

Co-Brand Activism: Girls' Empowerment in Sports

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Abstract: Brands increasingly become advocates of sociopolitical issues by aligning brands' purposes and values with prosocial practices, a strategy defined as brand activism. Recent research on the theoretical construct of brand activism calls for an investigation of the construct from the multiple stakeholders involved in the development and execution. Drawing from the premises of brand activism and femvertising, the study explores how a co-brand activism campaign on girls' empowerment in sports was developed and communicated through the collaboration of two activist brands, Dove, and Nike. Data was collected from the official websites and Instagram accounts of the activist brands, the internet website of the activist practice and the media news that resulted from this collaboration. Identified themes explain the process for the formulation and communication of the co-brand activist strategy – body confident sport program and #KeepHerConfident respectively. Research findings contribute to brand activism, femvertising and co-branding literatures by providing evidence for the dynamic interactions that shape the development and execution of co-brand activist strategies and the multiple-fit drivers that make this possible in the intersection of multiple female identity categories.

Keywords: Brand Activism, Femvertising, Co-Branding, Female Empowerment, Sports

Jel Codes: M31, M37, M3

Ortak Marka Aktivizm: Kızların Sporda Güçlenmesi

Öz: Markalar, marka aktivizmi olarak tanımlanan bir strateji ile amaçlarını ve değerlerini toplum yanlısı uygulamalarla uyumlu hale getirerek sosyopolitik konuların daha fazla savunucusu haline gelmektedirler. Marka aktivizminin teorik yapısına ilişkin son yapılan araştırmalarda, kavramın geliştirme ve uygulamaya dahil olan birden fazla paydaş tarafından araştırılmasını gerektiği tartışılmaktadır. Marka aktivizmi ve femvertising literatürlerinden yola çıkan bu çalışma, kızların sporda güçlendirilmesine yönelik Dove ve Nike iş birliğiyle ortak marka aktivizm kampanyasının nasıl geliştirildiğini ve iletildiğini araştırılmaktadır. Veriler, aktivist markaların resmi internet sitelerinden ve Instagram hesaplarından, aktivizm pratiğinin internet sitesinden ve bu işbirliği sonucunda ortaya çıkan medya haberlerinden toplandı. Belirlenen temalar – vücuda güven veren spor programı ve #KeepHerConfident – ortak marka aktivist stratejisinin oluşumunu ve iletişim sürecini açıklıyor. Araştırma bulguları, ortak marka aktivizm stratejilerinin geliştirilmesini ve uygulanmasını şekillendiren dinamik etkileşimlerine ve birden fazla kadın kimliği kategorisinin keşiminde bunu mümkün kılan çoklu uyum faktörlerine dair kanıtlar sağlayarak marka aktivizmi, femvertising ve ortak markalama literatürlerine katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Marka Aktivizmi, Femvertising, Ortak Markalama, Kadının Güçlendirilmesi, Spor

Jel Kodları: M31, M37, M3

Cite: Omeraki Çekirdekci, Ş. (2025). Co-brand activism: Girls' empowerment in sports. *Fiscaeconomia*, 9(2), 1039-1054. <https://doi.org/10.25295/fsecon.1563875>

Submitted: 09.10.2024

Accepted: 05.02.2025



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1. Introduction

On October 12, 2023, Realme a smart phone brand, launched a new campaign for its new product using two well-known athletes: Melissa Vargas and Mete Gazoz. Apart from the video content that was shared on traditional and online channels, billboards and posters were placed on public spaces portraying the celebrities holding the new product.

To the surprise of the brand, a consumer posted on X one of the billboards stating that Vargas is taller than Gazoz and accused the brand of recreating gender stereotypes. Gazoz on his personal X account notified followers that Vargas was sitting during the shot accompanied by a sad emoji. Only this tweet created 690 comments, 2.5K reposts, 149K likes and received 7.6 views in total. This phenomenon shows how gender stereotypes remain an important topic and in this context in the field of sports. Like the traditional gender stereotypes, female athletes are perceived as less powerful when compared to male counterparts.

The quest for gender equality and particularly female empowerment in sports is included in the agenda of several institutions. Gender equality in sports includes equal access to opportunities and the eradication of discrimination, representing a core value embraced by international organizations such as United Nations, European Union, and International Olympic Committee. The organizations and their relevant commissions attempt to empower females in sports by focusing on issues like increasing women's participation in sports and in sports-related governance and leadership positions, increasing investment in women's sports, providing equal participation and representation in media, and equal opportunities for girls in terms of physical activity and education (e.g. European Commission, UN Women).

Apart from international organizations, several brands support gender equality through gender portrayals in marketing communications or the development of corporate social responsibility projects encompassing different daily situations where gender inequality can be observed (e.g. Eisend, 2019; Mamuric, 2019; Tsai, et al., 2021). Increasingly nowadays, brands become advocates of sociopolitical issues by aligning brands' purposes and values with prosocial practices, a strategy defined as brand activism (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019; Vredenburg, et al., 2020). Brand management research lacks insights into how brands can become activists by embracing debates around a cause (e.g. Bajde, 2019; Koch, 2020). Extant studies on brand activism mainly focus on studying the phenomenon from the consumer perspective by analyzing consumers' perceptions of and responses to activist brands (e.g. Milfeld & Flint, 2021; Sibai et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Drawing from the premises of brand activism and the call for research on this brand perspective as it is still in its' infancy and highly debated in the literature (Cammarota, et al., 2023; Pimmentel, et al., 2024), the purpose of this research is to explore how a co-brand activism strategy is developed, and how it is communicated as a femvertising campaign. Specifically, the focus of this research will be to provide insights about the intersection of multiple agents that take an active role in the planning and implementation of a co-brand activism collaboration. The study particularly will concentrate on the following two research questions: by employing an intersectional lens how agents enable the co-creation of the co-brand activist strategy, and how they enable the communication of the femvertising campaign.

