

# Social Impact of Brand Activism Initiatives and Insights for Emerging Markets

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## Abstract

*This paper explores the under-researched area of how emerging market dynamics affect brands that take a sociopolitical stance. Our purpose is to gain a deeper understanding of brand activism in emerging markets and its impact on society and brands in the light of the Scandinavian Institutionalism Theory that deals with the changing meanings of ideas during their transition from one place to another. We have conducted in-depth interviews and alternated between literature reviews. Qualitative thematic analysis is used to comprehend the position of brand activism in emerging markets and present insights for future research. From a macro perspective, our insights propose a taxonomy of social impact for brand activism in emerging markets. This study suggests a dynamic and interactive process in which brand activism ideas and practices are circulated across national boundaries and institutional orders, shifting from generalized notions to embedded practices with local meanings.*

**Keywords:** Brand Activism, Emerging Markets, Scandinavian Institutionalism, Social Impact, Qualitative Research

## Öz

*Sosyo-politik bir duruş sergileyen markaları ve onlara yönelik algıları incelediğimiz bu çalışmada aktivizm literatüründe henüz yeterince araştırılmamış olan gelişmekte olan pazar dinamiklerinin bu markaların aktivizm girişimlerini nasıl etkilediği üzerine odaklanılmıştır. Bu çalışmada gelişmekte olan pazarlardaki marka aktivizmi girişimlerinin ve onun toplum ve markalar üzerindeki etkisinin, fikirlerin sınırlar, kültürler arasında değişen anlamlarını ele alan İskandinav Kurumsalcılığı Teorisi çerçevesinde daha derinlemesine anlaşılması amaçlanmıştır. Gelişmekte olan pazarlardaki marka aktivizminin konumunu anlamak ve geleceğe yönelik araştırma içgörülerini detaylı bir şekilde ortaya koyabilmek adına derinlemesine görüşmelere dayanan nitel tematik analiz kullanılmıştır. Analizlerimiz sonucunda makro perspektiften elde ettiğimiz içgörülere dayanarak çalışmanın sonunda gelişmekte olan pazarlardaki marka aktivizmi için sosyal etki sınıflandırması önerilmiştir. Bu çalışma marka aktivizmi fikirlerinin ve uygulamalarının ulusal sınırlar ve kurumsal düzenler ötesinde dolaştığı, genel kavramlardan yerel anlam taşıyan gömülü uygulamalara geçişin dinamik ve etkileşimli bir süreç olduğunu önermektedir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Marka Aktivizmi, Yükselen Pazarlar, İskandinav Kurumsalcılığı, Sosyal Etki, Kalitatif Araştırma

## Introduction

In the Merriam-Webster (2023) dictionary, activism is defined as a doctrine of taking direct and vigorous action to achieve political and social results, supporting or opposing controversial issues. The root of the word is grounded in 1915 when Swedish ‘activists’ petitioned for the end of that country’s neutrality in World War I (Marchetti, 2016). Back then, activism has taken many forms, such as political activism, consumer activism, brand activism, hashtag activism, etc. Activism manifests itself in consumption settings in several ways, such as consumer resistance (Penaloza and Price, 1993; Holt, 2002), culture jamming (Handelman, 1999), anti-branding (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2010), brand avoidance, anti-consumption (Lee et al., 2009), and political consumerism (Micheletti and Stolle, 2004). With such actions, consumers naturally try to push companies to adopt environmental conservation practices, supplier conduct codes, LGBTI+ employee policies, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts (Hoffman, 2001; Bartley, 2003; Raeburn, 2004; Soule, 2009).

Not only individual activists but also organizations are taking part in these initiatives to lead political or social change toward the greater good. Even though it seems organizations have only been recently involved in such movements, their routes lie in marketing practices since the 1960s. With the rise of social marketing, which aims to influence individuals, communities, structures, and societies to bring about positive social change (Zainuddin and Russell-Bennet, 2017), marketing has become a part of social change rather than a self-serving discipline. That transformation has led to the emergence of brand initiatives labeled as brand activism, the rebellious offspring of corporate social responsibility (Sarkar and Kotler, 2018; Moorman, 2020).

Even though consumers are satisfied with the results of brands’ socially responsible activities, today’s consumers expect more from brands. According to a study by Bailey and Phillips (2020), if consumers think a company has conservative values as a part of its organizational culture, it is perceived as less committed to social responsibility

and its community. Additionally, participants become 25.9% less likely to buy its products and 25.3% more likely to buy from a competitor. Another survey conducted with 600 U.S. adults shows that 47% of all respondents (and 51% of Gen-Z) associate CEOs’ social, environmental, and political views with those of their businesses. In detail, 35% said they are more likely to trust brands that take a stand on social, environmental, and political issues. Also, 43% said they specifically favor companies that do so on these socio-political issues (Swant, 2021).

As understood, new-age consumers are more interested in the ultimate good than simply boycotting transgressor companies. They expect them to participate in political or social change actively. Besides the growing consumer expectation of brands to behave purposefully (Hunt, 2019; Swaminathan et al., 2020), it should also be well calculated (Mukherjee and Althuisen, 2020), especially in emerging markets that have a sensitive balance between the market and the society.

