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Brand activism in the era of permacrisis: systematic literature review and future research agenda

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ABSTRACT

Permacrisis – the perpetual state of facing complex and interconnected crises – has been identified as the forces that impact society as a whole. Brand activism (BA) has been emerging as a response whereby companies engage with divisive socio-political crises. However, the BA literature has not adequately addressed the new role that companies should play in mitigating the effects of permacrisis. We conduct a systematic literature review (SLR) of 44 papers published between 2016 and 2024, applying the antecedents, decisions, and outcomes ADO framework. Our SLR inductively builds a framework of brand activism in the permacrisis that integrated themes across micro, meso and macro crises. Additionally, we highlight the interplay between necessity and opportunism in BA within the permacrisis context, offering new insights into its operations and mechanisms.

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KEYWORDS

Permacrisis; brand activism; systematic literature review; theoretical framework; future research agenda

Introduction

Brands are increasingly embracing a strategy known as brand activism (BA), wherein they take stances on divisive sociopolitical issues (Antonetti et al., 2024; Kipnis et al., 2024; Pimentel et al., 2023; Sterbenk et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Moorman (2020) defines BA as ‘public speech or actions focused on partisan issues made by or on behalf of a company using its corporate or individual brand name’ (p. 388). Traditionally, brand activism has been applied based on a somewhat opportunistic perspective. This has bearings on opportunity entrepreneurship, which is related to the identification of attractive business prospects (Angulo-Guerrero et al., 2017; Bjørnskov & Foss, 2008). Brands that capitalise on social issues as a means to boost their image and profitability (K. D. Thomas et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020) are not real activists (K. D. Thomas et al., 2020). As a result, opportunistic brand activism often results in associations of ‘woke - washing’ (Ahmad et al., 2024; Sobande, 2020) and leads to consumer scepticism and

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perceived hypocrisy regarding brand activism that unfavourably affects both brand equity (Lee et al., 2024) and firm value (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

The term *permacrisis* has recently been coined to describe the ongoing turbulence across many spheres of human life (Glancy, 2022). The Cambridge Dictionary defines a *permacrisis* as '*a long period of great difficulty, confusion, or suffering that seems to have no end. A permacrisis happens when "catastrophic events" such as wars, epidemics, pandemics, humanitarian crises, food insecurity, climate change and widespread regional conflicts occur more frequently and intensely*'. As a response to the *permacrisis*, recent research has begun to extend traditional brand activism to MAA, which are defined as 'acts through which brands/organisations and consumers create or draw on marketing meanings to convey and enact stances and experiences related to war' (Kipnis et al., 2024, p. 2). Lundberg et al. (2024) described a *permacrisis* as a 'continuous period of turmoil and multiple crises' (p. 103). Hallencreutz et al. (2024) note that the *permacrisis* will continue influencing our society in years to come and these changes are likely to serve as a catalyst for 'the necessary reforms to master sustainable transformations', which will 'require an ongoing adaptation process' (p. 2). Anisimova et al. (2024) found that the prolonged crisis of the pandemic combined with political unrest and socio-economic chaos could lead to decreased well-being in society. Agunsoye and Fotopoulou (2023) even employed the term 'emergencies' to describe what a *permacrisis* is to indicate that societies are at breaking point, requiring a complete reset. According to Hallencreutz et al. (2024), the economic impact that the *permacrisis* is likely to have on societies is structural rather than cyclical meaning that the impact will persist over a long period of time. However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, no systematic literature review (hereafter SLR) has advanced a theory of how a *permacrisis* impacts brand activism strategies or offered a framework and agenda for future research in this area.

This emergence of a *permacrisis* challenges the role of brand activism, due to its volatility beyond simply marketing strategies (Pimentel et al., 2023), urgency and political contentiousness (Schmidt et al., 2022) and a lack of trust (Ahmad et al., 2024; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022). Brand activism studies (e.g. Cammarota et al., 2023; Pimentel et al., 2023) suggest that consumers and stakeholders expect brands not only to be the voice for social issues but also to show their stance in times of crisis via their actions. However, managers may be hesitant to take a stance due to the fear of losing and alienating their customers despite their internally driven beliefs about their stance. In that regard, Schmidt et al. (2022) view brand activism as an ongoing need to '*adopt a sociopolitical stance both because of an internally driven set of beliefs or principles and because of the opportunity to tap into consumers' desire for an emotional connection to a brand*' (p. 5). What is clear is that brand activism during a *permacrisis* is akin to crisis management, which Burnett (1998) describes as follows: 'regardless of parameters, requires that strategic action be taken both to avoid or mitigate undesirable developments and to bring about a desirable resolution of the problems and must be a continuous effort' (p. 474).

We argue that companies should think beyond their economic interests and respond quickly to the crisis to avoid exposing themselves to reputational damage and the financial risk of inaction (Sims, 2022). In this context, a cultural branding strategy can be instrumental as it allows brands to connect deeply with the societal values, emotions and narratives that emerge during such turbulent times. Holt and Cameron (2010) highlight that socio-political polarisation can create ideological

opportunities for brands to step up and challenge the dominant thinking. As a result, some brands have successfully leveraged cultural branding to align with consumer ideals and societal expectations and hence set the agenda for positive societal change. Ben and Jerry's became an iconic brand because the company has consistently responded to increasingly socially conscious consumers. For example, Ben and Jerry's engaged in brand activism by making a public statement: 'We must dismantle white supremacy' (Solis, 2020) in response to the Black Lives Matter (hereafter BLM) movement. In 2022, IKEA, Volvo, Apple and Lego withdrew their operations from Russia as a manifestation of corporate activism (D'Arco et al., 2024). Despite these notable examples of brand activism and advocacy, we acknowledge that it is important to critically observe brands when they declare their moral and political stances on specific polarising societal issues (Sobande & Amponsah, 2025). Furthermore, research needs to generate more empirical evidence to suggest if brand activism initiatives have been able to achieve concrete favourable changes in society.

Existing research on the permacrisis has predominantly focused on individual resilience and coping during specific isolated crises, such as the global health risk posed by COVID-19 (Ingram et al., 2023; Sobande, 2020) and a desire to return to 'old good' normality (Sobande & Klein, 2023). To the best of the authors' knowledge, the role that the permacrisis plays in brand activism remains under-researched in the marketing domain. The context of contemporary brand activism is broader and manifests itself in various forms, ranging from supporting political activists' resistance networks to underground resistance. This implies that brand activism strategies operate at the intersection of politics and marketing (Jung & Mittal, 2020). In line with Sobande and Klein (2023), we argue that crises may offer the opportunity for brands to contribute to shaping positive societal dynamics and trends. In the context of a 'permacrisis', which exposes individuals to ongoing and intertwined challenges spanning wars, health, climate and cost-of-living crises (Ingram et al., 2023), we argue that it is essential to examine how brands respond under the conditions of deep and ongoing uncertainty. Our study therefore seeks to address the following research questions: (1) What types of crises have been dominating brand activism initiatives? (2) What are the permacrisis-induced brand activism decision-making parameters and mechanisms? (3) What are the tangible and intangible impacts of permacrisis induced brand activism? To the best of our knowledge, our article is one of the first studies to introduce the permacrisis context into the realm of brand activism. To achieve this purpose, first, we analyse crisis-induced brand activism initiatives through the lens of the organising antecedents-decisions-outcomes (ADO) framework (Paul & Benito, 2018; Paul et al., 2023). We argue that a series of specific recurring crises can have long-term effects that accumulate over time, contributing to the overall sense of a permanent state of crisis. Hence, given that the individual crises discussed in the literature forming part of our literature review are linked to broader global challenges (e.g. climate change, inequality), we deem that the brand activism observed in these contexts is relevant to understanding how brands behave during the broader permacrisis. Following this, we present the results of our analysis and discuss the themes that emerged inductively. We opted for inductive reasoning in this SLR (Krlev et al., 2025) due to the permacrisis being a nascent research phenomenon in the marketing literature, which has a long way to go in developing a sound empirical base and theoretical boundaries. Next, we synthesise these findings and propose a holistic framework that depicts brand activism in a dynamic

permacrisis context to guide future research and facilitate the integration of crisis-induced insights and the synthesis of impactful brand activism strategies.

Methodology

Conducting an SLR requires setting boundaries around vast and expanding literature (Atewologun et al., 2017). A SLR is an appropriate genre of in-depth review that offers researchers an opportunity to synthesise extant knowledge to provide a deeper understanding of the domain and the gaps existing in that domain and suggest a future research agenda (Paul & Criado, 2020; Paul et al., 2021). Unlike bibliometric reviews, which primarily focus on trends and citations, an SLR allows for delving deeply into theories, methods, and constructs (Paul & Criado, 2020). Furthermore, SLRs provide a comprehensive and structured synthesis of the existing literature and help advance a subject field as well as build theory (Paul et al., 2023), which is particularly important in emerging and complex fields such as brand activism in permacrises. Our SLR follows the guidelines in similar studies in the field (e.g. Jain et al., 2024; Paul & Rosado-Serrano, 2019). A domain-based review, also referred to as a framework-based review (Paul & Benito, 2018; Paul & Criado, 2020; Xie et al., 2017), was applied in our study.

We developed our framework-based review drawing on ADO (Antecedents, Decisions and Outcomes) (Paul & Criado, 2020). The ADO framework facilitated the delineation of the antecedents leading to brand activism, the decisions involved in its execution, and the outcomes thereof (Paul & Benito, 2018). The advantage of the ADO framework is that it enabled us to analyse how the three dimensions are inter-linked: how antecedents influence decisions, which in turn has an impact on outcomes (Paul et al., 2023). These linkages are an important consideration, and less feasible in bibliometric or other forms of reviews that overlook the interplay of these elements (Paul et al., 2023). Moreover, the ADO framework has been successfully applied in different areas, including internationalisation, marketing, and innovation, demonstrating its applicability to studying brand activism (Paul & Benito, 2018). The eight-year period, from 2016 to 2024, was determined based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria to capture the most relevant and focused data.

