

The Effect of Gen Z's Social Issue Activism, Motivations, and New Media Usage On Brand Activism

Abstract

Abstract: Brands face mounting pressure to engage in activism on contentious social issues, particularly from Generation Z (Gen Z), who value brands that contribute to social good. This study found that Gen Z's Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations drive online and traditional activism. Traditional activism correlates with higher issue involvement and positive brand attitudes. However, disagreement with a brand's activism can lead to negative perceptions, posing risks to the brand.

Introduction

Unlike in decades prior, brands are under increasing pressure to be social activist members in the community. Edelman (2019) found that 64% of consumers choose brands based on their own beliefs. The younger generations are trending towards greater political activism and are more politically active than other generations, especially on issues like climate change (Tyson et. al., 2021). Generation Z (hereafter Gen Z), comprised of people born after 1997 (Dimock, 2019), are more politically aware than ever before because of the role that social media has played as a source of information, a core place for interaction with peers, and vehicle for discussion and criticism (Theocharis, 2012). This leads many brands, especially those trying to target or strengthen brand loyalty with a younger generation, to wonder whether they should engage in social activism.

The rise of brand activism has its roots in broader historical activist approaches. Historically, protestors and businesses have had poor relationships that always led to negative outcomes (Van Den Broek, 2017). Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) rose in response to 1960s civil rights protests as both the government and private, for-profit business actions came under scrutiny. These organized disruptions of business practices such as sit-ins and boycotts motivated corporations to change (Andrews & Biggs, 2006). During this time, businesses needed to cede to protestors' demands and catch up with liberal social demands. As Van den Broek et al. (2017) suggest, the relationship between companies and protestors almost always negatively impacts business outcomes. The fear of heavy negative consequences motivated brands to be activists for social change— or at least give the appearance.

Today, businesses are still held accountable by social activist movements-- most recently in the Black Lives Matter movement, the Me Too movement, and LGBT rights issues. However,

with the rise of social media, not only has social activism turned to the online platform but it has also become easier for more brands to be called out for past problematic behavior. Social media has become critical to the dissemination of scandals and has reduced the time and resources needed to organize and mobilize protestors (Kaun, 2016). This evolution in communication styles and technology presents opportunities for cooperation as well as risks for controversy and public scrutiny.

Gen Z grew up as the perceived role of businesses to engage in corporate social responsibility shifted, so this generation has operated under the assumption that brands have an obligation to progress society in addition to their fiscal responsibility. While there are some impressions that Gen Z is comprised of apathetic voters (Theocharis, 2012), their values can be seen through their brand consumption choices (Micheletti et al., 2004) and consistent online activism. Gen Z, unlike Millennials, has lived their entire lives with technology in it. They get most of their political and business news from social media. As of 2018, 46 percent of Gen Zs followed 10+ social media influencers and 52% of Gen Zs are keeping track of at least three brands on social media (UNiDAYS, 2020).

However, while ample literature and industry research explore consumer expectations towards brand activism and what factors influence these expectations (Edelman, 2019), limited research examines how the new generation expects or evaluates brand activism. Considering that Gen Z is more politically active and well-versed in social media (Theocharis, 2012), there might be new and more complex relationships between socially progressive Gen Z consumers and brands. Therefore, this research will examine how Gen Z, a generation of people who engage in more activist activities and more online activities than prior generations, perceive brands that are taking activist stances.

Literature Review

Brand Activism

Brand activism is one category of socially conscious actions under the broader classification of CSA that a company can take. However, brand activism specifically refers to actions that take a position on a controversial issue that rarely has an easy, correct position for the brand to take (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Brand activism is often communicated through advertising or programs and is done with the hope that consumers' appreciation of the advocacy will lead to positive business outcomes. The key word seems to be "activism" where actions taken by the brand are done publicly and with the purpose of proactively building public support for the issue (Korschun, 2021). In contrast, similar terms in the literature like Cause-Related Marketing, Corporate Social Marketing, and Advocacy Advertising deal with relatively less controversial topics that people will not find inappropriate, incorrect, or incongruent with their own values, such as breast cancer research (Vredenburg et al., 2020). The most common issues that are at the forefront of brand activism are LGBTQIA+ issues, Black Lives Matter, climate change, gun reform, and immigration (PR Newswire, 2021).

The risk of brand activism is that it can be perceived as a performative token effort which is often perceived as inauthentic. Highly controversial corporate socio-political activist issues may lead to less favorable attitudes because consumers feel that the brands' stances are insincere (Atanga et al., 2022). Due to the controversial nature of brand activist issues, there is a significant risk for brands if the consumer does not agree with the brand's position or brands fails to convince the consumer of their authenticity. Authenticity is hinged upon the perception that the messaging is an honest reflection of a brand's beliefs and is arguably the most important element in a brand's activist campaign. Hydock et al. (2020) found that if consumers are not

convinced that the brand is authentic in its activism then the benefits of the brand activism are severely reduced or insignificant. Not only must it be perceived as authentic but also it must be aligned with the consumer's values. However, even if the consumer's values are aligned with the brand activism, inauthenticity reduces the benefit. Misaligned inauthenticity does not negate the negative effects which means that regardless of congruency between consumers' views and brand message, a lack of perceived authenticity will likely result in a negative outcome for an activism campaign. In this case, authenticity will trump congruency.

