

BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

**BRAND ACTIVISM IN MARKETING STRATEGIES AND ITS EFFECTS
ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR.**

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2021-2022



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ABSTRACT

There is an open discussion in the business community on whether brands should take stances on socio-political divisive issues or not. The aim of this research is to get a deeper insight on the effects that brand activism has on consumer behaviour. Using a quantitative approach from data obtained through a survey contrasted with other real case studies, it was found that prior brand attachment results into a partial reduction of the negative effect of brand activism, apologizing for the brand's position only worsens the attitude of all consumers, and the long term effect of brand activism differs from the one in the short term, since in the long-run firms may expect a positive outcome from the activist strategy and the opposers' attitude is no longer affected by their activism. This provides marketing managers with added information to get a better picture on the decision-making process.

Keywords: Brand activism, business ethics, cognitive dissonance, consumer-brand identification, consumer behaviour, corporate social responsibility, in-group favouritism.

TÍTOL: L'activisme de marca en les estratègies de màrqueting i els seus efectes en el comportament del consumidor.

PARAULES CLAU: Activisme de marca, comportament del consumidor, dissonància cognitiva, ètica empresarial, favoritisme de grup, identificació consumidor-marca, responsabilitat social corporativa.

RESUM: Hi ha una discussió oberta a la comunitat empresarial sobre si les marques haurien d'adoptar posicions sobre qüestions sociopolítiques que creen divisió a la societat, segons els seus valors. L'objectiu d'aquesta investigació és obtenir una visió més profunda dels efectes que l'activisme de marca té sobre els consumidors en funció d'alguns atributs. Per aquesta raó, es realitza una revisió documental sobre el marc teòric i els estudis previs sobre l'activisme de marca, per després aplicar un enfocament quantitatiu mitjançant l'anàlisi de les dades obtingudes a partir d'una enquesta, les quals també es contrasten amb altres casos pràctics reals. Els resultats mostren que l'adhesió anterior a la marca es tradueix en una reducció parcial de l'efecte negatiu de l'activisme de marca, disculpar-se per la posició de la marca només empitjora l'actitud de tots els consumidors i l'efecte a llarg termini de l'activisme de marca difereix de l'efecte a curt termini, ja que les empreses poden esperar un resultat positiu de l'estratègia activista a llarg termini i l'actitud de l'opositor envers la marca ja no es veu afectada pel seu activisme, entre d'altres descobriments. Això proporciona als directores de màrqueting nova informació per obtenir una millor imatge alhora de prendre decisions, a la vegada que obre un nou ventall de possibles investigacions sobre el tema.

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1.- Introduction

Along with the development of new information and communication technologies, citizens tend to have bigger and more diverse environments to debate over what is morally right and, under some circumstances, they might expect brands to take stances on socio-political divisive topics.

It is obvious that Brand Activism has then acquired a great relevance in the marketing mix. A clear example is that, according to a survey by Morning Consult and Politico from 2022, 51% of U.S. voters 'strongly' or 'somehow' support the decision of brands speaking out on abortion access, specifically Gen Z voters, from which a 72% support them taking stances on the issue¹. On September 1st, the Texas state Legislature passed a bill that banned abortion rights after a heartbeat can be detected on the foetus, which happens generally around the sixth week of pregnancy, when most mothers have not realized that they are pregnant yet. Since then, several Republican-led states have been approving bills modelled on that one, restricting access to abortion access to women across the United States. There is an open debate in the American society in which everyone must have an opinion and, as we see, the majority of the population is even expecting brands to take a position on the issue. Major companies such as Amazon, Airbnb, Salesforce or Uber have positioned in favour of abortion rights, and some of them announced that they would be covering the travel expenses of employees seeking non-threatening medical care, such as abortions². In some cases, the reasoning behind the brand entering the debate is because their opinion will be heard and that might put the brand on everyone's lips, which is a big opportunity to be advertised. In other cases, the outcome might not be as positive, but the brand might still want to enter the debate, since their moral judgement makes them want to take a stance to make progress on a social change. That is the case of Citigroup, which, in spite of having a Republican target, also announced that they would pay travel expenses for employees affected by restricting abortion laws to facilitate access to adequate resources. The decision had bad consequences for the company, such as the House Republicans asking the U.S. to cancel government contracts with Citigroup³ and a Texas lawmaker threatening to pass a bill which would prevent Citigroup from underwriting any municipal bonds⁴. However, the company stood still showing their support to abortion rights without making any apology. That is what has been named by marketing managers and academics as **Brand Activism**.

¹ The full results of the survey can be found on <https://morningconsult.com/2022/05/04/brands-abortion-supreme-court-roe-v-wade/>

² A longer list of the position of US companies can be found on <https://theweek.com/feature/1013287/where-major-companies-stand-on-abortion-rights-the-scotus-leak>

³ Read full report on <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/abortion-citi-republicans-bank/>

⁴ Read full report on <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/18/business/citigroup-abortion-texas-warning.html>

In either way, that action of taking a stance on a divisive issue will have a direct impact on the way customers, both supportive and opposite to the moral judgement of the brand, will act towards it after that statement.

Hence, the purpose of this project can be divided by two:

- To get deeper knowledge and contribute in the academical field studying the effects of business ethics, and in particular, brand activism, on how it affects customer likelihood to buy a product and, thus, the performance of a corporation.
- Provide a new perspective to marketing managers on under which circumstances an activist marketing campaign may attract benefits to the business or, otherwise, it might harm its revenues and performance.

In order to conduct those objectives, the project is structured in the following way. First of all, in the following section there is a review of the past literature, to check what has previously been studied, build the theoretical environment of brand activism, and detect what needs to be studied next. After the hypotheses are built on the basis of that theory, they are tested through four case studies on section 3, following a quantitative approach that analyses the data obtained through a survey and complementing it with other real case studies, to check the veracity of the results in the real world. Finally, the conclusions reached during the research are presented on section 4, as well as its future implications on marketing management, and some suggestions for further research.

2. Brand activism: theoretical framework.

2.1.- Business ethics

In the late 20th Century, a new concept emerges in the Business field initially in the US and subsequently in Europe (Conill, 1996): **Business Ethics**, which is the study of appropriate business policies and practices regarding controversial aspects of their governance, communication and responsibilities (Twin A., 2021).

Long before that, businesses were not identified as a moral agent; only the people managing them could be responsible for their actions, since they are the ones having consciousness and being able to make a moral judgement. However, corporations are organized, which means that they have a structure so that not only a reduced group of people can make all decisions by themselves. This implies that, businesses must use a framework to orientate board managers on according to which values they should make their choices, which will make it obtain its own identity (Cortina & Castiñeira, 1997).

In order to do that, they need to define what their purpose, direction and underlying values of the organization are, so in case of rapid changes, they can come back to look at what are their reasons to exist and produce their products or services. That is the reason why they write mission, vision and values statements (Mitchell M., Chawla K., Kappen J. & Chrissy C., 2021).

The mission statement is the explanation of why the company exists, the vision statement includes the organization's aspirations of what it hopes to achieve or to become in the future and **the values statement provides a moral direction for the organization that guides decision making and establishes its core principles and philosophical ideals** (Bruton John/Lynn and Lumen Learning, 2022).

Under those statements, businesses can in fact be ethically judged for their decisions and the identity they build through them, such as the reasons behind the location of a production plant or the product itself, as they have been previously defined and they do not mean an arbitrary decision of a CEO in particular.

Marketing managers have to consider, when they approach a plan, that the brand will be judged as oneself by its potential customers, according to the decisions they make, which could benefit or harm its public image and, as a consequence, its revenues. Marketing management is, thus, a powerful tool that organizations can use to take a stance on their core principles and values, so that they can act in a morally correct manner, advocating for what they think is the right thing to do according to their values statement. Some examples are making official statements on their social media, including situations they want to

normalize in their advertisements or announcing the allocation of a fraction of the revenue to a social issue or an NGO.

According to Kantian ethics, to consider an act as moral it must have two characteristics: The first one is that it has a purpose and the second one is that it must be done independently of the potential benefit it might provide (Vessey D., 2017).⁵ If a brand publishes an activist statement, but the reason is that they think they will get benefit from it, the action could not be considered as a moral act according to Kant. However, the purpose of this study is not to get into the ethics behind brand activism, but to detect its effects on business performance.

With the current information society arising each time to higher levels, thanks to the advances in information and communication technologies, corporate communication cannot be reduced to just commercial purposes. Corporations are not anymore pure economic agents who sell their products or services. They are also expected to sell themselves. Customers do not get profit from a purchase just because of what they purchase, but also for the way that their product or service is made, distributed and sold (Cortina & Castiñeira, 1997). So, even though, generally, the aim of a business is to get an economical benefit out of their activities, organizations must provide the customers with an additional ethical value, and not only through what they preach, but also on the way they act on the causes they defend. Furthermore, it cannot be just a singular position on a social discussion, they have to understand what they will be doing to support that position in the following months or years. However, under some circumstances, brands might need to decide whether it is more important to hold on to their values and take action to improve fairness in society or do nothing if the action is going to harm the business or the brand image of some key stakeholders too much.

2.2.- The definition of brand activism

In order to define the concept of brand activism, first we need to consider other important definitions. **Corporate social responsibility (CSR)** is defined in previous literature as «a concept which refers to the corporate behaviour that is over and above legal requirements and is voluntarily adopted to achieve sustainable development» (in words of Idowu & Papasolomou, 2007). On the other hand, cause-related marketing (CRM) comprehends all marketing tools used by a company to promote their CSR effort and explain how corporate responsibility is carried out to their customers (Sheikh & Beise-Zee, 2011). However, the scope of the concepts CSR and CRM refers to social issues generally agreed by the whole population which do not create any type of division in moral opinions, such as

⁵ To deepen in Kant's ethics, read *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) and *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797).

ending global hunger or providing health care and education to poor countries. In consequence, previous research has demonstrated and ratified that there is a positive link between investing in CSR and a firm's financial performance (Orlitzky, Schmidt, and Rynes 2003; Russo and Fouts, 1997), along with a decrease in consumers' price sensitivity and increase in brand loyalty (Green & Peloza, 2011; Marin, Ruiz, & Rubio, 2009), except when CSR is perceived by consumers as a "**woke washing**" or an inauthentic marketing strategy (Wagner, Lutz, & Weitz, 2009; Yoon, Gürhan-Canli, & Schwarz, 2006). This only occurs normally when the company does not apply what they preach in their organization, human resources practices or supply chain, possibly damaging their image and potential for social change.