The research question will be observed in the context of the global brand, Dove. The brand on October 24, 2023, partnered with Nike and developed a new campaign to increase girls' body confidence in sports. Data is collected from the official websites and Instagram accounts of Dove and Nike as well as news stories about this collaboration.

The research attempts to make several contributions to the literature. First, it addresses the call to investigate brand activism from a firm perspective investigating the execution and communication of strategies by focusing on the multiple stakeholders involved. Second, this research will contribute to the femvertising literature by providing a brand activism perspective to the existing literature. Finally, the paper will also contribute to the co-branding literature by introducing the construct of brand activism in the partnerships between brands that aim to foster a social change. Managerially, this study will provide implications for the development, and communication of activist brands by focusing on how brands can become activists in the presence of multiple agents.

The paper will start with a critical review of the literatures on brand activism and femvertising, followed by information about the research design. Next the research

findings will be discussed using the themes of “Body Confident Program” and “#KeepHerConfident”. The paper will end with theoretical contributions, managerial implications, and areas for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Brand Activism

Initially, activism was incorporated in the research agenda of social and political sciences to examine individuals’ participation in social movements for achieving a sociopolitical or environmental goals (Podnar & Golob, 2024). In marketing the first conceptualization was developed by Sarkar & Kotler (2018, p. 468) addressing the phenomenon as “the business efforts to promote, impede or direct social, political, economic and/or environmental reform with the desire to improve society”. This means that activist brands communicate and take a position on sensitive, debatable issues.

Even though in the first glance brand activism may seem similar to corporate social responsibility (CSR), several dimensions differentiate the two constructs. In general CSR attempts to support brand identity by supporting certain non-controversial issues that are perceived generally favorably by all stakeholders (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Having high acceptance from the public, CSR activities address obligations required by law (Pimmentel, et al., 2024). However, brand activism is linked to controversial issues that can be perceived positively or negatively (Ahmad et al., 2022; Bhagwat, et al., 2020). Consequently, while CSR has positive effects on brand value, brand activism may lead to negative effects. Another salient difference is related to the motivation behind the adoption of these strategies. Whereas CSR attempts to support a cause, brand activism attempts to create change (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020). Apart from creating an awareness and finding support for the issue, firms by employing brand activist strategies attempt to persuade relevant stakeholders to develop necessary policies for the solution of controversial causes (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Given these differences, Sarkar and Kotler (2018) consider brand activism as an evolution from CSR.

The quest for taking a position has become more important as hyperconnectivity has turned consumers to even more powerful agents that direct firms and brands to become more responsible by taking active and public stances in contradictory issues (Swaminathan, et al., 2020). Ignoring or failing to take a position can activate consumers to question the authenticity of brands that can even lead to a corporate crisis (Podnar and Golob, 2024; Swaminathan, Sorescu et al., 2020). Authenticity, the perceived fit between brand communication and corporate practices, is a critical factor that determines consumers’ perceptions of activist brands (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2019; Ahmad et al., 2022). It refers not only to a form of communication, but a strategic decision for the long-term commitment to a cause (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Several scholars have now defined brand activism as a marketing strategy that assists brand differentiation and thus brand positioning, calling for the alignment of prosocial messages, corporate purpose, values, and practices (e.g. Key et al., 2023; Koch, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Sibai et al. (2021) argue that activist brands need to demonstrate moral competency to be perceived as authentic. Moral competency refers to the ability to systematically observe morally complicated issues and then, plan and execute consistent goals and strategies that go beyond the primary profit motive. Failing to demonstrate moral competency and thus, failing to authenticate their activism, brands will be judged as deviant, conformist or opportunistic (ibid). However, securing moral competency is not an easy task as brands are comprised of several stakeholders that possess vary degrees of competencies (e.g. Maon et al., 2021; Von Wallbach et al., 2017). Rohmanue & Jacobi (2024) focusing on the interactions between advertising agencies and activist brands, show how moral competency is not a static feature of brands but it develops dynamically through inter-organizational efforts. Consequently, the ability to develop and engage in authentic

brand activism depends not only on the brand, but also on the dynamic interactions of different actors.

Scholars call for a holistic management and brand orientation perspective when considering activism in firms (Podnar & Golob, 2024). Review articles on the brand activism construct call for research on different forms of activism (shareholder, CEO, employee, NGO, community, and consumer), on antecedents and outcomes of brand activism, on the agents, the scope, and the process for the formulation and implementation of brand activism strategies, and the intervening factors in the development process (Pimentel et al., 2024; Podnar & Golob, 2024). The construct has been explored extensively as a consumer-driven phenomenon and scholars call for more research from the firm perspective (Koch, 2020; Pimentel et al., 2024) and particularly, on the development of authentic brand activism in the presence of actors with varying moral competencies (Rohnmanue & Jacobi, 2024). The present study will explore femvertising as a form of brand activism communication in the presence of different agents.