Even though previous literature shows that authenticity is more important to consumers, it is arguably easier to achieve given that brands only need to be perceived as genuinely interested in the advocacy. Lee et al. (2013a) observed that campaigns that had public-serving motives resulted in greater purchase intentions and had a significant effect on perceived authenticity. Even if the product and social issue seem to be contradictory such as an alcohol brand advocating for binge drinking prevention, positive attitudes towards the message still result in positive outcomes if the motives are deemed genuine. However, the congruency requirement for successful brand activism is more difficult to fulfill because the consumers of a brand's products may be greatly divided on an activist issue that is by nature more controversial than other cause-related marketing activities. The risk of brand activism may be increasing with the political polarization of society. The net impact of brand activism may be dependent on whether consumers are engaged in the issues and critically examining brands' activism.

Issue Involvement

Issue involvement is the degree of initial relevance of the issue to the consumer which can be affected by previous experience with the cause. Consumers with issue involvement may try to pressure brands to adopt activist stances or hold them responsible for previously stated positions.

Patel et al. (2017) found that consumers have more favorable attitudes toward brands practicing activism because consumers feel positively about the social contribution. Consumers who have higher involvement with the cause have more favorable attitudes toward brands that engage with the cause (Patel et al., 2017). However, as consumers care more about brands' participation in brand activism, this favorable attitude could be seen less as an exception and more as a rule by which brands may be expected to engage with. If the consumer base is increasingly adopting activist causes in their own lives, they may begin to expect brands to also engage. The favorable outcomes observed previously are more difficult to reproduce as consumer expectations shift.

People who have issue involvement likely have greater knowledge of the issue than most and may spend more time evaluating brands' activist messages. Miller & Sinclair (2009) found that when an informed stakeholder with experience in and a greater understanding of the industry saw an activism campaign, they were more suspicious of ulterior motives. Under the elaboration likelihood model, these people would have stronger motivations and the ability to consider the quality of the message. This could lead to a deeper examination of the message's authenticity, any contextual significance, or a brand's understanding of an issue.

Previous literature suggests that people with different identities will respond to messaging differently than people who do not share that identity or who share it to a lesser degree. Barbara Miller and Janas Sinclair (2009) found that community stakeholders in controversial industries like coal, oil, alcohol, or tobacco were more suspicious of anonymous messaging from the industry and more critical of messaging. This distrust of messaging was attributed to greater contextual knowledge of past industry actions and regulations due to more time being spent in the industry. While the generalizability of this study is a potential flaw, it could be possible that others who have a higher issue involvement— and greater contextual knowledge and present

issues within the discussion of the cause— have different responses to messaging than a layman. Similarly, Lee et al. (2013b) found that people with varying strength of identification to their Asian ethnic identity had varying message perceptions and preferences for a spokesperson also of Asian ethnicity. The degree of positive perception increased with the strength of identification with their ethnicity because they felt greater congruence with the Asian spokesperson. While issue involvement is not as permanent as ethnicity, they are both powerful identities that a consumer may feel strong congruence with. Consumers with strong issue involvement are likely invested in the outcome of the advocacy issue and thus may respond differently to brand activism messages because of their identity.

Research thus far primarily treats issue involvement as a consistent element when consumers may have a varying scale of strength in their issue involvement. Strength may vary depending on perceived relevance or threat of consequences in the case of inaction. When consumers feel different levels of issue involvement, they will feel varying levels of trust toward brand messages (Pfau et al., 2010; Zhang & Borden, 2022). Those who feel low involvement will likely respond to brand activism differently than those who feel a strong sense of involvement. Outcomes like resistance, counterarguing, or further investigation into the brand's message can emerge from issue involvement (Pfau et.al., 2010). Consumers who feel greater issue involvement are expected to value congruence with brand activism messaging more important than those who feel lower issue involvement. Thus, those who engage in issue involvement are the most likely to spur brands to also engage in social activism.

Expectations towards Brands

Some current social issues are more galvanizing than others and thus offer greater benefits to consumers who agree with the activism message (Schmidt et. al., 2018). Although controversy as

a factor usually motivates consumers to engage more with a topic, addressing more controversial issues may introduce the risk of alienation as it is easier to lose consumers who disagree with a brand's stance than it is to gain new consumers whose values align with the brand.