To unravel these complexities, we adopt the Scandinavian tradition of neo-institutionalism (e.g., Haverman and Rao, 1997; Lounsbury and Pollack, 2001). This approach goes beyond the pure diffusion of meaning and practice and instead calls for researchers to capture the contextual aspects of how ideas circulate interactively, evolve in a highly iterative manner, and transform into localized meanings and practices (Salles-Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson, 2006; Jamali et al., 2017). As Boxenbaum and Pedersen (2009) summarize, Scandinavian Institutionalism emphasizes “variation and distinctiveness rather than isomorphism and standardization” (p. 179). It focuses on “research objects that are situated, dynamic, unique, ambiguous, fragmented, and emergent” (p. 187). In the light of Scandinavian Institutionalism Theory, our purpose is to understand brand activism better in emerging markets and its impact on society and brands dealing with the changing meanings of ideas during their transition from one place to another (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008; Wæraas and Sataøen, 2014).

Turkey is a suitable research context for brand activism among developing countries to seek answers to these research questions. Albeit its high market potential, it also has significant structural challenges that trigger activist movements. According to the OECD (2021), inequality in Turkey is higher than in most advanced economies. The poorest 20% of households earn 6.1% of total income. More than 75% of the population is exposed to harmful levels of air pollution. When we consider the lack of consensual culture, the authoritarian tendencies, the occurrence of political polarization, and the narrow understanding of democracy in Turkey (Szymanski, 2016; Tausch and Heshmati, 2017), it is necessary to reconsider brand activism to translate and adapt it within the dynamics of emerging markets for successful socio-political cause-oriented brand activism.

Analyzing the translation and adaptation of brand activism in developing country contexts will enhance the social impact of activism initiatives by brands operating in emerging markets. Scandinavian Institutionalism formulates the concept of translation as the process of abstracting an idea from its original context, transforming it into a new context, concretizing it in practice, and institutionalizing it over time (Vossen and Van Gestel, 2019). According to the understanding of translation developed by Scandinavian Institutionalists, actors play a crucial role in the translation process (Vossen and Van Gestel, 2019).

When actors with influential roles in organizational decision-making introduce a management idea into their organizations, that idea undergoes changes and acquires new meanings influenced by the cognitive and behavioral characteristics of these actors and the institutional environment. Actively shape, reinforce, ignore, or modify new ideas during the translation process (Vossen and Van Gestel, 2019). They have also been recognized as key elements in effectively translating established ideas into daily practices (Kjeldsen, 2013). Therefore, this study seeks answers to uncover the localized meanings and practices of brand activism from the perspective of the actors who translate, adopt, and implement the construct.

In the following sections, we begin by reviewing the brand activism literature and highlight how it is generated with the Anglo-Saxon perspective on the circulation of ideas. As the next step, along with the interviews, we aim to frame the activism construct and show its positive and negative effects on society and brands. In closing, we synthesize the findings, identify the variation and distinctiveness of brand activism in emerging markets, and offer reflections to guide future contextually nuanced brand activism research.

## Literature Review

### Brand Activism

In our hyper-connected world, brands no longer remain neutral on sociopolitical matters. A Good Firms (2020) survey found that 63.2% of marketers believe brands should take a political stance. Consumer demand for brands to support social and political causes has risen from 66% in 2017 to 70% in 2019 (N = 1500) (“Brands Creating Change in the Conscious Consumer Era” study). Notably, 77% of consumers expect employees to voice concerns when their company’s decisions conflict with its values. This trend, termed “brand activism,” is characterized by brands taking non-neutral positions on contested sociopolitical issues to drive social change and marketing success (Vredenburg et al., 2020). For instance, Nike’s campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick championed racial equality, and Ben and Jerry’s introduced “Pecan Resist” ice cream to challenge policies on various fronts. Such activism involves using public statements, donations, and cause-related marketing.

Compared to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), brand activism emphasizes values and social impact more than actions and outcomes (Vredenburg et al., 2020). It aligns messaging and practices closely and can involve controversial topics. This distinguishes it from CSR, which often focuses on widely accepted, non-divisive issues (Mizrai et al., 2022). However, nuances of brand activism in emerging markets and developing countries remain unexplored. Scholars have primarily focused on developed nations, leaving a gap in understanding how brand activism is

practiced and responded to in emerging markets. This study addresses this point and focuses on professionals' views on brand activism in a Turkish context.

As global interest in brand activism grows, its expression in developing countries becomes increasingly visible. Understanding brand activism beyond developed markets is an essential step in advancing our knowledge in this field.

### **Dynamics of Turkey as an Emerging Market**

Understanding emerging markets is crucial for marketing research as they shape marketing theory and practice (Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006; Sheth, 2011). Emerging markets, like Turkey, with rapid growth, a growing middle class, advancing infrastructure, and technological competitiveness, attract multinational companies. These companies face unique challenges and dynamics upon entering these markets. The shift of power towards emerging markets, highlighted by notable acquisitions like Tata Motors and General Electric, demonstrates their influence (Sheth, 2020). Competitive brands in emerging markets offer assortments that cater to customer demands, creating economic value (Layton, 2011). Brand survival in this competitive environment requires understanding the social matrix, anticipating needs, and grasping market dynamics.