Nevertheless, **brand activism** is defined in words of Philip Kotler and Christian Sarkar (2018) as the following: «Brand Activism consists of business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society». It can be represented in a variate scope of different forms. For instance, public statements, partnerships, public donations, the CEO's actions or as a part of the marketing strategy, among others, are different forms of brand activism.

In this case, the main difference with CSR is that the concept of activism refers to promoting one's point of view on **social or political issues that, generally, cause a division in the public opinion**, such as the legalization of abortion, gay-marriage, or the acceptance of immigrants, driven by the morals of each individual. Even if the topic of discussion does not create much divisive opinions, it is still considered brand activism in a global environment if it does encourage or impede a change in society worldwide.

Activism does not necessarily have to be linked to progressive ideals, since it can also impede improvements in society. Thus, there are two types of brand activism depending on the direction it has. On the one hand, **regressive activism** is the one that resists to change (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). For instance, the efforts made by a sector of the tobacco industry during the 20th Century for the population to continue consuming tobacco was an example of regressive activism (López Aza, 2020). On the other hand, **progressive activism** refers to business efforts that seek to stimulate the evolution of society (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). Two examples of a progressive activist brands would be Patagonia, with their efforts to reduce carbon emissions from the manufacturing industries and protect nature (Patagonia, 2022), or The Body Shop, which was the first international cosmetics brand that made campaigns

against animal testing, pressuring with success the EU into forbidding the imports and sales of animal-tested cosmetic products in the European Union in 2013 (The Body Shop, 2022).⁶

Another classification can be made according to the nature or purpose of the activism. López Aza C., (2020), divides brand activism into four types depending on the purpose:

Table 1. Types of brand activism according to its nature.

Social activism	Refers to all business efforts to make a change in the welfare state of citizens, by promoting causes such as LGBT+ equality, feminism or ethnic discrimination.
Civil activism	Englobes activism in terms of enforcing or restricting civil rights in laws, business organization or economic equality. For instance, promoting democracy, labour unions, policies that fight inequality, freedom of movement, rights of privacy and freedom of information.
Environmental activism	Includes all business effort to promote the fight against climate change and the preservation of the environment.
Political activism	This is the most controversial one since it consists of the defence of a political ideology. For example, supporting or opposing to a new law or a mediatic court ruling, criticising the performance of a government or taking side in a war conflict.

Source: Own elaboration with information from López Aza, C. work.

A global study from Edelman (2018) showed that 46% of the consumers believe that brands have better ideas for solving their countries’ problems than governments, 53% say brands can actually do more to solve social ills than governments and 54% find it easier to get brands to address social problems than governments to take action. Hence, brand activism is a tool that should not be easily discarded by managers, since it can attract new targets, especially the young ones, which prefer to «buy a brand if it supports a cause or purpose in accordance with the brand ideology and personality when compared to the non-activist brands» (Shetty et al., 2019).

In 2018, Kotler P. and Sarkar C. published in their book *Brand Activism: From Purpose to Action* the first framework to help brands develop and apply brand activism in their strategy as a set of steps⁷:

⁶ See more details of the activist history from The Body Shop here: <https://www.thebodyshop.com/es-es/nosotros/activismo/nuestro-adn-activista/a/a00081>

⁷ The same framework can be found in the following website: <https://www.activistbrands.com/the-brand-activism-toolkit/>

1. Brand activism strategy questionnaire: Take a look at the history of the brand values and evaluate the impact that brand activism will have on their leadership, reputation and culture. In this step the company needs to define what they want to achieve by becoming an activist brand.
2. Brand activism maps: Illustrate in a map all types of activism; (they divide brand activism in 6 types) social, legal, economic, environmental, political and business activism, and the possible directions of the activism; regressive, when the activism impedes a change, or progressive, when the activism enforces a change. This way they can decide which issues matter the most and which forms of activism fit more with the company history and values.
3. The brand activism canvas: It is a tool used to picture the differences between the values of the company and its stakeholders. The canvas should help to design an activist strategy that will help the brand achieve its goals, both activist and economical, by taking into account the opportunities and risks they face.
4. Brand activism X matrix: It uses the structure of a *Hoshin Kanri* matrix with the purpose to plan and monitor a viable activist plan, considering the priorities and activities, performance indicators and short- and long-term goals.
5. Brand activism scorecard: A simple dashboard used to communicate progresses on the activist state of the company.

2.3.- Review of previous literature on the effects of brand activism in consumer attitude

To understand how brand activism may affect business performance, we refer now to the **consumer-brand identification** (CBI) theory, which states that consumers build stronger relations with brands they can identify with (Tuškej U, Golob U, Podnar K, 2013). This happens when consumers find similarities between themselves and the brand, such as feeling satisfied with the brand social benefits and having memorable brand experiences. A high level of CBI leads to some benefits for the company, which are brand advocacy, an increase in the intention of purchase and brand loyalty by the consumers (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), among others.

Furthermore, since corporate social responsibility only advertises or promotes non-divisive social issues, the consumer might sympathise with the moral foundations of the brand, but they cannot get a unique insight on the moral identity of the organization as much as if the brand was promoting a socio-cultural change or a divisive issue. In consequence, even though it is much more unpredictable and riskier than CSR, the outcome of a brand activism-driven marketing strategy might cause a higher level of consumer-brand identification.

As we have seen, organizations have an opportunity to increase self-brand identification slightly but assuredly with cause-related marketing strategies (Green and Peloza 2011; Marin, Ruiz, and Rubio 2009). However, the effect of brand activism does not remain as clear. It certainly supplies an opportunity for customers to assess their self-brand identification, as they can verify whether their interests, moral judgements and values agree with the ones that the brand is advocating. But although that should lead to an increase in brand loyalty, intention of purchase and brand advocacy, the effect that brand activist campaigns will have on business performance is something still discussed.

Even though the experts on the topic agree that most brands cannot stay in neutral positions, previous research has found diverse possible outcomes for their strategies. Whereas there are some studies that reflect a positive correlation on the effect that brand activism has in self-brand identification and business performance (see for example, Shetty S., Venkataramaiah N.B., Anand K., 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020), another study debated the existence of an asymmetric effect of self-brand similarity in the domain of moral judgements (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

Mukherjee & Althuizen discussed that when a customer disagreed with the social or political stand taken by a brand, they could verify that they do not have the same moral judgement. Since people believe that their own moral foundations are what is “right”, superior or the standard thinking, that consumer-brand disagreement causes a loss of consumer-brand identification, which leads to less likelihood of purchasing the product, brand loyalty and brand advocacy. On the other hand, they argue that if a customer agrees with the position taken by a brand, something different happens. They naturally assess that they agree with the brand in their interests, moral judgements and values, but they adjudicate that to the normal standard (Turiel, 1983). In this case, as people believe that their own moral foundations are the supreme, superior, and standard ones again, they cannot find anything special in the brand standing up for a moral purpose they sympathize with. So, consequently, they will not experience more consumer-brand identification that can lead to positive effects for the business.

After some surveys, they were able to prove their hypotheses of an asymmetric effect on attitudes, intentions, and behaviour of a brand activism statement on consumers, finding a decrease in brand attitude when there is consumer-brand disagreement, but demonstrating no significant effect in the case of self-brand agreement in the short-run.

However, brand activism is still a booming topic in marketing that needs more research. In their study, Mukherjee and Althuizen ask people to answer a survey to prove their hypothesis, but they do not hypothesize or classify the respondents according to any other topic than whether they agree or not with the stand that the brand takes.

2.4.- The influence of consumers' political view on the effect of brand activism

As Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) comment at the end of their paper, an article analysing data from the American National Election Studies and European Social Surveys found that liberals in the United States and leftists from 15 European countries are more likely to buy a product or boycott it for political reasons than conservatives and rightists (Jost, Langer & Singh, 2017). So, one of the branches of this study is to check how a consumer's political ideology influences the effect of brand activism.

H1: *The effect of brand activism on consumer attitude is higher in leftists than rightists.*

2.5.- The influence of a controversial brand activism marketing strategy and a public apology on the effect of brand activism.

Mukherjee & Althuizen, (2020) proved that in the short-run brand activism has no significant effect in the case of consumer-brand agreement on consumer attitudes, intentions, and behaviour. However, when the controversy becomes viral, and the brand receives public backlash from those who disagree with them, something different occurs.

In-group bias or **in-group favouritism** is an aspect of human behaviour which indicates that in societies and people are more likely to favour members of their own group rather than others (Fu et al., 2012). This applies to religious, ethnic and political affiliation groups, but also to moral judgement.

With the impact of social networks and the ease of communication, the number of organized criticism and boycotts over brands has increased in the past years. In those cases, the boycotters not only threat and argue with the activist company, but also the moral judgement that it represents. Then, in-group favouritism applies: those who agree and empathise with the statement of the brand feel that the threat by the opposing group is also thrown against them. In this scenario, they no longer adjudicate the morals of the brand to the normal standard, since they can check the bad consequences it had for them, and they may reward the brand by increasing attitude and intention to buy the brand's products as an act of support for stepping up in defence of their shared moral principles.

Moreover, in some cases brands end up apologizing for the statement when they receive too much public backlash as an act of trying to reverse it. In this case, very little positive effect is expected from the opposing group, since «identity-driven thinking leads to judgement that resist change» (as stated by Bolton & Reed, 2004), which means that the first negative judgement will prevail over the apology. Once the opposers have "cancelled" the brand, it is very difficult to get their trust back. On the other hand, those who agreed

with the original brand's moral principles will see that apology as an act of betrayal and an incoherent marketing strategy (Wagner, Lutz, & Weitz, 2009; Yoon, Gürhan-Canli, & Schwarz, 2006), which will lead them to also penalize the brand.

H2: *Public backlash to a brand activism-driven marketing campaign will lead sympathisers to increase positive brand attitude.*

H3: *An apology does not bring any positive effect, as it is seen as an act of betrayal by those who agreed with the original brand's statement, and it does not change the image of the brand on those who disagreed.*

2.6.- Exceptions on the negative effect of brand activism.

One of the reasons why brand activism might cause problems within a firm is because if the customer is not satisfied with the product or service or, in this case, the moral judgement taken by the brand, they can just switch to another one. In some cases, switching brands is not an easy solution for the customer.

The theory of **cognitive dissonance** (Festinger, 1957) is a theory from social psychology that can be applied to the reaction of consumers on brand activism. Festinger explains that people feel uncomfortable when they find incongruences between their actions and their values (dissonance). That feeling will lead humans to act in a certain way to reduce the cognitive dissonance, the same way that hunger leads to eat in order to reduce that hunger.