Current literature also uses Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT) to explain how consumers set norms for brands and corporate social responsibility activities, especially in situations of crisis communications, new media, and healthcare (Park et al., 2021). Like how social norms dictate behavior based on context and experience, expectations are formed based on a reliable, anticipatable pattern of behavior. Expectations can be confirmed or violated in either positive or negative directions. Often, a violation of expected behavior requires the individual to then think more deeply and critically about whether to reject the new information or accept it and use it to dictate expectations going forward (Song & Lan, 2022; Park et al., 2021). Given that Gen Z is not only perpetually online getting a stream of updated news but also specific issue-oriented in their activism and willing to quickly call out hypocrisy in business practices, this group of up-and-coming consumers may constantly be evaluating and updating their expectations of brands to engage in brand activism as well as broader, less politically contentious socially responsible activities.

This research investigates whether consumers with high (or low) issue involvement have higher expectations for brands to engage in brand activism as they both look for brands that have congruent commitment to a cause and challenge brands to become more congruent to their values. Based on trends of greater political activism engagement, it would be plausible that younger generations feel greater issue involvement and thus would hold more favorable attitudes towards brands that also engage with that cause (Edelman, 2019).

H1: When the level of issue involvement is higher, (a) the desire to see a social activist stance (i.e., consumer expectations) will be higher, (b) and attitude towards the brand and (c) support intentions will be higher.

Product Type

Prior literature primarily divides brands into two types: utilitarian products and hedonistic products (Voss et al., 2003; Shih & Wang, 2021). Utilitarian products are defined by their functional benefits while hedonistic products offer more emotional or social benefits. The product type may affect whether the consumer would use that brand to represent their self-identity through the purchase of products. People choose certain hedonistic products because they feel their sense of self-identity is positively affirmed when they feel congruence with the product and brand (Johe & Bhullar, 2016). Brand attitude and purchase intention would vary depending on whether a utilitarian or hedonic characteristic was highlighted (Shih & Wang, 2021). One possible cause is that cause-related marketing adds affective benefits in addition to the functional benefits. Because of the varying benefits being sought after for different product types, product type may moderate the effect issue involvement has on purchase intentions as consumers seek to find brands congruent with congruent activist values for products that are meant to represent the consumer's identity.

H2: A hedonistic (vs. utilitarian) product type will moderate the effects of issue involvement and lead to (a) higher expectations toward brand activism, (b) more positive attitude towards the brand, and (c) support intentions.

Gen Z

Gen Z— comprised of people born in 1997 or after (Dimock, 2019)— grew up as the perceived role of businesses to engage in corporate social responsibility shifted, so this

generation has operated under the assumption that brands have an obligation to progress society in addition to their fiscal responsibility. Historically, college-aged students have been the greatest impetus for change with most of the activism being goal-oriented for the diversification of higher education, primarily to address issues of exclusion of certain racial or ethnic minorities (Theocharis, 2012). As this generation of people grows into the workforce and establishes their favored brands, they are also watching for which brands match their values. While there are some impressions that Gen Z is comprised of apathetic voters (Theocharis, 2012), their values can be seen through their brand consumption choices (Micheletti et al., 2004) and consistent online activism. Gen Z, unlike Millennials, has lived their entire lives with technology in it. They get most of their political and business news from social media. As of 2018, 46 percent of Gen Zs followed 10+ social media influencers and 52% of Gen Zs are keeping track of at least three brands on social media (UNiDAYS, 2020).

Types of activism: Traditional vs. Online

The specific type of activist activities (online vs. traditional) may also affect the level of issue involvement because of the amount of commitment and risk (Glenn, 2015) required for the social and emotional rewards. Traditional activism includes activist actions done before the advent of the internet such as voting and petitions. Online forms of activism were created with the flexibility of the internet and have risen in popularity in the last decade. While the internet and social media are primarily used to disseminate information about events happening offline, there are also versions of activism adapted to an online environment such as petitions, hashtag movements, and calling out brands for hypocritical messaging and behavior. But there is also a subset of online activism called "slacktivism" where people are more passive in their activism as compared to traditional activism. Schmidt et al., (2018) outline three different degrees of

activism participation: authentic participation, slacktivist participation, and no participation.

Authentic activism requires the most commitment to the values being advocated for but is increasingly what consumers expect from brands. Slacktivism encompasses forms of activism that require less engagement such as a post on social media (Glenn, 2015). It highlights the perception that these activist activities are inherently passive and thus are a lesser form of activism. While tricky to distinguish and often criticized as a detractive distraction from effective activism, slacktivism can be seen as a form of activism with the lowest barrier to entry and the lowest level of risk (Glenn, 2015). For some, it is the first step into more intensive activist activities, but others believe it is distracting and over-extends activist attention on the issue.

Activism faces many problems with motivating participants such as the free rider dilemma in which people are seeking the rewards without the work which disincentivizes everyone to work and instead needs to create a collective identity among participants to motivate people (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Often a similar identity or interests are not enough motivation without a specific reward, but by forming a collective identity among participants in a group, unique to being part of that group, a participant is more likely to feel that they have a significant stake in that group and must contribute out of a sense of loyalty (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Critical to activist group identities are themes of injustice to delineate members of the group from its opponents or non-members.

