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# Activist brand perception: Conceptualization, scale development and validation

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## ABSTRACT

Brand activism (BA) has attracted substantial attention due to consumers' rising expectations for brands to address social and political issues. However, empirical research on consumers' understanding of activist brands (i.e., brands that engage in brand activism) remains limited, mainly due to the absence of a valid measurement tool. To fill this gap, the authors introduce a two-dimensional consumer Activist Brand Perception (ABP) scale with eight items. Drawing from extensive literature analysis, relevant manifestations of BA are identified as the foundation for the scale. Through a rigorous scale development process involving qualitative and quantitative assessment, the (ABP) scale emerges as a reliable instrument to capture consumer perceptions of activist brands, enabling researchers to comprehend how consumers view activist brands.

## 1. Introduction

Consumer demand for companies to take a stand and publicly express their views on a variety of controversial social, environmental, economic, or political topics is growing (Edelman, 2021; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Given such expectations, an increasing number of brands have recently begun expressing their opinions on a range of diverse issues, spanning from racial discrimination to COVID lockdowns and environmental problems (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Korschun, Martin, and Vadakkepatt, 2020; Shortall, 2019). Prominent brands, including Hobby Lobby and Ben & Jerry's, are known for their Brand Activism (BA) and increasingly align with pivotal social movements such as LGBTQ+ rights and Black Lives Matter (Eyada, 2020). Nike is actively engaging in activism around social issues, such as racial injustice and police brutality (Eyada, 2020), while Patagonia is well-known for its environmental activism (Peters and Silverman, 2016). However, despite the growing popularity, engaging in BA is no guarantee for business success, as some consumers are skeptical (Edelman, 2019; The Conversation, 2018) and view BA as a marketing ploy (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; The Conversation, 2018). While BA strategies can showcase a brand's stand on divisive issues, they also risk polarizing consumers given the controversial nature of these movements (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021).

Despite being a relatively novel and underexplored phenomenon (Bhagwat et al., 2020; The Conversation, 2018), BA is now gaining increasing research attention (e.g. Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020; Parcha and Westerman, 2020; Hydock, Paharia, and Blair, 2020). However, while prior studies on BA provide valuable foundations on which to build, unresolved issues remain. First, there are some inconsistencies in how the existing body of literature defines BA and its domain (e.g., Appels et al. 2022; Dodd and Supa, 2015; Eilert and Nappier Cherup, 2020; Olkkonen and Morsing, 2022). Second, previous studies often rely on brand-related constructs, such as brand image and brand perception, to capture different aspects of BA (e.g., Bhagwat et al., 2020; Klostermann, Hydock, and Decker, 2022). While these studies have advanced knowledge on BA, they do not provide a broad, non-context-specific operationalization of the construct and, consequently, only offer a fragmented picture regarding manifestations of BA. Third, the perception of BA differs substantially across consumer segments (Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020), and the importance consumers attach to specific controversial issues differs by country (Schlegelmilch and Saracevic, 2022). In turn, this impacts on the motivation and frequency with which brands engage in BA.

Whether brands should or should not take a stand on controversial issues has become even more important in light of various armed conflicts, such as between Russia and Ukraine, which puts many companies

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in a difficult position regarding the proper actions and stance to take (Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship, 2022). In fact, emphasizing the importance of BA for brands, companies, and society in general, the Marketing Science Institute (2016; 2022), reiterated its call for additional research on the topic. We follow this call for research and argue that the unresolved issues point to the need for a valid and reliable measure of consumer perception of BA. Notably, to date there is no generally accepted measurement instrument that captures consumer perceptions toward activist brands (Cammarota et al., 2023). A scale that can capture how consumers perceive activist brands would facilitate research on BA and would also be a valuable management tool.

To this end, our work offers two main contributions. First, building on the existing literature, we review prior insights on the BA construct to reflect on consumer perceptions of activist brands. In doing so, we theoretically develop and empirically validate a new measurement instrument that captures consumer perceptions of activist brands, clarifies the domain of the Activist Brand Perception (ABP) construct, and captures its multidimensional nature.

At the outset, it is important to draw a clear distinction between the consumer perspective, which is the focus of this paper, and the company perspective. BA may be viewed from a company’s “inside out perspective” and focus on how to become an activist brand and what type of activist engagements and controversial topics should be selected by an activist brand. In contrast, ABP provides an “outside in perspective,” as it refers to how stakeholders, and among them foremost consumers, perceive an activist product brand or an activist corporate brand. These two perspectives are analogous to the distinction between the “strategic intent” on the one hand, and consumer perceptions of the strategies actually delivered by a product brand or corporate brand on the other hand.

Creating the new ABP scale, we follow a rigorous scale development approach (Churchill, 1979; Netemeyer, Bearden, and Sharma, 2003) and rely on data from five complementary studies. In assessing the nomological validity (Netemeyer, Bearden, and Sharma, 2003) of the new ABP scale, we identify its common outcomes and show that ABP affects brand attitude, brand reputation, and brand trust. Overall, our new valid and reliable scale of consumer ABP, which can be used in diverse country and industry settings, makes an important contribution to the literature on BA, helps shed further light on the construct, and should motivate further systematic research on the role of BA in the consumer–brand relationship. From a managerial perspective, the findings provide a comprehensive overview of consumer ABP and demonstrate how authenticity and public commitment to BA shapes consumer perceptions

of activist brands.