As discussed before, customers build relations with brands they can identify with (Tuškej U, Golob U, Podnar K, 2013). When there is consumer-brand disagreement, consumers experience cognitive dissonance, and they will act to reduce it and go back to the equilibrium of the perception of themselves. In those occasions, there are three possible outcomes:

- I. They try to justify the brand's perceived immoral statement, even changing their attitude and beliefs.
- II. They will set apart their own moral rationalization, adding some ideas to their own beliefs so that they can continue disagreeing with the brand, but find it morally correct to continue consuming their products.
- III. They find themselves so disappointed because of the immoral brand's statement which does not comply with their expectations that they stop consuming their product.

In some cases, the level of consumer-brand identification is so high that some of them find themselves attached to a brand that they love or feel strongly related to it (Gómez-Suárez, 2019). That will make it more difficult for them to stop consuming products from a brand

when they experience cognitive dissonance because of the activism they choose. So, in theory, prior brand attachment should result into a reduction of the negative effect of brand activism, since when there is consumer-brand disagreement, instead of directly stop consuming the products from the brand (outcome III), consumers attached to a brand will more likely opt for options I and II to reduce their cognitive dissonance but continuing purchasing their products.

This might be more usual than it seems. For example, imagine a music act taking a stand on a socio-political divisive issue. Of course, the fans that agree will support, but those who disagree with them will try to rationalize their moral judgement, since, because of the high prior brand attachment they have, quitting from being a fan might be very difficult for them to do. Translating that into any other brand with highly consumer loyalty might give the same outcome.

H4: *High prior brand attachment results into a total or partial reduction of the negative effect of brand activism.*

2.7.- Short-term vs. long-term effect of brand activism.

Research until nowadays has focused on studying the short-term effects of brand activism since they can be more easily quantified through surveys. However, it would be interesting to check for evidence to see if in the long-term the effect is different. For example, when there is consumer-brand disagreement, as time passes by people may end up forgetting a punctual activist strategy, the moral judgement might not have any effect on their self-brand identification and, thus, intention of purchasing their products will stay the same. Contrastingly a brand repeatedly standing up for a divisive issue may positively effect consumer-brand identification in the long-term, increasing consumer attitude on the group who agrees with them.

H5: *The effect of brand activism is different in the short-term than in the long-term.*

3.- Empirical and qualitative studies.

3.1.- Methodology overview

In order to ratify or reject the hypotheses, an analysis of real business cases from brands that have applied brand activism in their marketing strategies is performed. Thus, first an empirical approach was taken from data collected via survey to check for statistical evidence to test the hypotheses. However, as there is a great number of examples for activist brands, only enough cases were included so that the answers collected could provide sufficient information to study the hypotheses without making the survey excessively long. This way, it would be more direct and appealing, and more people could be appealed to answer it entirely. Nonetheless, all the results from the survey are complemented with more business cases that were not included in it, but which are also adequately relevant to support the findings from the survey with a qualitative approach.

The survey was conducted during the days 02/06/2022 to 05/06/2022, with 237 respondents. In the survey, people we first asked some contextual questions to know about some of their view on social and political controversial topics that are relevant to the study. Then, real activist business cases were exposed as a part of four different studies, and they were asked before and after explaining the stand taken by the brand which was their likelihood of purchasing their product from one to ten. Each of those cases were specifically chosen in accordance with the hypotheses proposed previously, so that it would be possible to measure in a quantitative way the differences in consumer behaviour for each specific scenario.

The criteria chosen to analyse the results from the survey was hypothesis testing, calculating Student's t values in different manners, depending on the nature of the test. In order to maintain a minimum of 95% confidence level, **only p-values under .05 are considered significantly enough to reject the null hypotheses.**

The first type of test that can be found on this study is the difference in dependent samples or matched pairs, which is the difference between the value of a variable in the same sample before and after an event. For example, the differences in the likelihood of purchasing a product from a brand before and after knowing about their activist stand in the same sample. For dependent samples, the t-statistic was computed using the following formula, assuming normal distributions, with n-1 degrees of freedom:

$$t = \frac{\bar{d} - D_0}{\frac{s_d}{\sqrt{n}}}$$

Where, \bar{d} is the mean difference between the two assessments, D_0 is the hypothesized mean difference, s_d is the sample standard deviation of differences and n is the sample size (number of pairs).

In all cases of dependent samples, D_0 is hypothesized to be equal to 0, so that if the computed t statistic is higher than the critical value (p -value < .05), it would be possible to statistically reject the null hypothesis of no difference between the two assessments, demonstrating that what we measure changes the evaluation of the same group. Otherwise, if the t statistic is lower than the critical value (p -value > .05), the tests will not have provided enough statistical evidence to demonstrate a difference between the two assessments, from which we will conclude that what we measure has no effect in the difference between one evaluation and the other in the same group.

The second type of test is made on independent samples, in which the difference of the mean values of the same variable between two different groups is assessed. For example, the negative effect of brand activism in leftists and rightists, or between consumers with different prior brand attachment. To compare differences in population means from independent samples ($\mu_x - \mu_y$), the t-statistic is computed using the following formulas, assuming unequal standard deviations:

$$t = \frac{(\bar{x} - \bar{y}) - D_0}{\sqrt{\frac{s_x^2}{n_x} + \frac{s_y^2}{n_y}}} \qquad v = \frac{[\left(\frac{s_x^2}{n_x}\right) + \left(\frac{s_y^2}{n_y}\right)]^2}{\frac{\left(\frac{s_x^2}{n_x}\right)^2}{n_x - 1} + \frac{\left(\frac{s_y^2}{n_y}\right)^2}{n_y - 1}}$$

Where v is the degrees of freedom from the t-value, \bar{x} and \bar{y} are the means from both samples, D_0 is the hypothesized difference in the mean values, s_x and s_y are the samples' standard deviations and n_x and n_y are the size of the samples.

If the p -value from the t-statistic is lower than the maximum accepted for a 95% confidence interval (p -value < .05), the study will provide enough statistical evidence to prove a difference in the mean value of the variable between the two independent samples. Otherwise, if the p -value is higher than the maximum accepted (p -value > .05), the test will not provide evidence that suggests a difference in the mean value of the two independent samples. In that case, we will assume that the value of the variable that we measure is the same in the two independent groups.

Finally, the third different test that can be found on this study is differences between population proportions. For example, the difference in the proportion of people who purchase a product from an activist brand, between the population who agree with the

brand and those who disagree. For population proportions, the test statistic for $H_0: P_x - P_y = 0$ is a z-statistic that was computed using the following formula:

$$z = \frac{(\hat{p}_x - \hat{p}_y)}{\sqrt{\frac{\hat{p}_0(1-\hat{p}_0)}{n_x} + \frac{\hat{p}_0(1-\hat{p}_0)}{n_y}}}$$

Where \hat{p}_x and \hat{p}_y are the sample proportions, n_x and n_y are the size of the samples and $\hat{p}_0 = \frac{n_x\hat{p}_x + n_y\hat{p}_y}{n_x + n_y}$.

Then, if the p -value of the z statistic is lower than the maximum accepted for a 95% confidence level (p -value < .05), the results will suggest a difference in between the population proportions of the value that has been studied. Otherwise, a p -value higher than the maximum accepted one (p -value > .05) would suggest that there is no difference in the population proportions of the studied variable.

3.2.- Study 1

The first study was performed in order to test H1 which proposed that *“The effect of brand activism on consumer attitude is higher in leftists than rightists”*. For this purpose, two brands from the fashion industry were chosen and the reaction of respondents was assessed to find if there were any differences in consumer attitude according to their ideology.

In the fashion industry, there are very few examples of brands who position themselves as leftists. That is the case of 198, a Spanish fashion brand created in 2010. The brand became popularly known in Spain after the leader from the left-wing republican political party Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, wore a T-Shirt designed by 198 from the Spanish Republic National Football team during the reflexion day before the 2015 Spanish elections for the Congress of Deputies (Sánchez Hidalgo, 2019). The T-Shirt was designed with the colours of the flag from the Second Spanish Republic, which represents the modern republican movement in Spain, mostly supported by leftists. Years after that, he wore a sweater with the 198 logo for the electoral debate in 2019 (Sánchez Hidalgo, 2019). While the brand does not identify itself with any concrete political party, their slogan in their website is «198 clothing brand made to win» («198 Marca de ropa hecha para vencer», as originally stated in Spanish), followed by a statement explaining their republican and leftist political view⁸.

⁸ Go to annex 1 to see the full statement.

On the opposite, there is the fashion brand Spagnolo. Even though they also do not link themselves with any political party (Vázquez, 2018)⁹, they are proudly Spanish, the name of the brand means 'Spanish' in Italian, the slogan is "Committed to ours" ("*Comprometidos con lo nuestro*" as in Spanish) and the logo is based in the Spanish flag. According to a survey published by the Ministry of Defence from Spain (Palmer, 2020), the Spanish flag is a symbol that is liked by 90,9% of the rightists and 85,9% of the centrists, while only 19,7% of the leftists say they like it and get excited by it.¹⁰

In Spain, leftists are generally republicans opposed to the Crown and thus, will sympathise with the political activism by 198 in majority, while rightists are generally more conservative, supporters of the Crown and will sympathise with any Spanish symbolism, such as the use of the flag by Spagnolo. With these cases, the reaction of leftists and rightist has been assessed on brands who take sides according and against their political view.

In the first part of the survey, respondents were asked to position their political ideology from 1 to 10, where 1 meant far-left and 10 meant far right. The sample was separated into two groups: Those who answered a 4 or less, were englobed as the leftist group (L), and those who answered a 5 or more were englobed into the centre-right group (C-R). For this study, the responses of those who showed support to the Catalan independence process were rejected, since they are expected to decline any Spanish symbol, republican or not, without making any difference whether they are leftists or rightists. In consequence, the size sample for leftists who positioned indifferent or against Catalan Independence was $n_l = 80$ and for the rightists $n_{c-r} = 73$.

Before explaining the brands' stands on the Spanish political atmosphere, which is considered **political brand activism**, respondents were asked to make a first assessment on the likelihood that they would purchase any product from the brands. The first results reported that in beforehand, respondents showed a neutral likelihood of purchasing clothes from 198 or Spagnolo, regardless of their political view, as the majority of them did not know the brands. In the case of leftists, the mean for the likelihood of purchasing Spagnolo was slightly negative ($M = 3.938$) since some of the respondents probably knew the brand before this survey, as they expressed a negative initial brand attitude towards it.