Activism Motivation

Existing literature outlines two motivation categories for activism participation: intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivations are founded in a person's attitudes to do a certain action and external persuasion. It is an internal decision to act based on perceived benefits such as satisfaction, and it places a high emphasis on individual choice (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska,

2017). This type of decision-making is encouraged by social media and other digital spaces because the user chooses to seek out certain types of content. After all, that type of content will give certain benefits. In contrast, extrinsic motivations are social benefits that can only be endowed by other people such as perceptions of generosity or gratitude (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017). Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations worked to increase activism participation, but intrinsic motivations were more effective in both traditional and online activism (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017). However, extrinsic motivation had greater explanatory power over online activism, suggesting the activism may be passive clicktivism which has little personal significance (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017). Slacktivism, due to the perception of lesser engagement, is motivated by extrinsic factors because of the perceptions of morality that viewers would have. Extrinsically motivated slacktivism tends towards self-serving moral displays that hide private immoral behavior or indifference (Glenn, 2015). Because extrinsic motivation online leads to more passive, less personally significant forms of activism, the goal of activism for people who predominately do online activism is not as significant as the extrinsic benefits. As a result, there is less commitment to holding brands accountable for their brand activism messages.

H3: Strong extrinsic motivation may a) reduce the expectation on brands and b) may increase the level of issue involvement.

H4: Higher levels of extrinsic motivation will lead to higher frequency of participation of online activism and higher levels of intrinsic motivation will lead to more frequent participation in traditional activism.

H5: Participation in both traditional and online social activism engagement will lead to higher issue involvement; however, participation in traditional social activism engagement may have a stronger effect.

H6: Issue involvement will mediate online social activism engagement's association with (a) expectations of brands' activism and (b) support intentions. However, issue involvement will not mediate traditional social activism engagement's association with (c) expectations of brands' activism and (d) support intentions.

H7: When personal social activism engagement matches the brand activism issue, (a) attitudes toward the brand and (b) purchase intentions will increase.

H8: Higher levels of (dis)agreement with brands' activism will lead to more negative (positive) attitudes towards the brand.

RQ1: How will Gen Z's political affiliation affect their (a) extrinsic/intrinsic motivations and (b) attitudes toward the brand?

Method

Online surveys were conducted through Qualtrics. Participants were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk as well as through an undergraduate body from a large midwestern public university. Quota sampling method was used, where participants were recruited to be between ages of 18 and 30. The MTurk sample also required participants to be residing in the U.S. and have approval rates of 95% and higher. reCAPTCHA was used to filter out bots and attention check questions were used to filter out low quality responses, which resulted in a total of $N=281$ valid responses after cleaning. For the student sample, emails were sent to undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 30, and a total of $N = 134$ students within that age range completed the survey. This results in a total of $N=415$ for the combined sample.

The brands included in the survey were selected based on their popularity among Gen-Z. All brands were on a list of the top 50 brands according to Gen-Z, but some were also on a list of brands well known for their activist actions (Digital Marketing Institute, 2022). Additionally, among these ten brands, five were utilitarian brands (Google, Zoom, Samsung, Target, and General Electric) and five were hedonic brands (Netflix, Coca-Cola, Starbucks, The Walt-Disney Company, and LEGO).

Participants

Of the $N=415$ participants, $n = 203$ (48.9%) identified as male, $n = 196$ (47.2%) identified as female, $n = 12$ (2.9%) identified as non-binary, $n = 3$ (.7%) chose to not specify, and $n = 1$ (.2%) self-described their gender. Participants have an average age of $M=$ ($SD=$). Participants consisted of $n = 375$ (90.4%) White, $n = 13$ (3.1%) Black of African American, $n = 7$ (1.7%) American Indian or Alaska Native, $n = 13$ (3.1%) Asian, and $n = 7$ (1.7%) other specified races. As for ethnicity, $n = 41$ (9.9%) identified as Hispanic or Latino. A total of $n=113$ (27.2%) were students, and $n=271$ (65.3%) were employed full time. Participants leaned more liberal as they scored an average of $M=3.96$, $SD = 1.99$ (on a 7-point scale where 1 = extremely conservative and 7 = extremely liberal) and $n=245$ (59%) identify as Democrat.

Participants reported that they frequently engage in both online ($M=4.87$, $SD=1.10$) and traditional activism ($M=4.85$, $SD=1.06$) (1=never, 7=all the time), and are frequent social and digital media users (ranging from $M=5.02$, $SD=1.33$ to $M=5.38$, $SD=1.21$). When participating in social activism events, $n=148$ (35.7%) reported that they were participants roles, while $n=135$ (32.5%) reported that they were in leadership or organizer roles, and $n=39$ (9.4%) reported that they were bystanders. The social issues participants most engaged in were environmental protection ($n=75$, 18.1%), followed by LGBTQ rights ($n=63$, 15.2%), BLM or racial injustice

($n=58$, 14%), climate change ($n=56$, 13.5%), etc. However, only $n=87$ (21%) of participants said that they have purchased from brand because of their social stances.

