Entry

Brand Activism: Gen Z and Socio-Political Branding

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Definition

Branding refers to the distinctiveness of an organization that differentiates it from its competitors and builds loyalty with customers. Brand trust is the confidence consumers have in a company to deliver consistently against their expectations of the brand. Brand equity is the commercial value that a brand has and is linked to consumer perception and loyalty. Culture refers to the expected behaviors of a defined group of people, e.g., customers. Brand activism is when an organization takes a visible ideological stance associated with a specific issue or social concern. Socio-political branding refers to the practice of using brand activism specifically to connect with certain key stakeholder groups.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary branding landscape, the boundaries between commerce, culture and politics have become increasingly blurred over time [1,2]. In today's world, brands are no longer viewed simply as being economic entities that sell goods and services, and instead they are increasingly expected to engage meaningfully with the socio-political issues that shape public discourse [3]. This development has given rise to what is often referred to as brand activism, which is a strategic and ideologically visible stance that an organization may choose to adopt in response to pressing social, environmental and political concerns [4,5].

Brand activism is embedded in a company's identity, and socio-political branding is then communicated through its products, advertising and public engagements [6]. Often, it is not merely about 'doing good' and in fact it is more about being seen to 'take a stand' [7]. Brands now often publicly align themselves with movements such as Black Lives Matter, Fridays for Future, LGBTQ+ rights, mental health awareness and anti-racism, all of which signal a shift in how the brand value for these organizations is constructed and maintained in contemporary markets [8,9].

This ongoing shift in position has important implications for the way brand equity is conceptualized. Classic models of brand equity, such as those developed by Aaker [10,11] and Keller [12], focus on key elements including awareness, loyalty and perceived quality [13]. However, in today's value-driven marketplace, these elements are also increasingly influenced by how a brand's political and ethical positioning is aligned to their consumers' own values [14].

Consumers now evaluate brands not only on functional attributes, or esthetic appeal, but also on perceived integrity, authenticity and alignment with their personal beliefs [15].

These dimensions introduce emotional and ideological risk into brand–consumer relationships, especially when there is a perceived gap between what a brand claims and what is practiced [16]. This especially applies to Generation Z (Gen Z), who are defined broadly as those born between 1997 and 2012 [17], and who are the first cohort to grow up fully immersed in digital technologies and global information flow [18]. As such, they are not only technologically savvy, but also acutely socially aware, politically engaged and value-driven [19–21]. As a result, Gen Z are much quicker to 'call out' brands that appear to be inauthentic [22,23].

Foundational branding literature emphasizes that brand identity is shaped not only by visual assets or positioning, but also by the deeper meanings that brands cultivate with their audiences [11,24]. Increasingly, however, this identity is not defined solely by organizations but instead is being co-created through ongoing interaction between brands, consumers and cultural publics. As O'Sullivan et al. [25] highlighted, this co-creative process is especially salient in socio-political contexts, where branding intersects with ethical expectations, and the consumer voice plays a central role in evaluating authenticity.

Building on these concepts, this paper seeks to synthesize and evaluate academic research at the intersection of branding, socio-political engagement and consumer behavior, with a specific emphasis on the role of authenticity, emotional connection and generational change. To achieve this, we have applied an interpretive classification schema as the analytical framework for the study (Figure 1) in which the categories of brand identity, socio-political branding, value-driven consumer culture and the future direction have each been considered in turn. For this study, we have included older publications considered to be key to the development of this discipline area, and we have also included newer publications that articulate current thinking regarding many of these evolving issues.
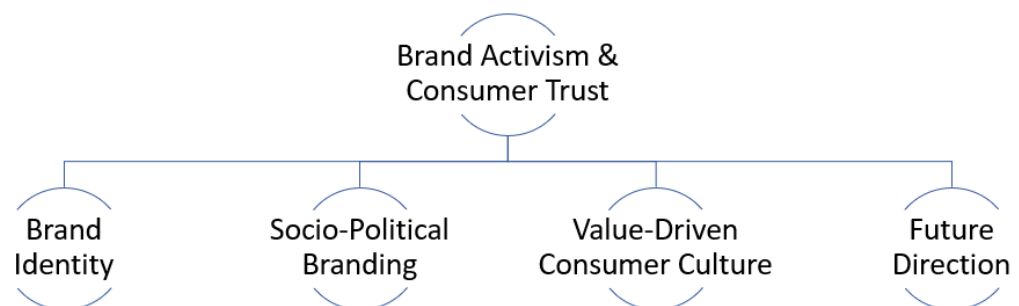