Following the first assessment, respondents were explained the republican and leftist vision of 198 and the Spanish pride from Spagnolo and were asked afterwards to reassess the likelihood that they would purchase any product from the brands. As there were some

⁹ Read the press release with statements made by Spagnolo's shop manager here: https://www.lavozdigital.es/cadiz/lvdi-estamos-orgullosos-nuestra-bandera-independientemente-politica-201812051404_noticia.html

¹⁰ Check for full results here: https://www.elnacional.cat/es/politica/catalanes-gustan-emocionan-bandera-himno-espanoles_539865_102.html

differences in the mean likelihood of purchasing products from 198 and Spagnolo in both leftists and centre-rightists, the individual differences were assessed to find statistical evidence of the effect of their brand activism in all matched pairs, using dependent samples t-tests¹¹.

Firstly, in the case of leftists, there was not any significant change in the expressed likelihood of buying a product from 198 after knowing about the brand's stand on Spanish politics ($M = 4.625$, $SD = 2.456$), in comparison with the initial assessment ($M = 4.950$, $SD = 0.973$); $t(79) = -1.289$, p -value = .2012. That means that **there is not a significant change on leftists' consumer attitude when there is consumer-brand agreement on brand activism**. However, there was enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis that there is no difference on leftists' consumer attitude on Spagnolo after knowing about their political stand ($M = 1.725$, $SD = 1.612$), in comparison with the initial evaluation ($M = 3.938$, $SD = 1.853$); $t(79) = -9.842$, p -value < .0001. Specifically, the results show that **leftists react negatively to consumer-brand disagreement**.

Succeeding, in the case of centre-rightists, there was no significant effect of the brand activism on the likelihood of purchasing a product from Spagnolo after knowing about their stand on Spanish pride ($M = 4.068$, $SD = 2.565$), in comparison with their initial evaluation ($M = 4.438$, $SD = 1.696$); $t(72) = -1.550$, p -value = .1255. That implies that **there is not any change on centre-rightists' consumer attitude when there is consumer-brand agreement on brand activism**. However, as expected, centre-rightists experienced a significant decrease on consumer attitude on 198 after knowing about their republican and leftist stand on Spanish politics ($M = 2.055$, $SD = 1.498$), in comparison with the initial assessment ($M = 4.575$, $SD = 1.323$); $t(72) = -12.914$, p -value < .0001. Specifically, the results show that **centre-rightists also react negatively to consumer-brand disagreement**.

Until here it was found that both leftists and centre-rightists do not significantly change their consumer attitude towards brands when there is consumer-brand agreement, but they react negatively to brand activism when there is consumer-brand disagreement. Furthermore, to check more for different reactions between leftists and centre-rightists to brand activism, the distinction between centre-rightists' reaction to the brand activism of 198 and the leftists' reaction to Spagnolo's activism was studied, using a t-test for independent samples.

There was no significant difference in the negative effect that consumer-brand disagreement has on leftists ($n = 80$, $M = -2.725$, $SD = 1.622$) than the effect it was on centre-rightists ($n = 73$, $M = -2.521$, $SD = 1.668$); $t(149) = -0.767$, p -value = .4443.

¹¹ Go to annex 2 to see a graphical representation of the results.

The results from the survey suggest then, that neither leftist or centre-rightists react positively on brand activism when there is consumer-brand agreement, and that both of them react negatively in the same way when there is consumer-brand disagreement, in the short-run. The studied reaction of Spaniards in this survey happens in accordance with the outcome of some brand activism cases from American companies.

For example, democrats (leftists) reacted negatively to the head of public affairs of New Balance, Matthew LeBretton, criticising Obama's administration and showing positivity on Trump's win one day after the 2016 elections, on an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*. After that statement, hundreds of users posted on social networks that they would boycott the brand and some of them uploaded videos throwing their shoes to the garbage or setting them on fire (Seals, 2016).

On the other hand, Ed Stack, CEO of Dick's Sporting Goods, announced in 2018 that they would retire assault weapons from their inventories and increase to 21 the minimum age to be able to buy weapons in their stores. The announcement came after there was a school shooting in Florida that caused 17 deaths with a weapon that had been bought at a Dick's Sporting Goods store. Republicans (rightists) reacted negatively on the decision of the brand promising boycotts. The retirement of assault weapons costed 150 million dollars to the company in loss of sales or a decline in 1,7% annual sales in 2018. However, the company stucked to their new activist position with more restrictions to the sale of weapons and activist actions to promote gun control (López Aza, 2020).

In conclusion from this study, we decline H1 in favour of the alternative hypothesis that suggests that **both leftists and rightists react in the same way towards brand activism**. Specifically, in the short-run both sectors of society show no positive effect of brand activism when they agree with the brand's stand, but react negatively when there is consumer-brand disagreement by punishing the brand with a decrease of consumer attitude.

3.3.- Study 2

The 2nd study was performed in order to test H2 and H3 which proposed that *“Public backlash to a brand activism-driven marketing campaign will lead sympathisers to increase positive brand attitude”* and *“An apology does not bring any positive effect, as it is seen as an act of betrayal by those who agreed with the original brand's statement, and it does not change the image of the brand on those who disagreed”*. For this purpose, a case of a brand which suffered public backlash after releasing a brand activism-driven marketing campaign, which ended up in the brand retiring the ad was chosen to test the reaction of respondents on the events.

In 2016, El Corte Inglés, the biggest department store in Spain, released a campaign for the comeback to school in which a family composed by two male-parents were preparing their child's school comeback, normalizing LGBT families. That is a social activist campaign aligned with other marketing campaigns that the company had already released normalizing the LGBT Community. This time, however, the brand received backlash from the ultra-catholic organization Hazte Oír, including a petition with 21.000 signatures to retire the spot, as well as from far-right politicians. Even though another petition asking them not to remove the spot reached almost 70.000 signatures, the controversy ended with the retirement of the video from their YouTube account. While the company alleged the decision was due to the caducity of music rights, Hazte Oír celebrated a victory for the traditional families (Rodríguez-Pina, 2016).

Respondents were asked first if they found it convenient that brands included LGBT characters in their marketing campaigns. According to their answers to that question, the sample was divided into three groups: Those who answered 'yes' ($n = 160$), the ones that showed indifference ($n = 66$) and the ones that positioned against it ($n = 10$, originally 11 but there was an outlier eliminated from the sample). Then, they were asked to evaluate from 1 to 10 which was their likelihood of purchasing any product during the following year in El Corte Inglés in three occasions: before explaining the events, after explaining the activist position from the brand and the backlash they faced from it and, lastly, after explaining the retirement of the campaign. Also, they were asked if they already knew about those activist positions to later compare the short- and long-term effects of brand activism¹².

In the first place, the reaction of the different groups to the brand's social activism and the backlash received is assessed performing dependent-samples t-tests.

After explaining the El Corte Inglés comeback to school campaign and the backlash it received, there was a significant increase in the expressed likelihood of buying a product in El Corte Inglés during the following year by those who agreed that brands should include LBGT characters in their marketing campaigns ($M = 6.263$, $SD = 2.561$), in comparison with the initial assessment ($M = 5.469$, $SD = 2.694$); $t(159) = 6.409$, p -value $< .0001$.

So, in this case, as there was public backlash against the brand for their social activism, those who sympathised with the brand's stand rewarded the brand by increasing consumer attitude.

Succeeding, there was no significant effect of the brand activism on the likelihood of purchasing a product in El Corte Inglés by those who showed indifference on whether brands should include LGBT characters in their marketing campaigns or not ($M = 5.409$, $SD = 2.578$),

¹² For this comparison, see study 4.

in comparison with their initial evaluation ($M = 5.167$, $SD = 2.635$); $t(65) = 1.414$, p -value = .1621.

Finally, as expected, there was a significant negative effect of the brand activism in the likelihood of buying something in El Corte Inglés during the following year by the opposing group to the brand's social activism ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 4.489$), comparing with their initial assessment ($M = 6.4$, $SD = 2.489$); $t(9) = -2.692$, p -value = .0247.

There are some other examples of brands who received an increase in sales in the short term from the population who supported their activist stand, after receiving backlash from the opposing group. For instance, Correos, the Spanish national mailing company, released a campaign for the 2020 pride month which consisted in the painting of nine mailboxes, five delivery vans and the Chueca¹³ branch with the LGBT flag colours. The campaign received criticism from the far-right political party VOX leader, Santiago Abascal, as well as from other rightist political leaders. However, the marketing activist campaign was considered a complete success since it only needed an investment of 12,000€, while the impact of the campaign was valued in more than 500,000€. Moreover, the campaign was accompanied by the release of a stamp with the LGBT flag which sold more than 15,000 units in less than a week, recovering the full investment (Criado, 2020).¹⁴

Moreover, the CEO of the restaurant chain Chick-fil-A, Dan Cathy, positioned against gay marriage in 2012 during the public debate over its legalization in the US. Furthermore, the company contributed with 5 million U.S. dollars to far-right groups who have politically fought against the legalization of equality marriage, as well as promoting conversion therapy groups. The brand suffered fierce backlash from LGBT activists and marriage equality supporters. Alternatively, the supporters of Cathy's statement rewarded the brand with a "Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day", which resulted in a 29.9% increase of sales and customers in comparison with a normal day (Norman, 2012).

With all this evidence, H2 can be ratified, concluding that certainly **public backlash to brand activism will lead sympathisers to increase positive consumer attitude towards the brand in the short term.**

In some cases, the public backlash received in the short term must be difficult for the brands to deal with and it might result in the retirement of the campaign or an apology. Continuing with the previous study from El Corte Inglés, the case is an example of a brand who ended up retiring the campaign. The effect of that step back from the brand, claimed by

¹³ An area in the centre of Madrid known as they gay neighbourhood.

¹⁴ Read the full story on https://www.elespanol.com/invertia/empresas/20200622/arcoiris-correos-convirtio-inversion-eur-impacto-millon/499450392_0.html

the opposing group Hazte Oír, is studied on the different groups also performing dependent samples t-tests:

There was enough evidence to prove a negative effect of the apology in the likelihood of purchasing a product in El Corte Inglés in the following year on the supporter group ($M = 4.875$, $SD = 2.861$) in comparison with the previous assessment ($M = 6.263$, $SD = 2.561$); $t(159) = -9.286$, $p < .0001$, and even with the initial one ($M = 5.469$, $SD = 2.694$); $t(159) = -4.167$, $p < .0001$. This means that the positive consumer attitude that was built with the brand activist marketing campaign with the population who agreed with the brand's social stand was ruined with the retirement of the campaign. In addition, it even originated a negative effect in comparison with the consumer attitude prior to the start of the activist campaign.