Procedure

Participants were first asked about the nature of their own activism. Participants chose from a list of common social activism issues that they were considering when answering the personal activism questions. The questions asked about intrinsic versus extrinsic motivations behind their activism. Then participants were asked generally about their attitudes on brand activism with no specific brand in mind. For context and clarity, the term “brand activism” was defined and participants were given a descriptive example of brand activism from Ben & Jerry’s. Next, participants were asked the same set of questions about brand activism from a specific brand. There were ten possible brands that Qualtrics randomly assigned to each participant. The ten brands were chosen from a list of Gen Z’s favorite brands (Insider, 2021). Five of these brands were cross listed with a list of brands identified as having effective brand activism (Digital Marketing Institute, 2022). Five of the brands aligned more closely with utilitarian product type qualities and the other five aligned more with hedonic product type qualities. Participants were asked questions to verify whether they perceived each brand as more hedonic or utilitarian. Finally, participants were asked about demographic information including age, gender, ethnicity, employment, and political leaning.

Measures

Measures for issue involvement (Pfau et. al., 2010) ($M= 4.96$, $SD=1.09$, Cronbach’s $\alpha=.93$), intrinsic ($M=5.20$, $SD=.99$, Cronbach’s $\alpha=.72$) and extrinsic motivations ($M= 5.32$, $SD= 1.05$, Cronbach’s $\alpha=.72$) (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017) were adopted from previous studies. Issue involvement and motivation type were measured on 7-point scale

(1=strongly disagree and 7=strongly agree). Parka et. al.'s scale for participants' intentions to support a corporation was adapted to better fit brand activism. Statements like "I would buy from this brand again", "I would recommend this brand", "I would look for products from them in the future", "I would follow this brand on social media" were measured on a 7-point scale (1=strongly disagree and 7=strongly agree) ($M= 5.32$, $SD=.96$, Cronbach's $\alpha=.89$).

Utilitarian (effective/ ineffective; helpful/unhelpful; functional/ not functional; necessary/ unnecessary; practical/ impractical) and hedonistic characteristics (not fun/ fun; dull/ exciting; not delightful/ delightful; not thrilling/ thrilling; unenjoyable/ enjoyable) were measured using scales from Voss et al. (2003). Using a 7-point scale, we asked about online and traditional activism participation frequency (1=never and 7=all the time) and type (e.g. liking a socially conscious post, participating in a protest, donating money towards a specific cause, etc.). Social media usage frequency (Hysa et. al., 2021) and brand expectations were also measured (Park et. al., 2021). Consumer attitude towards the brand was measured using a 7-point semantic differential scale of nine characteristics: cool, socially responsible, reasonably priced, sincere, exciting, authoritative, compassionate, creative, innovative. Finally, demographic information about gender, race, income, working status, and political leaning was collected.

Hypothesis Testing

A linear regression was used to test H1: When the level of issue involvement is higher, the desire to see a social activist stance (i.e., brand expectations) will be higher, and attitude towards the brand and support intentions will be higher. When issue involvement was higher, brand expectations were positively associated ($\beta = .76$, $p<.001$, $R^2= .58$, $F(1, 278) = 375.74$, $p<.001$). Attitude towards the brand was also positively ($\beta = .33$, $p<.001$, $R^2= .11$, $F(1, 411) = 48.573$, $p<.001$). Finally, support intentions also increased as issue involvement increased ($\beta = .33$,

$p < .001$, $R^2 = .47$, $F(1, 278) = 247.38$, $p < .001$). All parts of this hypothesis were true which indicates that among Gen Z participants, those who had higher issue involvement had greater expectations of brands to do brand activism, more positive attitudes towards those brands, and greater continued support of those brands.

H2 predicted product type's moderation effects on issue involvement and (a) brand activism expectations, (b) brand attitude, and (c) support intentions. PROCESS Moderation model (model 1) was used to test H2. Product type was dummy coded (hedonic = 1, utilitarian = 0). Results showed that product type did not moderate the effects of issue involvement on brand activism expectations and support intentions. While issue involvement was significantly related with both expectations ($\beta = .70$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .58$, $F(3, 276) = 126.66$, $p < .001$) and support intentions ($\beta = .73$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .47$, $F(3, 276) = 82.26$, $p < .001$), product type was not associated with either and no significant interaction effects were found either.

However, for attitudes toward the brands, an interaction effect between product type and issue involvement was found ($\beta = -.18$, $p = .05$, $R^2 = .13$, $F(3, 409) = 21.17$, $p < .001$). Though issue involvement ($\beta = .43$, $p < .001$) and product type ($\beta = 1.22$, $p = .01$) both had significant positive relationships with brand attitude, the interaction effect on brand attitude was negative ($\beta = -.18$, $p = .05$). Therefore, H2(a) and H2(c) were not supported, H2(b) was supported.