2.2. Femvertising and Brand Activism

Developed in the fourth wave of feminism, femvertising is a form of advertising used to describe advertisements that challenge traditional female stereotypes and embrace narratives of female empowerment (Gomez-Borquez et al., 2024; Akestam et al., 2017). Women from different backgrounds in terms of age, size and race are portrayed in various public and private contexts challenging earlier stereotypes (check Gomez-Borquez et al., 2024 for a review). Brands actively employ this strategy to communicate female inclusion and empowerment through focusing on issues like natural beauty, physical strength, knowledge, and agency to take charge of one's life (Tsai et al., 2021). Mamuric (2019) further argues that brands should embrace four pillars to be perceived as influential and drive change: empathy by understanding and supporting females' needs, significance by portraying females in leading positions, emotion by focusing not only rational but also emotional appeals in communication and lastly, inclusivity by reflecting those in females' lives and defining who they are and who they aspire to be.

Research provides evidence that femvertising enables brand awareness, creates a positive brand attitude, and allows the development of strong emotional connections with female consumers (e.g. Akestam et al., 2017; Hsu, 2018; Tsai et al., 2021). Consequently, brands that target female consumers are advised to use female empowerment in their communication strategies (Lima & Casais, 2021). Especially, this becomes even more important as consumers, professionals, and the public in general act as a driving force for the quest for changing established gender stereotypes in marketing practices (Hsu, 2018).

Scholars also point to some criticisms regarding the motivations behind this strategy. One criticism is that brands use themes of female empowerment as a tactic to promote and sell products and thus, issues are raised on who is really benefiting from this execution (Iqbal, 2015; Mamuric, 2019; Schmidt et al., 2022). Research also points to the fact that consumers are skeptical towards brands that use femvertising and whether they are undertaking the necessary practices to support and empower particularly female employees within the organization (Sterbenk et al., 2022). Sterbenk et al. (2022) using the term "fempower-washing" discuss the inconsistencies between femvertising and actual corporate behaviors by failing in investing in programs or undertaking other practices to support the female workforce (such as inequities in recruitment, promotion, and compensation).

Scholars adopt different theoretical lenses for the study of femvertising. A group of scholars treats the strategy as a new CSR cause to support the value of the brand (e.g. Hsu, 2018; Mamuric, 2019; Tsai et al., 2021). From the perspective of CSR, femvertising is used to support female empowerment creating favorable attitudes that will increase purchase intentions (Teng et al., 2021). This means that brands take actions for a social cause to protect and improve the society's welfare and meet organizational objectives without taking any further actions to induce a change.

Another group of scholars, view femvertising as a form of brand activism. Consumers are actively seeking brands that will take a position on socio-political issues (Schmidt et al., 2022). Brand activism necessitates changes in marketing practices and specifically development of strategies that will initiate changes in policies (for a review check Cammarota et al., 2023; Pimentel et al., 2024). Femvertising is a communication strategy that can be used by firms with the objective of forming an activist brand or transforming an established brand to an activist brand by embracing gender equality, female inclusivity, and female empowerment.

Increasingly, scholars also point to the issue of intersectionality in femvertising and in marketing in general (Banet-Weiser and Glatt, 2023; Sobande, 2019; Uduehi et al., 2024). Intersectionality calls for acknowledging that individuals have intersectional identities referring to the combination of categories related to biology (such as age and body type), social norms (such as social class), or the visible characteristics of a given identity (such as disability and race) (Uduehi et al., 2024). Kozinets & Jenkins (2022) point to the significance of adopting an intersectional lens. The authors discuss that the women's rights movement in the 60s was predominantly a white woman's movement, whereas today activists are thinking across race. Uduehi et al. (2024) emphasize the significance of adopting an intersectional marketing paradigm that acknowledges and represents the combination of social categories not as additional information to describe a homogenous group of consumers, but as significant differences that should be used as the starting point for the detailed comprehension of consumers within the marketplace. Nevertheless, there is also a criticism on brands' use of intersectionality as a strategy for fulfilling financial objectives especially in times of crisis. Banet-Weiser & Glatt (2023) using the Black Lives Matter movement discuss that intersectionality is often employed as a branding exercise that once it loses public interest the branding response also decreases.

Overall, intersectionality plays a significant role in bridging the constructs of femvertising and brand activism. Femvertising campaigns often use an intersectional perspective to communicate overlapping issues of gender with race and social class, enriching the depth of brand activism. For this article femvertising will be explored as a form of brand activism communication using an intersectional lens by focusing on the collaboration of Dove and Nike.

3. Methodology

Dove partnered with Nike for the development of a program that aims to increase girls' confidence in sports. Even though the campaign was launched on October 24, 2023, the program was established in two years. The objective of the research is to evaluate the actors that enabled the development and communication of the program with a lens on the principles of brand activism and femvertising. Both Dove and Nike have embraced inclusivity in their mission, values and the organization-wide executed strategies that target internal and external stakeholders. For more than 15 years, Dove's self-esteem project attempts to help females, girls, parents, teachers, and youth leaders by focusing on different societal issues that negatively affect individuals' self-esteem (Dove, n.d., a). As defined in their mission statement the brand aims to "make a positive experience of beauty accessible to all women" (Unilever, n.d.). Similarly, Nike with their pioneering "Just Do It" slogan has a strong commitment to bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world irrespective of gender, body, race, ethnicity, and religion using the mantra "We serve athletes. If you have a body, you are an athlete" (Nike, n.d.).

Data was collected from the official internet websites and Instagram accounts of Dove and Nike, the internet website that was developed to inform the public about the outcome of the collaboration and provide the necessary resources for execution of the program (Body Confident Sport, 2024) as well as the resulting publicity on this collaboration from the day of the launch. Specifically, Dove has designed a content on its official website to promote body confidence in Sports (Dove, n.d., b).

