced our exploration of Ben and Jerry's activism, providing insights into the themes most prominent in the brand's communication across different European countries. The text network analysis approach provided both a macro-level and a micro-level understanding of the activist content. On a macro level, the thematic clusters offered an overview of the main topics present in Ben and Jerry's activism, while on a micro level, the analysis focused on examining the relations that emerged between specific terms and concepts, revealing nuanced connections and country-specific communication dynamics. These two layers of analysis, when combined, allow for robust cross-validation: the frequency analysis (macro-level) identifies broad trends, and the text network analysis (micro-level) sheds light on deeper thematic interconnections, thereby strengthening the reliability of our findings.

3.3 Study 2

Study 2 adopts a semiotic approach to delve deeper into the findings from Study 1, using a phenomenological lens to extract and analyze the underlying meanings (Lima *et al.*, 2019). This helps us understand whether and how activist communication is standardized or adapted internationally. Semiotics, as the study of signs embedded in human, natural, and mechanical communication (Gretzel and Collier de Mendonça, 2019), seeks to understand the cultural meanings embedded in languages and communication processes (Nöth and Santaella, 2017). It is particularly well-suited for analyzing visual communication elements (Skaggs, 2017). From this perspective, semiotic analysis is highly applicable to marketing research, offering an interpretive framework focused on meaning-making (Lima *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, this method is especially useful for examining how the brand adapts and standardizes elements and meanings to its activist communication across different contexts, allowing us to answer RQ2: How do brands adapt or standardize activist communication across different European markets?

3.3.1 Data collection

Based on the results from Study 1, three main themes emerged across all three countries analyzed (Sweden, Spain, and Greece). Specifically, the three themes are 1) environmental concerns; 2) human rights; and 3) LGBTQIA+ rights. Consequently, we revisited the brand's Instagram profile for each country (Rahkova *et al.*, 2023). The aim was to further explore these themes and understand the significance of activist communication for the brand and whether and how it standardizes or adapts across these three different socio-political themes. Thus, we extracted the relevant posts for each theme in each profile, collecting both the copy and the visuals through screenshots. These elements were then placed into a custom matrix for each country, creating a detailed dataset for semiotic content analysis.

3.3.2 Semiotic Content Analysis

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Semiotic analysis allows us to understand the system created by a brand and how it is used to communicate meanings. Individual semiotic signs are studied separately and broken down into phases to interpret what is being communicated by a brand (Oswald, 2012). Semiotic signals can include colors, the language used, tone of voice, and images. Consequently, we categorized these signals into two macro-categories: visual codes and verbal codes (Kucuk, 2015). To ensure methodological rigor, three researchers independently reviewed all visuals and texts, classifying them according to a predefined matrix (Baldry and Thibault, 2006). We created a dictionary with the possible alternatives we used for the semiotic analysis, as shown in Table 1.

Tab. 1: Elements focused on semiotic analysis

Acronym	Meaning
S	Same visual format and same text in English language
T	Same visual format and text translated into the national language
D	Different visual format and different text in the national language
E	Different visual format and different text in English language
yes	The campaign is present in that country
n.a.	The campaign is not present in that country

Source: Source: Author's Elaboration

4. Findings

4.1 Study 1 Findings

Activist Communication Intensity and Topics

The analysis of activist-related content on social media accounts across Greece, Sweden, and Spain reveals significant variation in the frequency, focus, and prominence of activist topics in each country. Overall, Greece featured 30 activist-related posts out of 476 total posts (6.3%), Spain had 80 out of 1200 (6.7%), and Sweden had the highest proportion with 83 out of 1420 posts (5.8%). The tables below summarize the topical clusters identified in each country, highlighting the influence of specific activist themes.

The Greek Profile has a notable focus on environmental topics, such as climate action, sustainability, and fair trade (Table 2). This emphasis reflects the country's commitment to addressing environmental challenges and promoting sustainable practices. In addition to the main topics presented in the table, there are other relevant topics, such as Sustainable Communities (7%), which also indicate a community-driven approach to sustainability.