## 2. Theoretical background and conceptualization of brand activism

### 2.1. Brand activism

The concept of BA can be traced back to the 1970 s and is similar to Sethi’s (1979, p. 70) definition of advocacy as “the propagation of ideas and the elucidation of controversial social issues of public importance.” More recent research understands BA as brands’ public engagement in controversial issues (e.g., Klostermann,Hydock,and Decker, 2022; Sibai, Mimoun,and Boukis, 2021), which overlaps with the notion of corporate social advocacy (Dodd and Supa, 2015). According to Sarkar and Kotler (2021, p. 24), BA “consists of business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society.” Similarly, Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020, p. 461) propose a definition of activism on the corporate level and define corporate activism as “a company’s willingness to take a stand on social, political, economic, and environmental issues to create societal change by influencing the attitudes and behaviors of actors in its institutional environment.” Table 1 presents an overview of the existing definitions and conceptualizations of BA. While it is evident that differences exist in how existing literature defines BA, there is agreement that it pertains to a public demonstration of a stance on a controversial issue. Another communality is that BA relates to an act of a single brand or the entire corporation. As consumers and other stakeholders may not always be aware of the interrelationships between corporations and their myriad brands, this paper takes a more holistic approach and assesses the construct both from a corporate brand and a product brand level. For the purpose of this scale development procedure, we rely on Mukherjee and Althuizen’s (2020) definition of BA, as this operationalization incorporates a broader scope and a wider list of agents compared to the other listed definitions.

Looking beyond the definitional issues, research on BA indicates an asymmetric effect of BA, showing that positive attitudes toward the brand decrease when consumers disagree with the brand’s activist position but neither decrease nor increase when consumers are supportive of the brand’s position (Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020). Parcha and Westerman (2020) show that, depending on the personal relevance of an issue to an individual and the way brands communicate their stance on that particular topic, BA may change that individual’s attitude toward the issue. Bhagwat et al. (2020) demonstrate that, regardless of the

**Table 1**  
Definitions and operationalizations of activism in brand related context.

Form of activism	Definition	Source	Agents	Scope
Brand activism	“The act of publicly taking a stand on divisive social or political issues by a brand or an individual associated with a brand”	Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020, p. 773	Brand, corporation, CEO, employees, and/or other stakeholders	Consumers, corporation, employees, market, and society
	“Business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society”	Sarkar and Kotler 2021, p. 24	Brand, corporation, and/or CEO	Consumers, corporation
Corporate activism	“A company’s willingness to take a stand on social, political, economic, and environmental issues to create societal change by influencing the attitudes and behaviors of actors in its institutional environment.”	Eilert and Nappier Cherup 2020, p. 461	Corporation	Corporation, government, market, and society
Corporate sociopolitical activism	Public demonstration of support for or opposition to one side of a partisan socio-political issue	Exemplary studies: Bhagwat et al., 2020	Corporation	Consumers, corporation, market, and society
CEO activism	CEOs speaking out on issues unrelated to their company’s core business	Exemplary studies: Appels et al. 2022; Olkkonen and Morsing, 2022	CEO	Consumers, corporation, employees, market, and society
Advocacy	„the propagation of ideas and the elucidation of controversial social issues of public importance”	Sethi 1979, p. 70	Brand, corporation	Consumers, market, society
Corporate social advocacy	Brands’ public engagement in controversial issues	Dodd and Supa, 2015	Brand, corporation	Market, society

possible positive effect on firm value, investors are mainly not in favor of brands taking a stand on controversial issues. Moreover, [Hydock, Paharia, and Blair \(2020\)](#) conclude that small brands and companies have a slightly higher chance of benefiting from activism than large companies. Overall, BA comes with high risk ([Hydock, Paharia, and Blair, 2020](#); [Korschun, Martin, and Vadakkepatt, 2020](#)) and may only be effective under a clear strategic foundation ([Cammarota et al., 2023](#)). [Stanley \(2020\)](#) recommends that brands firmly anchor their values in their brand identity to clearly communicate their public stance on controversial issues.

The frequency with which brands engage in BA, the controversial issues on which they focus, and the motivation for engaging in BA differ among countries ([Schlegelmilch and Saracevic, 2022](#)); BA exhibits a lower prevalence in Europe than in the United States, where the majority of activism initiatives originate ([Chatterji and Toffel, 2018](#)). In addition, the issues companies take a stance on are often country specific. For example, while in India religious divides represent a popular BA topic ([Shetty et al., 2023](#)), this issue is not as important in the United States or Europe. Instead, racial (e.g., Black Lives Matter) and idiosyncratic (e.g., gun rights) issues have been subject to BA in the United States, while environmental concerns are an important BA topic in Europe ([Sarkar and Kotler, 2021](#)). Furthermore, the motivations behind BA may differ across countries. While in the United States and India 65 % of consumers expect companies to take a public stance on controversial issues, this percentage is much lower in Europe, with only 33 % of British and 45 % of Italian consumers reporting the same expectations ([Weber Shandwick, 2017](#)). A valid and reliable measurement scale that accounts for the context within which a brand operates would aid understanding of such differences both for international and domestic brands.

## 2.2. Need for a new scale

There are three key reasons underlining the need for a new scale. First, the existing body of research provides divergent views on the domain of BA. For instance, while most of the researchers approach BA on a brand or corporate level (e.g., [Dodd and Supa, 2015](#); [Eilert and Nappier Cherup, 2020](#); [Mukherjee and Althuisen, 2020](#)), some approach it as CEO actions (e.g., [Appels et al. 2022](#); [Olkkonen and Morsing, 2022](#)). Although various forms of activism (e.g., BA, corporate activism, CEO activism) are likely to overlap in practice, understanding the conceptual foundation of different but related terms is important ([Wettstein and Baur, 2016](#)).

Next, research on BA often employs case study approaches (e.g., [Middleton et al., 2021](#); [Sibai, Mimoun, and Boukis, 2021](#)) or event study analyses (e.g., [Bhagwat et al., 2020](#); [Klostermann, Hydock, and Decker, 2022](#)). Given the lack of a valid and reliable scale that could capture consumer perceptions of activist brands, studies have used different brand-related constructs, such as perceived brand authenticity (e.g., [Mukherjee and Althuisen, 2020](#)), brand image (e.g., [Bhagwat et al., 2020](#)), brand perception ([Klostermann, Hydock, and Decker, 2022](#)), and person–organization fit (e.g., [Mukherjee and Althuisen, 2020](#)) to assess consumer reactions to BA. While such approaches have advanced knowledge on BA, given the aforementioned definitions of BA, these proxies capture the BA construct only partially and may be interpreted as separate manifestations of the multidimensional ABP construct. Again, a scale measuring how consumers perceive activist brands would help derive a clear conceptualization of BA.