The data was analyzed using the procedures of qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). As mentioned above, the data was the digital content that was created and shared in different digital platforms. The analysis had a qualitative focus aiming to understand the process for the development and communication of a co-brand activism campaign focusing on understanding the who, what, why how, and when factors.

During the first stage of the coding, each message was categorized based on whether it focused on the communication of how the campaign was developed (planning) or the communication for the promotion of the campaign. In the second stage of the analysis, the data was analyzed by using the following categories identified in the literature: brand activism concerns and characteristics, brand activism agents and scope. These categories refer to the brand activism process framework developed by Pimentel et al. (2024). The concerns and the characteristics of brand activism refer to the decisions on what brands should associate with and how to do so (Swaminathan et al., 2020). Brand activism concerns and characteristics include issues related to social, political, economic, workplace, and environmental activism respectively (Pimentel et al., 2024). In the examined research context, the issues related to social activism (social inclusion and diversity issues related to gender, race and age relations) were used as a unit of analysis. Brand activism agents refer to the stakeholders that take an active role in the decisions concerning activism such as corporations, brands, NGOs and individuals (Pimentel et al., 2024). While brand activism scope refers to the target audience of brand activism that may involve different stakeholders such as consumers, society, the market, shareholders and the government (ibid). The data in the specified categories was further analyzed by considering issues related to intersectionality.

The main objective for the analysis was not to map the frequencies of identified categories but to discuss how the interrelationships of moral competencies, stakeholders, resources and discourses enable the development and communication of the co-brand activism campaign. Finally, these categories were placed under two broad themes that assist the development of the narrative that answers the research questions supported by evidence from the communicated strategies.

4. Findings

The research findings were analyzed using two themes: “Body confident sport program”, the name of the program developed by Dove and Nike, and “#KeepHerConfident” the hashtag used to create awareness and increase consumers’ engagement in the program. The first theme explains the process for the development of the body confident sport program, while the second theme explores the communication of the co-brand activist, femvertising campaign.

4.1. Body Confident Sport Program

The body confident program was developed by Dove and Nike over two years in collaboration with academic research centers that focus on appearance, body image, and girls and women in sports. The activist brands with researchers from the UWE Bristol University Center for Appearance Research and the University of Minnesota Tucker Center for Research on Girls and Women in Sports investigated the reasons for dropping out of sports and tried to identify actions to increase girls’ participation and self-confidence in sports, which refers to the primary concerns for the development of the program (Pimentel et al., 2024).

In order to form the content of the co-brand activism process, data was collected from nearly 2,000 girls living in France, India, Japan, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and the United States. According to the research findings, globally 45% of teenage girls’ dropout out of sports when compared to boys. It is a fact that during puberty girls experience significant change in their bodies and this may make girls more conscious and vulnerable about their physical appearance coupled with the stereotypical judgements that

surrounds them in their everyday lives. Body dissatisfaction and bullying keeps girls out of the field. Girls that participated in the research discuss that the sports environment has a significant impact on their body confidence and self-esteem. 74% of girls state that they would have stayed in sports if they had a coach that would help them identify and stay confident in sports. Given this scientific fact, Nike, Dove, and the research centers identified coaches act as significant agents for the development of actionable programs that will help the formation of positive perceptions about body and sports.

The body confident sport program was also scientifically initiated by receiving inputs from the long-lasting experiences of the activist brands (Dove's self-esteem and body-confidence program and Nike's empowering program for girl athletes) together with the scientific knowledge and understandings created and promoted by the research centers that focus on psychosocial and cultural aspects of appearance, and girls' and women's participation in sports. Even though the program was initiated by the activist brands and the research centers, the content of the program was formulated from the insights received from the girls that participated in the research. Consequently, multiple agents initiated the development of the co-brand activist strategy. In contrast to the existing literature on brand activism that focuses on a single brand (e.g. Koch, 2020; Rohmanue & Jacobi, 2024), the present study shows how two powerful activist brands can jointly form a co-brand activist strategy in collaboration with other agents.

The findings of this two-year long research allowed the development of the Body Confident Program that provides online tools and training for coaches to create body confident athletes (11-17 years old girls), coaches, and sport environments (Body Confident Sport, 2023). An important fact is how the agents define an athlete and a coach, which refer to the primary brand activism scope or target audience (Pimentel et al., 2024). An athlete is "anyone who moves their body in a way that makes them feel comfortable and confident whatever their age, gender, body type or ability, anyone can be an athlete" resonating with Nike's mission "if you have a body, you are an athlete". A coach refers to a broad construct that includes volunteers, teachers, parents, guardians, caregivers, siblings, and coaches defined as "any caring adult who guides or supports young people to move and find success both on and off the field". Consequently, a coach is any adult that can promote body confidence in athletes rather than only targeting sports coaches. The way that an athlete is defined shows that the activist brands acknowledge intersectionality by combining age, gender, body type and ability (Uduehi et al., 2024).

The program consists of two main sections: the coaches' training module, and the coaches' guide and curriculum. The coaches' training module includes three main sections. The first section is the "Body Talk in Sport" that attempts to create an awareness of the negative effects that body stereotype talk has on girls' bodies and playing experiences. The second section, "What our Bodies Experience in Sport" tries to shift attention from "what my body looks like when playing sport" to "what can my body do and experience". The third section "Listening to our Bodies in Sport" identifies the different sensations that the girls' bodies experience when playing sports. Overall, this training module attempts to create an awareness about girls' body changes in puberty and the negative body stereotypes that prevent girls from showing their full potential and even keep them out of sports. The coaches' training module assists the co-activist brands to communicate the concerns towards the social problem.