Brand activism, a key concept, requires contextual adaptation in emerging markets. It moves beyond diffusion, necessitating a nuanced understanding of local dynamics (Salles-Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson, 2006). With its unique culture and communication style, Turkish society provides an exciting context for brand activism through social media. Social media's democratizing and depersonalized aspects enable both conversation and hijacking. Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory highlights Turkey's collectivist nature and high power distance. Nations with high collectivism, high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, high masculinity, and long-term orientations use social media driven by pro-social needs involving connecting with community members, following the online leaders, understanding the society and

community, and building networks (Pal, 2018). This societal context enables collective movements and indirect communication, offering a potential for successful brand activism. While individuals may not freely express their opinions due to high-power distance, social media enables and empowers such conversations by providing anonymity. Consequently, social media contributes to democratization across various facets of society, especially in non-democratic countries (Fathi-Makvand and Fernandez, 2017), and supports activist initiatives by nurturing the collectivist nature of society. Especially with hashtag activism (e.g., #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, #DedimOlabilir), consumers have the opportunity to raise their voices and, hence, more readily support the activist initiatives of brands for the greater good of society.

This study examines brand activism's meaning in the Turkish context, considering social media's impact and outlining its consequences. Turkish characteristics, such as fragmented markets and state intervention, contribute to distinct outcomes of brand activism. Despite challenges, Turkey's cultural heritage and emerging market potential suggest positive impacts of brand activism, promoting societal needs and business strategies. Based on the literature review presented in the previous sections, we ask, "What are brand activism's negative and positive impacts on brands and consumers/society in emerging markets?"

### **Methodology**

To understand brand activism in emerging markets comprehensively, we conducted six online semi-structured, in-depth interviews with opinion leaders, academics, and marketing managers in Turkey. This study adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2013) minimum criteria for small projects with thematic analysis. The interviews, lasting approximately one to one and a half hours each, were conducted without offering incentives, ensuring confidentiality. We employed purposeful sampling to select informants (refer to Table I) through personal contacts, researcher networks, and recommendations from interview participants. This approach allowed us to choose

individuals with substantial experience and expertise in the research area who were willing to openly discuss the study's somewhat controversial nature (Shaheen and Pradhan, 2019).

After transcribing the interviews with the assistance of a research assistant, we entered the coding phase. In the initial coding stage, each researcher manually coded the transcripts, aligning selected statements with the relevant research questions. Subsequently, relevant quotes were translated from Turkish to English. In the second phase, NVivo software was used to organize the data, code transcriptions, and facilitate analysis. Researchers referenced the literature for insights while coding the data (Corbin and Strauss, 2014). Each researcher identified the themes individually and iteratively refined through collaborative discussions until a consensus was reached. The following section presents findings from the in-depth interviews, addressing the research question.

## Findings

Given the overall negative impact found in advanced economies, we first outline the negative and positive outcomes of brand activism in emerging markets (see Table II). For brands, engaging in activism in emerging markets is notably costly due to the chronic resource shortages and inadequate infrastructure (Sheth, 2011). For instance, entering into activism areas may require companies to restructure their organizational charts, redefine job roles, and allocate new responsibilities, posing challenges for HR management and incurring related costs.

*"...Everyone is actually very active. How they will position this structure, this title, this department is a question... How does it work, where it should be reported, what kind of job description it has, they have issues."*

Table I. Informant Profiles.

| Participant ID | Title  | Industry / Expertise                       | Foreign/<br>National Brand | Work<br>Experience | Gender | Education Level |
|----------------|--|--|----------------------------|--------------------|--------|-----------------|
| MM-I           | Marketing Communications and Corporate Communications Unit Manager | Motor Vehicle Manufacturing                | Foreign                    | 2008               | Female | Master          |
| MM-II          | Assistant General Manager, Consumer Insights & Communications      | Retail Apparel                             | National                   | 1998               | Female | Undergraduate   |
| MM-III         | Sustainability Manager   | Retail FMCG                                | Foreign                    | 2006               | Female | Master          |
| NGO-I          | Vice President   | Think Tank                                 | Foreign                    | 1999               | Female | PhD Candidate   |
| A-I            | Full Professor   | Higher Education / International Relations | National                   | 1996               | Male   | PhD             |
| A-II           | Full Professor   | Higher Education / International Relations | National                   | 1999               | Female | PhD             |

#### MM-II

Moreover, ESG regulations in emerging markets lack government commitment, transparency, or detail, forcing companies to establish their norms and processes. This often directs their focus inward rather than on social impact assessment.

*“Concerning the ESG’s governance dimension, we are struggling. I can say this for all companies in general. While the governance is a plane organized by the state in Europe and is now governed by the regulations, we are always behind in Turkey, as in everything else. ... We are left on a plane to the initiatives of companies in these matters. What happens to my environmental impact, my social impact? In Turkey, this concept is present in some large companies but not in our company. Then the company comes first to focus on its sustainability of financial assets.”*

#### MM-II

Weak institutional practices can hinder companies from developing KPIs (key performance indicators) to measure their initiatives' impact on the firm and the society they intend to serve. This narrow perspective poses a major challenge for brands managing their performance in these areas.

*“... Being so emotionally attached to this issue [sustainability], the company -in my opinion- is facing a challenge to go more systematically and to show that it is an owner of this business. Everyone is good, and we are already a sustainable company. But you have to stay focused on your KPIs and manage in a planned way.”*

#### MM-III

Failing to revise existing KPIs or assess each activism attempt individually can lead to poor decisions that may unintentionally cause harm to society's well-being and welfare more than they would if they followed the status quo. MM-III articulates this by;

*“Once the gray area is there, all can jump in. [Company X], the company that most pollutes the world and puts plastic on the market, is one of the main elements in the fight against climate change, and it sponsors COP27. Don't be, then?”*