Finally, the conceptual relatedness of BA also prompts the important question of whether consumers can differentiate BA from corporate social responsibility (CSR), corporate philanthropy, and cause-related marketing (CRM) ([Schlegelmilch and Saracevic, 2022](#)). Addressing this question demands a better conceptualization of the term “brand activism” ([Cammarota et al., 2023](#)). For instance, environmental concern is often related to CSR, so why is Patagonia associated with BA ([Moorman, 2020](#))? Investigating the phenomenon through the lens of

consumers’ perceptions would provide a better understanding of the term.

## 2.3. A conceptualization of brand activism through literature

Along with corporate activism, BA is often associated with other activities, such as CSR, corporate philanthropy, and CRM. We argue that BA and corporate activism both have their roots in CSR. This also holds for corporate philanthropy, as it represents the firm’s voluntary contribution of (non)monetary resources to charitable organizations and promotes social good ([Breeze and Wiepking, 2020](#)). [Varadarajan and Menon \(1988, p. 60\)](#) define CRM as “the process of formulating and implementing marketing activities that are characterized by an offer from the firm to contribute a specified amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-providing exchanges that satisfy organizational and individual objectives.” However, one of the main characteristics that distinguish BA from CSR, corporate philanthropy, and CRM is the type of issues to which these constructs are related. Whereas BA is connected with controversial issues, CSR, corporate philanthropy, and CRM pertain to widely accepted, noncontroversial societal issues ([Bhagwat et al., 2020](#); [Eilert and Nappier Cherup, 2020](#); [Hydock, Paharia, and Blair, 2020](#); [Mukherjee and Althuisen, 2020](#); [Nalick et al., 2016](#)). In contrast to CSR and CRM, BA is associated with issues that go beyond the immediate interest of the brand, and activist brands actively communicate and explain their stance on a controversial topic ([Schlegelmilch and Saracevic, 2022](#)). As such, a consumer ABP scale needs to capture whether an issue supported by a brand is a potentially controversial sociopolitical or environmental issue ([Table 2, manifestation 1](#)). It is important to note that we refer to the key manifestations of BA instead of dimensions of BA, as manifestations provide a better description of BA as an act.

BA represents an active and public fight for change by influencing attitudes and behavior to help resolve a controversial issue ([Eilert and Nappier Cherup, 2020](#); [Hambrick and Wowak, 2021](#); [Wettstein and Baur, 2016](#)). The controversial nature of issues related to BA results in higher risks than CSR, corporate philanthropy, and CRM ([Bhagwat et al., 2020](#); [Hydock, Paharia, and Blair, 2020](#)). In their research on the effects of BA, [Hydock, Paharia, and Blair \(2020\)](#) conclude that the unfavorable consequences of BA, such as distrust, negative attitudes, and value incongruence, are stronger than their favorable counterparts (i.e., trust, positive attitudes, and value congruence). Regardless of the possible negative consequences of BA though, especially with regard to consumers who disagree with the brand’s stance on a certain topic, brands actively engage in activism (e.g., [Appels et al., 2020](#); [Eilert and Nappier Cherup, 2020](#)). As such, a consumer ABP scale needs to include items that specify how actively and publicly a brand advocates an issue ([Table 2, manifestations 2 and 3](#)). In addition, as BA is associated with high risks, the ABP scale should gauge whether consumers are aware of the risks companies take when communicating their stance on controversial issues ([Table 2, manifestation 4](#)).

Although consumers expect brands to take a stance on different issues, they are often skeptical of brands expressing their opinions on controversial topics ([Mirzaei, Wilkie, and Siuki, 2022](#)). Frequently, consumers perceive BA merely as marketing tactics, rather than genuine engagement (e.g., [Bhagwat et al., 2020](#); [Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019](#)), and some scholars perceive BA as a communication strategy (e.g., [Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019](#)). Other researchers argue that brands should actively engage in societal issues (e.g., [Sarkar and Kotler, 2021](#)). Indeed, some brands such as Patagonia successfully communicate their activism through action and not only through marketing campaigns. Thus, whether BA needs to manifest itself in “real actions” or can merely be an active brand communication on a controversial issue is still unclear. The above discussion implies that the ABP scale should include items that look at consumer skepticism towards brands expressing their opinion on controversial topics ([Table 2, manifestation 5](#)). Furthermore, activist engagement can involve different brand representatives ([Bhagwat et al.,](#)

**Table 2**  
Brand activism manifestations based on extant literature.

	Key manifestations <sup>a</sup>	Literature sources (examples)
1	Controversiality of issues	Bhagwat et al. (2020); Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020); Hydock, Paharia, and Blair (2020); Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020); Nalick et al. (2016)
2	Extent of activity of brand engagement	Bhagwat et al. (2020); Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020); Wettstein and Baur (2016)
3	Publicity of brand engagement	Bhagwat et al. (2020); Curry (2020); Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020); Hambrick and Wowak (2021); Wettstein and Baur (2016)
4	Risks associated with brand engagement	Hydock, Paharia, and Blair (2020)
5	Consumer skepticism toward brand engagement	Mirzaei, Wilkie, and Siuki (2022)
6	Activist engagement of different brand representatives	Bhagwat et al. (2020); Moorman (2020); Sarkar and Kotler (2021)
7	Credibility of brand's activist engagement	Wettstein and Baur (2016)
8	Match between the brands core values and the controversial issue on which it takes a stance on	Chatterji and Toffel (2018)
9	Motivation behind brand actions	Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020)
10	Genuineness of brand actions	Chatterji and Toffel (2018)
11	Transparency of brand actions	Chatterji and Toffel (2018)
12	Embeddedness of the issue in the environment	Hambrick and Wowak (2021); Klostermann, Hydock, and Decker (2022); Sarkar and Kotler (2021); Shetty et al. (2023)
13	Consistency brand's activist actions	Bhagwat et al. (2020); Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020); Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020); Wettstein and Baur (2016)
14	Frequency brand's activist actions	Bhagwat et al. (2020); Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020); Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020); Wettstein and Baur (2016)
15	Continuity brand's activist actions	Bhagwat et al. (2020); Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020); Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020); Wettstein and Baur (2016)
16	Brand image	Bhagwat et al. (2020)
17	Brand perception	Klostermann, Hydock, and Decker (2022)
18	Perceived brand authenticity	Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020)
19	Person-organization fit	Cable and DeRue (2002); Jensen, Andersen, and Jacobsen (2019); Lam et al. (2013); Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020); Roberson, Collins, and Oreg (2005)