The "Coaches' Guide and Curriculum" on the other hand offers solutions for social change by providing resources on how the program can be implemented. The "Coaches' Guide and Curriculum" includes three sections: "Coaches' Session Guide", "Presentation Deck" and "Athletes' Workbook". The first section titled as "Coaches' Session Guide" explains to coaches how to deliver the program that includes examples of responses that should be aimed to hear from athletes and tips to help deliver the program. The curriculum includes three main sessions: "Understanding Body Image", "Tackling Negative Body Image" and "Promoting Body Confidence". The second section is the "Presentation Deck" that contains images, videos, and scripts, which will help the coaches

to facilitate the discussion. The third section is the “Athletes’ Workbook” that provides a space for girls to write their responses to questions that were raised during the sessions. Consequently, the coaches’ guide and curriculum offer solutions and resources for the implementation of the co-brand activist strategy. Even though the scope of the program are the coaches indirectly it targets young girls, who should be motivated to undertake the course and use the resources offered.

Before the launch of the program, a pilot study was performed to test whether the program was successful. Clinical trials with a sample of 1,200 girls provided scientifically tested results, which prove that the program will assist in building girls’ self-esteem and body confidence in sports. The university-industry cooperation coupled with the mission and values of the activist brands and sound research on the stakeholders involved allows the formulation and implementation of the co-brand activist strategy that offers scientifically proven actions to solve the identified problem and foster social change. The agents or stakeholders that enable the co-creation of the program increase the authenticity of the co-brand activist strategy. Authenticity will assist the target audience to perceive brands and their actions as credible and unique, driven by true purpose and values (e.g. Schmidt et al., 2022; Sibai et al., 2021; Vredenburg, et al., 2020). Overall, the change expected can be summarized by the last statement communicated in the introductory video on the website. Dr. Emily Matheson, a research member of the Center for Appearance Research that is specialized in body image and sports states that “Athletes that accept, respect and connect with their bodies are unstoppable”.

4.2. #KeepHerConfident

The program aims to reach 1 million young girls around the world and for this reason the activist brands have used several agents that will make this possible: namely, corporate representatives of Nike and Dove, brand ambassadors, NGOs, representatives from the research centers, athletes, coaches, and girls. This second theme explores the agents that took any active role in the communication of the co-brand femvertising program.

The “Body Confident Program” was launched on October 24th, 2023, initially with the creation of an Instagram post that includes the logos of the activist brands and the date of the launch. The post reads “Body confidence in sports. Dove x Nike. 10.24.23” and the hashtags #KeepHerConfident, #Dove, #Nike, and #GirlsInSports.

On the same day in New York in Nike’s headquarters building the program was launched with the participation of several representatives from media, academic experts, athletes, girls, and coaches. The room where the launch took place was filled with posters that communicated the findings of the research.

Two brand ambassadors served as the main sources for the launch of the program that day: Venus Williams for Dove and Laurie Hernandez for Nike. The brand ambassadors shared their own personal experiences in sports. In the Instagram story posted by Dove during the panel Williams, tennis champion and entrepreneur, stated:

“Sports taught me every single thing I know today. Resilience. How to win? How to lose? How to be confident? You can stand up for yourself. It is ok to gain weight, lose weight. But your body does not change who you are. Sport is transformative. It transforms your inside and your outside. But the inside it what really matters”.

In a press release, Laurie Hernandez, Gold Medal Olympic Gymnast, stated (Dove, 2023):

“We know that sports offer girls enormous benefits. Coaches and athletes alike have a collective responsibility to create inclusive spaces and positive experiences that give all girls an opportunity to discover the power of sports. Sports fuels confidence, which in turn enables girls to enjoy a lifetime of moving and playing the sports, they love”.

Both brand ambassadors attempt to help transform girls’ self-belief and confidence in sports, move the body talk from appearance to capability and create a positive inclusive environment for all girls. What connects the co-brand activism strategy is the

congruence/fit of perceptions of body positivity. This issue of fit is discussed in the co-branding literature (e.g. Ahn et al., 2020; Senechal et al., 2014) and the findings provide evidence that it should be extended to the co-brand activism literature. The selection of the ambassadors additionally acknowledges intersectionality. Using an African American and a Latin American athlete indirectly reinforces the multiple identities that girls can have (Uduehi et al., 2024).

During the launch a panel was also held with three girl athletes. This content was shared on the Instagram account of Dove. The girls discussed the body talk that surrounds them and how this negative talk affects them psychologically.

"Put extra meat. You are skinny".

"I tried to convince myself that I am too heavy to be an athlete".

"I felt self-conscious and uncomfortable".

The panelist directed the girls to explain how they managed to stay in sports moving the discussion to the main finding of the scientific research, the role of coaches in this journey.

"I have incredible coaches who are teaching me how to use my size to my advantage".

"I was fortunate to have great coaches that helped me understand what was going on with my body and why I was feeling that way I was".

Consequently, the panel using the agents' real lived experiences move the audience from the concerns to the solution. Consumers' concerns and solutions align with the ones of the co-brand activism strategy.

With the launch of the program, several press releases communicated information about the co-brand activist strategy. Representatives from both brands communicate the success of this partnership and the positive changes that aim to bring by focusing on their enduring mission of empowering girls and women (Dove, 2023).