To prevent negative outcomes, brands must comprehend public sensitivities regarding specific issues. Negative results are inevitable when brands invest in causes misaligned with consumer

priorities in target markets. In such cases, they may avoid controversial topics and focus on safer areas. However, bypassing these issues only addresses symptoms rather than the root causes, potentially undermining the perceived commitment to brand activism, as it can divert attention from the more contentious aspects of problems requiring more profound solutions. This is usually encountered in the market of brand activism, as the quote from MM-II shows;

*“In multi-company participatory research, we conducted on sustainability in Turkey with IPSOS and Sustainable Brands, the main topic that the Turkish nation mentions in the name of sustainability is food waste. The other is violence against women. We do not deal with the issue of violence, but we are a company that thinks a lot about what we can do for women.”*

MM-I echoes these challenges and highlights a particular concern for brands under global firms in emerging markets, especially when selecting causes. A poor choice or inadequate implementation can damage the emotional bond between the brand and its customers, reduce the brand's overall social impact in the chosen area, and even harm its broader societal reputation. Boycotts and consumer backlash are significant concerns for global brands engaging in activism in emerging markets. As suggested by MM-I;

*“...the negative effects are, of course, there: risking the emotional bond that the brand has established with the consumer or the total benefit it creates by owning a certain area. Or in terms of the positive results: for all consumers to create a positive perception on behalf of the brand.”*

These vulnerabilities, along with economic challenges such as high inflation, unemployment, and the prevalence of the grey market, raise doubts about companies' commitment to and prioritization of brand activism. Global events like the Ukrainian war and the COVID-19 pandemic compel organizations to adapt to unstable conditions, diverting their attention from sustainability issues.

*“... after the pandemic...countries have started to raise their borders. Free trade agreements, for example, are slowly breaking down. For example, we cannot export products to Egypt or Morocco. ... Because the country said that if you can't produce here, you can't*

sell. Then, they relaxed this temper but forbade the outflow of money. Are the axes shifting, especially after the Ukraine-Russia war, which is disrupting the system at the moment? There is a case of globalization being reorganized with relations between different countries. There is a new order in international trade. We are experiencing the difficulties this brings.”

#### MM-II

Such contextual issues may impact global multinational companies' presence in emerging markets. When organizations downsize or reduce investments, activism tends to take a narrower, self-serving rather than community-serving approach. Hence, the community misses the chance to be supported by the brands in addressing societal problems.

“We had to change our strategy over time. While we were a bigger brand in Turkey [the company used to own a manufacturing plant], we had a social responsibility [note here ‘activism’ is not preferred to be used here] strategy in which we also touched on local societal issues. At the point where we are more of an importer brand, we are trying to touch on areas parallel to the values the global automotive brand is trying to highlight in our societal projects.”

#### MM-I

This ultimately hurts the general public in emerging markets since even though global firms tend to follow a universal strategy of supporting controversial issues such as LGBT rights, they may tend to localize their global brand purpose and opt for a cautious stance due to strong cultural values in countries like Turkey. This can leave disadvantaged groups without support from global brands. MM-I articulated these hesitations more than once;

“Our global brand has a stance. In many countries, we have bold stances during the Pride Parade, where all logos are changed. But we approach that issue a little more cautiously locally... Unfortunately, we could not support the Pride Parade in Turkey ... Because this subject is still taboo in Turkey. ... On the activism side, we do not do much in Turkey. Frankly, we prefer to be distant from those issues.”

National companies face the challenge of balancing economic growth aspirations with responsible and sustainable practices. Responding to various market needs and consumption cycles may result in over-production, leading local consumers to over-consume. This cycle of over-production and sales can harm consumers' finances and overall well-being.

“... There are eight seasons. ... There is summer, there is winter, ... the early summer, and ... the heat transition. There is winter and dark winter. Now, there is an ever-changing fashion in these eight seasons. This is the concept of fast fashion that Zara started. I will say, unfortunately, because it tires the world. There is more production than necessary; consumption is made more. Our clothing consumption has increased by 60% in the last five years. A piece of clothing is used only seven times, while it was used many times in the past.”

#### MM-II

Another challenge is the inability to effectively communicate good conduct. Companies deeply committed to a cause and heavily invested in brand activism may hesitate to promote it, fearing it could come across as bragging. However, this reluctance could lead to missed opportunities and losing ground to less competent competitors in activism. MM-III touches upon this;

“... I said at a meeting the other day: We have been doing this [sustainability] for years. We are used to it. For us, this does not seem like a new thing. But a new place [activism domain] has opened, and we still don't have a corner there. [Brand M] has many projects beyond its Geographical Indications. [1] That is the first main project, but we haven't told about it to the others.”

Before discussing the positive impacts, it's essential to highlight both the advantages and drawbacks of social media in shaping and sometimes preventing negative impacts, especially within the ongoing debate over skepticism versus authenticity in brand activism efforts. Social media's pervasive and fleeting nature, along with the influence of online personalities, poses challenges for brands in managing negative or potentially fake news related to less sensitive

<sup>1</sup>[https://www.wipo.int/geo\\_indications/en/#:~:text=What%20is%20a%20geographical%20indication,originating%20in%20a%20given%20place.](https://www.wipo.int/geo_indications/en/#:~:text=What%20is%20a%20geographical%20indication,originating%20in%20a%20given%20place.)

company actions while addressing activism issues. This can easily sway public opinion since misinformation spreads rapidly. Rather than seeking credible sources, the general public may overlook valuable information. For instance, companies often face communication crises resulting from improper message framing, prompting them to develop new social media-specific communication strategies through firsthand experience.