In our analysis we applied inductive reasoning (Krlev et al., 2025) from specific crises that were analysed in our study pool to form general inferences that can be applied more widely to the cascade of various, prolonged crises termed as a permacrisis. Inductive analysis can be applied when the research phenomenon has not yet been established in the prior literature and is therefore built from reading and examining existing illustrations (Mundet Pons et al., 2025). Inductive reasoning enables researchers to look for patterns to construct broader models to work with (Arthur, 1994). The logic behind applying inductive reasoning in our study is that as a phenomenon a permacrisis consists of a multitude of elements or crises, in the context of our SLR, that jointly create an evolutionary and complex aggregate environment (Arthur, 1994).

The search strategy and process

The search strategy was based on relevant SLR studies from the marketing field (see Billore et al., 2023; Paul & Bhukya, 2021). The search incorporated titles, abstracts, and keywords in two databases (Scopus and Web of Science) in line with the standards of

most European universities (Vieira & Gomes, 2009). The search strategy involved combining the following keywords: 'brand*', 'activis*', 'corporat*', 'influenc*', and 'crisis', specifically in titles, abstracts, and keywords. These terms were chosen to ensure comprehensive coverage of literature related to brand activism within the context of crises, as well as to capture nuanced discussions in diverse contexts. This targeted approach aligns with the guidance of Paul and Criado (2020) for systematic literature reviews and enhances the robustness of the synthesis. Moreover, in line with Redline et al. (2023), we conducted an additional search on Google Scholar, to include relevant research papers that might not have been captured in our initial electronic searches due to delays in indexing on other platforms (for the list of articles, see Appendix). The detailed steps describing the literature selection for our study are provided in Figure 1.

To ensure a more targeted search for relevant scholarly works, we opted to exclude document types such as conference proceedings, book chapters, theses, book reviews, magazines, and trade journals (Paul & Criado, 2020). We selected papers from peer-reviewed journals in the English language. As per the guidance given by Paul and Criado (2020), we included papers published in top-tier journals, categorised as A* and A in the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) ranking, and levels 3, 4, and 4* as per the latest Chartered Association of Business Schools (ABS) ranking. Figure 1 outlines the article review process, which resulted in a refined list of 174 articles, after initially finding 31,634 and then removing duplicates Table 1.

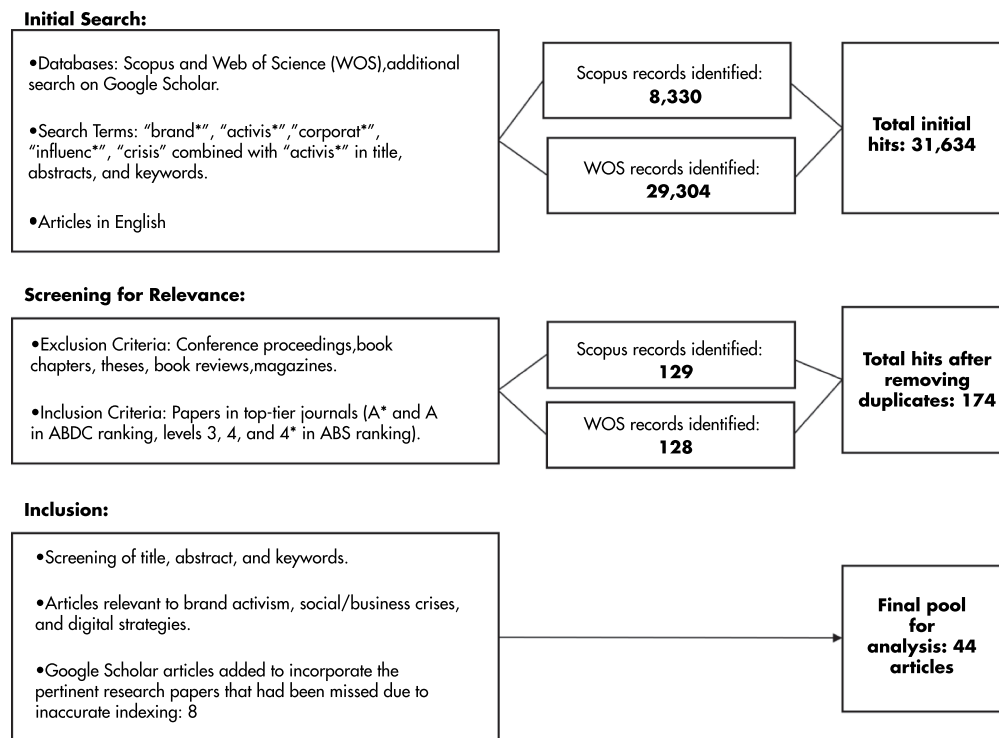


Figure 1. Article selection process.

Table 1. Future research agenda for brand activism in permacrisis.

Permacrisis-based brand activism theme	Potential research questions
Interconnectedness of crises	<p>Which types of crises-induced brand activism have the most significant impact on consumer responses to a brand and engagement? To what extent would this outcome differ for firms that proactively implement BA strategies; when BA is adopted as a post-crisis effort; and when brands remain silent?</p> <p>To what extent do changes in market structure, resulting from cascading crises and disruptions, affect consumers and other stakeholders?</p> <p>How do interconnected crises impact multiple stakeholders, and how can building a strong collaboration enhance the transparency and accountability of businesses to address these challenges?</p>
Crafting brand activism authenticity	<p>In the permacrisis context, what internal factors drive authenticity in brand activism?</p> <p>How can we measure the long-term effects of crisis-induced brand activism initiatives on consumers and other stakeholders without solely relying on experimental methodologies?</p> <p>What is the relationship between perceived authenticity in brand activism and various emotional consumer responses (e.g. empathy) that drive positive performance outcomes?</p> <p>What factors might lead to brand inauthenticity and consequently result in consumer disagreement with crisis-induced brand activism initiatives?</p>
Multimodality in communications.	<p>Unlike corporate social responsibility, how do different crisis communication strategies employed by brands during a permacrisis impact stakeholder perception, especially in fostering trust, transparency and positive relationships with various stakeholders?</p> <p>To what extent does a brand activism-related crisis communication differ across cultures in the context of brand activism during a permacrisis?</p> <p>To what extent do digital platforms and artificial intelligence influence crisis communications strategies, in particular in building reputation and dealing with fake news during a permacrisis?</p> <p>What is the long-term impact of crisis communication strategies on brand equity?</p>

Source: Created by the authors.

From the 174 articles found in the first step, an initial screening of the title, abstract and keywords was carried out. Following the procedure suggested by Vrontis et al. (2021) for validating the inclusion, exclusion, and quality criteria against all of the retrieved studies, we kept 44 relevant articles for the final pool and analysis. The criteria for selecting the papers were centred on their relevance to the key themes of brand activism initiatives in response to various crises that occur in political, social, health and cultural contexts Table 2.

Analysis process

Each author independently screened the titles, abstracts, and full texts, resolving any discrepancies through discussion. To ensure rigour, the initial categorisation was validated by each author. The approach to the categorisation and validation by all the authors was an important step in enhancing the credibility and reliability of the findings (see Dekel-Dachs et al., 2021). All three authors participated in discussions about different interpretations of the data. We then analysed the studies through the lenses of the ADO framework (Paul & Benito, 2018). We focused specifically on the crisis context that was explicitly discussed or implied in these studies. The studies selected for this systematic literature review covered a range of topics related to how brands respond to various political, social, cultural and economic crises through their brand activism initiatives. The studies in the review pool

Table 2. Summary and findings of studies in the review pool.

TITLE	AUTHOR	JOURNAL	YEAR	RESULTS	METHOD
From Dr. Seuss to Barbie's cancellation: brand's institutional work in response to changed market logics	Aboelenien, A; Nguyen, CM	Journal of Brand Management	2024	Propose three strategies for maintaining brand activism legitimacy: revamping, surveying, and attaching to enable children's entertainment brands to sustain legitimacy amid socio-cultural and political changes in their marketing/branding towards children.	Qualitative analysis of press releases and articles, and netnography of parenting blogs.
From warmth to warrior: impacts of non-profit brand activism on brand bravery, brand hypocrisy and brand equity	Lee, Z; Spry, A; Ekinci, Y; Vredenburg, J	Journal of Brand Management	2024	Our study suggests that there are equity gains for non-profit brands that shed traditional 'warmth' positioning and embrace activism and brand bravery.	Quantitative with online questionnaire survey.
Peer effects on brand activism: evidence from brand and user chatter on Twitter	Guha, M; Korschun, D	Journal of Brand Management	2024	The study found that companies follow brand activism initiatives of peer-companies in order to gain market intelligence about the risks and benefits of brand activism during social and health crises such as LGBTQ rights, BLM and COVID-19	Quantitative analysis of Twitter data from 177 global brands over specific timelines, using fixed-effects logistic regression.
The activist brand and the transformational power of resistance: towards a narrative conceptual framework	Andersen, SE; Johansen, TS	Journal of Brand Management	2024	Building on the narrative approach, the paper develops an anti and counternarrative framework to explain how these complex micro-level dynamics and processes of resistance transform the brand.	Narrative approach using antinarrative and counternarrative concepts.
Brand activism and the consequence of woke -washing	Ahmad, F; Guzmán, F,	Journal of Business Research	2024	The study demonstrates that if brands communicate specific internal messages with a focus on specific changes inside the organisation, then consumers perceive the activism messages to be more aligned with the issue, leading to increased brand authenticity. However, if brands get involved in sociopolitical activism but fail to fulfil their promise, it leads to woke-washing.	Quantitative with four experimental studies.
The Role of War-Related Marketing Activism Actions in Community Resilience: From the Ground in Ukraine	Kipnis, E; Pysarenko, N; Galalae, C; Mari, C; Ruiz, C; Vorster, L	Journal of Public Policy & Marketing	2024	The study demonstrates how Ukraine war-related MAA are harnessed and serve as a medium in community dialogues concerning envisaged resilience trajectories (survival, creativity and growth, and recovery).	Multimodal qualitative methodology
Brands and activism: ecosystem and paradoxes	Podnar, K; Golob, U	Journal of Brand Management	2024	Provides conceptual insights into the relationship between brand activism and other forms of activism. The study proposes the ecosystem that includes shareholder, stakeholder, employee, NGO, community and consumer types of activism.	Conceptual paper