Tab. 2: Ben and Jerry's Greece - Activist Topics

Topical Cluster	Influence	Percentage of Entries	Keywords
1. Sustainability	31%	9%	sustainability, reduce footprint, future
2. Fair Trade Movement	18%	16%	climate justice, fair trade, equality
3. Climate Action	17%	7%	climate action, environment, new goals

Source: Author's Elaboration through Infranodus

In the Swedish Profile, the focus is primarily on socially controversial topics, such as transpersons' rights and safety, with significant emphasis on transpersons' safety (23%). Refugee engagement and Fairtrade advocacy are also key topics, highlighting Sweden's strong commitment to LGBTQ+ rights, humanitarian causes, and fairtrade (Table 3). Other topics, such as Children's Rights (11%), also play an important role, underscoring the country's broader focus on social justice.

Tab. 3: Ben and Jerry's Sweden - Activist Topics

Topical Cluster	Influence	Percentage of Entries	Keywords
1. Transpersons' Safety	23%	12%	transgender safety, support, awareness
2. Refugee Engagement	22%	17%	refugee support, link for details
3. Fairtrade Advocacy	23%	44%	fairtrade, ice cream, world impact

Source: Author's Elaboration through Infranodus

In the Spanish Profile, the emphasis is on veganism, climate action, and human rights. Vegan-related activism is particularly prominent, appearing as the most influential topic (Vegan Flavor at 34%). There is also a significant focus on climate action and human rights, indicating Spain's dedication to both environmental and community-oriented causes. Additional topics, such as Social Support (13%), further emphasize Spain's focus on social justice and support for marginalized groups (Table 4).

Tab. 4: Ben and Jerry's Spain - Activist Topics

Topical Cluster	Influence	Percentage of Entries	Keywords
1. Vegan Flavor	34%	17%	vegan taste, Spanish flavor, popular
2. Climate Action	21%	8%	climate change, community regulations
3. Human Rights	13%	19%	support migrants, fight for rights

Source: Our Elaboration through Infranodus

The results show that while there are some common themes across the three countries, each country also emphasizes different aspects of activism. Greece has a notable focus on environmental topics, such as climate action, sustainability, and fair trade. Sweden, on the other hand, concentrates on socially controversial topics like transpersons' safety, LGBTQ+ rights, and refugee support, with fairtrade advocacy also being

important. Spain highlights veganism, climate action, and human rights, reflecting an emphasis on both environmental and community-focused activism. These differences indicate that while all three countries support a variety of activist causes, the specific focus areas and prominence of topics differ depending on each country's sociopolitical context.

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Country-specific activist communication

Based on an in-depth analysis of Ben and Jerry's Instagram profiles in Spain, Sweden, and Greece using the Infranodus tool, we identified interesting patterns in activist communication linked to country-specific policies and sociopolitical contexts. In Spain, Ben and Jerry's activist messaging shows a substantial connection with government policies and specific activist organizations. Notably, terms like "reglament" (regulation), "derechos" (rights), and mentions of organizations such as "@redacoge" (a network supporting migrant rights) were frequent, indicating that Ben and Jerry's messaging in Spain often engages with local legislation concerning human rights and migrant issues. These keywords suggest an effort to align brand activism with Spain's political discourse on migration, likely aimed at influencing policy reforms. Furthermore, the word "cambi" (change), often linked to climate and social issues, was mentioned in contexts involving public campaigns and direct calls to action, reflecting a strong emphasis on advocating for legislative change.