*“A saying about the Dalai Lama was shared in a product advertisement, but this caused a crisis in social media... The crisis has become a system where Corporate Communication first checks the laws and regulations; then, the marketing department can take the post live. It led to designing and implementing social media control processes worldwide.”*

#### MM-I

Interestingly, despite global brands' cautious approach, emerging market audiences tend to overlook negative issues, which fade quickly on social media. This differs from advanced economies, where activism campaigns can polarize consumers. Some may align more closely with brands that share their values, while others may feel alienated, leading to brand avoidance and lower self-brand congruity (Schmidt, 2021). Consequently, brand activism can become strategic (Schmidt, 2021; Mirzaei et al., 2022), especially for companies with individual branding strategies. In emerging markets, consumers are often unaware that different brands belong to the same company, allowing companies to remain profitable even with 'woke washing.' Factors like limited income, high prices, and time constraints may also lead consumers to continue purchasing brands they do not like.

*“...when we say such counter, compelling issues, brands take risks. The risk is around 10-15% of my consumer pool. That means I don't take the risk. On the contrary, brands may think I am creating serious brand loyalty. Or I have a wide variety of other brands besides Elidor [a shampoo brand by Unilever that featured a famous Turkish volleyball player who happens to be part of the LGBTI+ community], which I can use for this purpose. One of my brands supports it. I do not put myself at such a big risk when I own different brands in that category. Maybe I even sell more.”*

#### A-II

This highlights the issue of **authentic brand activism**, especially considering the agility inherent in social media. Its flexibility and speed enable brands to express their beliefs and behaviors promptly. However, on the downside, the enduring accessibility of content through archives turns social media brand engagements into a monitoring tool. If a brand intentionally straddles both sides of a polar issue, fully aware that any loss will be compensated, can it still be considered an activist brand? This underscores the necessity of defining the boundaries of authentic brand activism in emerging markets, particularly in the context of social media. Brands' activist efforts in the digital space are susceptible to accusations of clicktivism, hashtag activism, slacktivism, or greenwashing (MS article 2022).

*“When I open hashtag, it means ‘This is the topic, let's discuss it together in the public arena, I am leading it.’. But when a brand does it, it can be seen as quite clicktivist. So, there is a possibility of going to Greenwashing again.”*

#### NGO-I

At the other end of the continuum from greenwashing lies green hushing, where some highly activist brands do not communicate their stance on their social media, thinking their efforts are insufficient, which can lead to wide and harmful criticisms.

*“We recently conducted a carbon footprint awareness survey with our five very important brands. For example, they were also shy. These become a crisis quickly, and the consumer says, ‘Okay, but you are deceiving me that nothing is happening.’ Many people have awakened. That's why we find it safer to talk by completing the whole process. But this is also a dilemma because if we don't talk, awareness will not increase, and if we talk too much, it will be perceived as greenwashing. In fact, we can focus on finding the model of the optimum point in our research.”*

#### NGO-I

On the bright side, social media's awareness-raising role is consequential. According to the research by Sustainable Brands and IPSOS (Sustainable Brands 2022), 20-30% of Turkish consumers consider environmental conservation important to some extent, while the majority do



not. Those who deem it unimportant cite their limited influence and argue that the government should take action. While this pertains specifically to environmental sustainability, a similar perspective may apply to areas requiring collaboration in social sustainability. Here comes the enabler role of social media to provide awareness and disseminate the news fast;

*“Little by little, we are starting to communicate about these issues... Social media will have a very valuable role in raising awareness and involving people in this picture. Of course, these influencers act as role models; unfortunately, there are too many of them, and not all show the same care. That said, especially after the pandemic, it is highly possible to make an impact by using this channel, joining and listening to live broadcasts, and watching videos, that is, accessing the information on demand. Social media is invaluable in democratizing knowledge.”*

#### MM-II

*“I think that social media has greatly accelerated this issue [brand activism]. I think it has a serious positive contribution in terms of increasing the awareness and dissemination of the issue to enable individual participation, like change.org, on an individual basis. This, of course, also affected the brands. As people’s interest, expectation level, or the speed of people’s reach increases, brands also play an important role in terms of making more communication about this issue from their social platforms or telling people who are the denominators of the benefit they create on that topic, what this benefit is, etc.”*

#### MM-I

During the interviews, three critical indicators for authentic brand activism emerged. The first indicator emphasizes the alignment between **organizational culture** and brand activism initiatives. NGO-I highlights a negative example and stresses the importance of integrating the cause into corporate culture and conduct.

*“...the feminist movement says, ‘I exist.’ As a woman, I have a name. Elidor featured some celebrities in that campaign and said, ‘If there is no equality in the workplace, I do not exist!’. The feminist movement does not say, ‘I don’t exist.’ They were criticized for this movement. You need to spend time, eat, and drink with feminists to understand their rhetoric. That’s why I think these parties and specialties need attention and should also be in the organization.”*

#### NGO-I

*“If there is no such thing in the brand’s essence, choosing it on March 8<sup>th</sup> means nothing. A gas station brand tries to keep the proportion of women in a gas pump at a certain percentage. So, it is like keeping this sort of thing together throughout the year, not just March 8<sup>th</sup>...Is the brand doing something temporarily or infusing it into its entire company policy?”*

#### A-II

While A-II, the academic interviewee, highlights corporate culture’s significance, she connects it to the second indicator of authentic brand activism: the sustained integration and the **continuity** of socially responsible practices within corporate culture and conduct. When these practices become ingrained in corporate culture, a brand gains agility for rapid decision-making and problem-solving during unexpected crises. This adaptability is particularly crucial in times of economic instability in emerging markets, where uncertainty management requires agility (Teece et al., 2016). Both interviewees, A-II and MM-III, emphasize that agility on social media should be complemented by concrete business actions, especially during crises;