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

TITLE	AUTHOR	JOURNAL	YEAR	RESULTS	METHOD
Speedy activists: How firm response time to sociopolitical events influences consumer behaviour.	Nam, J; Balakrishnan, M; De Freitas, J; Brooks, AW	Journal of Consumer Psychology	2023	This study finds that consumers express more positive sentiment and greater purchasing intentions towards firms that react more quickly to sociopolitical issues.	Mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative content analysis and quantitative sentiment analysis.
The effect of Generation Z's perceptions of brand activism on brand loyalty: evidence from Vietnam	Nguyen, DT; Le, DH; Truong, LG; Truong, NG; Vu, VV	Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing	2023	The study found that perceived argument quality has a considerable impact on brand loyalty through two mediating factors, brand attitude and brand trust.	Quantitative, with structural equation modelling.
Branded activism: Navigating the tension between culture and market in social media	Gambetti, R; Biraghi, S	And Logistics Futures	2023	The study findings emphasise complexity around contestation and polarisation generated by brand activism on social media. The study specifically stresses the issues of woke-washing and the tension between culture – being a brand or just market player.	Social media qualitative research by means of netnography
Blending identity-specific depiction and activism advocacy in Black-centric health advertising on social media: intersectional health communication targeting Black cisgender heterosexual and Black LGBTQ populations	Li, MJ	International Journal of Advertising	2023	The findings demonstrated that identity-specific sex-positive depiction interacts with audience identity to impact perceived susceptibility to contracting HIV and attitudes to the related communication campaign.	Quantitative, with online experiment with a factorial design.
When brands get real: the role of authenticity and electronic word-of-mouth in shaping consumer response to brands taking a stand	Chu, SC; Kim, H; Kim, Y	International Journal of Advertising	2023	The study identified the key antecedents to the authenticity of brand activism such as brand-sociopolitical cause fit, self-serving motive and trust.	Quantitative, with confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling.
A counterinsurgent (COIN) framework to defend against consumer activists	Chen, SV	Journal of Brand Management	2023	The study develops a framework of proactive and reactive strategies to manage brand crises.	Literature Review of military, consumer activism, and brand management literature.
Examining the outcomes of influencer activism	Thomas, VL; Fowler, K	Journal of Business Research	2023	The results show that while activism positively affects consumers' attitudes towards the influencer, expectations for future activism activities are also enhanced.	Mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of social media engagement data with qualitative survey-based research.

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

TITLE	AUTHOR	JOURNAL	YEAR	RESULTS	METHOD
Employees' online brand advocacy behaviours as a response to justice and emotion	Aksoy, NC; Yazici, N; Duzenci, A	Journal of Product & Brand Management	2023	Using the cognition – affection – behaviour framework, this study found a positive effect of employee-perceived organisational justice, employee emotions, and organisational trust and the moderating role of organisational identification on online brand advocacy.	Online surveys were distributed to 840 employees, and the gathered data was analysed by using structural equation modelling.
Differential Response to Corporate Political Advocacy and Corporate Social Responsibility: Implications for Political Polarization and Radicalization	Weber, TJ; Joireman, J; Sprott, DE; Hydock, C	Journal of Public Policy & Marketing	2023	The findings demonstrate that CPA results in increased negative consumer sentiment and CSR results in increased positive sentiment on social media.	Mixed-method approach combining quantitative analysis of online data along with qualitative coding of brand actions.
The times they are a-changing: examining the effects of luxury brand activism on political consumerism and eWOM	Tan, CSL	Journal of Strategic Marketing	2023	This study found that there is a difference between generations X, Y and Jones in relation to the perceived hypocrisy and perceived authenticity of political consumerism.	Quantitative approach, with four studies targeting different generations (Y, X, and Jones) using a survey.
Consumer rewarding mechanism in global corporate activism: An experiment using the Russia-Ukraine War	Fong, IWY; Kim, S	Public Relations Review	2023	The findings of this study that focused on consumer responses to the large-scale activism (Russia-Ukraine War) show that proactiveness and commitment in corporate activism reduce egoistic and opportunistic motive attribution while they increase value-driven motive attribution among the public.	Quantitative online experiment.
Enhancing young consumers' relational and behavioural outcomes: The impact of CEO activism authenticity and value alignment	Jin, J; Mitson, R; Qin, YS; Vielledent, M; Men, LR	Public Relations Review	2023	The results show that the perceived authenticity of CEO activism positively influenced young consumers' relationships with the organisation and their intent to purchase.	Quantitative online survey.
'I'm hatin' it': Negative consumer-brand relationships in online anti-brand communities	Brandao, A; Popoli, P	European Journal of Marketing	2022	The findings show that brand anthropomorphism is often used by anti-brand communities in order to express their disagreement with the brand.	Qualitative, with 'symbolic netnographic' method.
Opposing brand activism: triggers and strategies of consumers' antibrand actions	Pöyry, E; Laaksonen, SM	European Journal of Marketing	2022	This study examined opposing brand activism in terms of triggers and strategies of consumers' antibrand actions.	Qualitative, with content analysis and multiple correspondence analysis.
Is Femvertising the New Greenwashing? Examining Corporate Commitment to Gender Equality	Sterbenk Y; Champlin, S; Windels K; Shelton, S	Journal of Business Ethics	2022	This study found that the majority of the award-winning companies were engaged in less than 10 of the possible 23 gender equality initiatives within their internal corporate programs.	Qualitative with comparative qualitative analysis.

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

TITLE	AUTHOR	JOURNAL	YEAR	RESULTS	METHOD
Effective messaging strategies to increase brand love for sociopolitical activist brands	Ahmad, F; Guzman, F; Kidwell, B	Journal of Business Research	2022	Brands must convey hope rather than frustration in their messages. However, brands should convey frustration when communicating a rhetorical commitment to a cause.	Exploratory and five experimental studies using text mining analysis and controlled experiment.
Woke brand activism authenticity or the lack of it	Mirzaei, A; Wilkie, DC; Siuki, H	Journal of Business Research	2022	The study identifies six dimensions for woke activism authenticity for companies: social context independency, inclusion, sacrifice, practice, fit, and motivation.	Two-stage content analysis of over 46,000 and 34,000 online consumer comments using the Leximancer text analysis software.
Sarcastic or Assertive: How Should Brands Reply to Consumers' Uncivil Comments on Social Media in the Context of Brand Activism?	Batista, JM; Barros, LSG; Peixoto, FV; Botelho, D	Journal of Interactive Marketing	2022	The results exploring different causes (LGBTQ+ phobia, sexism, and racial equity) show that consumers evaluate brands that reply using an assertive tone more favourably than those using a sarcastic tone.	Quantitative online experiments.
Impact of Global Brand Chief Marketing Officers' Corporate Social Responsibility and Sociopolitical Activism Communication on Twitter: Playing on a moving pitch: foregrounding the impact of sociocultural contexts on social movements and brands	Özturan, P; Grinstein, A	Journal of International Marketing	2022	This study draws on expectancy violation theory and finds that Chief Marketing Officers (CMOs) hardly publish socio-political activism communication on Twitter but portrays a higher digital impact of retweets for CSR.	Quantitative empirical analysis of 17,468 tweets from CMOs of top global brands.
The effect of corporate political advocacy on brand perception: an event study analysis	Rosenthal, B; Cardoso, F; Bortoluci, JH	Journal of Marketing Management	2022	The study finds that sociocultural contexts are not always stable and may shape (i.e. provide social norms and ideologies for) and anchor (i.e. offer mobilisable resources for) the actions of social movements and brands.	Mixed-method approach, combining systematic literature review, thematic analysis, and semi structured interviews.
Frontiers: How support for Black Lives Matter impacts consumer responses on social media	Klostermann, J; Hydock, C.; Decker, R	Journal of Product & Brand Management	2022	The study results show that corporate political advocacy had a negative effect on consumers' brand perceptions and that the effect was stronger for customers relative to non-customers.	An event study of 106 CPA events and weekly consumer brand perception data was conducted.
How consumers subvert advertising through rhetorical institutional work	Wang, Y; Qin, MS; Luo, X; Kou, Y	Marketing Science	2022	The paper finds that individual company BLM support leads to negligible effects, whereas large-scale BLM support from many brands can lead to strong negative effects (i.e. the bandwagon effect) on consumer perceptions.	Applied a combination of econometric models with machine learning techniques to analyse the unstructured social media content data
	Middleton, K; Thompson-Whiteside, H; Turnbull, S; Fletcher-Brown, J	Psychology & Marketing	2022	The study finds that the use of rhetorical strategies is helpful in subverting contentious advertising.	Qualitative approach, using thematic analysis and qualitative psychology methodologies.

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Table 2. (Continued).