Regarding the sample of the population who show indifference on whether brands should include LGBT characters in their marketing campaigns or not, there was enough evidence to prove that there is a negative effect of the retirement of the campaign on their likelihood of buying a product in El Corte Inglés during the following year ($M = 4.985$, $SD = 2.628$) compared to the previous assessment ($M = 5.409$, $SD = 2.578$); $t(65) = -2.557$, $p\text{-value} = .0129$. However, in this group there was no significant effect of a change between the first and the last assessment ($M = 5.167$, $SD = 2.635$); $t(65) = -0.909$, $p\text{-value} = .3667$. This implies that, since the 100% of the sample of those who showed indifference on whether brands should include LGBT characters in their marketing campaigns or not said that they supported the LGBT community, the slight increase on consumer attitude they might have with the brand's activist campaign is completely reversed once the brand retires the campaign or makes an apology. However, the negative effect that the retirement of the campaign has occurs only to the extent that their likelihood of purchasing products from the brand is statistically the same as the one on the starting point.

Finally, in regard to the opposing group, there was enough evidence to proof a positive effect of the retirement of the campaign on the likelihood of buying a product in the following year ($M = 4.7$, $SD = 3.122$), when comparing with the previous assessment ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 4.489$); $t(9) = 6.389$, $p\text{-value} = .0001$. However, that effect was not enough to reverse all the negative impact of the campaign on this group, since there was evidence that the final assessment on the likelihood of purchasing a product from El Corte Inglés in the following year showed lower consumer attitude than the initial one ($M = 6.4$, $SD = 2.489$); $t(9) = -3.999$, $p\text{-value} = .0031$.

Hence, there was enough statistical evidence to ratify H3: An apology does not bring any positive effect, as it is seen as an act of betrayal by those who agreed with the original brand's statement and will punish them by decreasing brand attitude, even to a lower point

than the initial one, and in the case of those who disagreed, the apology is not enough to reverse all the previous negative effect of the activism.

3.4.- Study 3

The purpose of the 3rd study was to test H4 which suggested that *“High prior brand attachment results into a total or partial reduction of the negative effect of brand activism”*. For this purpose, the regressive environmental activism of a singer and the reaction of respondents was assessed to find if there was a reduction of the negative effect of brand activism on those opposers who showed the highest prior brand attachment.

In order to measure prior brand attachment, respondents were asked on a scale from 1 to 10 how much they liked the Spanish singer Rosalía. Also, they were asked if they listened or purchased her 2018 album “El Mal Querer”. Then they were shown three Instagram posts by the singer from 2019 in which she was wearing and promoting three coats from the Danish brand Saks Potts¹⁵. Even though the company right now only accepts «leather and shearling that is a by-product from the meat industry» and from 2022 they «no longer produce or sell any type of fur from animals raised purely for their fur», as stated in the Code of Conduct in their website (Saks Potts, 2022)¹⁶, they were actually using fur from animals for the production of their clothes back then, such as lamb skin and fox hair. They would justify its use by stating that fur is naturally more sustainable than synthetics, since it is a renewable material that does not involve any pollution or chemicals during the production process (Singer, 2019). Even if Rosalía is not a business herself, as any other music act, she represents her own brand, not only with her music products, but also from her public behaviour. Therefore, since the use of fur in the fashion industry is a really controversial topic because of the ethics behind it and the impact it makes on the population of some animal species, promoting a brand in her social media that was **normalizing the purchase of real animal fur for their production is considered a case of environmental brand activism**.

After those posts, the singer received several negative criticism, even with some followers confirming they would stop listening to her music, but she did not delete the post, neither did she express any apologies. Once the respondents were explained about these events, they were asked if they already knew about the controversy, to rate how much they

¹⁵ You can find the posts on Annex 3.

¹⁶ See full current Code of Conduct from Saks Potts in <https://www.sakspotts.com/code-of-conduct>.

liked Rosalía from 1 to 10 again and if they listened or purchased her 2022 album “Motomami”¹⁷.

In the first part of the study, respondents had been asked if they were in favour of the use of animal fur in the fashion industry. Thus, only the answers from those who positioned against it were considered for this case study ($n = 183$), since the aim was only to measure the differences in negative effects of brand activism according to prior brand attachment. Therefore, the sample was divided into three groups:

- The first one was composed of those respondents who initially answered that they liked Rosalía from 1 to 5 on a scale from 1 to 10, being the group without prior brand attachment ($n = 68$).
- The second group consisted of respondents from the survey which showed a low prior brand attachment (answers 6 to 8 on how much they initially liked the singer) ($n = 78$).
- The third group was composed by only the portion from the sample with the highest prior brand attachment (9 to 10) ($n = 37$).

The negative effect of brand activism was studied on the three groups by performing dependent-samples t-tests, comparing their final answer on how much they liked Rosalía from 1 to 10 with the assessment they made before being explained about the posts¹⁸:

The first test showed that there is a negatively significant effect of brand activism on the opposer group with the less brand attachment ($M = 2.426$, $SD = 1.386$), when compared to the initial assessment ($M = 3.559$, $SD = 1.320$); $t(67) = -6.761$, $p\text{-value} < .0001$.

The second test also showed a significant negative effect of brand activism in the group with low prior brand attachment on the assessment of how much they liked Rosalía ($M = 6.474$, $SD = 1.457$), when compared to the initial evaluation ($M = 7.141$, $SD = 0.768$); $t(77) = -4.508$, $p\text{-value} < .0001$.

There was also a significant decrease in consumer attitude on respondents with the highest prior brand attachment ($M = 9.162$, $SD = 0.866$), when compared to their initial assessment before the Saks Potts case being exposed ($M = 9.486$, $SD = 0.507$); $t(36) = -3.151$, $p\text{-value} = .0033$.

Those results confirm that in no case prior brand attachment will totally erase the negative effect of brand activism when there is consumer-brand disagreement in the short-

¹⁷ The comparison on the consumption of *El Mal Querer* (pre-activism) and *Motomami* (post-activism) is made with the purpose of studying the long-term effect of brand activism on Study 4.

¹⁸ Go to annex 4 for a graphical representation of the results.

term, since the difference was significant for all three groups. However, it was also convenient to check statistical evidence that could demonstrate for dissimilarities between the mean differences of the three groups. Hence, independence-samples t-tests were conducted to compare the mean differences, assuming non-equal standard deviations of the populations:

When testing for evidence that could proof for dissimilarities between mean differences on pre- and post-brand activism consumer attitude in the group with no prior brand attachment ($M = -1.132$, $SD = 1.381$) and the group with a low prior brand attachment ($M = -0.667$, $SD = 1.306$), the difference on the mean reactions on consumer attitude of both groups was found to be statistically significant; $t(140) = -2.0843$, p -value = .0390. That means that **the negative effect of brand activism is partially reduced when there is some prior brand attachment** in comparison to the group with no prior brand attachment.

Nonetheless, since the maximum type I error α previously chosen as acceptable was the p -value = .05, the survey results did not provide enough evidence to suggest that the negative effect of brand activism is even more partially reduced in the sample with the highest prior brand attachment ($M = -0.324$, $SD = 0.626$) in comparison with the sample with little prior brand attachment ($M = -0.667$, $SD = 1.306$); $t(113) = -1,900$, p -value = .0600. However, the results proved statistical evidence to suggest with a 94% confidence level that the negative effect of brand activism is lower on the population with the highest prior brand attachment, compared to the population with little prior brand attachment. That is still a pretty acceptable confidence level. In order to be able to accept this hypothesis with a 5% significance level, it would be convenient to increase the sample size.

Finally, as expected, there is also statistical evidence that demonstrates a difference in between the effect of brand activism on the group with the highest prior brand attachment ($M = -0.324$, $SD = 0.626$), when compared to the group with no prior brand attachment ($M = -1.132$, $SD = 1.381$); $t(101) = -4.110$, p -value < .0001.

In conclusion, H4 is accepted since, even though brand activism has a negative effect on consumer behaviour at all prior brand attachment levels when there is consumer-brand disagreement, it has been statistically proved that **prior brand attachment progressively contributes to a partial reduction of the negative effect of brand activism**. That means that the higher the prior brand attachment, the lower is the negative effect of brand activism.

3.5.- Study 4

Finally, for the last study, H5 which suggested that «*The effect of brand activism is different in the short-term than in the long-term*» is studied with statistical evidence from the survey as well as two additional real business cases.

For this specific study, respondents were asked if they sympathised more with FC Barcelona or the RCD Espanyol and their responses were classified depending on whether they showed support, indifference or positioned against the Catalan independentist process.

The background for this question is that Futbol Club Barcelona has a long history of defending Catalan culture since the club was founded. Their activism is not only about their positioning as a Catalan institution, but also about the actions they have made accordingly to their values. During its first decades, they acted against the Spanish dictatorships, with some fatal consequences such as the murder of Josep Sunyol, President of FC Barcelona back then, in 1936 when he accidentally entered the occupied zone by the Francoist army during the Civil War (Solé, 2017)¹⁹. In its recent history, **FC Barcelona is still considered a political activist brand**. In their website they state that «without forgetting our roots in BARCELONA and our CATALAN identity and culture, we have always been open to the world, and have become a meeting ground for different people, cultures and nations» (FC Barcelona, 2022)²⁰ and they have been acting according to that ideology. For example, they let a part of the 2013 human chain in support of Catalan independence, known as *Via Catalana*, pass through the FC Barcelona stadium Camp Nou (Solé, 2017) and in 2019 they published a statement in their social media positioning the club against the jail sentence for Catalan politicians who had declared the independence; «Prison is not the solution» (FC Barcelona, 2019)²¹. One of the last outcomes of their activism was to achieve the future release of a version of the Spotify app in Catalan, announced on April 3rd by Joan Laporta, President of FC Barcelona, as a result of the negotiations for their partnership with the music streaming platform (VilaWeb, 2022).

On the other side, the second biggest football club in Catalonia, the Real Club Deportivo Espanyol, has never been positioned as a political activist brand, staying neutral on socio-political events such as the Catalan independence issue. In 2019, regarding the jail sentence for Catalan leaders, however, because of the impossibility of staying silent in today's society as previously studied, the brand stated that they showed respect to judicial decisions, as they regretted the pain that some situations could cause to individuals and their families (RCD Espanyol, 2019)²².