In Sweden, Ben and Jerry's communication appears more focused on broader human rights and social inclusion themes, with a specific emphasis on LGBTQ+ activism. Words like "transgender," "human," and mentions of organizations like "@rflslungdom" (a youth LGBTQ+ advocacy group) show that the brand tailors its activist narrative towards the local sociocultural priorities. However, mentions of specific government bodies or policies are minimal, which might suggest a less direct approach towards influencing local governance compared to Spain. Instead, the communication seems aimed at fostering social change through awareness and community building, potentially due to Sweden's already progressive policies regarding LGBTQ+ rights, where public sentiment plays a pivotal role in upholding and expanding these rights.

In Greece, the activist communication strategy was less explicitly connected to governmental entities or specific policy mentions. Instead, there was a significant focus on terms related to social solidarity, such as "crisis," "refuge," and "support," reflecting Greece's sociopolitical landscape, particularly in relation to its ongoing economic challenges and refugee crisis. The brand's communication often referenced "human rights" and "migration," but with fewer direct links to policymakers or legislative advocacy compared to Spain.

4.2 Study 2 Findings

Adaptation vs Standardization of International Brand Activism: A Semiotic Analysis

Table 5 presents an overview of Ben and Jerry's campaigns across different countries and years, focusing on climate action, human rights,

and civil rights. The table details each campaign's visual and textual aspects, categorizing them by the level of standardization. Specifically, it distinguishes between campaigns that (1) used the same visual format and English text, (2) used the same visual format but translated the text into the national language, (3) employed different visual formats with localized texts, or (4) utilized different visual formats and retained English text.

Interestingly, these campaigns frequently aligned with three major global events in most countries analyzed: Earth Day for environmental issues, World Refugee Day and Fairtrade Day for human rights, and International Pride Month for LGBTQIA+ rights.

Focusing on the Earth Day campaign, we observed high standardization, with uniform presentations across multiple countries. On the other hand, the World Refugee Day campaign tended to feature varied visual formats and texts in national languages. Similarly, the Fairtrade Day and International Pride Month campaigns exhibited lower levels of standardization, suggesting that cultural and moral factors influenced the adaptation of these campaigns or, in some cases, led to their absence in specific countries.

Tab. 5: Semiotic analysis

Issue	Campaign	Year	Country		
			Sweden	Spain	Greece
Climate action	Earth day	2021	S	T	D
		2022	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
		2023	S	D	n.a.
Human rights	World refugee day	2021	E	E	n.a.
		2022	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
		2023	D	D	n.a.
	Fairtrade day	2021	S	D	n.a.
		2022	n.a.	D	
		2023	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Civil rights	International Pride Month	2021	E	D	E
		2022	S	D	S
		2023	n.a.	D	E

Note: S: Same visual format and same text in English language; T: Same visual format and text translated into the national language; D = Different visual format and different text in the national language; E = Different visual format and different text in English language; yes = the campaign is present in that country; n.a. = the campaign is not present in that country.

Source: our elaboration

5. Discussions

The results of this study provide critical insights into the extent and nature of Ben and Jerry's activist communication across European countries, contributing to a broader understanding of how MNEs navigate activism in diverse sociopolitical contexts.

The findings from the frequency analysis of activist posts demonstrate that the extent of commitment to activism varies significantly across Ben and Jerry's country-specific profiles, shedding light on how sociopolitical and cultural factors influence the prioritization of activist messaging (RQ1). In Sweden, for instance, the high proportion of activist content may reflect a more favorable institutional environment for advocacy and cultural receptiveness to progressive messages (Podnar and Golob, 2024; Livas *et al.*, 2023). In contrast, Greece exhibited lower activist content, potentially due to factors such as restricted press freedom and sociopolitical conservatism, which constrain the efficacy and acceptability of activism (Reporters Without Borders, 2023)

The text network analysis further enriched our understanding of the thematic structure of Ben and Jerry's activist communication, providing a nuanced view of how brand messaging adapts to different sociopolitical contexts. Using InfraNodus, the text network analysis allowed us to identify thematic clusters representing distinct but interrelated activism areas within the discourse. For example, clusters emerged around climate action, LGBTQ+ rights, economic justice, and migration. In Sweden, the network emphasized the importance of environmental sustainability and LGBTQ+ issues, which aligns with the country's progressive policies and cultural openness. In Spain, economic inequality and labor rights clusters were more prominent, indicating a local focus on socioeconomic issues that resonate with the national context, where political discourse often centers on equality and justice (Ghauri *et al.*, 2021).