TITLE	AUTHOR	JOURNAL	YEAR	RESULTS	METHOD
Business-centred versus socially responsible corporate diversity communication. An assessment of stakeholder (dis)agreement on Twitter	Maiorescu-Murphy, RD	Public Relations Review	2022	The results reveal that companies that had long-term consistency in their CSR approach to diversity received more favourable user responses.	To analyse the diversity communication of five American companies, two data sets were collected and analysed from the microblogging Twitter.
Perceptions about corporate positioning on controversial sociopolitical issues: Examining big pharma engagement with patient advocacy	Müller, N	Public Relations Review	2022	The study findings suggest that despite financial and technical support, the pharma companies do not publicly engage with the patient advocacy group's initiatives for promoting human rights.	Qualitative ethnographic approach.
Advertising during COVID-19: Exploring Perceived Brand Message Authenticity and Potential Psychological Reactance	Shoenberger, H; Kim, E; Sun, Y	Journal of Advertising	2021	The study confirms the importance of enhanced authenticity in brand messaging to the public during the COVID-19 health crisis.	Employs a 2 (message type: threat to freedom vs. no threat to freedom) × 2 (brand: Uber vs. Heineken) experimental design.
Firm value impact of corporate activism: Facebook and the stop hate for profit campaign	Villagra, N; Monfort, A; Méndez-Suárez, M	Journal of Business Research	2021	The study shows that a target company that received boycotts from other organisations via their corporate activism effort suffered from negative stock market effects. However, the sponsoring companies associated with the target company were not affected negatively.	Quantitative study with data from the stock market response to the #StopHateforProfit Facebook.
Consumer responses to brand communications involving COVID-19	Hesse, A; Niederle, F; Schö, L; Stautz, D	Journal of Marketing Management	2021	The study findings demonstrate that brand empathy during the COVID-19 pandemic could reduce consumer sensitivity associated with the social distancing condition.	Mixed-method qualitative approach with thematic analysis.
Political polarisation: challenges, opportunities, and hope for consumer welfare, marketers, and public policy	Weber, TJ; Hydock, C; Ding, W; Gardner, M; Jacob, P; Mandel, N; Sprott, DE; Van Steenburg, E	Journal of Public Policy & Marketing	2021	The study found that polarisation can be harmful for some stakeholders (e.g. negative effects on consumer welfare, including financial welfare) but also constructive for different stakeholders (e.g. creates new opportunities and challenges for segmentation, targeting, loyalty, and product offerings)	Qualitative approach, with literature review and conceptual analysis.
Voice of the stars – exploring the outcomes of online celebrity activism	Jain, K; Sharma, I; Behl, A	Journal of Strategic Marketing	2021	This study found that the consumer perception of the authenticity of celebrity activism and hypocrisy affects consumer attitudes towards celebrity and their self-brand connection.	Quantitative approach, with questionnaire survey.

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

TITLE	AUTHOR	JOURNAL	YEAR	RESULTS	METHOD
Co-brand partnerships making space for the next black girl: Backlash in social justice branding	Smith, DC; James, CD; Griffiths, MA	Psychology & Marketing	2021	This study demonstrates the complex and significant impact of social justice marketing on social media on consumer perceptions, highlighting both the empowering and risky implications for companies and brands engaging in social justice branding. The results from four experimental studies, involving both unknown and well-known brands, show that attitudes towards the brand decreased substantially among consumers who disagreed with a brand's stance, whereas there was no significant effect among consumers who were supportive of the brand's stance.	Qualitative analysis of consumer reviews on Trustpilot.
Brand activism: Does courting controversy help or hurt a brand?	Mukherjee, S; Althuizen, N	International Journal of Research In Marketing	2020	The study analysed 293 CSA events initiated by 149 firms across industries, and found that, on average, CSA elicited an adverse reaction from investors. This is because investors evaluate CSA as a signal of a firm's allocation of resources away from profit-oriented objectives and towards a risky activity with an uncertain outcome.	Quantitative, with five empirical studies and experimental design.
Corporate sociopolitical activism and firm value	Bhagwat, Y; Warren, NL; Beck, JT; Watson IV	Journal of Marketing	2020	The study analysed 293 CSA events initiated by 149 firms across industries, and found that, on average, CSA elicited an adverse reaction from investors. This is because investors evaluate CSA as a signal of a firm's allocation of resources away from profit-oriented objectives and towards a risky activity with an uncertain outcome.	Quantitative, using a dataset of 293 corporate sociopolitical activism (CSA) events from 149 firms across 39 industries.
Woke-washing: intersectional femvertising and branding woke bravery	Sobande, F	European Journal of Marketing	2019	The study explores the interconnections and issues associated with woke-washing: 'intersectional' femvertising and branding	Qualitative, with interpretive and critical discursive analysis.
Power relations within brand management: the challenge of social media	Leitch, S; Merlot, E	Journal of Brand Management	2018	The study found that the disruptive influence of social media evolves around four categories: relationships, power, social practice and resistance.	Literature review and theoretical discussion.
Exploring the empowering and paradoxical relationship between social media and CSR activism	Boyd, DE; McGarry, BM; Clarke, TB	Journal of Business Research	2016	The study provides a typology of consumer-perceived CSR activism in social media.	Qualitative, using semi-structured, in-depth interviews.
The double-edged crisis: Invisible Children's social media response to the Kony 2012 campaign	Madden, S; Janoske, M; Briones, RL	Public Relations Review	2016	Social media can play a role in increasing awareness about humanitarian causes and can cause organisational crises through threatening legitimacy.	Qualitative content analysis methodology.

Source: *Sample of papers.*

applied diverse methodologies. As shown in [Figure 2](#), qualitative and quantitative approaches each represented 32% of the studies. Experimental design and mixed-methods approaches were also employed, each accounting for 14% of the studies, while literature reviews made up 7% and conceptual papers 2% of the total.

The studies conducted between 2020 and 2024 highlight an academic response to global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and social justice movements, such as BLM (e.g. Shoenberger et al., [2021](#); Wang et al., [2022](#)), which have significantly influenced brand communication strategies and consumer engagement (e.g. Fong & Kim, [2023](#)). Before this period (2016–2020), studies focused on the exploration of the role of social media in brand activism, and initiated discussions on the complexities of brand activism and its authenticity (e.g. Boyd et al., [2016](#)). The observed evolution of the focus in the brand activism field from broader discussions to a more nuanced exploration of strategies in response to specific social and cultural issues reflects the growing significance of brand activism in times of crisis. These include wars or post-war contexts (e.g. Kipnis et al., [2024](#)), racial and gender discrimination and injustice, abortion rights, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, and religious matters (Ahmad et al., [2024](#)). [Figure 3](#) illustrates the types of crises that were revealed in the analysis, which collectively indicate a shift towards a permacrisis.

The following section outlines the phases of the ADO framework that enabled us to identify the types of crises and disruptions (Antecedents); crises-induced brand activism initiatives (Decisions); and the impacts on brand performance from being engaged in the crisis-induced brand activism (Outcomes).

Antecedents (A)

Consumer-related antecedents (micro level)

Through our analysis, several clusters of crises emerged at the *micro*, *meso* and *macro* levels. The studies exploring different causes that could collectively indicate cultural and social crises including LGBTQ rights, sexism, and racial equity showed that consumers view brands that defend their involvement with certain causes using an assertive tone in their communication favourably (Batista et al., [2022](#)). Relatedly, Ahmad et al. ([2024](#)) found that ensuring that activism messages are congruent with the issue (i.e. abortion rights, racial equality, and LGBTQ rights) can lead to increased brand authenticity among consumers.

Consumer expectations often induce brands to make fast and clear decisions about their public stance. That is why, increasingly, brands take a stance on controversial, contested, or polarising causes and communicate that on social media platforms and other IMC platforms and, to achieve the desired effect, CEOs and company employees need to really be behind their words and deeds. Authentic brand activism was shown to be particularly important to younger consumers (Aboelenien & Nguyen, [2024](#); Nguyen et al., [2023](#); Podnar & Golob, [2024](#)) as younger consumers increasingly expect that companies take stances on sociopolitical issues (Jin et al., [2023](#)).

Business-related antecedents (meso level)

One of the foundations of a company's brand activism lies in its core values, which shape its identity and purpose (Pöyry & Laaksonen, [2022](#)). The alignment between organisational values and brand activism is pivotal in fostering a genuine and impactful

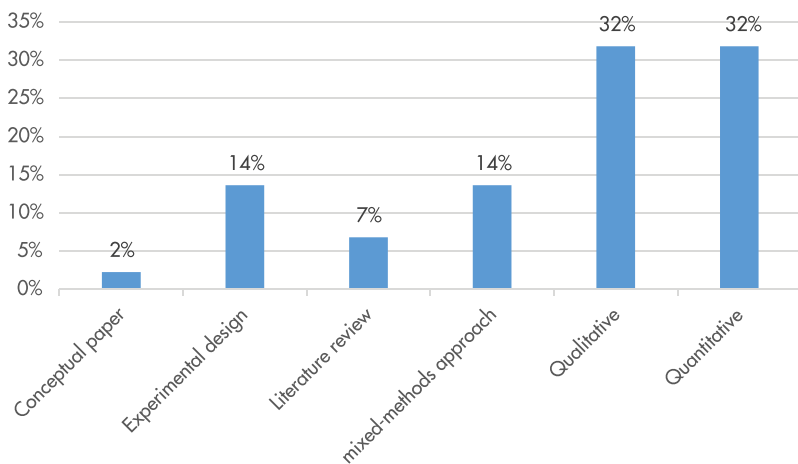


Figure 2. Method: distribution and frequency.

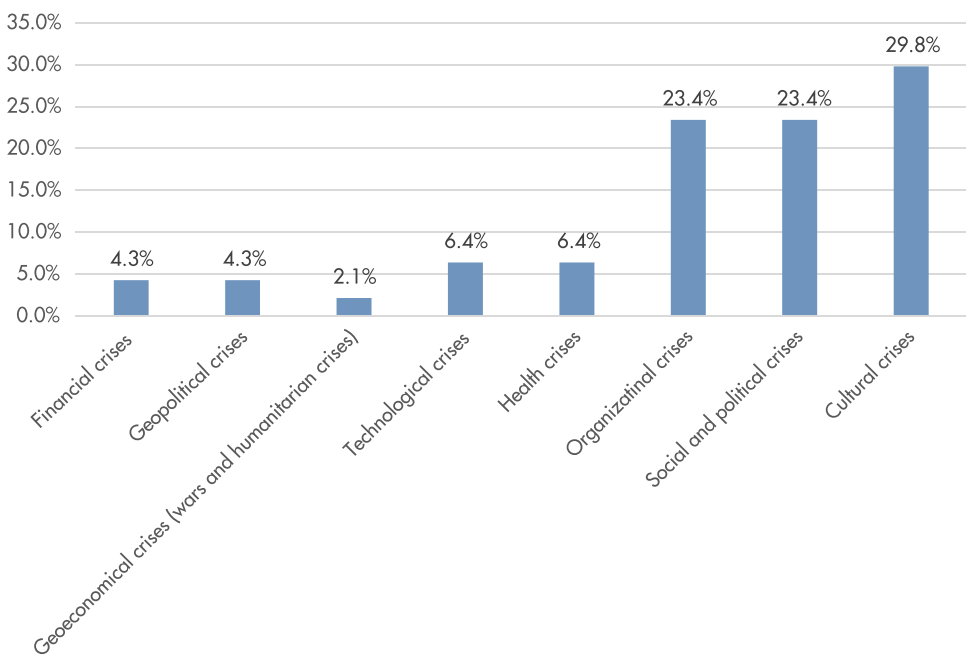


Figure 3. Types of crises identified in the study pool.

commitment to social and environmental causes. These values serve as the basis for strategic decision-making, guiding the company's actions in the face of crises. Our review shows two key categories of perceived corporate motives: firm-serving and public-serving motives (Fong & Kim, 2023). Companies that prioritise values such as sustainability, social responsibility, and ethical business practices are aligned with strategic self-serving, as these actions are closely tied to typical business objectives. In the era of a permacrisis, while there are different types of cascading crises, it is more important to evaluate corporate values as this can help in navigating permacrisis challenges, ensuring that the

brand activism efforts resonate authentically with both internal and external stakeholders (Mirzaei et al., 2022).