H3 looked at how strong extrinsic motivations affect the consumers' expectations for brands and increase the level of issue involvement. Using two linear regressions, both variables have a positive relationship with participants' extrinsic motivations. Stronger extrinsic motivations for participants' own activism indicated higher expectations for the brands to engage in activism ($\beta = .70$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .47$, $F(1, 279) = 245.06$, $p < .001$). However, an additional linear regression found that stronger intrinsic motivations also lead to expectations on brands ($\beta = .81$, $p < .001$,

$R^2 = .57$, $F(1, 279) = 366.91$, $p < .001$). When entered into the same model, intrinsic motivations ($\beta = .60$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .59$, $F(2, 278) = 199.85$, $p < .001$) had a stronger impact on brand expectations to a greater degree than extrinsic motivations ($\beta = .24$, $p < .001$). Stronger extrinsic motivations also indicated significantly higher issue involvement ($\beta = .58$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .33$, $F(1, 411) = 203.51$, $p < .001$), meaning that H3(a) is not supported but H3(b) is supported.

Examining H4, four linear regression tests were done to determine whether stronger extrinsic and intrinsic motivation indicated the degree of participation for online and traditional activism respectively. All tests had similar results with $p < .001$ (see chart). This indicates that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations affect consumer activism participation, but there is no clear indication that extrinsic motivation affects online activism more than intrinsic motivation. The same is true for traditional forms of activism. While H4 is supported, the relationship between the type of motivation and the type of activism may overlap.

	External Motivation (DV)	Internal Motivation (DV)
Online Activism (IV)	$\beta = .58$, $p < .001$ $R^2 = .33$ $F(1, 411) = 203.51$ $p < .001$	$\beta = .58$ $p < .001$ $R^2 = .34$ $F(1, 276) = 140.617$ $p < .001$
Traditional Activism (IV)	$\beta = .59$ $p < .001$ $R^2 = .35$ $F(1, 273) = 147.00$ $p < .001$	$\beta = .59$ $p < .001$ $R^2 = .34$ $F(1, 273) = 143.183$ $p < .001$

H5 predicted and compared participation in traditional and online social activism engagement and their relationship with issue involvement. Linear regressions were conducted to test H5. When entered in the regression model separately, both traditional ($\beta = .63$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .39$, $F(3, 272) = 176.94$, $p < .001$) and online social activism engagement ($\beta = .57$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .33$, $F(3, 275) = 133.70$, $p < .001$) significantly predicted issue involvement. However, when

entered into the same regression model, while traditional social activism engagement was still significantly positively related with issue involvement ($\beta = .56, p < .001$), online social activism engagement failed to predict issue involvement ($\beta = .09, p = .37$) ($R^2 = .40, F(3, 268) = 88.70, p < .001$). Therefore, H5 was supported.

H6 proposed issue involvement as a mediator between online and traditional activism engagement and brand activism expectations and support intentions. PROCESS mediation model (model 4) was used to test H6. Results indicated that issue involvement successfully mediated traditional activism engagement's effects on both expectations and support intentions. Traditional activism engagement predicted issue involvement ($\beta = .52, p < .001, R^2 = .39, F(1, 272) = 176.94, p < .001$), and issue involvement in turn predicted both brand activism expectations ($\beta = .66, p < .001, R^2 = .59, F(2, 271) = 193.98, p < .001$) and brand support intentions ($\beta = .50, p < .001, R^2 = .54, F(2, 271) = 158.34, p < .001$). Traditional activism engagement was also significantly related with brand activism expectations ($\beta = .15, p < .001$) and support intentions ($\beta = .31, p < .001$), though the relationships were weaker.

Similarly, issue involvement also successfully mediated online activism engagement's effects on both expectations and support intentions. Online activism engagement predicted issue involvement ($\beta = .46, p < .001, R^2 = .33, F(1, 275) = 133.70, p < .001$), and issue involvement in turn predicted both brand activism expectations ($\beta = .68, p < .001, R^2 = .59, F(2, 274) = 197.25, p < .001$) and brand support intentions ($\beta = .51, p < .001, R^2 = .56, F(2, 274) = 175.04, p < .001$). Online activism engagement was also significantly related with brand activism expectations ($\beta = .13, p < .01$) and support intentions ($\beta = .32, p < .001$), though the relationships were weaker. Therefore, H6(a) and H6(b) were supported, but H6(c) and H6(d) were not supported.

H7 predicted that both attitudes towards the brand and support intentions would be higher when the personal activism issue matched the brand activism issue. An independent t-test examined attitudes towards the brand and support intentions between the participants whose chosen activism issue topic matched with the brand's activism topic (e.g. personally does activism for climate change and was later asked to evaluate the brand activism from a brand that also did climate change activism) and participants for whom the topics did not match. Those that matched between individual and brand activism issue did have more positive attitudes towards the brand ($M=5.46$, $SD=1.04$) and support intentions ($M=5.53$, $SD=.72$) than those who evaluated a brand with a different activism issue (brand attitude: $M=5.23$, $SD=1.13$; brand support intentions: $M=5.26$, $SD=1.01$), and both the attitude towards the brand ($t(132.44)=-1.76$, $p=.04$) and support intentions ($t(134.57)=-2.41$, $p=.01$) were statistically significant. Thus, H7 is supported.