Analyzing the relationships between thematic clusters at the micro level further revealed how Ben and Jerry's activism reflected country-specific cultural narratives and social priorities. For example, the interconnectedness of themes like LGBTQ+ rights and community support in Sweden contrasted with the thematic connections between labor rights and social justice in Spain, illustrating how the brand adapted its discourse to match the prevailing social climate of each country. The relationships between these clusters highlighted the intricate ways Ben and Jerry's communicates its messages, ensuring they resonate with local audiences by aligning with nationally relevant issues.

The semiotic analysis of specific campaigns, such as Earth Day, World Refugee Day, and International Pride Month, further illuminates how Ben and Jerry's balances standardization and adaptation across European markets. The Earth Day campaign illustrated a strong trend toward standardization, highlighting the universal appeal of environmental issues and allowing Ben and Jerry's to maintain a consistent visual and textual narrative across Sweden, Spain, and Greece. Such consistency suggests that global environmental concerns are perceived as less contentious, making them suitable for a unified approach across different markets (Nambisan, 2020).

In contrast, World Refugee Day and International Pride Month campaigns demonstrated significant variability, reflecting the brand's adaptation to align with diverse cultural sensitivities and moral considerations. For example, World Refugee Day's textual and visual elements varied considerably between Spain and Greece, likely in response

to local public sentiment towards migration (Shishkina and Iassaev, 2018). Similarly, the International Pride Month campaign adjusted its tone and imagery to better align with the sociocultural context of each country, highlighting the necessity for MNEs to adapt their activism to respect local cultural expectations and social norms (Saracevic and Schlegelmilch, 2024).

By integrating social, political, and cultural distance dimensions into its strategy formulation for international brand activism, Ben and Jerry's has successfully navigated the complexities of engaging in activism across different markets. Understanding these distance dimensions allowed the brand to ensure its activism aligned with global values and local cultural contexts, thereby enhancing both the impact and acceptance of its messages across diverse markets (Bucley *et al.*, 2017; Van Zanten and Van Tulder, 2018). However, these findings also underscore the heightened risks of "woke washing" or accusations of hypocrisy when a brand's local adaptations appear to conflict with its global stance, suggesting that authenticity must be carefully maintained across all markets.

6. Theoretical Implications

This pioneering research establishes crucial foundations for understanding international brand activism, representing a significant leap in studying how MNEs engage in brand activism across diverse global contexts. It is the first to undertake an international comparison of brand activism communication, unravelling the complex interplay between local, glocal, and standardized strategies within the fraught terrain of social, political, economic, and environmental issues (Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020). This study lays the groundwork for a more holistic conceptualization of international brand activism, extending the existing theoretical constructs in brand activism research.

The findings reveal the contingent nature of brand activism strategies, underscoring the need for standardization and adaptation in international markets, similar to theories in international advertising. Contingency perspectives suggest a distinction between advertising strategy and execution regarding standardization, while adaptation depends on situational factors such as demographics, language, and local culture. By applying these insights to the context of brand activism, this research helps broaden the understanding of how situational factors impact the formulation and execution of activism campaigns in different countries (Livas *et al.*, 2023). In other words, brand activism may be integrated into existing international marketing frameworks that weigh the benefits of global coherence against the advantages of local adaptation, while recognizing additional ethical and reputational risks unique to socio-political engagement. The study also provides an operational framework for examining how varying levels of press freedom and local policies shape the implementation of brand activism across different sociopolitical contexts. Further, we highlight that heightened scrutiny in countries with high press freedom can lead to intensified reputational risks, thus emphasizing the need for authenticity and transparency in brand activism.