*“It’s a spontaneous situation that we talk about all the time in social movements, and how does the brand respond to this spontaneity? It’s like another legitimacy given by the fact that the Divan Hotel is open [during the Gezi Park incident, Divan Hotel, owned by the Koç Group, hosted the protestors running away from the police force, while many stores avoided such as Starbucks, eventually facing some boycotts from a group of consumers]. Something that the brand did not expect to encounter much... How strategic of brand activism is this?”*

#### A-II

*“Koç Group once did a project called ‘Vocational Education: A Crucial Matter for the Nation’ project. This is a good example to benchmark for brand activism since it is a long-term project that trains technical personnel and contributes to education. ... Sustainability itself is a medium that needs to make a breakthrough occasionally and do things that temper the brand. For example, everyone used to say that plastic is not good for health, yet when you say that ‘you eat as much plastic as a business card or credit card every year,’ it becomes much more effective. I think social*

*media is a suitable place for such things to come out. It stops people for a while, but it is short-lived."*

MM-III

Finally, the third indicator of authentic brand activism is **not to abuse the cultural authority role** while addressing the 'what is in it for me?' question. Brands are traditionally seen as representing the values of the nations in which they operate, and they are expected to operate with an economic focus, even if they also care for the triple bottom line of business. This holds true today, in this fertile ground of the digital era, and more so in the emerging market context. This indicator is observed when companies choose, at times, indirect, less visible paths of contributing to society at large about the cause they support with brand activism. Beyond direct consumer engagement, they also focus on raising awareness among their employees and business partners while developing and co-implementing projects for the cause. As suggested by interviewees, being a 360-degree, holistic role model should be the aspiration when adopting brand activism for a cause;

*"Of course, because the first thing that comes to the consumer's mind is, 'The brand is deceiving me.'... In global research, when we compare the United States and Turkey, the majority of Turkish people also say: 'I trust what the brand I use tells me.' In the United States, this rate is much lower. ... there is a little more opportunity for brands in Turkey. Because if we start from Hofstede, the Turkish consumer with higher status distances, the more culturally we believe in authority. Therefore, the credibility of the brands seems to still exist in our country."*

NGO-I

*"... We are a sustainable company anyway... We are like a rabbit against a tortoise. We already ran a lot, and we are very fast, we are very good. But our end-consumer B2C channels are weak. To be known, it is necessary to make serious decisions and changes regarding the communication strategy."*

MM-III

*"It's about what kind of culture the company is imposing. Because there are huge working masses inside, and what kind of culture does it keep them alive... Our company has three principles: customer satisfaction, employee satisfaction, and supplier*

*satisfaction ... We are a company that says everyone has the right to dress well. That's why we are trying to democratize clothing. That's why there are the sustainability principles of the United Nations. .... The other mission we are dedicated to is: Social sustainability. One of the duties of this team is strong women, a strong society, strong future. ... I also give the programs created in cooperation with the support of the corporate academy to these women. ... We went to underdeveloped eastern cities and started giving training to men. 'You have a wife; you have a family. Are you aware of women's rights?' We are starting to embroider it softly. We have a dream of getting to the bottom of the problem."*

MM-II

In addition to the noted negative aspects, there are positive outcomes rarely seen, even in advanced economies. High unemployment and turnover rates are common in emerging economies. Therefore, when brands embrace values like democracy, inclusion, and diversity, it's often a new experience for many employees. While instilling such a culture in organizations takes time, brands should persist as it yields promising returns. Job satisfaction rates in Turkey are notably low, so brand activism aimed at internal constituents results in happier employees and a more cohesive organizational culture, laying the groundwork for long-term success.

*"... We have a leadership model with two wings. Like a bird, you need two wings to fly. On the one hand, there are qualities associated with the right brain, such as fairness, situational leadership, etc. On the other hand, there is a leadership understanding that includes more left-brain concepts such as technical and professional expertise and vision. We try to align the company's culture with that leadership model and understanding... We are trying to create a corporate culture that is very democratic, where everyone can voice their voice, where diversity is very high, and where respect is very high."*

MM-II

Brand activism also brings numerous benefits to external stakeholders. Brands can achieve significant gains by prioritizing satisfaction throughout the value chain. Fair procedures and terms, such as flexible payment options for suppliers to effectively manage their costs and revenues, foster lasting and professional buyer-

supplier relationships. Although such over-generational buyer-seller relationships are historically a part of commerce in emerging markets, they become a rare gem compared to those in advanced economies. In terms of mutual returns, this way, brands also ensure better quality raw materials and enhance their own value-added over the competition while decreasing their cost of reaching the right suppliers. Likewise, addressing inequalities in knowledge, expertise, and promoting fairness and transparency in transactions results in higher customer satisfaction. As informants outline;

*“When [Brand M] purchases produce, we first say, let’s go and teach geographically marked products. We then teach the correct planting techniques. The quality team is a technical team, but if a more technical one is needed, they find it. They give training. They ensure that products are produced with the right applications, and this is what we call the supply side, the side in the chain before M., where it is very strong. And it also creates an effect, an economic effect. Not only the social and environmental benefits but also the economic benefits are considered.”*