Based on our review, we further note that consistency and how brand activism is ingrained in the fabric of corporate culture is key (Maorescu-Murphy, 2022). Companies achieving this integration empower employees at all levels to embody the brand's commitment to permacrisis-related causes (Aksoy et al., 2023). As employees internalise these values, they become advocates for brand activism, contributing to a unified and authentic corporate identity that resonates with consumers. The incorporation of activism into corporate culture thus becomes a transformative force, driving sustained and purposeful action in the face of permacrisis challenges.

Society and culture-related antecedents (macro level)

The antecedents in the form of social, cultural, economic or political crises discussed in the studies and hence the drivers behind brand activism initiatives in many instances were interwoven and inter-related. The findings suggest that it was the crises that tended to come first, and brand activism followed thereafter. Another observation is that the brand activism initiatives were mostly aimed at the general public in order to avoid what Burnett (1998) coined a public perception crisis. Previous studies (Jin et al., 2023; Nam et al., 2023; V. L. Thomas & Fowler, 2023) demonstrate that the authentic initiation of brand activism as a company response to ongoing and varying social crises, including racial inequality and LGBTQ rights, abortion rights and racial equality (Ahmad et al., 2024) elicits consumers' relationship with the organisation and their intent to purchase (Ahmad et al., 2024; Jin et al., 2023).

Macro-level antecedents set the external conditions that require firms to respond to crises. The war in Ukraine and the humanitarian crisis that has followed has highlighted the complexity of consumers' and the public's perception and reaction to large-scale corporate activism (e.g. Kipnis et al., 2024). More specifically, it has created a further shift in consumer attitudes and behaviour resulting in a dilemma between consumer motives including motive attribution (egoistic, strategic, value-driven and stakeholder-driven) and their need to participate in political consumerism (Fong & Kim, 2023). The complexity of geopolitical and geo-economic crises reveals two other major conflicting antecedents when there is polarisation regarding various social and political issues among consumers and a growing scepticism about political institutions and, at the same time, firms are increasingly involved in sociopolitical issues via corporate political advocacy (CPA) and corporate social responsibility CSR (Weber et al., 2023).

Decisions (D)

The classic brand activism strategy has a bearing on the marketing strategy (El-Ansary, 2006). At the same time, it goes beyond a marketing strategy because it requires strategic crises management elements. Crises are the phenomena that managers should plan for in a systematic and proactive manner; they need to produce strategic responses to minimise their adverse effects (Burnett, 1998). In practice, the implementation of crises-induced brand activism suggests a series of actions taken by firms that can occur through various means, such as statements, initiatives (Pimentel et al., 2023), taking stances, and withdrawing from, or staying

either individually or simultaneously in a certain region or a country. When it comes to the brand activism scope, given the focus on crises in this study, the findings go beyond those established in the strategic marketing literature – an organisational and marketing scope (Varadarajan, 2010) – to encompass crisis-related plans anticipating the likelihood of a crisis occurring and its severity for the company and its brand. Our analysis reveals that brand activism initiatives have evolved around the following strategic decisions: *the strategy content*; *the strategy formulation process*; and *the strategy implementation* (Varadarajan, 2010).

The strategy content

The key to strategy content for brands is to actively demonstrate their commitment to social justice causes and authentically align with the brand's purpose while consistently communicating this commitment (Schmidt et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2021) and avoiding perceptions of being inauthentic (Thompson & Kumar, 2022). The COVID-19 health crisis emphasised the value of such a commitment, as brands actively leveraged the pandemic for content marketing and addressed the dichotomous and polarising views of consumers (Hesse et al., 2021). For firms seeking to associate with and support social causes within the realm of CSR, focusing on tested and more certain issues provides a less risky approach. While authenticity remains essential, firms should exercise caution when endorsing events, individuals or polarising issues associated with CPA. One way to achieve authenticity and thereby build brand equity is through anthropomorphism (Brandão & Popoli, 2023). This involves endowing a brand with favourable human characteristics such as empathy (Hesse et al., 2021), hope (Ahmad et al., 2024) or bravery (Lee et al., 2024).

The strategy formulation process

A shift towards CPA or/and combining CPA initiatives with classic CSR appears unavoidable, driven by increasing business involvement in politics (Müller, 2022). Given the increasing pressure from overlapping crises, the strategy formulation process needs to explicitly incorporate proactiveness and commitment in their corporate activism (Fong & Kim, 2023). A proactive approach to crises and planning at the organisational level has been shown to assist managers to respond better to unforeseen contingencies (Chandran & Abukhalifeh, 2021; Giousmpasoglou, 2023). For example, Kipnis et al. (2024) offer a new perspective by examining war-related marketing activism actions (hereafter MAA) and proposing how brands can 'serve as links to estranged people and groups' in post-war contexts (p. 12).

To minimise any potential backlash from consumers, it is crucial to ensure congruence between the brand activism values communicated and the values of the intended audience (Li, 2023). To combat impressions of inauthenticity, firms need to increasingly work towards creating an alignment between the firm's stance, actions, and public messaging (Moorman, 2020; Nam et al., 2023; Vredenburg et al., 2020). For example, brands operating in the children's market bear a heightened responsibility in formulating their crises-induced brand activism strategies. This is due to children utilising brands to create connections with their peers, for self-identification and to distinguish themselves from adults (Aboelenien & Nguyen, 2024).

The strategy implementation

Brand managers need to learn to navigate the tension between being both cultural and market players in polarising and woke times (Sobande, 2020). This can be achieved by delving deeply into the conversational challenges that brand activism faces (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023). However, corporate activism involves assessing the risks and the possibility of a potential backlash from consumers. Therefore, ‘careful’ implementation of the brand activism strategy is the way forward; in other words, firms need to exercise some distance between a stance and a brand (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Given the volatile geopolitical situation and tension among the public and consumers associated with unresolved and often controversial issues, engaging in crises-induced corporate political activism can be a risky undertaking in the short and even medium term (Özturan & Grinstein, 2022; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022; Weber et al., 2023). In implementing their BA strategies, companies need to focus on an authentic commitment to different issues of social and cultural significance (i.e. gender equality, LGBTQ rights and the BLM movement). This is because authenticity in brand activism is likely to be instrumental in assisting companies to distance themselves from being associated with corporate hypocrisy (Sterbenk et al., 2022). For companies weighing up the risks and benefits of engaging in activism on social media, it is helpful to follow the brand activism initiatives of peer companies in order to gain market intelligence about the risks and benefits of brand activism during social and health crises such as LGBTQ rights, BLM and COVID-19 (Guha & Korschun, 2023). Overall, despite the growing importance of a proactive approach to crises for brand activism outcomes, our review reveals a paucity of studies that explicitly combine a crisis response strategy with a brand activism strategy. Recent studies on responses to global crises, e.g. COVID-19, reveal that the facilitation of CSR practices at the strategic level enables the development of firms’ resilience, making them able to respond better to crises (Filimonau et al., 2020). Proactiveness and commitment in corporate activism have been shown to decrease egoistic motive attribution in the public while at the same time increasing the value-driven motive attribution of firms, which in turn has been shown to have significant effects on the public’s intention to engage in political consumerism (see Fong & Kim, 2023). In implementing brand activism decisions, it is important to prevent ‘carewashing’. This term denotes businesses attempting to bolster their credibility by presenting themselves as socially responsible entities while simultaneously contributing to issues like inequality and environmental harm (Chatzidakis et al., 2020).

Outcomes (O)

As markets become increasingly competitive and demanding in the face of continuous crises, companies need to be able to manage a broader set of brand performance measures beyond financial indicators (Anisimova, 2010). The findings reveal a spectrum of financial and non-financial measures that are used to evaluate the effectiveness of brand activism, which can be categorised using the terms ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ performance measures, essentially comprising a ‘balanced scorecard’ (Kaplan & Norton, 1992). A balanced scorecard has been widely adopted by organisations seeking to turn their strategy into a set of comprehensive performance metrics across key areas including financial, customer, and internal processes, as well as learning and growth (Hristov et al., 2024). For example, the importance of brand image in the marketplace has grown since

the emergence of the permacrisis (Hallencreutz et al., 2024). A recent study on Swedish consumers revealed that intangible assets including brand awareness, trustworthiness and reputation served as a sustained beacon for consumers in times of uncertainty and turbulence (Hallencreutz et al., 2024).

The papers in our study pool evaluated the impacts of BA on different performance metrics including stock market effects (Villagra et al., 2021), consumer purchase intentions (Fong & Kim, 2023; Jin et al., 2023; Nam et al., 2023), political consumerism (Tan, 2023), brand equity (Lee et al., 2024), brand loyalty (Nguyen et al., 2023), reputation (Maiorescu-Murphy, 2022; Weber et al., 2023) communication impact (Özturan & Grinstein, 2022), and finally, employee brand advocacy (Aksoy et al., 2023). Nam et al. (2023) show that when companies react quickly to sociopolitical issues positive sentiment and greater consumer purchasing intentions follow.