The research contributes to grand challenges literature by exploring how brand activism can address complex, multinational social issues such as climate change, inequality, and human rights (Ghauri *et al.*, 2021). Given that grand challenges are inherently multinational in scope, the role of MNEs as agents of social change is increasingly crucial. Therefore, this study provides theoretical foundations for understanding how MNEs can leverage brand activism to create value for their stakeholders and society at large (Kolk *et al.*, 2010). By understanding brand activism as a potential tool to navigate foreign markets and contribute to global sustainability efforts, this research highlights the strategic importance of integrating activism into business practices to tackle cross-border socio-political challenges.

The study adopts a comprehensive approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses to dissect digital brand activism on Instagram. Quantifying the frequency and scope of MNEs' communications on specific contentious topics provides a robust framework to assess the extent and focus of their activism efforts. This quantitative foundation offers a broad overview of MNEs' commitments to various causes, establishing a baseline for understanding their engagement levels with controversial issues. Moreover, the research unveils the deeper meanings behind activist communication by including qualitative methods like semiotic analysis. The semiotic analysis of campaigns like Earth Day, World Refugee Day, and International Pride Month reveals the strategic adaptation of visual and textual elements to resonate with local cultural and moral values, emphasizing the importance of cultural sensitivity in brand communication (Saracevic and Schlegelmilch, 2024).

The integration of cross-country comparisons highlights how activism strategies may diverge due to differences in cultural expectations, political landscapes, and public attitudes. The study finds that the perception of brand activism differs substantially across consumer segments, and the importance consumers attach to specific controversial issues varies significantly by country (Saracevic and Schlegelmilch, 2024; Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020). This dynamic affects how often and with what intensity brands engage in activism, impacting the motivation and frequency of activism campaigns. Understanding these contextual differences is vital for MNEs seeking to implement activist strategies that resonate effectively with local audiences, ensuring both authenticity and legitimacy.

7. Managerial Implications

Building on our findings, MNEs' brand managers can adopt a series of actionable strategies to navigate the complexities of engaging in brand activism across Europe's diverse socio-political landscapes:

Strategic Issue Selection: MNEs must carefully choose which issues to advocate for, considering both global brand identity and local sentiment. Universal topics like climate action may be standardized across regions to maintain cohesion, whereas more culturally sensitive issues (e.g., LGBTQ+ rights, immigration) might necessitate adaptation to respect local norms or media environments.

Tone and Language Calibration: Press freedom plays a pivotal role in shaping the tone and directness of activist communication. In high-press-freedom environments (e.g., Sweden), a brand can adopt a bolder stance without as much concern for censorship. However, doing so may also invite closer scrutiny of the brand's authenticity. In countries with restricted press freedom (e.g., Greece), a more cautious communication style might help mitigate backlash or censorship.

Visual and Textual Consistency vs. Localization: Our semiotic analysis indicates that campaigns such as Earth Day can easily be standardized to emphasize environmental responsibility globally, whereas campaigns on sensitive topics, such as Pride Month or refugee issues, benefit from local tailoring. Managers should thus decide which elements, visuals, language, call-to-action, require adaptation for local impact.

Policy and Advocacy Alignment: In certain markets, referencing policy or legislation can lend credibility to brand activism. In Spain, for instance, Ben and Jerry's leveraged local organizations and legislative discussions around migration, illustrating that explicit policy alignment can enhance local legitimacy. However, in more conservative or restrictive press environments, direct references to policy may prove risky.

Authenticity and Transparency: The ever-present risk of being labeled as "woke washing" underscores that sincerity is paramount. If a brand's global stance contradicts its local communications, the dissonance can erode consumer trust. MNEs should ensure that their activism is backed by tangible actions, internal policies, and consistent messaging across markets.