<sup>a</sup> We refer to manifestations instead of to dimensions, because manifestations provide a better description of BA as an act.

2020; Moorman, 2020). Therefore, a consumer ABP scale should gauge the credibility of the brand's activist engagement and capture whether BA merely consists of communication statements or involves the entire fabric of the brand (Table 2, manifestations 6 and 7).

The key objective of BA is to promote change of public attitudes and behavior toward different societal issues (Eilert and Nappier Cherup, 2020; Sethi, 1979). Therefore, brands need to carefully address the fit between their core values and the controversial issue they aim to take a stance on and ensure that this particular issue corresponds to their identity before communicating their stance publicly (Chatterji and Toffel, 2018). To mitigate consumer skepticism about the underlying motives behind their activism, brands need to be genuinely open and transparent in terms of the controversial issues they support or oppose (Curry, 2020). Therefore, a consumer ABP scale should attempt to measure the match between a brand's core values and the controversial issue on which it takes a stance (Table 2, manifestation 8). Furthermore, the ABP scale needs to gauge motivation, brand genuineness, and

transparency in terms of activism (Table 2, manifestations 9–11).

Skepticism of BA may also be country-specific, as the motivation for engaging in BA differs between countries (e.g., Chatterji and Toffel, 2018), as do the issues on which companies take a stance (e.g., Sarkar and Kotler, 2021). Research has demonstrated an increasing trend of brands to express their opinions on topics such as poverty reduction, tax avoidance of large companies, gender equality, minority rights, environmental concerns, racial equity, income inequality, immigration, food waste, climate change, and others (Hambrick and Wowak, 2021; Klostermann,Hydock,and Decker, 2022). Given the potentially country-specific nature of BA, a consumer ABP scale should measure whether consumers view a controversial issue as idiosyncratic of the environment in which the brand is embedded (Table 2, manifestation 12).

Both expectations and acceptance of companies advocating their position on different controversial topics have increased in recent years (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Korschun,Martin,and Vadakkepatt, 2020; Shortall, 2019). As a result, several brands such as Nike, Hobby Lobby, and Target have increasingly expressed their stance on divisive political or social issues (The Wall Street Journal, 2016). While research has shown that activism can have either positive or negative consequences on a brand (e.g., Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hydock,Paharia,and Blair, 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020; Parcha and Westerman, 2020), neutrality is not an advisable option (Moorman, 2020), as silence can be misinterpreted by the public (Watzlawick and Beavin, 1967). As such, brands should focus on ensuring a long-term match between their identity and brand communication and practice (Müller, 2022). To do so, they should evaluate consumers' perceptions of the strategic foundation for BA. To this end, a consumer ABP scale should capture the consistency, frequency, and continuity of the brand's activist actions (Table 2, manifestations 13–15).

Quantitative studies on BA often use other brand-related constructs as proxies, as a specifically designed measurement instrument capturing consumer perceptions of activist brands does not yet exist. For example, Bhagwat et al. (2020) investigate "brand image" in their study on BA, whereas Klostermann, Hydock, and Decker (2022) use "brand perception." Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) use constructs such as perceived brand authenticity (e.g., Morhart et al., 2015) and person–organization fit (e.g., Cable and DeRue, 2002; Jensen,Andersen,and Jacobsen, 2019; Lam et al., 2013; Levinger, 1980; Roberson,Collins,and Oreg, 2005). In the development of a new consumer ABP scale, a close evaluation of these previously used proxies is necessary to identify aspects that reflect important theoretical underpinning of the BA construct (Table 2, manifestations 16–19). For example, credibility and continuity play an important part in "perceived brand authenticity" (Morhart et al., 2015), while a match between a brand's core values and the controversial issue the brand supports represents the "brand–issue fit" (Lafferty, 2007; Rifon et al., 2004). Given prior research's recommendations to evaluate brand-related constructs and proxies to capture consumer perceptions of activist bands, a consumer ABP scale should capture the image, perceptions, and perceived authenticity of such brands.

### 3. Scale development methodology

To develop the new ABP scale, we followed a rigorous scale development process (Churchill, 1979; Netemeyer,Bearden,and Sharma, 2003), and rely on data obtained through five complementary studies. As a further guidance in structuring our manuscript, we follow a number of exemplary publications on scale development (e.g., Anaza et al., 2021; Iacobucci Ostrom, and Grayson 1995; Jahanvi and Sharma, 2021; Piha,Papadas,and Davvetas, 2021; Schoefer and Diamantopoulos, 2008). Table 3 outlines the scale development process, which includes five focus group discussions aimed at the identification of key manifestations of BA from the perspective of international respondents and 20 personal interviews aimed at item pool generation. Both steps were judged by researchers experienced in scale development and consumer research. Quantitative studies in this process aim at purification of the