"Since 2004, Dove has been working to arm the next generation with tools to build body confidence and self-esteem so that no young person is held back... Sports have the potential to make girls feel confident and strong, yet for so many, the judgement and criticism they face within the sports environment is damaging their confidence and limiting their self-belief. We are proud to team up with a likeminded brand like Nike to take action towards a more equitable future for girls – on and off the field" Alessandro Manfredi, Chief Marketing Officer, Dove.

"Nike believes all kids should have an opportunity to play, and we're focused on expanding play and sports for girls who are moving the least. Globally, girls face complex cultural and social barriers, and they also enter sports later and drop out of sports earlier. Our partnership with Dove, and unique focus on coaching through body confidence, aims to change that. Together, we're taking action to break barriers by providing coaches with the tools to empower girls with a lifetime of confidence." Vanessa Garcia-Brito, VP, Chief Social & Community Impact Officer, Nike, Inc.

From the accounts of both managers, it is evident there are multiple fit drivers for the successful development and execution of the co-brand activist strategy: the brand fit between the two activist brands, and the brand fit of the prosocial practices that they have executed up until this collaboration. These fit drivers are different from the ones already depicted in the co-branding literature that focuses on the congruence of consumers' brand perceptions and the congruence of product categories (e.g. Ahn et al., 2020; Senechal et al., 2014). Particularly, the fit with prosocial practices aims to increase the credibility of the developed co-branding collaboration.

After the launch of the campaign, especially Dove partnered with additional brand ambassadors to increase the awareness and impact of the body confident program: a mom, coach, and athlete, Kylie Kelce, and a girl father, coach and athlete, Steve Young. Content was shared on the Instagram account and official website of Dove. All ambassadors announce their partnership with Dove, share their own personal experiences and call girls to share their skills using the hashtag #KeepHerConfident to communicate the power of girls in sports. Especially, each Dove partner nominated another athlete to

boost talk on the topic. One of these athletes is Allison Lang, an amputee volleyball athlete and disability advocate. On the Instagram post the athlete discusses how coaches in adaptive sports for disabled athletes helped her to realize her self-worth. In the athlete words “I became so self-conscious about my leg when I was 12 that I dropped out of sports”. The selection of ambassadors is also an example of the acknowledgement of intersectional identities by the combination of factors related to biology (such as age and body type), social norms (social class and lifestyle), or the visibility of the given identity (disability) (Uduehi et al., 2024).

Given the hashtag call, girls individually or as a team shared their skills by posting videos using the hashtag on TikTok. This girl (consumer) generated content was also shared and archived in the stories of Dove’s Instagram account on February 7th that marks “National Girls and Women in Sports Day”. Especially, the archived videos portray girls in sports that are not viewed as traditionally feminine such as weightlifting, field and ice hockey and cross fit. In order to increase girls’ engagement with the program, Snapchat Bitmoji lenses were also created as a boost for body confidence. First by selecting the baseball, basketball or football lens, girls were able to take pictures of themselves dressed in the appropriate outfit in the specific field. The other lens allowed girls to play sports with the help of an avatar. Given the scope of the co-brand activism campaign, using social media strategies is an effective strategy to spread the campaign and engage the target audience. Especially, as user generated content is perceived as more trustworthy when compared to firm-generated content (Han, 2024).

On February 10th, 2023, one day before the Super Bowl LVIII 2024, an Instagram post was shared by Dove that created a teaser effect for the new campaign. Even though, the co-branding strategy continues, Dove took an active role for the development of this new campaign. The video shows a bib in the form of large Dove Bar Soap flying over Vegas and revealing a poster that reads “Let’s help keep girls in Sports #KeepHerConfident”. The post reads “Is it a bird? Kinda. Is it a plane? No, it’s a Beauty Bar. Now, we’ve got your attention. Our Body Confident Sport program has landed in Vegas, ready for the big game. Let’s #KeepHerConfident” using the hashtags #Dove, #BeautyBar, #KeepHerConfident, #BodyConfidentSport, #BigGame, and #CGI”. Whether the video is real, or computer generated, the post received 4.098 likes and 169 comments. This content was followed by the air of a new commercial for the promotion of the program and a football event on February 11th, 2023, on the day of the Super Bowl.

Dove after 9 years returned as an advertiser for Super Bowl LVII to promote body confidence in girls and keep them playing the sports that they love (Mallick, 2023). The advertisement titled as “Hard Knocks: A Dove Big Game Film” was developed by the Ogilvy UK agency. The film starts with handy-cam style videos of girls of all ages and races hitting or falling while practicing different sports (gymnastics, ice-skate, baseball, American football, and football). These short videos are followed by the classic white screen used at the end of most Dove commercials that include the logo and the slogan of the brand. However, this shot was used to convey the most important scientific fact of the program: “The knocks do not stop girls playing sports low body confidence does”. In this first half of the 30-second ad the popular song from Annie “It’s the hard knock life” is used with a new twist in the lyrics: “It’s a hard knock life for us, it’s a hard knock life for us, instead of treated, we get kicked, it’s a hard knock life”. The jingle coupled with the message on the last shot communicates that rather than the physical knocks, psychological trauma keeps girls out of the game. In the second half of the ad music fades away and a tight shot of a girl appears. The girl observes her body in the mirror at the locker room. She looks concerned, bites her lips, and stretches her Nike branded swimming suit to cover her hips. Moving to a wide shot while the girl still observes her body, the verbal part of the message reads “45% of girls quit sports by age of 14”, followed by the white screen of Dove and the logo of the brand. The message ends with “Together we can keep them in the game. Join the Body Confident Sport program” message. In the last scene the girl wearing her swimming cap and goggles runs with a smile along the corridor to reach

the pool. While diving in the pool confidently and joining her friends, the finale of the song “It’s a hard knock life” is reminded with the message “Let’s #KeepHerConfident” and the logo of Dove. The storytelling allows viewers to recall memories of resilience during girls’ determinations during the knocks followed by an empathy even discomfort due to the way that the scientific fact was presented. This campaign focuses more on girls’ low body confidence rather than the significant role of coaches in changing this negative perception. Consequently, it focuses on the brands activism concerns and characteristics rather than the implementation of the co-brand activism campaign. Intersectionality is also acknowledged in the first part of the commercial by showing girls in different ages and races exercising in the sports field. The dramaturgic storytelling attempts to get the attention of the target audience and motivate them to perform an online search on the provided hashtag.