Figure 1. The interpretive classification schema used for this study.

Ultimately, this paper concludes that socio-political branding is increasingly necessary for organizations operating in ethically aware markets. However, the decision to 'take a stand' brings with it new strategic challenges. In the age of digital transparency and consumer activism, brand trust must be earned through consistency, accountability and genuine social contribution, not just by delivering compelling campaigns and catchy slogans.

2. The Evolution of Brand Identity and Consumer Relationships

2.1. Changing Nature of Brand Identity

Contemporary branding demands that organizations go beyond transactional messaging, demonstrating meaningful alignment with the concerns and aspirations of their stakeholders [25].

The concept that brand identity refers to, i.e., the "symbols and the set of the brand associations that represent the core character of the brand ... as identifiers of the brand to other people" [26] (p. 256), has undergone a significant transformation. Indeed, early frameworks conceptualized brand identity in terms of visual and functional attributes such

as logos, slogans, packaging and product features [11]. However, with the rise in postmodern marketing, and the experience economy, brand identity has evolved beyond functional differentiation to encompass intangible, emotional and socio-cultural meaning [27–31].

Kapferer's [24] Brand Identity Prism remains one of the most widely cited models in this regard, capturing six dimensions of identity, these being (1) physique, (2) personality, (3) culture, (4) relationship, (5) reflection and (6) self-image. Together, these elements construct a holistic view of how a brand expresses itself, and how it wishes to be perceived. Importantly, brand identity is not static and instead it is strategically shaped, communicated and co-created with consumers through diverse physical and digital touchpoints [32–35].

This evolution reflects broader cultural and economic changes. In saturated markets, where functional differentiation is increasingly limited, it is widely agreed that brands rely on emotional and ideological connections as sources of competitive advantage [12,30,31,36–39]. With brands increasingly functioning as cultural symbols and identity markers, they are now expected to 'stand for something' beyond just profit. This shift sets the stage for brand equity and emotional loyalty, and especially socio-political branding, as extensions of brand identity [3].

2.2. Brand Equity and Emotional Loyalty

The concept of brand equity, commonly defined as the added value a brand brings to a product or service, has also been reimagined considering these developments. While Aaker [10] and Keller [12] emphasize dimensions such as awareness, quality perception and loyalty, contemporary scholarship highlights the growing importance of emotional, symbolic and ethical values.

Emotional branding, defined as the cultivation of affective bonds between consumers and brands, has emerged as a dominant paradigm [40,41]. Brands are no longer passive identifiers for many consumers, but instead have become active relationship partners, with personalities, values and social commitments that mirror those of their consumers [42]. This relational approach treats the brand as being a character in a broader cultural narrative, and as such, emotional resonance and trust are central to consumer engagement [25].

However, with emotional branding comes increased vulnerability [7]. Just as personal relationships are built on trust and authenticity, so too are brand relationships [16,43]. When consumers feel that a brand has violated its stated values, or betrayed their emotional investment, the resulting backlash can be swift and intense [44]. In this context, the emotional stakes of conditional branding, particularly for socio-political brands, are higher than ever before, and the consumer group for which this is most relevant is that of Gen Z.

2.3. Generation Z and Conditional Brand Loyalty

Gen is one of the most significant forces shaping brand–consumer relationships today [45,46]. This cohort, often described as being digital natives, are socially conscious and identity-driven, and they have redefined brand loyalty by prioritizing authenticity, ethical stance and social engagement over habitual purchasing [19,47–49].