**Table 3**  
Scale development process.

Stages of scale development process	Details
Study 1: Construct definition and content domain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 focus group discussions</li> <li>• Qualitative analysis of focus group transcripts to further clarify the construct and its key manifestations</li> <li>• This process results in the confirmation of the 19 key manifestations of BA according to the literature review and identification of six additional manifestations of BA</li> <li>• Three researchers with background in scale development and consumer behavior judge the 25 identified manifestations of BA for representativeness and clarity</li> <li>• We remove 10 key manifestations for content validity and two additional key manifestations for redundancy</li> <li>• We group the remaining 13 key manifestations of BA in nine ABP dimensions, and retain them for the next step</li> </ul>
Study 2: Initial item generation and reduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generation of 46 items based on the nine manifestations of BA</li> <li>• Two researchers with background in scale development and consumer behavior judge the items for representativeness, clarity, and dimensionality</li> <li>• We retain 32 items for the next step</li> </ul>
Studies 3 and 4: Scale purification and item refinement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey to 188 international respondents</li> <li>• 15 items meet the psychometric criteria for the next step</li> <li>• Survey to 200 international respondents</li> <li>• 8 items meet the psychometric criteria for validity tests</li> <li>• Initial reliability assessment</li> </ul>
Studies 5 and 6: Finalization of the scale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey to 387 international respondents</li> <li>• All 8 items meet the psychometric criteria for validity tests</li> <li>• Construct dimensionality</li> <li>• Internal reliability</li> <li>• Convergent and discriminant validity</li> <li>• Nomological validity</li> </ul>

scale, item refinement, finalization of the scale and the empirical assessment of its psychometric properties. Given the country-specific nature of BA (e.g., Weber [Shandwick, 2017](#)), we employed participants from different national backgrounds in all five studies to avoid a potential country-related bias of the new ABP scale. Appendix A1 provides the full initial list of items of the brand orientation scale as well as its progression through to the end of the scale development process.

**3.1. Study 1 – Construct definition and content domain**

Our review of the relevant literature and past proxy measures (e.g., brand–issue fit, perceived brand authenticity) identified 19 key manifestations that could be captured in a consumer ABP scale (e.g. controversiality of the issue, brand’s transparency about its stance on and engagement around a controversial issue, credibility of the brand’s activist engagement, etc.). To confirm their relevance and extend the preliminary set of these manifestations, we conducted five focus groups. We recruited informants from two large Austrian universities and from an international women’s club in Vienna. The groups consisted of six to eight individuals (15 men and 20 women ranging in age from 19 to 74 years), most of whom had a university education (77 %). To obtain insights on the perception of BA from people with different cultural backgrounds, we recruited informants from a variety of countries (i.e., Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Belarus, Brazil, Canada, Germany, India, Italy, Kazakhstan, Russia, Slovakia, Turkey, and the United States). Detailed sample demographics of focus group participants are included in Appendix A2. All focus group discussions were in English. They lasted between 47 and 70 min and were recorded and subsequently

transcribed.

First, we asked participants in all groups to share their understanding of and perception toward activist brands. Next, we moderated the discussion so to reflect on the key manifestations of brand activism identified through our review of the literature (see Appendix A3 for interview guide). We subjected all focus group transcripts to content analysis to identify the main manifestations and characteristics of brand activism from the respondents’ perspective. To synthesize and categorize the focus groups’ data, we used personal notes to connect individual responses of focus group participants to key manifestations of BA identified through the review of the literature. This allowed us to conduct a fine-grained qualitative analysis of the insights obtained through focus group discussions. For example, Lisa said she expects CEOs to publicly comment on controversial issues: *“I think CEOs are often the face of the company, and if they don’t stand behind brand activism, it does not seem genuine.”* This comment supports the need to incorporate items that assess activist engagement of different brand representatives, such as employee engagement, CEO engagement, and investor engagement. Furthermore, Johanna noted that *“the importance and controversial nature of issues brands take a stance on depend on what is going on externally.”* This comment confirms the observation that BA is country-specific and that a consumer ABP scale should incorporate items that measure how embedded an issue is in the environment in which an activist band operates.

Overall, the focus group discussions on BA confirmed the relevance of the manifestations identified in our literature review, but also pointed us to the identification of additional facets of BA that emerged from the quotes of focus group discussants and helped us to extend the list of the manifestations necessary to develop a consumer ABP scale (see [Table 4](#) for additional manifestations of BA that emerged from focus group discussions).

From the focus group discussions and the literature review, we identified 25 key manifestations of BA that helped us generate a first comprehensive list of items to include in our consumer ABP scale. To further refine the initial list of key manifestations, we asked three researchers with a background in consumer behavior to comment on the

**Table 4**  
Additional key manifestations of brand activism identified through focus group discussions.

	Indicative quotes of focus group discussants	Key manifestations
1	I think brands should address controversial topics, but it depends on the approach. It can harm a brand if it takes an aggressive approach.”	This comment implies that the consumer ABP scale should gauge the aggressiveness of the BA approach.
2	“I would expect have a strong position and commitment toward the problem they stand for.”	This indicates that the consumer ABP scale should capture a brand’s commitment to the controversial issue.
3	“Being active means that companies use their knowledge and resources to stand for something that does not necessarily have to be in their field of operation.”	This implies that the consumer ABP scale should capture the resources invested in BA.
4	“Brands should already have achieved something related to the controversial topic.”	This indicates the need to incorporate items that assess a brand’s past experience with and previous achievements in the controversial topic.
5	“I would say that it depends on the industry. I cannot imagine a fashion brand taking a stance on political issues.”	A consumer ABP scale should gauge consumers’ perception of the relevance of activist engagement across different industries.
6	“For transparency reasons, I think it would help to work with other companies or [nongovernment organizations], so that the customers have more trust in campaigns or activities they do.”	This comment implies that a consumer ABP scale should capture possible coalitions advocating controversial issues.