H8 predicted that stronger agreement would lead to more positive attitudes towards the brand. A linear regression determined that these two variables were significantly related ($\beta = .41$, $p<.001$, $R^2= .17$, $F(1, 402) = 82.04$, $p<.001$). These results support H8 and indicate that a consumer's disagreement with the brand's activism choices could lead to more negative attitudes towards the brand.

RQ1 aimed to explore how Gen Z's political affiliation and social media usage frequency affect their (a) extrinsic/intrinsic motivations and (b) attitudes toward the brand. In a sample of $N= 415$, there were 92 participants (22%) who identified as Republican, 245 participants (59%) identified as a Democrat, 51 participants (12%) who identified as an Independent, 14 participants (3%) who identified as something else, and 13 participants (3%) who had no preference. An independent t-test found that Democrats ($M=5.50$, $SD=.85$) had slightly stronger extrinsic

motivations than Republicans ($M=5.12$, $SD=1.33$) ($t(119) = -2.53$, $p = .006$). It also found that Democrats ($M=5.36$, $SD=.77$) had slightly stronger intrinsic motivations than Republicans ($M=5.10$, $SD=1.26$) ($t(117) = -1.90$, $p = .030$). These findings prove that between different political affiliations of members of Gen Z, those who identify as Democrats feel slightly stronger intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that can be put towards various causes. However, an independent t-test found that there was no significant difference between Democrats ($M=5.45$, $SD=.99$) and Republicans ($M=5.23$, $SD= 1.27$) in their attitudes towards brands ($t(135) = -1.48$, $p = .07$) and brand support intentions ($t(89) = -.93$, $p = .18$).

Discussion

This research focuses on Gen-Z's views on brand activism, and overall, they respond positively to brand activism in the form of positive attitudes towards the brand and higher support intentions as supported by H1 and H2. However, looking deeper at Gen-Z's relationship with activism, online media, and motivations behind activism, further nuances appear.

Gen-Z uses the internet and social media to constantly be tuned in to injustice and resulting activist movements. As a result, many people in this generation have participated in various types of activism either online or in-person. Results from H4 indicate that those who have higher levels of issue involvement place higher expectations on brands to engage in these social issues. This reinforces previous findings from Patel et al. (2017) that consumers' issue involvement has positive attitudes toward brands that also contribute to advancing that social issue through brand activism. It also supports the idea that these positive associations have also developed in Gen-Z specifically. But within Gen-Z there is a range of motivations behind activism.

This study found that while both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations positively affected Gen-Z's expectations for the brands to engage with the social issue, extrinsic motivations were

stronger. This means that people are more heavily motivated by social benefits and acknowledgment than internal satisfaction. While this does not support Lilleker and Koc-Michalska's (2017) findings that intrinsic motivations were more effective in increasing participation in traditional and online activism, Lilleker and Koc-Michalska (2017) also proposed that extrinsic motivations online may result in slacktivist activities which the primary goal is to gain social clout.

People who had participated in some form of online activism had lower expectations of brands to respond with activist actions. In contrast, participants who had gone to an in-person protest had a significant expectation of brands to partake in their activism. However, in Gen Z, traditional forms of activism led to higher issue involvement than online forms. People who invest greater time and energy and overcome inconvenience to engage offline are more involved yet appear more cynical about their ability to see their investment returned by brands. Those who participated in online activism (or slacktivism) that required less attention and commitment expected brands to put forth a brand activist effort and had higher support intentions. These results may support Miller and Janas Sinclair's (2009) findings that community stakeholders who had greater knowledge of an issue were more distrustful of marketing messages about that issue.

Understanding how Gen Z establishes expectations and reacts to a deviation from expectations will be relevant to brands looking to attract this rising consumer group. According to Expectancy Violations Theory, consumers often think more deeply about seeing unexpected behavior such as supporting a social cause and can respond negatively or positively. Previous literature is conflicted on whether brand activism leads to more positive or more negative reactions from consumers. Johe and Bhullar (2016) and Lee et al. (2013a) found positive outcomes for the brand when a consumer's identity is congruently represented through the

brand's actions. However, H8 found that consumers' disagreement with a brand's activism led to more negative views of the brand, which supports similar research that found that brand activism led to negative outcomes for the brand (e.g. market share loss, Hydock, 2020; attitude towards the brand; Atanga et al., 2022). However, when there is congruence between the individual's chosen activist issue is the same as the brand, consumers feel more positively toward the brand and have higher support intentions.