Brand activism and corporate political activism (CPA) are relatively new strategies and their impact on brand performance measures is yet to be understood. Increasingly, brands are forced to intervene and engage in contentious issues (Klostermann et al., 2022), often risking a customer backlash. Some studies have indicated that engaging in CPA can be risky (Özturan & Grinstein, 2022; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022; Weber et al., 2023). This is because the relationship between BA initiatives and market performance measures has been inconsistent (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2024). As Pimentel et al. (2023) put it, brand activism can become 'a double-edged sword' for organisations. While it can generate support from some stakeholders and consumers through boycotts, at the same time it can lead to a backlash in the form of boycotts when BA is viewed as having opportunistic motives (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022). A study by Bhagwat et al. (2020) found that, on average, CPA elicits an adverse reaction from investors. Lee et al. (2024) study found that there were equity gains for non-profit brands that shed traditional 'warmth' positioning and embraced activism and brand bravery in relation to NGOs. Conversely, Wang et al. (2022) found that when individual companies support significant socio-cultural movements e.g. Black Lives Matter (BLM), this leads to negligible effects on consumer responses whereas large-scale BLM support from many brands can lead to strong negative effects (i.e. the bandwagon effect) on consumer responses on social media. Villagra et al. (2021) analysed the stock market performance of the target company Facebook and the sponsor companies after the Stop Hate campaign and found that whilst the company under attack saw a significant negative effect on the stock market, there was no effect on the sponsoring companies.

The emerging themes from the review pool

Our findings reveal that in the earlier phases of the development of the brand activism domain, the primary focus was growth and market expansion, with studies focusing on the impacts of brand activism on social media and consumer perceptions (e.g. Boyd et al., 2016; Leitch & Merlot, 2018). In more recent years, there has been a shift towards broader and polarising societal changes, which has forced brands to re-evaluate their roles in social justice and accountability narratives (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023; Klostermann et al., 2022; Sobande, 2020). Three major themes emerged in the analysis of our pool of studies: (1) The interconnectedness of crises, (2) Crafting brand activism authenticity and (3) Multimodality in communications.

The interconnectedness of permacrises and its impact on brand activism dynamics

This theme delves into the complexity of interconnected crises and activism, especially the ineffectiveness of isolated crisis management, the marginalisation of vulnerable groups and the failure to address root causes and systemic issues. Most studies on this theme focus on isolated incidents of activism, often overlooking the interconnectedness of issues such as health crises with socio-cultural or political and economic crises. Despite the acknowledgement of various forms of turbulence, disasters and crises that societies are increasingly embedded in, the term ‘permacrisis’ was not explicitly mentioned in our study pool. The current literature reviews identify many types of crises, but only a few recognise their interconnected nature (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Sobande, 2020). This lack of research is surprising, as crises are rarely isolated events; they are interconnected and have far-reaching consequences for society, culture, and the economy. For example, the Black Lives Matter and Me-Too movements revealed interlocking forms of oppression (Sobande, 2020). Such changes in society as a result of uncertainty can provide a great platform for brands to engage in new cultural ideologies and opportunities (Holt & Cameron, 2010).

Managing crises in isolation, without considering their interconnected nature, often results in short-sighted and ineffective responses. Addressing a single dimension of a crisis without recognising its broader impact can lead to incomplete solutions and unintended consequences. For instance, the initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic focused heavily on the health crisis (Hesse et al., 2021; Shoenberger et al., 2021), with lockdowns and restrictions aimed at controlling the virus’s spread and companies redirecting production to make hand sanitisers. While these measures were useful, they did not adequately address the economic and social inequalities, leading to criticism of such initiatives as ‘care washing’ and the commodification of care (Sobande, 2020). Such isolated approaches overlook the interconnected nature of modern crises, where economic stability, social cohesion, and public health are interdependent. A more integrated strategy on the part of companies could have included mental health support, targeted economic relief for vulnerable populations, and comprehensive public health measures, leading to a more resilient overall response.

Crises tend to disproportionately affect those who are already disadvantaged, such as minorities, low-income groups, and marginalised populations, exacerbating existing inequalities and causing long-term social and economic damage. For example, Li (2023) highlights that in the context of HIV prevention, health disparities disproportionately impact people of colour, particularly marginalised Black LGBTQ members. This is partly due to the unequal distribution of medical resources and the design of health communication messages. By integrating activism through an interconnectedness approach, such as #BlackLGBTQLivesMatter, significantly more response efficacy can be achieved compared to non-interconnected approaches like #BlackLivesMatter. Li’s paper also calls for the advertising industry to adopt intersectional thinking to inform strategies that address differences across intersectional/interconnected groups. This includes embedding intersectionality into communication practices, hiring policies, and promotion metrics. As noted by Lundberg et al. (2024), for many, the lockdowns in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–21 meant restricted mobility and doomscrolling negative news; they were restrictions that collectively arguably led to poor mental health. One of

the main challenges during COVID-19 that brands came face-to-face with was trying to align dichotomous and polarising views with the public (Hesse et al., 2021).

Following this, the failure to address the root causes and systemic issues became another significant aspect of marketers' approach to dealing with interconnectedness of crises (Podnar & Golob, 2024). Crises are often symptoms of deeper structural problems, such as institutional racism, economic inequality, and environmental degradation. A non-interconnected approach tends to focus on immediate relief rather than long-term solutions that target the root causes and systemic issues that underlie crises. These unresolved social and cultural issues (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023) can lead to strong adverse reactions from consumers (e.g. guerilla-style consumer 'activism' attacks with the purpose of damaging brands on social media) (Chen, 2023). For example, understanding the complexities of crises like the war in Ukraine, which spans geopolitical and geoeconomic dimensions, has prompted companies to adopt large-scale proactive brand activism initiatives (Fong & Kim, 2023). This has led to hundreds of companies, including major brands like Visa, Shiseido, Lush, Lego, and Husqvarna, withdrawing from Russia in response to the conflict (Sonnenfeld & Yale Research Team, 2022). The majority of brand activism studies focus on an isolated crisis, while ongoing and interconnected crises have not been paid similar attention. This gap in the literature presents an opportunity for future research to explore the dynamics of brand activism in a continuously evolving crisis context.

To summarise, the extant literature on this theme often disregards the interconnectedness perspective, especially in terms of how brands can identify and address the broader systemic issues that interconnect with the immediate crisis. The current economic, environmental and socio-political crises are symptoms and part of more deeply rooted structural issues. As long as these issues are not being addressed at their core, the number and intensity of the crises risk increasing and broadening. The tipping point therefore is when we realise that the number, intensity, and duration of overlapping crises requires a behavioural paradigm shift with the goal of mitigating crises.

Crafting brand activism authenticity

During times of continuous crisis, such as a permacrisis, the complexity of brand activism becomes more pronounced as consumers grow increasingly sceptical of brands (Thompson & Kumar, 2022). Thompson and Kumar (2022) argue that authenticity in this context is not a straightforward attribute or continuum but a dynamic negotiation of cultural contradictions. Consumers judge authenticity by the absence of inauthentic behaviours. Rather than focusing on what brands claim, consumers evaluate what brands avoid doing. To build trust, brands should focus on aligning their public stance with their internal values and practices (Thompson & Kumar, 2022). This means resisting market-driven pressures to adopt sociopolitical stances for short-term gain. Instead, authentic activism arises when a brand's actions are consistent, transparent, and rooted in a genuine commitment to societal issues, even when those actions are not immediately profitable or popular. By avoiding opportunistic behaviour, brands can foster a more resilient and credible connection with their consumers.

Brand activism scholars have scrutinised various aspects of businesses' motivations, distinguishing between self-serving and other-serving motives (Fong & Kim, 2023), as well

as discerning strategic versus tactical approaches (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020) that shape the perceived authenticity of their activism efforts. We adhere to the definition of brand activism given by Vredenburg et al. (2020), which best matches our study contents, as ‘the alignment of a brand’s explicit purpose and values with its activist marketing messaging and prosocial corporate practice’ (p. 445). When a brand’s actions are aligned with its identity and positioning strategy (Shoenberger et al., 2021), it is more likely to continue its activism over the long term beyond the crisis, even when the issue is no longer in the public spotlight. In contexts like advocating diversity and inclusion, fuelled by social movements, authentic activism involves going beyond mere support for a singular cause. Instead, activist brands demonstrate authenticity by instigating multiple structural changes that align them with various stakeholders such as customers, employees, and the community, thereby enhancing their legitimacy in the marketplace (Aboelenien & Nguyen, 2024).

Following this, the emphasis on integration between external and internal activities becomes another significant aspect of authentic brand activism in a permacrisis (Sterbenk et al., 2022). Some companies aim for an award-winning image for their internally committed efforts such as gender equality as these signal a company’s stance, commitment and goals for the future (Sterbenk et al., 2022). However, the previous studies reveal that companies recognised with gender equality awards often engage in fewer internal initiatives (Wagner et al., 2009). This discrepancy can lead to further crises and be perceived as a form of CSR washing where companies cherry-pick a certain aspect to focus on, rather than having a holistic approach. Additionally, the speed of organisational responses to crises is considered a key factor. In times of crisis, CEO activism presents an opportunity for companies to redefine and realign with stakeholders, making their corporate values more distinctive to key audiences. Such a symbiotic relationship between a brand and multiple stakeholders is likely to become key as a permacrisis threatens businesses longevity in the marketplace (Hallencreutz et al., 2024).