#### MM-III

*“We have two surveys per year about supplier satisfaction. The survey goes to all our suppliers. We are around 80% there, and the goal is to reach the 90s. Being fair, respecting payments and terms... We have KPIs to measure and meet these.”*

*“.. Customer satisfaction is the tip of the iceberg. We are a company that says everyone has the right to dress well. That’s why we’re trying to democratize clothing. That’s why among the sustainability goals of the United Nations, we serve with our products and mission to eliminate World inequalities. We are a company that says everyone has the right to dress well and tries to make affordable products accessible.”*

#### MM-II

Limited resources in emerging markets drive brands to achieve multiple objectives with a single strategy. Brand activism not only enhances differentiation but also promotes cost efficiency, frugal innovation, and improvisation in operational excellence. For instance, sustainability-focused activism projects necessitate cross-functional teams, even in highly hierarchical organizations, making them leaner and more cost-efficient. Engaging in multiple activist projects

simultaneously enables internal team members to acquire new skills and knowledge, transforming the organization into a learning entity. Additionally, one activism initiative may inadvertently benefit another cause or stakeholder need, creating synergies. Given the suboptimal nature of institutional systems in emerging markets, these opportunities incentivize brands to embark on activism efforts.

*“...Because we always work wholesale, products come and go with large pallets. Thousands of tons of these pallets remain on the platforms. A repair workshop is now open for the broken pallets. With our logistics team, we [the sustainability department] have done a project that reduces our costs in the fight against waste economically. We will provide very serious savings.”*

#### MM-III

*“Why do we donate clothes? ... You always sell your brand’s old-season apparel at your outlets. This helps get rid of that product. In fact, it is also part of one’s sustainability. That said, cloth garbage, especially in China and Africa, is a hot topic and is criticized a lot right now. We are trying to prevent them so that our products do not end up in the garbage. We are making an effort to reach those in need and share our unsold products with them as philanthropy. This is actually a part of our sustainable business model.”*

#### MM-II

Positive returns are more likely and secure when brands invest in causes aligning with consumers’ priorities in target markets. Brand identity also plays a vital role in this equation. Brands should select activism areas that resonate with their origins and visions, striving to drive societal change in these areas. For example;

*“We support two initiatives. ... a project in which women’s stories, those who have left their mark on society, successful women whose dreams have come true. In Turkey, we also support issues such as innovation, sustainability, good life, and well-being, which are parallel to our brand values in different fields. ... As a brand in which women played a very active role in its debut, the company turned into a more male-dominated brand over time, and to break this down, it launched an initiative to increase its communication with women. ... We support girls’ and women’s stories, and in general, we like to draw attention to gender inequality. There are also different issues, of course. ...we turn into a zero-carbon emission setup in our*

factories. This transformation project drives our support on the second initiative.”

### Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we aimed to comprehend the brand activism construct within emerging markets. We observe the emergence of a growing middle class, increased consumer purchasing power, rapid infrastructure development, and technological competitiveness in emerging markets. These factors have led to the rise of challenger brands (Chattopadhyay et al., 2012) like Huawei and Haier from China, Wipro from India, and the acquisition of global brands such as IBM’s PC division by Lenovo or Godiva chocolates by Ülker. However, the global success of these brands has not necessarily translated into local community development, indicating that their operations are still influenced by the characteristics of their local contexts (Jamali and Carroll, 2017).

Table 2. Negative and positive impacts of brand activism on brands and consumers/society in emerging markets.

| Themes  | Impact of Activism Initiatives on Brand               | Reflections on Society (Impact on Society) |
|---|---|--|
| <i>Positive reflections</i>                   |   |  |
| Authentic implications                        | Internationalization of the discourse:                |  |
|   | Organizational culture and the cause alignment        | Sincere contribution to societal changes   |
|   | Organizational culture and the leadership alignment   | Permanent investment on cause              |
|   | Vision and the cause alignment                        | Higher success rates                       |
|   | Capable of giving agile reactions                     | Positive brand perception in society       |
| 360- degree implications, Holistic role-model |   | Long-term success in society development   |
|   |   | Decreasing unemployment and turnover rates |
|   | Democratic implications                               |  |
| Cooperating with stakeholders                 | Eliminating inequalities in knowledge/expertise       | Increased education in society             |
|   | Encouraging fairness and transparency in transactions | Increasing marketing literacy in society   |

|                                 |  |   |
|---------------------------------|--|---|
|                                 | Higher customer satisfaction   | Elimination of inequalities in consumption  |
|                                 | Supplier satisfaction  | Equitable distribution of limited resources   |
|                                 | Cross-functional teams   | Creating synergies  |
|                                 | Sustainable business model   | Circular economy  |
|                                 |  | Sustainable society, environment  |
| <i>Negative reflections</i>     |  |   |
| Reorganizational costs          | More focus on internal processes   | Less focus on social impact assessment  |
|                                 | Lack of strong institutional practices                                     | Fail to serve the society   |
|                                 | Creating gray areas  | Harm to environment, society’s well-being and welfare   |
|                                 | Surface-level approach   | Redirect the attention from more controversial sides of the problems  |
| Downsizing/limiting investments | Narrowing activism (Focusing firm-serving activism than community serving) | Missing the chance of being supported by the brands in order to find solutions to societal problems.              |
|                                 |  | Disadvantaged groups in emerging markets with strong cultural values cannot receive the support of global brands. |
| Unsustainable implications      | Vicious cycle of overproduction/sales                                      | Harmful for environment, consumers’ wallets and in general well-being   |
|                                 | Not being fluent in communicating  | Society unaware the support   |
|                                 | Suffering from wrong message framing in social media                       | Offending the societal sensitivities  |
|                                 | Wrong choice of areas and/or   | Damaging total social impact of the brand in the chosen area  |
| Woke washing                    | Inadequate implementation  | Harm the total positive attitude towards the brand in larger society  |
|                                 | Hurt brand credibility   | Misled, deceived society  |
|                                 | Risking emotional bond with customers                                      |   |