Cross-functional Coordination: Brand activism typically goes beyond marketing to involve corporate social responsibility teams, legal advisors, and even operations managers. A cross-functional approach ensures that activist messaging is consistent with the company's overall values, reducing the risk of misalignment between internal practices and external messaging.

By considering these strategies, brands can more effectively address local and global concerns while maintaining a coherent activist identity. This not only helps build consumer trust and brand equity but also bolsters the brand's legitimacy in the eyes of diverse stakeholders.

8. Conclusions

The primary conclusion of this study underscores the essential need for MNEs to maintain a delicate balance between global brand objectives and local market sensitivities when implementing brand activism strategies. Gaining legitimacy to address socio-political challenges across varied contexts necessitates a profound commitment to local communities and a comprehension of unique cultural and social dynamics (Hooper, 2016). Our research highlights that the success of such initiatives critically hinges on the ability of MNEs to adapt their messaging and tactics to fit the diverse cultural, social, and political landscapes in which they operate. This involves a strategic choice between standardization efforts for broader

appeal and adapting approaches to resonate more deeply within specific markets. The decision on this spectrum significantly affects the activism efforts' credibility, reception, and overall impact.

Furthermore, while brand activism presents an opportunity to positively influence social conditions in the countries where brands operate, it must be approached cautiously. If not managed carefully, such efforts can backfire, damaging the brand's reputation or being dismissed as mere "woke" moves that fail to genuinely address issues and instead polarize consumers (Rhodes, 2023). This underscores the importance of crafting activism strategies that are not only aligned with the brand's values but are also sensitive to and informed by the socio-political context of each market.

Therefore, the key takeaway from this study is that MNEs looking to leverage brand activism as a tool for positive change must invest in comprehensive local market analysis to guide their strategies. This ensures that their efforts are seen as authentic and relevant by the target communities and contribute meaningfully to the social discourse and challenges specific to each region.

This research is a foundational step towards a deeper understanding of how effective brand activism can bridge the gap between global connectedness and local relevance, ultimately enhancing MNEs' roles as catalysts for societal change and demonstrating the profound potential of thoughtfully executed corporate activism. This strategic approach helps prevent the pitfalls of misaligned activism and fosters a more impactful and respected presence in the global market.

9. Limitations and Future Directions for Research

While our analysis provides insights into the dynamics of digital brand activism through Instagram, we also recognize some limitations and opportunities for future research. Our research, primarily centered on Instagram, represents just one facet of digital communication. This focus limits the generalizability of our findings across other platforms where audience engagement and content strategies might differ. Additionally, quantitative measures of activism intensity might not fully capture these campaigns' qualitative impact and public reception, potentially overlooking subtleties in consumer sentiment and cultural reception.

Future studies should extend the investigation to other social media platforms, official websites, and digital campaigns to offer a holistic view of brand activism. This would help us understand how different platforms are leveraged for varied strategic purposes. Longitudinal research might also illuminate how brand activism evolves over time in response to shifting socio-political climates, capturing the fluidity of consumer sentiment and policy changes.

Comparative research across multiple MNEs in various industries could shed light on whether activism outcomes differ based on a brand's sector or product category. Some industries may be more naturally aligned with socio-political engagement, food and beverage, for example, while others might face steeper challenges in connecting with social causes. Delving

into qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews with brand managers and stakeholders could offer more detailed perspectives on managerial decision-making processes behind activist strategies.

Finally, future research could explore the role of emerging technologies, such as AI-driven sentiment analysis, in shaping brand activism strategies, helping brands to continuously monitor and adapt their messages in real time. Investigating how brand activism is institutionalized within corporate structures and supply chains may also reveal new directions for achieving long-term impact and authenticity across international contexts.

By addressing these areas, future research can build on the foundational insights provided by this study to offer a more nuanced understanding of how MNEs function as agents of change in a globally connected yet culturally diverse world. This would enhance corporate social responsibility and foster strategic business growth within the complex landscape of international markets.

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