Turning towards the nature of the brands, this research showed that the product type (utilitarian vs hedonic) will moderate the effects of issue involvement on consumers' attitudes toward the brand. The level of issue involvement significantly affected attitudes toward brands, and product type had a negative moderating effect on brand attitudes where hedonic brands saw more positive attitudes. Hedonistic products doing brand activism received more positive attitude perceptions than utilitarian product types. This supports the idea that people have positive cognitive responses when they align themselves with products that are congruent with their values (Ilicic & Webster, 2016) because they feel a greater sense of authenticity. It also supports findings from Chang and Liu (2012) that hedonic products saw a greater effect on brand attitudes from brand activism. Product type and the issue involvement interaction were positively associated with congruent brand activism. Hedonistic characteristics can lead to more positive brand attitudes from people with higher issue involvement. One explanation is that those with higher issue involvement likely put more attention towards and value on affective benefits when looking at a hedonic brand. They are seeking to become self-congruent with the hedonic product type more than they desire to be self-congruent with a utilitarian brand. When they find a brand that is congruent, those with higher issue involvement may more strongly and thus more

positively extend the passion they feel for their activism towards positive attitudes towards a brand.

As is characteristic of socially controversial topics, the stances a brand can take to support activism often align with one of the two major American political parties. Thus, those stances will be congruent with or against a portion of the consumer population. In this study, Gen Z identified as Democrats at three times the rate as Republicans. In a comparison of the two groups, those who identified as Democrats had stronger intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Unsurprisingly, Gen Z runs more liberal and thus is pushing brands to take more liberal stances on social issues in their activism. Gen Z Democrats have stronger motivations to do activism which could be attributed to liberal values appealing to socially disadvantaged communities who want to see themselves uplifted. Those with greater motivation are likely to push brands to take a position and be leaders in advancing social progress. However, neither political affiliation had a significant difference in attitudes towards the brand and brand support intentions between the group, so there does not seem to be a strong positive outcome to draw brands into liberal stances in their activism, but as previous literature establishes, there are often negative outcomes for ignoring activists.

Theoretical and Practical implications

This study contributes to a better understanding of how Gen Z views brand activism, especially in relation to their own activist and political identities. For Gen Z, brands are expected to not only be subject to social change but also to play an active role in supporting that change. A consumer's issue involvement can occur in online or traditional spaces. Consumers who do online forms of activism demonstrate less issue involvement due to the relative ease of acting in online spaces. This is sometimes called Slacktivism to highlight the lazy, passive nature of the

activism effort. People doing Slacktivism online may be participating because they want to see reputational and social benefits online (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017). However, issue involvement also increases when people feel extrinsic motivation which suggests that any form of activism will lead people to pay attention to brands' efforts to engage with that issue.

When people engage in conversation around these issues, they establish a set of expectations for brands. Factors like agreement with the brand's activism and type of brand will influence how a consumer establishes their expectations. In the best case, a consumer will agree with the brand's activism messaging and bestow positive reactions and business outcomes onto the brand (Leet et al., 2013a). Those with higher issue involvement could extend the passion they feel for their activism towards positive attitudes towards a brand despite the possibility that those with higher issue engagement set expectations that are more difficult for a brand to meet. But if the brand takes a stance that the consumer does not agree with, it will prompt consumers to think more deeply about the message in accordance with EVT and then decide whether they agree. Disagreement introduces an additional risk of alienating a portion of consumers and bringing negative outcomes for a brand. Gen Z not only cares about brands engaging in activism but also wants them to hold positions they agree with to see approval. Brand type also impacts people's expectations because hedonistic brands saw more positive gains from brand activism than utilitarian brands. The value offered by a hedonic brand is often more reliant on affective or social benefits (Shih & Wang, 2021; Chang & Liu, 2012), so consumers put in effort to choose brands with images that are congruent with their self-image. Thus, hedonic brands should put greater care into ensuring that activist messaging is congruent with the values of their consumers.

Compared to other generations, Gen Z holds more liberal values and identifies as predominantly Democrat. These people felt stronger motivations to activism which will lead to

an overrepresentation of liberal-leaning people among those with any degree of issue involvement. As a result, left-leaning positions are more likely to be well received by Gen Z. Neither political affiliation offers significantly more positive benefits for brands such as brand support intention or attitude towards the brand, so to appeal to the greatest number of consumers, activism messages from the brand should align with the majority values of the target audience—in the case of Gen Z, that is left-leaning.

Limitations

As a survey study, the findings indicate a correlative relationship between variables rather than a causal relationship. This study focused on how consumers' activism affected their views of brands, expectations of brands to do activism, and resulting support intentions. This tends toward consumer engagement with brands in a positive direction, but due to the politicized nature of brand activism, disagreement was also considered. However, because disagreement was measured with a single self-reported item scale, further investigation into and measurement of disagreement of brand activism could provide a deeper understanding of the potential risks of non-congruent brand activism. Additionally, most participants were college students so there is an opportunity for future exploration of people in Gen Z who did not pursue higher education. Additionally, because some people classified as Gen Z are not yet adults or responsible for their own purchasing decisions, future studies could more holistically examine Gen Z's brand activism views. Given that the effect of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations on activism was somewhat inconclusive, additional research could clarify the relationship between consumer motivations and activism outcomes.

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