For Gen Z, loyalty is not based on habit, nostalgia or even convenience. Instead, it is conditional, context-sensitive and value-driven [19].

Unlike previous generations, Gen Z consumers are willing to disengage from brands that they perceive as being inauthentic, exploitative or out of step with current ethical norms [50,51]. Conversely, they are also quick to embrace brands that align with their values and demonstrate meaningful social impact [52,53]. This generation expects transparency, accountability and activism, not simply expressed as being a marketing add-on, but instead as a core component of brand identity [53].

Digital culture amplifies these expectations. Social media has transformed branding into a real-time participatory process in which consumers not only consume brand narratives but actively shape and challenge them [54]. In this environment, the stakes for socio-political branding are particularly high as brand messages are scrutinized, shared, critiqued and turned into memes at an incredibly accelerated speed, often by the very audiences that the brands themselves are seeking to engage [3]. The digital engagement of consumers has therefore now become an integral part of brand creation.

2.4. Digital Engagement and Brand Co-Creation

Alongside emotional and generational shifts, the digitalization of consumer culture has fundamentally altered how brand identity is constructed and maintained. As Lemon and Verhoef [55] argue, the contemporary customer journey now involves multiple digital 'touchpoints', and these can vary from mobile apps and loyalty schemes to social media engagement and online reviews. These interactions are not merely transactional as they are also experiential and symbolic, helping to shape consumer perceptions at every stage [56,57]. Brands that offer highly integrated digital loyalty apps, curated social content and AI-personalized experiences, exemplify how emotional branding is increasingly mediated through digital infrastructures [58].

However, digital visibility also heightens reputational risk. If a brand's digital actions, such as ignoring social justice campaigns or moderating negative feedback, appear misaligned with its stated values, then consumer trust can quickly erode [25]. For socially conscious consumers, ethical branding needs to be as consistent as possible across all platforms, not just in campaign narratives, but also in customer service, data usage and platform ethics [17].

2.5. Identity Congruence to Brand Betrayal

The notion of identity congruence, which is the psychological alignment between consumer self-concept and brand identity, offers a powerful lens through which to understand socio-political branding [59,60]. When consumers perceive a brand as reflecting their own values and aspirations, they are more likely to feel loyal and to be emotionally connected [58].

However, this same emotional alignment makes consumers more vulnerable to disillusionment when brands fall short. Fournier's [40] theory of consumer–brand relationships conceptualizes this as a form of betrayal in which emotional investment is violated through perceived hypocrisy, inconsistency and/or exploitation.

In socio-political contexts, such betrayals are particularly damaging. Research undertaken in separate studies by Grégoire et al. [61], Shin and Yoon [62] and Pandey et al. [63] indicate that negative brand experiences among emotionally attached consumers are more likely to provoke active backlash, including public criticism and organized boycotts. With technology-savvy consumers, such responses are often digitally mediated and highly visible, therefore reinforcing the cycle of reputational fragility [64].

3. Socio-Political Branding and Brand Activism

3.1. Defining Socio-Political Branding

Socio-political branding refers to the practice of integrating political, ethical and social values into the core identity and communication strategy of a brand. It involves integrating value-driven purpose and activism with a brand by taking an explicit stance on a societal and political issue, thereby positioning the organization as a participant in the public discourse rather than as a neutral observer [65–67]. This form of activism is only effective when embedded authentically into the brand's core purpose. O'Sullivan [68] argues that

brand credibility in socially conscious markets hinges on sustained culturally embedded commitments rather than performative gestures.

This branding approach is increasingly visible in campaigns that go beyond generic calls for corporate responsibility, instead framing the brand as being an advocate or ally for social causes [50,51]. This illustrates that for some organizations, brand activism has become a defining feature of both their identity, and differentiation, in the marketplace [5,60,65–67,69–71].