Hence, the long-term positive effect of brand activism was studied by testing the null hypothesis that the proportion of FC Barcelona supporters over RCD Espanyol was the same among Catalan independence supporters ($\hat{p}_x = \frac{81}{84} \approx 0.964$) than the one among those who

¹⁹ Read an extended history of FC Barcelona's political brand activism on <https://revistamirall.com/2017/05/09/barca-i-catalanisme-una-historia-inseparable/>

²⁰ Citation taken from FC Barcelona's official website: <https://www.fcbarcelona.com/en/club/more-than-a-club>

²¹ Go to annex 5 to see full statement.

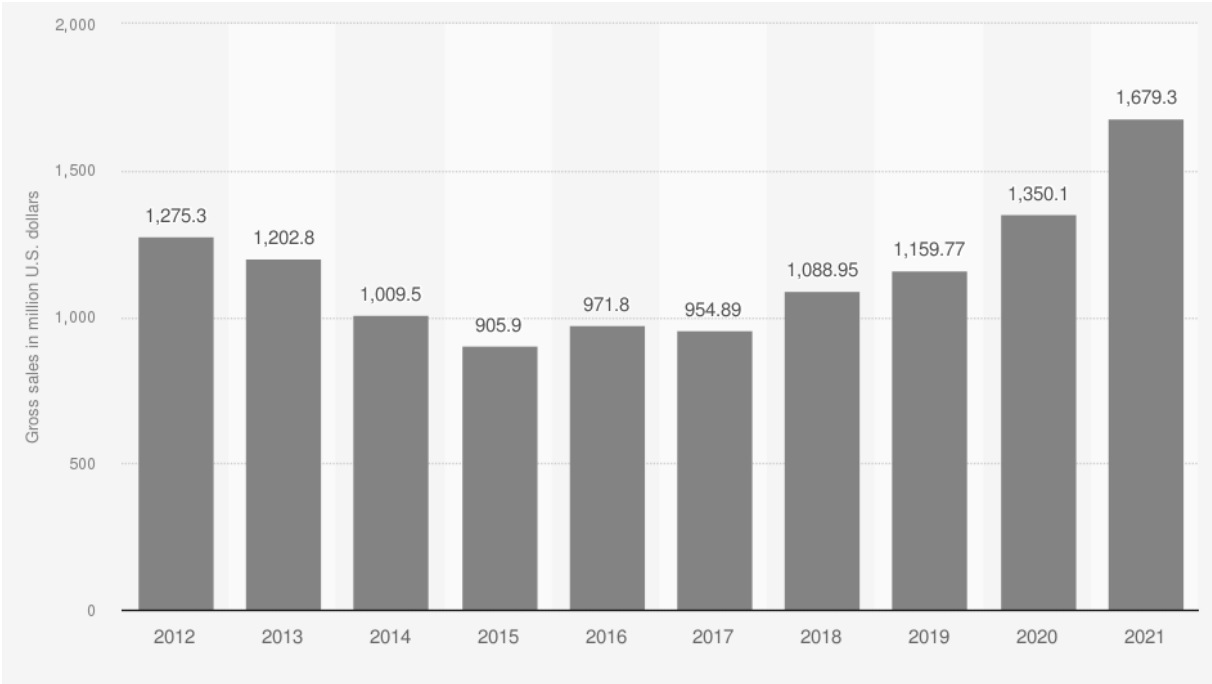
²² Go to annex 6 to see full statement.

show indifference on the Catalan independentist process ($\hat{p}_z = \frac{45}{56} \approx 0.804$). The results demonstrated that there is empirical evidence to reject the null hypothesis in favour of concluding that there is a bigger proportion of FC Barcelona supporters among Catalan independentists than in the control group who are indifferent on that specific political issue; $z = 2.8284$, $p\text{-value} = .0047$. These results imply that in the long term, consumer-brand agreement on brand activism results into a significant positive effect on consumer attitude towards the brand.

In that same line, there are some examples of brands which experienced a positive effect of brand activism in the long-term. That is the case, for instance, of Barbie, a company from the Mattel group. After years of declining revenues, Barbie decided to become a social activist brand from 2016, by fighting against the gender gap and beauty standards. Their purpose now is that both girls and boys can imagine themselves being whatever they want. To do so, they have released new products that reflect the diversity in body types and inclusivity, as well as a doll line released in 2019 with 20 different roles, so that girls can play taking roles from activists or journalists to directors and entrepreneurs (López Aza, 2020).

As a long-term consequence, the change in the position of Mattel’s Barbie brand was a complete success. The brand activism strategy regained the trust from consumers who were previously judging the doll from being too superficial. This resulted into a rebound of worldwide yearly sales, which increased in 72.8% since the start of Barbie’s brand activism in 2016 (Tighe, 2022).

Figure 1. Gross sales of Barbie brand worldwide from 2012 to 2021 (in million U.S. dollars)



Source: Statista with data from Mattel’s records.

Hence, it can be concluded that brand activism has a positive effect on consumer attitude in the long-term when there is consumer-brand agreement. The positive results from the activism come when the company integrates its activism into their strategy, and it does not consist of a one solely action.

To continue, the differences between long-term and short-term effects of brand activism is studied in case of consumer-brand disagreement. As it is previously explained, in the short-term, a disagreement between the ideals of the customer and the stand taken by the brand results into a negative effect on consumer attitude. However, in this section it is tested whether that negative effect is prolonged in time or not.

Coming back to the FC Barcelona vs. RCD Espanyol case study, the long-term negative effect of brand activism was studied by testing the null hypothesis that the proportion of those who sympathise with FC Barcelona over RCD Espanyol is the same among the population which positions against Catalan independence and FC Barcelona's political activism ($\hat{p}_y = \frac{67}{97} \approx 0.691$) than among the control group which shows indifference on it ($\hat{p}_z = \frac{45}{56} \approx 0.804$). In this case, the statistical evidence was not enough to prove any difference between population proportions of FC Barcelona supporters; $z = -1.593$, $p\text{-value} = .1112$. This implies that there is no evidence in this study that could prove a significant negative effect of brand activism on consumer attitude towards the brand in the long-term, when there is consumer-brand disagreement.

To check for more evidence that can manifest if brand activism has negative effect on consumer attitude in the long term or not, we went back to study the answers of respondents from cases 2 and 3. Since case 2 is from 2018 and case 3 from 2019, respondents were asked in both instances if they already knew about the brand activism example given. This way, it would be possible to check if the effects of brand activism found in the short-term stay as time passes by.

Therefore, going back to case study 2, a short-term negative effect of releasing a brand activist marketing campaign and then retiring it was demonstrated in the population who agreed with the initial brand's stand. If that effect was prolonged in time, the mean of the initial assessment on the likelihood of buying a product in El Corte Inglés would be lower in those who knew about the events than in those who did not.

An independent samples t-test was performed in other to check for empirical evidence that demonstrated a difference in consumer attitude of those who already knew the brand's campaign and its retirement ($n = 28$, $M = 5.071$, $SD = 2.624$) and those who did not ($n = 132$, $M = 5.553$, $SD = 2.711$), inside the sample of those who agreed with the brand's initial stand. There was no significant evidence that could prove differences between the

population means; $t(40) = -0.549$, $p\text{-value} = .5861$. This implies that the negative effect of the retirement or apology of a brand activist campaign is also progressively vanished in the long-term.

Finally, in case study 3, respondents were asked if they knew about Rosalía's normalization of the use of animal fur in the fashion industry before it was explained. Since there is a negative short-term effect of brand activism in case of consumer-brand disagreement, if consumers acted according to their morals, those who knew about her activism should have decreased the consumption of her music after the events. Thus, the consumption of *Motomami* should have decreased in comparison to *El Mal Querer* more in the group who knew about the events than in the group who did not.

From the 183 respondents who positioned against the use of animal fur for the production of clothes in the fashion industry, 75 knew about Rosalía case in beforehand and 108 did not. Another independent samples t-test was performed to check for differences on the population proportions who listened to *El Mal Querer* (previous to the controversy) and *Motomami* (released after the controversy) to find differences in consumer behaviour between the group who knew about the events and those who did not.

Table 2. Sample proportion who consumed Rosalía's pre- and post-controversy albums according to whether they knew about the brand's activism or not.

Did they know about the brand's stand?	Sample proportion who listened to <i>El Mal Querer</i>	Sample proportion who listened to <i>Motomami</i>
No	0.435	0.361
Yes	0.693	0.693

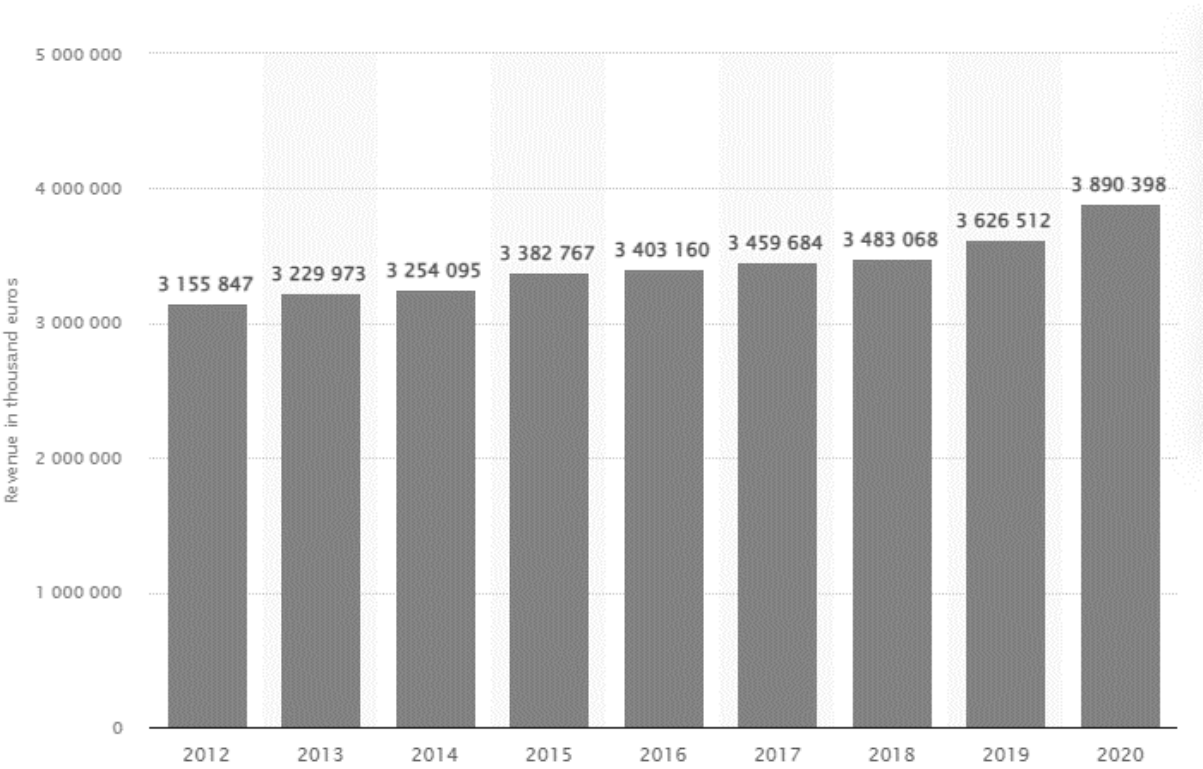
Source: Own elaboration with data from the survey.