content validity and possible redundancies (Rossiter, 2002). To examine the identified key manifestations of BA in terms of content validity and redundancy, we provided the three researchers with Mukherjee and Althuizen's (2020) definition of BA and asked them to assess each manifestation in relation to "the act of publicly taking a stand on divisive social or political issues by a brand or an individual associated with a brand" (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020, p. 773). We also asked the researchers to identify aspects that cannot be assessed by consumers. Consequently, issues such as risk level, motivation, resources invested, coalition size, and strategic foundation were removed from the list. Furthermore, all three researchers advised us to remove aspects that do not relate to the act of BA itself (e.g., embeddedness of the issue in the environment, brand image, person-organization fit, brand perception, perceived brand authenticity). In their evaluation of the key manifestations of BA, the researchers also identified some other aspects that cannot be gauged by consumers and, consequently, were removed from further considerations (e.g., "consumer skepticism toward BA"; "brand's motivation for engaging in BA"). No additional issues were identified. Based on their nature, the remaining manifestations of BA were grouped together (Appendix A1), and we subsequently used the resulting list of nine key manifestations of BA as a basis for the ABP item pool generation.

Given that the interest of this study lies on consumer perceptions toward activist brands (i.e., brands that engage in the act of brand activism), we define the ABP construct as consumer perceptions toward a brand, or an individual associated with the brand that publicly takes a stand on divisive social or political issues. Concerning the construct dimensionality, given that the identified manifestations of brand activism present key manifestations of the same construct, we formally define ABP as a reflective multidimensional construct (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer, 2001).

### 3.2. Study 2 – Initial item generation and reduction

To further guide the item pool generation, we conducted 20 personal interviews in which we asked respondents to describe an activist brand in relation to the identified key manifestations of BA. Our goal was again to confirm the relevance of the items, to eliminate any redundant items, and possibly to generate any additional manifestations. This approach corresponds to the scale development procedure Schoefer and Diamantopoulos (2008) recommend. For example, we asked respondents what they perceive as active brand engagement in a controversial topic (Table 2, key manifestation 2). The sample consisted of students and employees (46 % male, 54 % female) from a large Austrian university. Respondents ranged in age from 20 to 61 years ( $M = 27$ ), and most had a university education (80 %). From these interviews, insights from the focus group discussions, and an examination of existing scales (some of which also measured some of the identified manifestations), we generated a pool of 46 items. We again asked two colleagues with experience in scale development and consumer research to evaluate the 46 items in terms of content validity and redundancy. For this, we provided these researchers with the BA definition of Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) and asked them to select all the items on the list that did not involve consumer perceptions toward the public act of taking a stand on a potentially controversial issue by a brand or individuals associated with the brand. Following the standard procedure in a scale development process (e.g., Netemeyer, Bearden, and Sharma, 2003), the goal of this step was to ensure direct correspondence between the given ABP definition and the ABP construct. We ended up with 28 items that built the basis for the quantitative testing and purification of our consumer ABP scale.

### 3.3. Studies 3 and 4 – Scale purification and item refinement

In a first stage, we incorporated the item pools generated through the aforementioned procedures into a questionnaire and administered it

online to a first sample of 188 (45 % male, 55 % female) students and employees from a large Austrian university. Respondents ranged in age from 20 to 37 years ( $M = 22$ ,  $SD = 3.085$ ), and 41 % had a university degree (bachelor degree or higher-level education). The respondents' annual net household income ranged from less than €15,000 to over €100,000, with an average of €15,000–€24,999 per year. All survey respondents indicated how strongly the 28 items described their perceptions of activist brands. The scale format ranged from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"), and we subjected the collected data to a maximum-likelihood common factor analysis with oblique rotation (Ping, 2004). This analysis produced a structure consisting of eight factors accounting for 68.59 % of the cumulative variance. Inspection of the factor loadings showed that four items had high cross-loadings ( $>.40$ ), while one item failed to load on any of the identified factors. Thus, we removed these items and reran the factor analysis in three additional rounds, considering the identification of items with no loadings or cross-loadings in each round. The final factor solution consisted of 15 items and three factors, with all items loading significantly on a single factor. We assessed the internal reliability of the derived factors by calculating Cronbach's alpha. Calculation of alpha reliabilities (Table 5) for the three derived factors produced highly acceptable estimates (all  $> 0.8$ ). Overall, the results of the factor analyses show that consumer perceptions of an activist brand relate to three distinct dimensions. "Authenticity of brand activism" describes consumer perceptions of genuineness, reliability, and authenticity of brand activist engagement, while "trustworthiness of brand activism" reflects consumer perceptions of the accuracy with which a brand informs about its activist engagement. "Public commitment to brand activism" describes consumer perceptions of the publicity of a brand's commitment to its stance on and engagement around a controversial issue.

In the second stage of the consumer ABP scale development process, we administered the 15 items retained from the first stage online to a second sample of 200 respondents (49 % male, 50 % female). For this purpose, we employed convenience sampling and collected data from internet workers on Prolific. The sampling frame included native English speakers above 18 years of age, living in all countries where Prolific is available (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, with the exception of Turkey, Lithuania, Colombia, and Costa Rica; Prolific, 2022). In addition, we ensured a gender-balanced sample to allow even distribution of the survey to male and female respondents. Respondents ranged in age from 20 to 74 years ( $M = 36$ ,  $SD = 12.673$ ), and most had a university education (81 %). As in the previous survey, the respondents' annual net household income ranged from less than €15,000 to more than €100,000; with an average of €35,000–€49,999 per year. As in the previous stage, respondents indicated how strongly the 15 items described their perceptions of an activist brand (scale format from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree"). We again subjected the collected data to maximum-likelihood common factor analysis with oblique rotation (Ping, 2004), which resulted in the exclusion of two items due to no loadings and five additional items due to high cross-loadings ( $>.40$ ). The remaining 8 items (Table 6) loaded significantly on one of the two identified factors only (alpha reliabilities for the two derived factors  $> 0.7$ ). Similar to the previous stage, "authenticity of brand activism" resulted in five items describing consumer perceptions of genuineness, reliability, and authenticity of brand activist engagement. With its three items, "public commitment to brand activism" describes consumer perceptions about the publicity of a brands' commitment to its stance on and engagement around a