On the same day when the ad was revealed, Dove partnered with GenYouth, a youth wellness organization that aims to create healthy school communities, and Positive Coach USA, an organization that provides training and resources to ensure positive youth development experience for all children. Dove and GenYouth organized a daylong event that included a panel of the brand ambassadors Williams and Young, a girls’ football game coached by Williams and Young, and a surprise visit of Ciara, singer, influencer and advocate for empowerment and education. The event was named as “45-Yard Line Flag Football Event” to emphasize that 45% percent girls drop out of sports due to low body confidence. This event also enabled positive communication and engagement with the program due to the presence of influencers as well as the content created and shared by the girls that participated.

Apart from the Instagram accounts, the official website of Dove also provides detailed information about the reasons for the development of the program and the actions that should be taken to support girls. The following sections are included on the website: why girls quit, what you can do, dove ambassadors, girls’ stories, join in on social and explore. The information provided in each content moves the target audience from the co-brand activism concerns and characteristics towards the communication of the proposed solution to enable social change. The content on “girls’ stories” provides the lived experiences of ordinary girls by providing the findings of the data used for the formulation of the program. For example, the research finding “2 in 3 girls consider quitting the sport they love” is supported by Alix’s experience; “Alix disliked how her legs looked while running and so she lost interest in the sport she once loved”. Consequently, research findings and real girls’ lived experiences attempt to increase the credibility and authenticity of the program.

In their official website, Dove also announces their new partnership with TOGETHXR, a community of athletes that offer resources and develop programs for equality, equity, and visibility in sports. The website includes three videos of athletes in diverse ages, races and physical appearance, who showing their childhood photos share their own stories about the stereotypes that decreased their body confidence and how eventually they managed to stay in the game. For example, Tiare Jennings, a Latin American softball player, the smallest in the field in terms height, often experienced body talk for not being tall or strong enough. However, as she moved to college, her family, friends, teammates, and coaches helped her to remain confident in sports. Jennings shared lived experiences show the diverse representations of women (in terms of ethnicity and body size) as well as the significance of multiple agents in contributing to a broader activist agenda.

Overall, with the launch of the “Body Confident Sport” program several stakeholders take an active role in the communication of the program that is co-created by the activist brands, scientific centers and girls and coaches that participated in the research. In the communication of the co-brand activist strategy brand representatives, brand ambassadors and influencers, NGOs, media, and consumers take an active role in the co-creation of meanings and practices. Especially, the selected brand ambassadors and

girls'/consumers' generated content embraces intersectionality by focusing on differences regarding physical appearance, race and ethnicity, and disabilities. Nevertheless, despite the focus on intersectionality, the website for the "Body Confident Sport" program provides information on which athletes can potentially be excluded: athletes that question their gender identity and/or that fall outside the demographic that the program was developed (boys, girls under 10 years old, and girls with disabilities).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The research findings show how a co-brand activism campaign is co-created and communicated in the presence of multiple stakeholders in the context of the "Body Confidence Sport" program. The research makes several contributions to the literatures of brand activism, co-branding and femvertising respectively.

First, it addresses the call to investigate brand activism from a firm perspective investigating the execution and communication of strategies by focusing on the multiple stakeholders involved (Pimentel et al., 2024; Rohmanue & Jacobi, 2024). Existing research on brand activism mainly focus on the examination of the phenomenon from the consumer perspective by analyzing consumers' perceptions of and responses to activist brands (e.g. Milfeld & Flint, 2021; Sibai et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Consequently, the first theoretical contribution addresses the call on the brand management literature to understand how brands become activist by embracing debates around a cause (e.g. Bajde, 2019; Koch, 2020). The findings of the research provide empirical support to Pimentel et al. (2024)'s call that brand activism should be studied from a strategic marketing perspective. Brand activist strategies are developed in processes of co-creation between the firm and its stakeholders (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Villagra et al., 2021) with the objective of reaching a transformative outcome (Pimentel et al., 2024). The findings support that brand activism concerns and characteristics, brand activism scope and agents enable the planning, formulation and implementation of the brand activism strategy (Pimentel, et al., 2024). However, in contrast to the existing literature that focus on brand activism for a single brand (e.g. Pimentel et al., 2024; Rohmanue & Jacobi, 2024; Verlegh, 2024), the research context shows that brand activism can be initiated and developed by the collaboration of powerful activist brands and sound scientific research that incorporates the target audience in the strategy development process. The findings show that the number of stakeholders even increase during the communication of the co-brand activist strategy through the inclusion of credible brand ambassadors, influencers, NGOs, girls and their user generated content, and coaches. This allows further co-creation of meanings and practices to create an awareness for the co-brand activist strategy and the transformative outcome expected.