3.2. Brand Activism as a Strategic Imperative

In markets dominated by value-conscious consumers, particularly the case with consumers defined as being part of Gen Z, staying silent on important societal issues is increasingly interpreted as being apathy, or even complicity [72]. Vredenburg et al. [5] note that inaction can be just as reputationally damaging as taking an unpopular stand. Scholars suggest that contemporary consumers view their relationship with brands as being a form of 'social contract', and they expect evidence of moral courage and transparency from the brands that they support [72,73]. When brands fail to live up to these expectations, even unintentionally, they risk not just reputational damage, but emotional backlash in the form of outrage and/or anti-brand activism [73,74].

From a strategic perspective, engaging in socio-political branding can offer several advantages:

1.　It differentiates brands within crowded markets, offering a unique narrative that appeals to emotionally engaged consumers [15,65–67,75].
2.　It develops identity congruence, which is where consumers see their own personal beliefs reflected in the brand's values, thereby deepening emotional loyalty [59,60].
3.　It invites earned media, virality and social relevance, especially when brands are perceived as genuine participants in cultural conversations [5,65,75,76].

However, the rewards of brand activism are contingent upon authenticity. Without this, the very mechanisms that create loyalty can turn against the brand.

3.3. Risk of Woke-Washing and Authenticity Gaps

While brand activism can enhance brand equity and emotional connection, the potential reputational risk has to be considered. One of the most frequently cited concerns is the potential for woke-washing, which is a term used to describe the co-opting of social justice rhetoric for commercial purposes without corresponding organizational commitment or action [5,77]. Consumers, particularly those in Gen Z, are increasingly adept at detecting when a brand's actions do not align with its proclaimed values [5].

Authenticity, in this context, is not simply about sincerity, and instead it is about consistency, continuity and credibility. The tension is that even if authentically delivered, the stance taken may not match the views of all existing and future consumers, which may lead to consequential action being taken by one or more stakeholder groups [50,51]. Beverland [78], and Morhart et al. [79], identify three core elements of brand authenticity, these being

1.　Continuity, i.e., a brand remains committed to its values over time.
2.　Credibility, i.e., a brand is believable and competent in its actions.
3.　Integrity, i.e., a brand aligns its internal practices with its external messaging.

Failure in any of these three areas can lead to accusations of hypocrisy, opportunism or manipulation. This is especially precarious in digital environments in which consumer backlash can be rapid, visible and viral [50,51,80,81]. Symbolic capital based upon shared ideals is therefore fragile, and this value can rapidly dissolve when misalignment is exposed,

or even just thought to possibly exist [82]. The risks of consumers perceiving the signs of brand betrayal can therefore be significant.

3.4. Emotional Risk and Brand Betrayal

Engaging in socio-political discourse exposes brands not only to reputational risk, but also to emotional risk [83]. Consumers who feel a strong moral connection to a brand are more likely to experience a sense of betrayal if that brand is perceived to act in ways that contradict their shared values [40,61]. This is especially pertinent for Gen Z consumers, whose brand loyalty is contingent on ongoing ethical alignment [84].

The concept of brand betrayal is used to describe the emotional disengagement that occurs when consumers perceive hypocrisy in brand behavior [85,86]. Importantly, the strength of the emotional bond often determines the intensity of the backlash. Brands that have built their identity on social values often face heightened scrutiny, and if they subsequently falter, the disappointment is not merely commercial but may often become personal [87].

Digital platforms amplify these dynamics as social media can enable disenchanted consumers to publicize their grievances, mobilize others and so generate collective disapproval [54]. In this context, the emotional dimensions of brand activism must be managed with as much care as the strategic and communicative aspects.

3.5. Advocacy Versus Authenticity

For brand activism to be effective, it must therefore extend beyond rhetoric to demonstrate authentic commitment through tangible actions and organizational alignment [5,65–67]. Vredenburg et al. [5] therefore proposed a four-part model of authentic brand activism, which includes

1. Stakeholder orientation (actively engaging and responding to the needs of diverse stakeholders, not just consumers).
2. Cultural sensitivity (adapting messaging and initiatives to local socio-political contexts).
3. Long-term commitment (demonstrating sustained engagement with causes, not one-off campaigns).
4. Organizational accountability (accepting responsibility for internal contradictions and addressing them transparently).