**Table 5**  
Alpha reliabilities for the derived factors.

Factor	Cronbach's $\alpha$		Number of items
1	Authenticity of brand activism	0.864	6
2	Trustworthiness of brand activism	0.806	3
3	Public commitment to brand activism	0.844	6

**Table 6**  
Pattern matrix and alpha reliabilities for the derived factors.

	Component	
	1	2
<b>Authenticity of brand activism</b> (Cronbach's alpha = 0.922)		
1. An activist brand is genuine about its activist engagement.	0.923	
2. An activist brand is authentic in its activist engagement.	0.914	
3. An activist brand is true to its stance on a controversial issue.	0.913	
4. An activist brand is completely dedicated to its activist engagement.	0.830	
5. An activist brand has a reliable stance (support or opposition) on a controversial topic.	0.779	
<b>Public commitment to brand activism</b> (Cronbach's alpha = 0.879)		
1. An activist brand publically communicates its stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue.		0.940
2. An activist brand publically expresses its stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue.		0.898
3. An activist brand is not silent about its stand on a controversial sociopolitical issue.		0.894

controversial issue.

3.4. Studies 5 and 6 – Finalization of the scale

The next stage in scale development focused on cross-validation and it involved the administration of the purified set of eight items to a third sample of 387 respondents (47 % male, 52 % female). As in the previous stage, we employed convenience sampling and collected data from internet workers on Prolific. We used the same sampling frame as in the previous stage of the ABP scale development process (i.e., a gender-balanced sample of native English speakers above 18 years of age and living in countries where Prolific is available). In addition, the sampling frame of the present round of data collection excluded all respondents from the previous sample. Respondents ranged in age from 20 to 74 years (M = 30, SD = 12.363), and most had a university education (62 %). As in the previous surveys, respondents' annual net household income ranged from less than €15,000 to over €100,000; with an average of €25,000–€34,999 per year. As in the previous stage, respondents indicated how strongly the eight items described their perceptions of an activist brand (scale format from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”).

Subsequently, we subjected the responses of this sample to CFA via AMOS 28 (Table 7). More specifically, we specified a two-factor model for consumer perceptions of activist brands and estimated it with the items allocated to each factor on the basis of the results of the previous stage. We identified no problematic items, and the model produced a good fit for both factors ( $\chi^2/d.f. = 1.468$ , root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = 0.049, comparative fit index [CFI] = 0.990, goodness-of-fit index [GFI] = 0.975, standardized root mean square

**Table 7**  
Fitness indices for the new measurement model.

Name of category	Index	Index value	Level of acceptance	Comments
Absolute fit	$\chi^2$	0.152	$p > 0.05$	Achieved
	RMSEA	0.029	RMSEA < 0.08	Achieved
	GFI	0.984	GFI > 0.90	Achieved
	SRMR	0.033	SRMR < 0.05	Achieved
Incremental fit	AGFI	0.969	AGFI > 0.90	Achieved
	CFI	0.996	CFI > 0.90	Achieved
	TLI	0.995	TLI > 0.90	Achieved
	NFI	0.986	NFI > 0.90	Achieved
Parsimonious fit	$\chi^2/d.f.$	1.329	$\chi^2/d.f. < 3.0$	Achieved

Notes: RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; GFI = goodness-of-fit index; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; AGFI = adjusted goodness-of-fit index; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index, NFI = nonnormed fit index.

residual [SRMR] = 0.041). All items loaded significantly ( $p < 0.01$ ) on their respective factors; there were no cross-loadings and no correlated measurement errors (Netemeyer, Bearden, and Sharma, 2003).

We further followed the recommendations of Netemeyer, Bearden, and Sharma (2003) and tested our operationalization of the ABP construct by comparing our initial model with an alternative unidimensional measurement model. The alternative model ( $\chi^2/d.f. = 25.518$ , RMSEA = 0.252, CFI = 0.723, GFI = 0.751, SRMR = 0.191), in which all eight items loaded on a single factor, showed that the original model was significantly better. Thus, a two-factor CFA model specified and estimated with the items allocated to each factor on the basis of the initial model confirmed the structure of the consumer ABP scale, as indicated by the pattern of significant factor loadings and the highly satisfactory composite reliability estimates.

3.4.1. Internal reliability

To assess the internal reliability for the two ABP dimensions, we calculated Cronbach's alpha. The values were satisfactory (authenticity of brand activism: alpha = 0.890; public commitment to brand activism: alpha = 0.863), exceeding the accepted reliability thresholds (Hair et al., 2014). The average item-to-total correlation for all individual items falling within each dimension indicates satisfactory levels of internal consistency (Bearden and Netemeyer, 1998). More precisely, all individual items associated with authenticity of brand activism show an average item-to-total correlation of 0.621 (all exceeding 0.620), while the individual items falling within public commitment to brand activism show an average item-to-total correlation of 0.680 (all exceeding 0.680).

3.4.2. Convergent and discriminant validity

To evaluate the convergent and discriminant validity of the consumer ABP scale, we calculated the average variance extracted (AVE) for each of the factors. As Table 8 shows, all AVE values exceeded 0.50, providing evidence of convergent validity (Ewing and Napoli, 2005). Furthermore, the conditions for discriminant validity were met, as each subscale's AVE was substantially higher than the squared multiple correlation between the subscales (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Subsequently, we detected a moderate positive correlation between the two ABP subscales ( $r = 0.314$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Thus, the convergent and discriminant validity results show evidence of the ABP scale's construct validity.