Once again, no significant negative effect of consumer-brand disagreement was found in the differences between album consumption in the population who knew about Rosalía's posts ($M = 0$, $SD = 0.403$) in comparison with those who did not know about the posts ($M = -0.074$, $SD = 0.447$); $t(170) = 1.168$, $p\text{-value} = .5837$. This implies that the data could not prove that the people who knew about the brand's stand stopped consuming the music in a bigger proportion than those who did not know. Hence, long-term negative effect of brand activism was proven to be insignificant in consumer attitude for the third time.

Applying these results to a real business case; Guido Barilla, CEO of Barilla Group, global leader of the pasta market, said in an interview for an Italian radio station in 2013 that they would never do a spot with a gay family, because «the concept of the sacred family remains one of its most important values for the firm». He also stated that «if the gays did not like it, they could always buy pasta from another brand» and positioned himself as an

homophobic CEO who is also against gay people adopting children (Il Messaggero, 2013).²³ Those comments provoked in consequence short-term negative effects, such as negative comments and calls to boycott the brand from Italian LGBT activists, such as Alessandro Zan, member of the Italian parliament (Reuters, 2013). The day after, Barilla addressed its audience through the US official brand’s Twitter account to apology for the comments made during the interview (Barilla Us, 2013). Since this study has previously proved that there is a decrease in consumer attitude on all groups after a brand initiates an activist statement but apologies for it afterwards in the short term, Barilla’s sales should have decreased from that point. However, in the long-term, those declarations did not have any impact on the Barilla Group, which even progressively increased its worldwide revenue by more than a 20% in the period between 2012 and 2020 (Wunsch, 2022).

Figure 2. Worldwide revenue of Barilla Group from 2012 to 2020 (in 1,000 euros)



Source: Statista with data from Barilla’s accounting records.

In conclusion from this section, there is strong statistical and qualitative evidence that suggests that there is no negative long-term effect of brand activism when there is consumer-brand disagreement. This could be due to the fact that consumers tend to forgive

²³ The full original interview can be listened in Italian in ilmessaggero.it/video/primopiano/guido_barilla_zanzara_non_farei_mai_spot_famiglia_gay-125950.html

or forget the brand's stand as time passes by and reverse the short-term negative effect of brand activism.

In the end, there is enough evidence to ratify H5 which suggested that **the effect of brand activism is different in the short term than in the long term**. Specifically in case of consumer-brand agreement on brand activism, there is no significant effect on consumer behaviour in the short-term (assuming no public backlash), while there is an actual positive effect in the long-term. Quite the opposite, in case of consumer-brand disagreement, there is a negative effect of brand activism in the short-term, while that effect is vanished with time until there is no long-term significant effect.

4.- Conclusions.

Since citizens tend to have more debates over what is morally right, younger generations are buying products based on their moral beliefs on a bigger scale and staying silent is no longer an option for brands who want to create a loyal customer base, managers have found the need to position on relevant socio-political divisive issues. This research has studied the effects of brand activism on consumer behaviour in the short and in the long term.

4.1.- Academical findings.

The four studies conducted on this research have provided further information on how consumers react to activist brands, whether they agree with them or not, which offers valuable new insights.

Firstly, even though Jost, Langer & Singh (2017) commented on an article that leftists are more likely to buy a product or boycott it for political reasons than rightists, this study has proven that wrong at least in the short term, where people regardless of their political view do not increase consumer attitude when there is consumer-brand agreement, but they do equally decrease likelihood of purchasing the products of a brand if there is consumer-brand disagreement on brand activism.

However, the second study found an exception on the lack of reaction of customers when there is consumer-brand agreement on brand activism. It was actually found that if a brand receives public backlash for their activism, sympathisers will reward them by increasing their intention to buy the brand's products as an act of support for stepping up in defence of their shared moral principles. Furthermore, if before experiencing the positive effect of brand activism, a company decides to apology for their stand or retire the campaign, sympathisers will decrease their attitude towards the brand to a lower point than the initial one, penalizing them for raising awareness on an issue that concerns them only to step back after they receive backlash for it. On the other hand, although opposers will increase consumer attitude towards the brand after the apology, that will not be enough to fully recover the initial negative effect of their activism.

Succeeding, one interesting finding from this research was that the negative effect of brand activism in the short-run is partially erased in the groups with the most prior brand attachment, in comparison with those without prior brand attachment at all. That means that companies with a loyal consumer base will experience less negative effect of brand activism in the short term.

Finally, the long-term effects of brand activism on consumer attitude were studied on this research. It was found that the effect is different than in the short-term since, in case of consumer-brand agreement, there is a positive effect of brand activism in the long-term, and in the case of consumer brand-disagreement, consumers forget about the stand taken by the brand (or get used to it), so the negative effect is vanished as time passes by until there is no long-term negative effect of brand activism. This implies that, even though without public backlash firms do not experience any positive effect from brand activism in the short-term, they will do experience such effect in the long-term if they keep their activist position steady.

4.2.- Implications of this study on Marketing Management.

The findings previously stated help to define a new guideline on how companies should apply brand activism in their marketing strategies and the outcome that they can expect from it.

First of all, when deciding to become an activist brand, companies have to **define a purpose** that is aligned with their values statement. That purpose must be aligned with the stakeholders' values as much as possible too, but it needs to be authentic. If the purpose of the brand activism is not legitimate, it will not be consistent enough to build the trust of the key audiences in the long-term and there is even the possibility that the image and potential for social change of the brand is damaged afterwards.

Once the purpose is defined, the company has to **present how they will enhance that activism** and the modality they will choose to take action. It is important to commercialize the actions more than the position itself, since consumers will not increase customer behaviour just because the brand thinks in the same way as them, but because they actually take relevant actions that benefit them and their morals. Also, the company must be transparent and integrate their activism at all levels of the business, especially at important senior officials such as the CEO, whose opinion can directly affect the perceived honesty of the activist strategy.

After the starting point, the company must **be prepared for the different possible reactions with an action plan**. It is key to expect no positive reaction from sympathisers at first, but a negative reaction from opposers no matter what their political view is. Even if there is public backlash and boycotts organized against the brand in the short-run, **it is crucial to defend the position taken** and to not step back or apology once it is made public. That would only make the situation worse since all sectors would have decreased consumer attitude in comparison with the initial point. At the end, the opposers who will demonstrate more negativity towards the brand will be those with the lowest prior brand attachment,

whose opinion should interest less the company. The target public with higher prior brand attachment who find disagreement with the stand taken by the brand will react less negatively in the short-run, and they will progressively forget it or get used to it to overcome their cognitive dissonance. That implies that in the long-run, brand activism will not have any significant negative effect on consumer behaviour of the opposing group. Contrastingly, brands who are prepared for that negative immediate reaction, but choose to **preserve the position, will build the necessary legitimacy and trust** so that sympathisers end up showing positive signs of consumer attitude in the long-run.

Finally, **following and controlling the achievement of the activist goals** is vital to know how to continue making a difference and actual social changes while obtaining a positive outcome from it.

4.3.- Suggestions for further research.

Brand activism is still a booming topic that is becoming more relevant as the expectations from consumers are changing and companies start to consider integrating it on their strategy. While the scope of this research was limited to study the effects that brand activism has on consumer behaviour, the results raise interesting new lines of investigation for further research on this topic.

First of all, this research has suggested that the negative effect of brand activism is progressively mitigated with time. Studying the reasons behind customers being able to overcome their cognitive dissonance and purchase the products or services from a brand, even when they disagree with their moral stand, would help to build a framework to help organizations to control it and accelerate the process of obtaining profit from the activist strategy.

Furthermore, this study focused on testing the changes that happen on consumer behaviour after a company decides to become an activist brand only in their attitude towards the brand and how that may affect its performance. However, the main point of activism should not be the positive benefit that a firm or a particular might obtain from acting morally, from a Kantian ethical point of view (Vessey D., 2017). Moreover, since 53% of the consumers say that brands have higher potential to solve social ills than governments (Edelman, 2018), it would be interesting to study the actual power that they hold to make relevant socio-political changes through their activism, as the possibility that consumers' way of thinking can direct or indirectly be influenced by the brands whom they are mostly attached to. That could help managers to have a wider vision when valuing the trade-off between the changes that they can make on our society by becoming activists -and by

advocating for the values that they believe in-, and the effects that doing so will have on brand image and business performance.

Finally, another topic that needs further research is the reaction of other stakeholders to brand activism. Even though customers are very important for the business performance, they are not the only stakeholders whose relationship an organization must take care of. For example, brand activism may also affect the relationship with investors, suppliers, employees, media, and the competence. That effect could also result interesting to be studied.

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6.- Annexes

Annex 1. 198's statement on their political view.

198 Marca de ropa hecha para vencer

La lucha se mantiene viva cuando hay alguien dispuesto a recoger el testigo para continuarla. Y en nuestro caso no hay lugar para la duda.

Somos los nietos y las nietas de las obreras que no pudieron matar. Y podemos decidir quienes seremos.

Somos el resultado de generaciones de mujeres y hombres que se plantaron frente al fascismo para cambiar el rumbo del destino que se les tenía preparado.

Porque por ellas y por ellos, decidimos quienes somos:

198 es República, memoria, sacrificio y millones de voces que el poder no será capaz de acallar de nuevo.

198 es reivindicación y la firme creencia de que el pueblo puede cambiarlo todo.