Interestingly, some studies have examined the collective impact of crisis-induced corporate activism, particularly when directed at a particular company through corporate boycotts, for instance, in the #StopHateforProfit campaign, where a coalition of companies criticised Facebook’s lack of action against violent or racist advertisers (Villagra et al., 2021). The research discovered a substantial negative effect on the target company’s stock market performance. Surprisingly, there were minimal positive gains, such as economic returns on the stock market, for the activist companies involved (Wang et al., 2022). These findings diverge from prior studies advocating that companies actively participate in corporate activism (Moorman, 2020). This form of collective corporate activism might be perceived as a seemingly ‘easy’ way for companies to fulfil their social obligations or as jumping on a bandwagon during times of crisis, potentially hindering their ability to stand out as courageous (Lee et al., 2024) and authentically purpose-driven (Vredenburg et al., 2020). The work in this stream, although limited, also explores peers’/rivals’ reactions to multiple social-cultural and political crises, opportunities and tensions in addition to monitoring real-time public responses (Guha & Korschun, 2023). Firms can counter impressions of inauthenticity by enhancing the alignment between the firm’s stance, actions, and public messaging (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

To summarise, authenticity is crucial for the success of brand activism during a permacrisis, but this pursuit can sometimes lead to woke-washing, where companies adopt socially progressive stances primarily for PR benefits rather than due to a genuine commitment (e.g. Ahmad et al., 2024; Sobande, 2020). A recent study by Podnar and Golob (2024) highlights the paradox where, in times of change, companies tend to commodify their activist actions, undermining their authenticity. Similarly, K. D. Thomas et al. (2020) emphasise the need to move from performative actions to more genuine efforts that address the barriers faced by black consumers. Moving beyond 'optical allyship' (K. D. Thomas et al., 2020) where activism is perceived as a convenience or PR strategy – requires embedding these efforts into the corporate strategy. This aligns with our argument that a crucial shift is needed from opportunistic activism to viewing it as a necessity. For example, when companies see addressing racial justice as necessary, it will likely involve making sacrifices, such as financial ones, to support their commitment. In such cases, companies also need to recognise key patterns in evolving cultural shifts that may threaten their brand's authenticity (Thompson & Kumar, 2022) and skilfully navigate the sociocultural complexities required to maintain it.

Multimodality in communications

In times of permacrisis, where overlapping crises challenge societies and businesses, brands must strategically choose their communication modalities, both verbal and non-verbal (e.g. videos, images, posts) to effectively engage with their audiences. Brands can employ different communication methods, including verbal, visual, and digital communications. Verbal communications often involve key figures like the CEO speaking out on crucial issues. Visual communications leverage imagery and video to convey powerful messages, while digital communications use online platforms and social media to reach a broader audience (Boyd et al., 2016; Özturan & Grinstein, 2022). Marketing plays a critical role in shaping perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours towards social responsibility. Socially responsible marketing activities (SRMA), which are similar in nature to CSR, can significantly enhance the performance and influence of the marketing department within the firm (Özturan & Grinstein, 2022). The alignment of SRMA with consumer values can further drive positive outcomes, answering the call for stakeholder marketing to be more effectively implemented in firms. Moreover, the legitimacy gained through social responsibility efforts can enhance both internal and external perceptions of the marketing department, leading to better overall organisational performance.

When dealing with brands, a better understanding of the distinctions between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate political activism (CPA) is needed. By analysing the extant literature, we untangled the distinction between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate political activism (CPA) in an increasingly polarised world as they elicit differential affective and behavioural responses (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Weber et al., 2023). The studies underscore that CSR typically involves companies signalling positive contributions through community support, a commitment to diversity, and generous employment practices. In contrast, CPA refers to companies taking a stance on contentious issues such as abortion, immigration, or gun control. Studies consistently indicate that CSR tends to foster positive consumer sentiments (Özturan & Grinstein, 2022) while negative sentiments are associated with CPA (Weber et al., 2023). The latter

emerges as a significant predictor of extreme views, radicalisation, and organised political threats and violence in the social media space. For example, despite Chief Marketing Officers (CMOs) infrequently publishing CSR or sociopolitical activism communications on Twitter, the research highlights a higher digital impact of retweets for CSR messages and a lower impact for sociopolitical tweets (Özturan & Grinstein, 2022).

Focusing on the types of messaging that are most effective, the studies suggest that during crises such as the Black Lives Matter movement, brand activism messages should focus on hope rather than frustration (Ahmad et al., 2024). Additionally, emphasising a sense of empathy (Hesse et al., 2021) and minimising perceived threats to freedom (Shoenberger et al., 2021) is crucial to reduce irritation and reactive responses during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In addressing negative consumer comments in crises, research indicates that adopting a more assertive tone, as opposed to a sarcastic one, proves to be more effective.

In periods of activism and permacrisis, when public scrutiny is at its peak, mere communication without accompanying action falls short and is often perceived as performative. While multimodal communication strategies can be effective to some extent, they have limitations. In these moments of heightened emotional intensity, the public expects more than just words; they demand meaningful action. Relying solely on communication can lead to what are often seen as empty gestures – superficial displays of moral responsibility that may seem fashionable or convenient for corporations and institutions (K. D. Thomas et al., 2020). These gestures, while perhaps well-intentioned, are unlikely to resonate deeply or bring about lasting change. In essence, for communication to be truly persuasive and impactful, it must be backed by genuine actions that demonstrate a real commitment to the causes being advocated. We argue that without this, such efforts are likely to be viewed with scepticism, particularly during times of crisis when the stakes are highest, and the public's expectations are elevated.

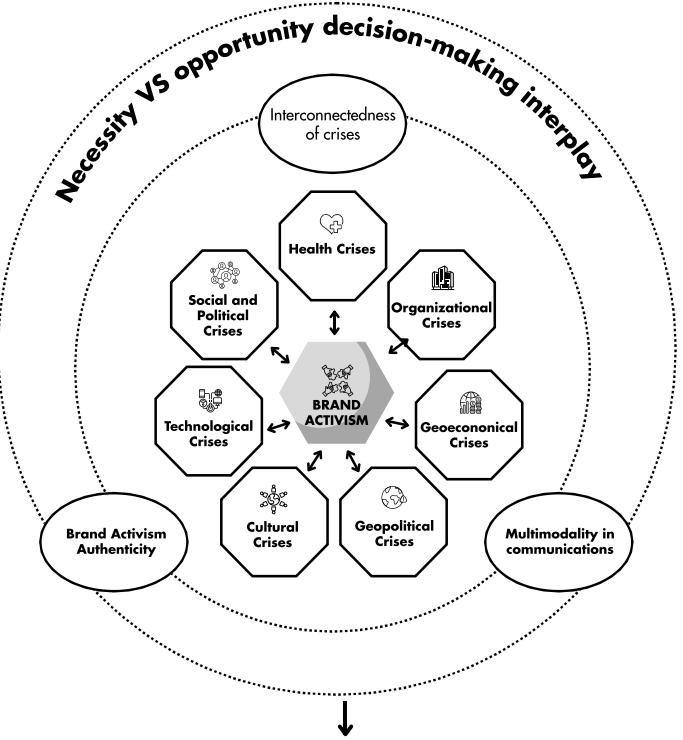
A proposed conceptual framework of permacrisis-driven brand activism

A well-structured organising framework is crucial for offering a cohesive and synthesised overview of the existing research (Hulland & Houston, 2020). Drawing from our review of the literature, we propose a framework that integrates the antecedents, decisions/mechanisms, and outcomes of current research on brand activism and the concept of permacrisis (see Figure 4). In our framework, we argue that a permacrisis creates a moral responsibility for brands (K. D. Thomas et al., 2020) to engage in necessity vs opportunism-motivated brand activism, which should become an essential part of their decision-making. To reduce the risk that crisis-driven brand activism could be perceived as opportunism, decision-makers need to i) identify the links between multiple crises for the purpose of understanding which key brand values are involved and could be at stake if action/response to a crisis is not taken; ii) ensure brand activism authenticity; and iii) apply a multi-modality approach to communication. In relation to performance outcomes, the findings suggest that brand activism can often result in short-to-medium-term financial losses for organisations, something that managers should be cognisant of. However, from a long-term perspective, demonstrating a strong stance on ethical and moral issues can significantly reduce perceived hypocrisy and increase brand equity (e.g. Lee et al., 2024).

ANTECEDENTS/
CRISES



BRAND ACTIVISM
DECISIONS AND
MECHANISMS



OUTCOMES



Figure 4. Permacrisis-driven brand activism framework.

Implications for theory

Our research advances the theory by extending previous systematic literature review articles on brand activism that examined the concept of brand activism as an organisation-driven initiative related to the strategic marketing field (e.g. Cammarota et al., 2023; Pimentel et al., 2023). Our study analyses the brand activism literature through the lenses of crises and considers what role permacrises will play in shaping effective activism in the marketplace going forward. Specifically, we propose necessity-motivated activism that is driven by the core brand values. This approach is meant to guide researchers who work on this area in future research where they need to move away from using activism in an opportunistic way (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Sobande, 2020). Previous activism research has emphasised that addressing the root causes and challenging the status quo are essential for improving societal issues via competency (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Sibai et al., 2021). However, in a permacrisis setting, where persistent and prolonged uncertainties have already altered the status quo (e.g. war), this approach may no longer apply. For

example, during large-scale crises, such as geopolitical conflicts (Kipnis et al., 2024) or global health emergencies (Fong & Kim, 2023), firms may feel compelled to deviate from past behaviours to address immediate social or political concerns. To mitigate this challenge, a clear understanding of value systems becomes paramount. Hence, extending brand activism research to permacrises can provide an alternative view where activism represents a resource that organisations can use to build new cultural ideologies (Holt & Cameron, 2010) driven by necessity and aligned with the core brand values and its actions.