This paper is the first attempt to define the construct of co-brand activism and explain the process for the development and communication of the strategy. The co-branding literature provides evidence for the partnership of brands for charitable causes (e.g. Bigne et al., 2012; Lafferty et al., 2004; Lafferty et al., 2016). However, these studies position this partnership in the CSR literature (Pinello et al., 2022). As it was discussed in the literature review CSR attempts to support a cause, whereas brand activism to create change (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020). CSR and brand activism are positioned along a spectrum regarding the degree of partisanship: CSR is low in partisanship as it deals with highly favored social issues (e.g., community resources, education), whereas CSA is polarizing (e.g., transgender rights, gender and racial equality) (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Firms by employing co-brand activist strategies try to reach and persuade relevant stakeholders to solve controversial causes (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). In the explored research context, the brands and the stakeholders co-create the co-brand activist strategy as an attempt to increase girls' body confidence in sports.

The literature discusses that what defines the successful development and execution of the activist strategy is the congruence/fit between a brand (determined by purpose, values and practices) and the cause for which the brand activism was developed

(Vredenburg et al., 2020). The fit between the brand activism campaign and the brand's image will influence perceived activism authenticity (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Fit is also an issue discussed in the co-branding literature that determines the success of the co-branding strategies (for a review check Paydas Turan, 2021; Pinello et al., 2022). In the co-branding literature fit is classified into brand fit referring to the congruence of consumer perceptions about the brands, and product fit referring to the congruence between the two product categories (e.g. Ahn et al., 2020; Senechal et al., 2014). However, the research findings show that there are multiple fit drivers for the successful development and execution of the co-brand activist strategy: the brand fit between the two activist brands, the brand fit of the prosocial practices that they have executed, as well as the fit between the activist co-brands and the stakeholders that participate in the co-creation of the co-brand activism campaign namely, the selected research centers, brand ambassadors, influencers, girls, and coaches. All stakeholders mobilize skills and competences for the dynamic creation of co-activist brands and for the transformative outcome of increasing body confidence in sports.

Second, the research also contributes to the femvertising literature by providing a brand activism perspective to the existing literature. While femvertising embraces narratives of female empowerment (Gomez-Borquez et al., 2024), in the research context rather than a CSR activity, the construct of femvertising should be evaluated within the brand activism perspective in the presence of high brand fit and especially in this context the presence of high co-brand fit. Femvertising is a manifestation of brand activism with a focused approach to gender-related concerns. This link between brand activism and femvertising will allow a more dynamic exploration of the femvertising phenomenon by incorporating the interactions of different actors. When all different channels of communication are observed, the research findings support that femvertising should focus on the inclusion of all female identities in terms physical appearance, race and ethnicity, disabilities, and sexual orientation (e.g. Gomez-Borquez et al., 2024; Varghese & Kumar, 2022). The paper addresses this research question by showing how does femvertising intersect other diversity, equity, and inclusion causes. The intersectionality of gender with other categories creates additional burdens on consumers' lived experiences that need to be acknowledged in the planning and execution of strategies.

Managerially, the study provides implications for the development, and communication of co-activist brands by focusing on how brands can become activists with the collaborations of multiple agents. More importantly the research findings support the conditions for the success of a co-brand activist strategy: brands that have a high brand fit, a high fit with brands' earlier prosocial practices and a high fit with stakeholders.

It should be also highlighted that brands should focus on industry-academia cooperation as observed on the planning and execution phase of the co-brand activist campaign. Universities have different research centers for the development of knowledge and the development of publications and programs. Sound academic research will increase the development as well as the communication of brand activist strategies. This industry-academia collaboration will increase the authenticity of the brand activism or co-brand activism strategies (e.g. Mirzaei et al. 2022; Rohmanue & Jacobi, 2023; Sibai et al., 2021). Certainly, this should be achieved with the collaboration of all relevant stakeholders. Brand activism requires deep and sustained commitment to social, political, economic, workplace, environmental and/or legal concerns and an ongoing engagement and collaboration with stakeholders (Gray, 2024).

Lastly, in the case of supporting and advocating female empowerment, femvertising should incorporate all female identities in the intersection of multiple identity categories that embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion. Intersectional portrayals and engagement will capture the dynamism of gender by recognizing how other social constructs can change the way that gender is internalized, lived and communicated (Rosa-Salas & Sobande, 2022; Uduehi et al., 2024).

The research focused on the development and the communication of co-brand activist strategies using only secondary data. The collection of primary data from co-brand activism agents could have increased the depth of the data. Moreover, given the objective of integrated marketing communications, only information that supports the program was communicated. Consequently, only positive interactions between agents were communicated even though these interactions are dynamic and can often lead to negotiations of power (Rohmanue & Jacobi, 2024).

Despite the successful execution of the program, there was not any evidence provided about the transformative outcomes of the program. Exploring consumers' and coaches' perceptions of the program and the outcomes received will offer valuable insights to the literatures of brand activism and femvertising respectively.

Even though the strategy acknowledges intersectionality, it assumes that this single program will be a solution that fits all social categories. Especially, research can focus on consumers in the intersection of gender and other social constructs and explore their perceptions of the co-brand activist strategy from an intersectional perspective.

Finally, introducing the co-brand activist construct in the literature offer venues for new research especially, by examining the differences between the constructs of co-branding and co-brand activism.

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Conflict of Interest: None.

Funding: None.

Ethical Approval: None.

Author Contributions: Şahver OMERAKI ÇEKİRDEKÇİ (100%)

Çıkar Çatışması: Yoktur.

Finansal Destek: Yoktur.

Etik Onay: Yoktur.

Yazar Katkısı: Şahver OMERAKI ÇEKİRDEKÇİ (%100)