Nuestro pasado está escrito, es cierto, pero no lo están los tiempos venideros. Aún hay fechas no escritas. Hay paisajes de un verde intacto y cielos azules. Aún hay esperanza para el mañana.

No solo debemos conocer nuestra historia para no repetirla. En nuestra mano está escribir nuevos logros, luchar contra la injusticia y seguir avanzando.

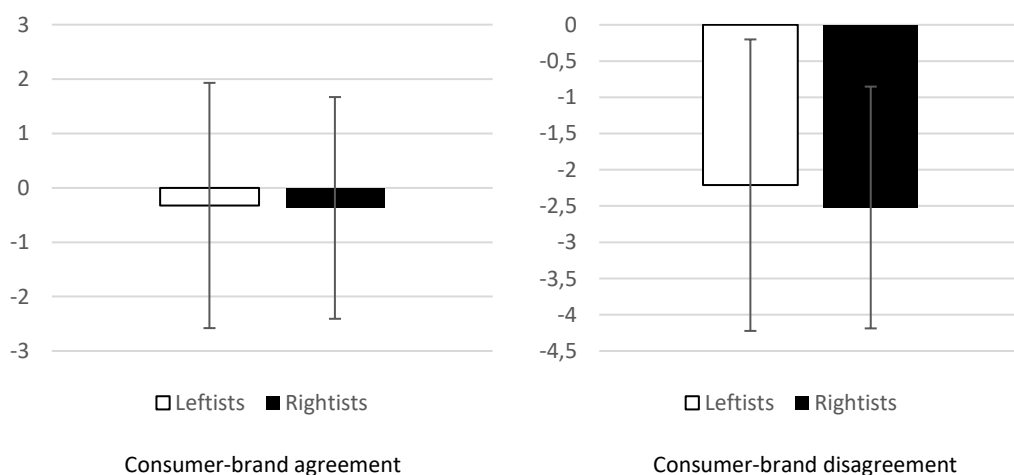
La responsabilidad también es nuestra, y el momento es ahora.

El futuro es nuestro

y **SOLO PODEMOS VENCER.**

Source: 198's webpage, <https://unonueveocho.es/content/14-quienes-somos>. Translation: *The fight remains alive when there is someone aiming to collect the baton to continue it. [...] 198 is Republic, memory, sacrifice and millions of voices which power will not be able to shout again. 198 is revindication and the solid belief that the people can change everything. [...] We should not only know out history not to repeat it. In our hands it is to write new achievements, fight against injustice and continue advancing. The responsibility is also ours, and the moment is now. The future is ours and **WE CAN ONLY WIN.***

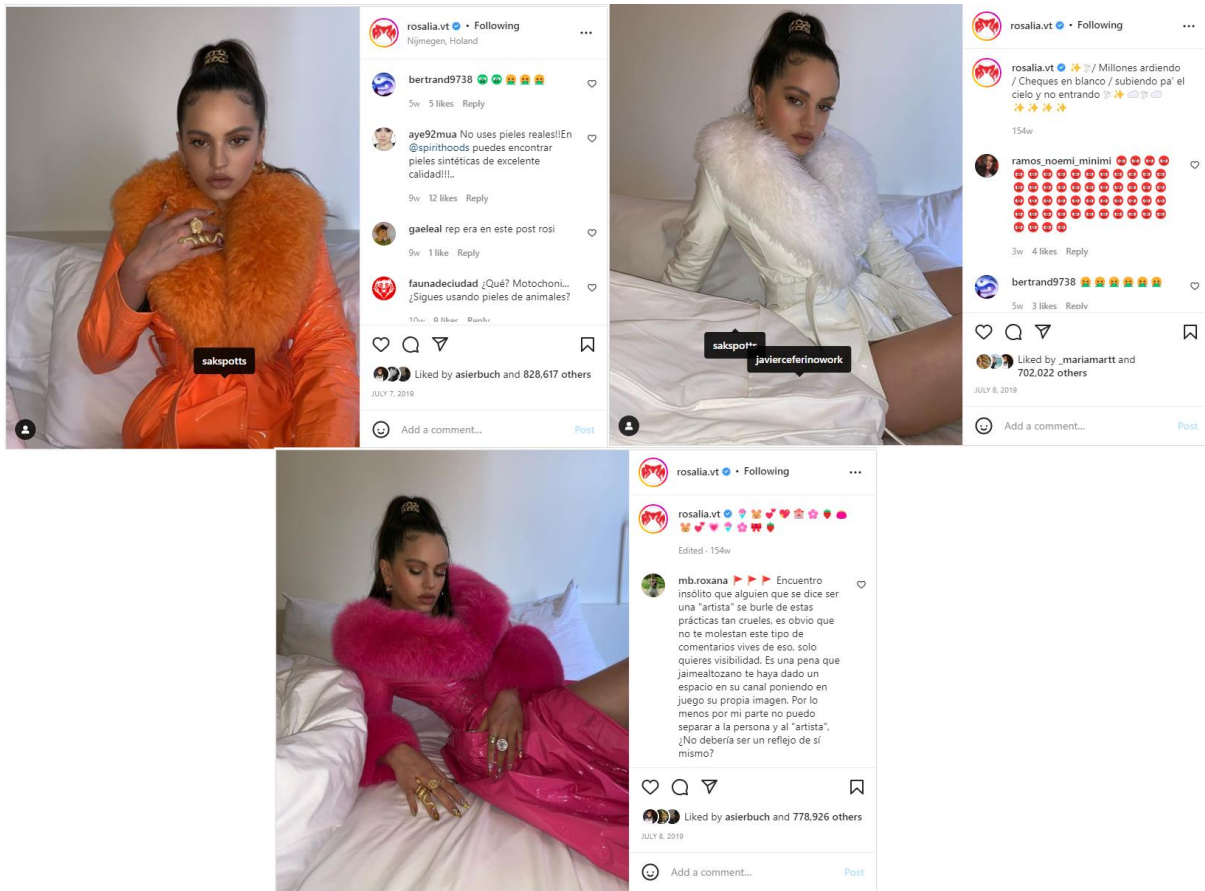
Annex 2. Leftists' and rightists' reaction to brand activism on the short term.



Source: Own elaboration with data obtained via survey.

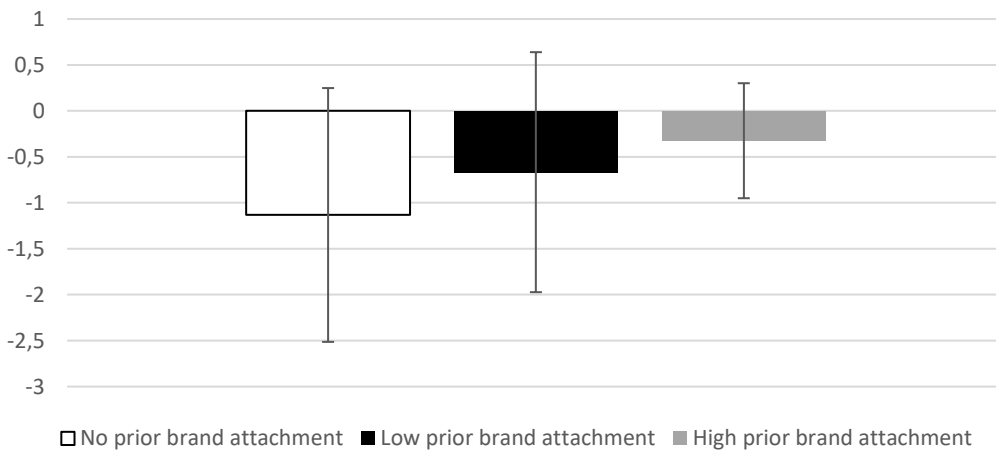
NOTE: Error bars represent the standard error of the mean

Annex 3. Rosalía's Instagram posts promoting Saks Potts coats.



Source: Rosalía [@rosalia.vt]. (2019, July 7th). [Instagram photos]

Annex 4. Reaction of opposers to brand activism according to their level of prior brand attachment.



Source: Own elaboration with data obtained via survey.

NOTE: Error bars represent the standard error of the mean

Annex 5. FC Barcelona's statement on the jail sentence for Catalan politicians.



FC Barcelona announcement
"Prison is not the solution"

[Tradueix el tuit](#)



COMMUNIQUE

PRISON IS NOT THE SOLUTION

El FC Barcelona, as one of the leading entities in Catalonia, and in accordance with its historical record, for the defence of freedom of expression and the right to decide, today, after the condemnatory ruling issued by the Supreme Court in relation to the open process against the Catalan civic and political leaders, states that:

In the same way that the preventive prison sentence didn't help to resolve the conflict, neither will the prison sentence given today, because prison is not the solution.

The resolution of the conflict in Catalonia must come exclusively from political dialogue.

Therefore, now more than ever, the club asks all political leaders to lead a process of dialogue and negotiation to resolve this conflict, which should also allow for the release of convicted civic and political leaders.

FC Barcelona also expresses all its support and solidarity to the families of those who are deprived of their freedom.

Barcelona, 14 October 2019

Source: FC Barcelona [@FCBarcelona]. (2019, October 14th) [Twitter].

Annex 6. RCD Espanyol's statement on the jail sentence for Catalan politicians.

Comunicat oficial
14/10/2019

Davant la recent Sentència del Tribunal Suprem en relació a l'anomenat procés, el RCD Espanyol de Barcelona manifesta el següent:

El Club és una entitat purament esportiva i, com a tal, no representa els sentiments, ni els posicionaments personals i individuals de tots els seus socis i sòcies, com no podia ser d'altra manera. Més enllà d'això, reiterem el nostre respecte a les decisions judicials, així com lamentem el patiment que malauradament determinades situacions processals puguin generar a persones individuals, les seves famílies o als sentiments col·lectius. Encoratgem a tots els poders públics a buscar solucions polítiques i democràtiques per aquesta crisi social, per la via del diàleg i dintre del marc legal i del més estricte respecte a la legalitat.

Source: RCD Espanyol webpage. Retrieved from <https://www.rcdespanyol.com/ca/actualitat/ n:10058>.

Translation: *Faced with the recent ruling of the Supreme Court [...], the RCD Espanyol of Barcelona states: The Club is a purely sporting entity and, as such, does not represent the feelings, nor the personal and individual positions of all its members [...]. Beyond that, we reiterate our respect for court decisions [...]. We encourage all public authorities to seek political and democratic solutions to this social crisis, through dialogue and within the legal framework and the strictest respect for legality.*