Another theoretical implication is the identification of how consumers perceive the authenticity of activism during times of crisis. We highlight that the manner in which communication is delivered – from the speed of response (Nam et al., 2023) to collaborate actions with other companies (Guha & Korschun, 2023) – plays a critical role in shaping these perceptions being authentic (Thompson & Kumar, 2022). In activism research, a key argument revolves around the risks associated with taking a stance, particularly the potential for consumer disagreement (Hydock et al., 2020; Whitler & Barta, 2024). However, during crises, the relevance of consumer agreement or disagreement diminishes, as the primary focus shifts towards rebuilding society, safeguarding public health, and supporting vulnerable populations. This shift in focus suggests that, in crisis situations, the effectiveness of activism is less about aligning with consumer opinions and more about addressing urgent societal needs. While much of the existing research has concentrated on the firm's perspective, our review sheds light on the broader impact of activism, emphasising its dialogical approach and influence on wider communities and stakeholders (Korschun et al., 2020). This broader perspective underscores the importance of collective action and the role of companies in contributing to societal resilience during challenging times. Finally, we extend the existing scarce studies (e.g. Agunsoye & Fotopoulou, 2023; Hallencreutz et al., 2024; Lundberg et al., 2024) by conceptualising the key distinguishing features of a permacrisis over crises. We argue that in a permacrisis, the impact is structural and persistent: in other words (1) society needs to cope with the consequences of disruptions for longer and more unpredictable periods of time (Lundberg et al., 2024); (2) a permacrisis reveals systematic inequalities in situations of emergency regarding class, gender, and labour – and how new paradigms need to provide better alternatives (Agunsoye & Fotopoulou, 2023); and (3) a permacrisis brings the importance of institutional analysis and calls for an enhanced role of formal and informal institutions in mitigating crises (Cihanli, 2023; Mulberg & Dassler, 2024).

Managerial implications

The overarching takeaway from our study underscores the high level of risk associated with brand activism, unlike corporate social responsibility initiatives. While communication about a brand's commitment and stance on specific issues has the potential to instigate change, its impact is neither guaranteed nor immediate. Its effectiveness depends on whether the motivation is perceived as 'opportunistic' or a 'necessity' that is aligned with the core brand values and its actions 'i.e., brand authenticity'. Firms demonstrating a steadfast and consistent commitment to social or political issues stand to gain the most. During large-scale crises, such as geopolitical conflicts or global health emergencies, managers are confronted with the challenge of providing prompt responses (Fong & Kim,

2023). Firms may feel compelled to deviate from past behaviours to address immediate concerns, raising the question of balancing rapid action with the desire to maintain a consistent commitment to social or political issues. To mitigate this challenge, transparent communication becomes paramount. This approach not only helps firms move away from a self-serving stance but also provides genuine content to communicate to multiple stakeholders, such as shareholders/investors, journalists, and partners. Importantly, such transparency helps legitimise the brand's position on higher moral ground (Sibai et al., 2021). A useful first step in this regard could be a value-mapping activity whereby brand managers map the brand's core values to current crises that feature these values in the sense that they are at stake and in need of being defended. Such a mapping exercise in turn enables brand activists to tackle multiple crises simultaneously, by using core brand values as a starting point and focusing on the brand-crisis value congruence. Achieving such congruence can in turn be expected to boost brand authenticity through enhanced clarity, consensus, and intensity perceptions on the part of the consumer.

Conclusions

To the best of the authors' knowledge, our paper is one of the first studies that focuses on brand activism in a permacrisis context and highlights the challenges and opportunities that organisations have to deal with in this new landscape. To answer our RQs, we conducted a systematic literature review of 44 relevant academic studies and proposed an integrative framework based on ADO that imbeds permacrisis-related brand activism into a necessity vs opportunism decision-making lens. To analyse our study pool, we combined an organising ADO framework and inductive reasoning. The framework is meant to enable decision-makers to use the specifics of the permacrisis environment to engage in value-motivated brand activism and serve as a societal change agent.

To address RQ1, we identified what types of crises dominate brand activism initiatives. We found that the antecedents include a higher sense of urgency and a complex web of micro, meso and macro crises that together indicate that we have entered an era of permacrisis. We found that brand activism initiatives tend to be triggered by larger-scale societal, economic and political crises and struggles, which in turn spill over into the business (meso) and consumers (micro) spheres. Brand activism initiatives were found to mostly target consumers and the public in a loss aversion spirit due to a potential public perception crisis.

In answering RQ2, we found that decision-making in a permacrisis context is more challenging, requiring a congruence between strategy content commitment, formulation and implementation, for rapid and authentic responses to crises. We found that the interaction between a permacrisis and brand activism is highly complex. The key insight is therefore that brand activism needs to reflect the deep and genuine inner conviction that engaging in brand activism comes from within and hence becomes a necessity for a company. Through our systematic literature review, we identified three themes: (i) the interconnectedness of crises, (ii) crafting authentic activism, and (iii) multimodality in communications. Going forward, we propose value-motivated brand activism to induce social change towards more sustainable and resilient societies.

In answering RQ3, we found that the performance implications of being engaged in brand activism or corporate political activism are mixed. The outcomes for companies

varied, with a potential for backlash effects on brands in the short term. At the same time, given the relative recency of brand activism, more research is needed to study and better understand the impacts of brand activism initiatives on long-term performance effects. The findings show that soft measures (e.g. image, reputation, trustworthiness) are on the rise, becoming anchors for consumers in times of turbulence. This suggests a need for a structural shift from past-performance-based financial performance measures towards more intangible future-oriented measures. In a similar vein, Lundberg et al. (2024) call for a rethinking of conventional business models and modalities (in this instance opportunistic brand activism) for agility and adaptability towards more resilient businesses (necessity brand activism aligned with true brand values).

Our study is meant to guide future research in the area of brand activism in permacrisis. Engaging in activism, whether it is brand or political activism, carries significant risks compared to more muted approaches such as corporate social responsibility. Even maintaining silence can pose risks in this scenario. Firms need to proactively anticipate a potential backlash, strategically synchronise their actions and break free from vicious opportunistic cycles.

Limitations and future research suggestions

We acknowledge that our study is not without limitations. One of the limitations of our paper is that we could have potentially missed some publications. However, due to the expanding field of brand activism, it would be unrealistic to cover all the published works in a single systematic literature review (Bakker, 2010). Another limitation could be the keywords used in the study search. We used specific terms related to brand activism, crises and permacrisis. These were appropriate for the chosen scope given that the research regarding the influence of permacrises on brand activism is in the nascent phase of development. However, we attempted to address the latter by using a backward and forward analysis that enabled us to include relevant studies on the topic under investigation (Baima et al., 2021). Furthermore, we acknowledge that the studies included in our systematic literature review do not analyse explicitly brand activism initiatives in response to the overall permacrisis but individual crises (e.g. climate change, COVID-19, BLM, gender equality among others). This is largely because the permacrisis is a recent phenomenon and, to the best of the authors' knowledge, has not been researched in the marketing domain and therefore is in need of empirical and theoretical advancement. In response to this, we set out to conduct a systematic literature review by inductively building a framework of brand activism in the permacrisis. As discussed, the term 'permacrisis' refers to a prolonged period of instability or continuous crises that affect society, often intertwined with global challenges like climate change, economic instability, political upheaval, and social unrest. While our study addresses brand activism in response to specific crises, we nevertheless make the case for its relevance to the permacrisis, for the following reasons. First, individual crises, when examined collectively – as in our study – form part of a broader, ongoing and overlapping pattern of instability and disruption that characterises the permacrisis. Even if each individual crisis is not as severe or large-scale as the overall permacrisis, the recurring nature of these crises mirrors the continuous state of uncertainty that indeed defines the permacrisis. Therefore, we argue that our collective study of brand activism in response to these individual crises,

which can be interpreted as microcosms of the larger, ongoing instability of the permacrisis, can offer insights into how brands in fact navigate the permacrisis based on the necessity versus opportunity interplay. In essence, our study offers insights into how brands engage with systemic issues that contribute to the phenomenon of permacrisis.

The interconnectedness of crises and its impact on brand activism dynamics highlights the inadequacy of managing crises in isolation without considering their interconnected nature. Current studies focus predominantly on isolated incidents of activism, neglecting how crises are interlinked, such as health, socio-cultural, and economic crises (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Sobande, 2020). This theme suggests that brands need to adopt more holistic and intersectional approaches in their activism, recognising the compounded effects of overlapping crises on vulnerable groups (Li, 2023). Future research should further explore these dynamics and how brands can effectively engage with interconnected crises.

The pursuit of authenticity in brand activism has become complex in the context of a permacrisis, since there is a growing expectation for brands to engage in activism that transcends mere marketing tactics. Studies have emphasised the importance of aligning a brand's activist messaging with its core values (Spry et al., 2021) to decrease the associations of woke-washing (Ahmad et al., 2024). This highlights the need for future research regarding the drivers of authenticity in brand activism and how brands can insert these principles into their strategic frameworks to ensure stakeholder trust. Multimodality in communications stresses the importance of strategic communication modalities in effectively engaging stakeholders during times of permacrisis (Özturan & Grinstein, 2022). Brands that use these strategies can more effectively communicate their activism messages. Future research could explore how different communication strategies impact stakeholder perceptions and the role of digital platforms and artificial intelligence in shaping these engagements during a permacrisis.

Going beyond the themes that emerged in the study, future research could examine the impact of brand activism in a permacrisis among broader stakeholder groups beyond employees' and suppliers' engagement (Aksoy et al., 2023). The diversity of stakeholder interests may however imply a misalignment between the brand activism desired and that construed, as well as the projected messages and stakeholder perceptions (Gioia et al., 2000). Previous postmodernism literature has even maintained the impossibility of achieving a full universalisation and universality in meanings (Lyotard, 1984). Therefore, future research could consider examining the extent to which diverse and changeable views on crises-induced brand activism can influence brand success and brand performance or the extent to which consumers and stakeholders are comfortable with these differences. Thirdly, although permacrisis-based brand activism is in its early stages, our sample comprised 44 articles, reflecting a dynamic research environment but also that the phenomenon of permacrisis is still at a nascent stage of its development in the marketing domain. We anticipate that the field will continue to grow and gain momentum, aligning with other research areas in politics and sustainability that explore a related phenomenon known as polycrisis, which refers to the simultaneous occurrence of multiple interconnected crises that aggravate each other, creating unpredictable challenges (Lawrence et al., 2024). It would be useful to understand such a perspective, particularly in articulating how multiple systems function collaboratively and approach ongoing crises not in isolation but in a synchronised manner. Finally, we recommend that future studies cover

a broader range of publication databases and journals, also considering sources within the realms of history, cultural studies, anthropology and philosophy that provide valuable insights to navigate brand activism in societies that are heavily affected by prolonged periods of simultaneous crises.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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