In practice, few brands meet all these criteria, yet for those aiming to engage ethically with activism, particularly in high-scrutiny contexts like the US and UK markets, this model offers a roadmap for mitigating backlash and thereby supports the building of more durable brand equity.

4. Gen Z and Value-Driven Consumer Culture

4.1. Understanding Generation Z as Ethical Consumers

As previously discussed, Generation Z represents a powerful and disruptive force within the global consumer landscape, distinguished as the first cohort to have grown up entirely in a digital and socially networked world [19,20,47,88]. As a result, Gen Z have distinctive values, behaviors and expectations, with the result that they are more socially conscious, justice-oriented, identity-aware and critically engaged [19,20]. Compared to previous generations whose loyalty to a brand was more price and quality orientated, the attitudes of Gen Z towards branding are instead shaped much more by how well a brand reflects and reinforces their own ethical priorities [89].

Ethical consumption is central to how this generation views themselves [14]. Building on earlier work on political consumerism [90], Generation Z are increasingly using brands as instruments of personal identity construction and social signaling, expressing their

values and political orientations through their consumption choices [91,92]. As such, purchasing decisions become ethical declarations, and consumer loyalty is increasingly tied to alignment on social issues such as climate change, gender equality, racial justice and workers' rights [21,93]. This shift in emphasis presents a challenge for brands as they now need to not only perform their functional role, but also, in parallel, contribute to cultural meaning-making.

4.2. From Passive Consumers to Active Participants

Unlike earlier generations, those in Generation Z do not consume brand messaging passively and instead, they actively engage with, remix, and critique brand communications across digital and social platforms [19,48,88,94]. They participate in brand discourse, challenging, remixing, amplifying or rejecting brand narratives very publicly through social media and digital networks [54]. These consumers expect direct and ongoing interaction with brands, valuing transparency around internal practices and responsiveness to feedback and/or criticism [5,19,48,72]. The traditional top-down model of branding is increasingly obsolete for this group, replaced instead by a horizontal, dialogic and participatory model of brand engagement [5].

This dynamic is especially pronounced in 'call-out' culture which is where young consumers hold brands publicly accountable for inconsistencies or ethical lapses [22,23]. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) function not only as channels of brand communication, but also as arenas for cultural commentary, ethical scrutiny and public accountability [5,48,88]. One misstep, be it a tone-deaf advertisement, an exposed labor violation or a performative diversity campaign, can spark digital outrage and prompt organized disengagement.

The implications for brand managers are significant, as Gen Z perceives brand relationships as being reciprocal and participatory, expecting mutual dialog, authenticity and shared value creation rather than the more traditional one-way communication that was most common previously [5,19,94]. Consumer loyalty is therefore conditional on continued good behavior.

4.3. The Conditional Nature of Loyalty

A defining feature of Gen Z consumer behavior is what might be termed 'conditional loyalty' in which emotional connection and brand trust are not absent, but instead they are highly contingent on the organization meeting, and then continuing to meet, consumer expectations [89]. For example, Gen Z will support brands that align with their values, but this support is provisional and subject to continuous evaluation [40].

This loyalty is also increasingly intersectional as those in Gen Z do not view issues in isolation [95,96]. A brand that demonstrates strong environmental sustainability credentials may nonetheless face rejection if it is perceived to fall short on other ethical dimensions such as diversity, inclusion, or labor practices [5,65–67,97]. These consumers take a holistic approach, considering a brand's overall ethical footprint, including its supply chain practices, political affiliations, representation policies and responsiveness to social critique [15]. Authenticity is measured simultaneously across multiple axes, and inconsistency in any one area can easily damage the whole relationship [95,96].