According to institutionalists, the adoption of institutionalized practices is driven by isomorphic pressures, which can lead to increased homogeneity over time. However, the unique dynamics of emerging markets suggest that blindly applying Western brand activism studies may not be suitable, as it overlooks local nuances

and dynamics. Scandinavian Institutionalism emphasizes the varying interpretations of ideas and standards based on different actors, allowing for localized application (Cassinger et al., 2016; Vossen and Van Gestel, 2019). Our qualitative study focuses on the process of brand activism and its local implications, aligning with this perspective (Boxenbaum and Pedersen, 2009).

Regarding the meaning of brand activism, we observe a broad approach that encompasses a wide range of societal and environmental issues beyond the partisan causes often addressed in advanced markets. This raises the question of whether brand activism is universally defined or culturally contingent, drawing parallels with the 'linkedemic' and 'adapted etic' debate in international marketing (Douglas and Craig, 2006). Our research pioneers an exploration of these distinctions, encouraging further discussion toward a unified conceptualization that applies across different contexts.

In emerging markets, the selection of brand activism causes, and the establishment of safe and risky boundaries often contribute to a 'us' vs. 'them' divide, especially in the context of rising right-wing populism. This challenge is more pronounced in emerging economies due to the significant role of the private and third sectors, influenced by state interventions. This highlights the need for a fresh definition of brand activism in emerging markets, warranting empirical validation.

The roots of CSR and activism are deeply embedded in emerging markets, suggesting a potentially favorable environment for such business conduct. As the digital landscape expands alongside social media, the question arises whether brand activism could find a platform for expression in the absence of a centralized structure. This query is of particular concern given the high level of state censorship on traditional media in emerging markets (Enikolopov et al., 2018). Our interviews indicate the potential for brand activism to drive positive behavioral change in emerging markets, leveraging brands' higher respect and recognition within the public sphere.

Given the vulnerabilities associated with employing social media (e.g., trolls and fake

negative publicity) in emerging markets to plant brand activism, we argue that brands should engage in authentic brand activism. More specifically, they should align their organizational culture with the activism initiatives of the brand. The fit discussion is already part of research in the area (e.g., Karaosmanoglu et al., 2016) advocate such a stance. Furthermore, the integration of CSR into marketing conduct is mentioned in recent work (Ozturan and Grinstein, 2022). Yet, in emerging markets, for brands to refrain from greenwashing claims and not to be shot in the foot by trolls or skeptical consumers is a go or no-go issue when investing in a brand activism cause.

Secondly, brands leave their marks in the digital space, and therefore, any discontinuity or one-shot approach to brand activism besides the aforementioned misalignment with organizational culture backfires. This is the continuity aspect of any authentic brand activism effort (Morhart et al., 2015). Since current literature on CSR or activism also lacks the dynamics component, this is an issue to be tested in the advanced economies context as well. Gatignon (2022) recently highlighted this aspect where activism in the form of, e.g. corporate volunteering, is valuable in developing countries as long as the company and its stakeholders continue their commitment to such efforts over time.

Finally, the brands still have legitimacy and are looked up to in emerging markets. Hence, they may enter this unexplored activism territory to gain higher profits. Yet suppose they tend to abuse the cultural authority role while addressing the 'what is in it for me?' question. In that case, they may be questioned a lot for their conduct and face the negative outcomes as their advanced economy constituents. More specifically, even for CSR efforts that usually are tied to, on average, positive returns, there are some boundary conditions. For example, when stakeholders are more suspicious of the brand's CSR efforts and motive, this can lead to negative reactions (e.g., Yoon et al., 2006). To overcome consumer skepticism, brands should sincerely employ KPIs that are not only based on eWOM, profits, etc., but also on metrics that build and evaluate their impact on people and the planet (Porter and Kramer, 2011; El-Akremiti et al., 2018). This responsible conduct in company policies

should be reflected in its digital policies too (Lobschat et al., 2021).

This study is based on one emerging economy and a limited set of participants. While we tried to reach breadth in terms of views and opinions, a further exploratory study that can complement our findings with a more comprehensive case study (e.g., Jurietti et al., 2017) could be beneficial. We suggest further quantitative work to explore which dimensions of social media play a motivator or a hijacker role by including participants from the field, i.e., brand managers and marketing executives. This would be fruitful for understanding the management perspective more deeply. Empirical work using secondary data could also be promising for understanding the consumer, social media audience, and participant perspective. We think some brands actively support and stand in solidarity with the underdogs of society or causes. Yet we did not look at social media activities, e.g., in Twitter, to fully claim the under- and non-represented groups/causes of a society in an emerging market, i.e. Turkey. That is, the positive returns we propose in our work need more valid tests by examining, for example, the tweets of brands in Turkey for the last two years based on a keyword library that represents human rights issues. By tracking replies and tweets, including related hashtags, we can then aim to analyze the tone and direction of the reflections on these issues. Despite these limitations, we hope to trigger attention to this novel yet inspiring domain and encourage new researchers and participants to join. This way, we will further encourage the benefits of social media in enhancing brand activism.

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