Choose Your Channels Strategically: How Gender Plays a Role in the Receiving of Online Brand Activism Ad Campaigns

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Brand activism is a form of marketing in which a brand or a company takes a position on a polarizing sociopolitical issue to send a clear message about its values and what it stands for (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). The ways through which companies communicate their stances have included ad campaigns (e.g., Nike's 'Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything'), CEO statements (Chatterji & Toffel, 2019; Hambrick & Wowak, 2021; Lan et al., 2020), and actions (e.g., Ben & Jerry's support of LGBTQ+, Delta Airlines discontinuance of discounts to National Rifle Association members). Consumers increasingly demand companies support a cause and pick a side on a publicly sensitive issue. In response, a growing number of U.S. marketing executives report that their brands will take a position on controversial topics (Accenture, 2019; Dooley, 2021; *The Highlights and Insights Report, September 2022 - The CMO Survey*, 2022). Research streams in brand activism have centered around consumer sentiments on a company's stance (Milfeld & Flint, 2021; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2022), the role of authenticity (Lim & Young, 2021; Mirzaei et al., 2022; Schmidt et al., 2022; Villagra, Clemente-Mediavilla, et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020), and assessment of risks and benefits to the firm performance (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hydock et al., 2019, 2020; Villagra, Monfort, et al., 2021). While brand activism research generally suggests that taking a position on a controversial issue carries more risks than benefits, the role of authenticity appears to play a critical role in securing a brand's long-term stability (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020). As Moorman (2020) suggests, when brands decide to what extent they want to be engaged in activism, they should strategically evaluate how consistently and authentically they demonstrate their position on an issue and how that could resonate with their target customers.

Thanks to technology advancements, many companies can tap into their customer data and learn more about their customer characteristics, gender being one of them. Gender information can be helpful, especially if a company considers launching an online brand activism campaign focusing on a gender-sensitive issue, such as gender equality or toxic masculinity. When communicating a company's position on a sociopolitical issue, such as gender equality or toxic masculinity, authenticity, and credibility play an important role in message framing so that what the company says is believable. (Kim & Kim, 2014; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Therefore, the focus of this study is to compare web consumer behavior tendencies between males and females using secondary data through the lens of the source credibility theory (Hovland et al., 1953). This theory states that the audience, consumers in this situation, are more likely to be persuaded when a credible source (a company) delivers the message. Since authenticity is a critical concept in brand activism, companies should strongly reconsider their past and future actions, whether they

are willing to practice what they preach and even sacrifice profits to appear authentic and credible. The results should guide companies interested in launching online brand activism campaigns focusing on gender-related issues and help them identify the best channels for target audiences.

Secondary data analyses were performed on mortgage customer data from a large U.S. mortgage company from 2008-2013 (Disch, 2018). The data included customer-level data, Experian consumer appended data, and proprietary third-party data appends. The sample consisted of 15,000 adult consumers (72% male, 26% female, 2.1% unknown gender) from across the U.S. The study explored whether males and females behaved differently as web consumers and what were the highest predictors (gender, geographic region, donor status, income level, home, and family behavior, food snob behavior, gardeners & crafters behavior) of high consumer behavior. Data analyses were performed using the SPSS statistical software package version 27 (IBM SPSS, 2020). Data were screened for assumption violation and possible multicollinearity (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2018), and transformations were performed. A large number of variables in the original dataset, indicating different types of consumer behavior, suggested that interrelations between them could exist. Therefore, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed to test the potential interrelations and to reduce the number of variables (Hair et al., 2019). Oblimin with the Keiser Normalization rotation method was used. Due to problematic cross-loading, two variables were removed from the analysis: do-it-yourself consumer behavior and gift-giving behavior. Ultimately, the EFA helped reduce ten consumer behavior variables to three (home & family, gardeners, and crafters, food snobs) and extracted 55% of the overall variance, barely meeting the 60% rule of thumb criteria for the amount of variance extracted per Hair et al. (2019).

An independent sample *t*-test was performed to test whether females demonstrate significantly higher mean web consumer behaviors than males. In addition, a binary logistic regression was performed to test whether gender and household income were the highest predictors of high web consumer behavior. The independent sample *t*-test results suggested that males, rather than females, demonstrate higher web consumer behavior scores. A high Cohen's *d* confirmed a large effect size for this test, supporting the test results and the relationship between gender and web consumer behavior scores. These findings suggest that channels other than online channels should be strongly considered when communicating the ad campaign to females. This may increase the campaign expenditures as non-online channels should be considered to ensure females are adequately exposed to the new campaign. The overall prediction success rate of the logistic regression was 73.9%. The results suggested that not only gender and household income, but also donor status, home & family behavior, and gardeners' & crafters' behavior were all significant predictors of high web consumer behavior scores and thus, should be taken into consideration when campaign messaging is developed, and channels are selected. While these findings support existing research about online consumer behavior differences by gender and female preference for multiple touchpoints before making a purchase (Ling, 2014; Richard et al., 2010; Wolin & Korgaonkar, 2003), this study extends the literature by exploring gender's role in an online brand activism campaign setting.

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