A brand may gain traction through campaigns supporting LGBTQ+ rights or mental health awareness, but if it is also associated with union suppression or tax avoidance, Gen Z is likely to perceive a credibility gap [98]. The resulting disengagement is not merely passive, as Gen Z is more likely than previous generations to boycott, or even switch to, an alternative product or service provider that better reflects their values [22,23].

4.4. Identity, Belonging and Brand Symbolism

Another defining trait of Gen Z consumer culture is the connection between branding and identity. Brands are no longer seen as external providers of products, but instead as symbolic tools for self-construction and community affiliation [82,99]. As O'Sullivan et al. [100] note, authentic and value-based branding links to identification and emotional engagement among stakeholders. This is especially relevant in categories such as food, fashion, technology and lifestyle, where brand affiliation functions as a marker of cultural and moral identity [18].

The implications of this dynamic are twofold. Firstly, brands that successfully mirror the values, language and esthetic preferences of Gen Z can create strong identification and cultural resonance, cultivating authentic relationships and emotional attachment [5,19,100]. Secondly, brands that violate these values, or appear to be tone-deaf to socio-cultural sensibilities, risk becoming symbols of alienation or moral compromise, thereby provoking backlash and eroding trust [67]. In either case, the emotional stakes for brand engagement are exceptionally high [101].

These ongoing dynamics place increasing pressure on brands to move beyond shallow symbolism and consequently, visual campaigns and social-media gestures, must be underpinned by genuine organizational commitment and cultural fluency [5,67]. Missteps, whether in design, messaging, or ethical alignment, can rapidly alienate consumers who interpret brand engagement as a reflection of their own values and identity [65–67,100].

5. Future Research Direction

Despite the growing body of scholarship on socio-political branding, brand activism and generational consumer behavior [102,103], several important gaps remain. These gaps are particularly visible when analyzing branding through the lens of evolving political values, digital culture and national context. Future research could make meaningful contributions to the field.

5.1. Cultural Differences

While much of the current literature on socio-political branding is grounded in North American contexts, there is a relative paucity of research that explores how these dynamics play out across different national and cultural settings. The UK, for example, presents a distinct socio-political environment, characterized by class consciousness, media activism and a complex political economy. Studies that localize brand activism, focusing on how UK consumers interpret ethical claims, sustainability messaging and/or diversity commitments, are urgently needed.

5.2. Organizational Challenges

Current discussions on socio-political branding often focus on external messaging, campaign content and consumer response. Far less attention has been paid to the internal organizational dynamics that support, or undermine, authentic brand activism. Addressing these issues could help bridge the gap between branding discourse and business ethics. Furthermore, the discussion continues regarding the issue of company participation in ethical debates in the first place [104,105] due to the potential for reputation consequences that may occur, and the complications that an organization's stance on a particular issue may not reflect the views of its own employees [106–108].

A significant proportion of the literature on brand activism and ethical branding relies on survey-based, quantitative or experimental methodologies. While these approaches offer valuable insights into generalizable trends and consumer attitudes, they often lack the depth and nuance necessary to understand how consumers make sense of brand

messaging in complex real-world contexts. There is therefore a need for more qualitative and interpretive research to explore the lived experiences, emotional responses and moral reasoning behind consumer engagement (or disengagement) with socio-political brands.

5.3. Emotional Mechanisms

Although the concepts of brand authenticity and brand love are well-established, the emotional volatility that accompanies value-based branding [109] remains under-theorized. The literature on brand betrayal [40] offers a useful starting point, but more research is needed to unpack the emotional toll of perceived ethical breaches, especially for identity-driven consumers such as Gen Z.

Future studies might also explore the psychological and social impact of ethical disillusionment with brands, the thresholds at which loyalty turns to outrage, the role of emotional labor in brand repair strategies and how forgiveness and redemption are negotiated in consumer–brand relationships. These insights could contribute to a more robust theory of ethical branding risk management in polarized and politicized marketplaces.

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