3.4.3. Nomological validity

To assess the nomological validity of the new consumer ABP scale, we carried out an additional round of data collection on Prolific. We used the same sampling frame as in the previous stage of the ABP scale development process (i.e., a gender-balanced sample of native English speakers above 18 years of age and living in countries where Prolific is available). Again, the sampling frame of this round of data collection excluded all respondents from the previous samples. As elaborated below, we used three established measures to assess the nomological validity of the new ABP scale (Appendix 4). Nomological validity refers

**Table 8**  
Factor loadings, reliabilities, and average variance extracted of the final sample.

Dimensions	Items <sup>a</sup>	Completely standardized loadings	Composite reliability	AVE
Authenticity of brand activism	1	0.915	0.936	0.748
	2	0.906		
	3	0.905		
	4	0.820		
	5	0.767		
Public commitment to brand activism	1	0.930	0.928	0.810
	2	0.891		
	3	0.879		

<sup>a</sup> See Table 6.

to the identification of theoretically relevant relationships from extant research and the investigation of whether the new scale behaves in a theoretically predictable manner (Netemeyer, Bearden, and Sharma, 2003). Informed by the findings from previous research (e.g., Appels et al., 2020; Hambrick and Wowak, 2021; Jones, Willness, and Madey, 2014; Parcha and Westerman, 2020; Sethi, 1979; Stanley, 2020), we identified brand attitude, brand reputation, and brand trust as potential outcomes of consumers' perceptions of activist brands (Table 9). BA strengthens consumer-brand relationships (Appels et al., 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020) by stimulating consumers' active involvement and advocacy (Rodríguez-Vilá et al., 2020). As consumers commonly use brands for self-expression, BA can add to the symbolic meaning of the brand and, consequently, influence the costs of switching to another brand (e.g., Hydock, Paharia, and Blair, 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020). Furthermore, BA affects different psychological factors, such as brand attitude, brand loyalty, brand trust, and perceived credibility (Appels et al., 2020; Hambrick and Wowak, 2021; Parcha and Westerman, 2020; Sethi, 1979; Stanley, 2020). Consequently, BA affects brand image, its reputation, and prestige (e.g., Hambrick and Wowak, 2021; Jones, Willness, and Madey, 2014), promotes purchase intention (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Dodd and Supa, 2015), and even outweighs price and quality in brand choice (Hydock, Paharia, and Blair, 2020). In addition, convincing BA might attract different stakeholders and effect change in public policy (Chatterji and Toffel, 2018; Eilert and Nappier Cherup, 2020). Relying on the discussion above, we identified three potential outcomes of ABP from the literature and expect ABP to positively affect brand attitude, brand reputation, and brand trust.

Given our aim to develop a valid and reliable measurement instrument that captures the idiosyncratic nature of activist brands from a consumer perspective, we did not focus on any specific countries in this research. As the issues on which companies take a stance are usually country-specific (The Hindu, 2019), consumers' perception of the controversiality of issues and their expectations of companies to take a public stance on potentially divisive issues differ between countries (Weber Shandwick, 2017). Therefore, we did not employ any real brand names at this stage. All survey respondents were asked to express their attitudes toward activist brands through a set of questions related to the two ABP dimensions, brand attitude, brand reputation, and brand trust.

This sample comprised of 458 respondents (50 % male, 48 % female) who ranged in age from 20 to 76 years ( $M = 41$ ,  $SD = 13.814$ ), and most of them had a university education (75 %). The average annual net household income of respondents in this sample fell in the €35,000–€49,999 range.

In our effort to provide evidence of nomological validity of the new ABP scale, we used the regression-based approach as one of the common methods utilized for this purpose (Netemeyer, Bearden, and Sharma 2003, p. 82.). As previously mentioned (sub-section 3.4.), ABP is a two-dimensional measure, so we regressed its two dimensions on brand attitude, brand reputation, and brand trust. As anticipated, the first regression analysis, with brand attitude as the dependent variable, produced a significant R-square of 0.247 ( $p < 0.01$ ), and authenticity of BA and public commitment to BA were significant predictors of brand attitude. The second multiple regression, with brand reputation as the dependent variable, also resulted in a significant R-square of 0.338 ( $p < 0.01$ ). As expected, authenticity of BA and public commitment to BA were significant predictors of brand reputation. Similarly, the final

**Table 9**  
Regression results (standardized coefficients).

ABP subscale	Brand Attitude	Brand Reputation	Brand Trust
Authenticity of brand activism	0.456**	0.525**	0.555**
Public commitment to brand activism	0.096*	0.125**	0.062

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

regression analysis, with brand trust as the dependent variable, produced a significant R-square of 0.335 ( $p < 0.01$ ). However, in the first two analyses authenticity of BA has a stronger effect on the outcome variables than public commitment to BA, and the results of the final regression analysis on this sample indicate a non-significant effect of public commitment to BA on brand trust. The theoretical reasoning behind this result might be found in previous results that draw attention to differences in consumer perceptions toward brands depending on the controversial topic they engage in (Luo and Bhattacharya, 2006). While authenticity of BA puts more emphasis on the brand itself, public commitment to BA puts more emphasis on the controversial issue and has to do with the active communication concerning a brand's stance on a controversial topic. The fact that we did not ask respondents to complete the survey in relation to any specific activist brand or a specific controversial topic might be the reasoning behind our findings in relation to brand trust. Thus, an active brand communication on an unspecified controversial issue might lead to consumer skepticism toward the brand (e.g., Edelman, 2019; The Conversation, 2018) and brand activism might be interpreted as a marketing ploy when no particular association to a specific activist brand is made. Overall, the results of the regression analyses provide support for the nomological validity of the consumer ABP scale. ABP accounts for a substantial proportion of variance in brand attitude (24.7 %), brand reputation (33.8 %), and brand trust (33.5 %), suggesting that the ability of ABP to predict the tested outcome variables is acceptable. While the explanatory power of public commitment to BA was weaker than the authenticity of BA, the outcome of the regression analyses indicates the ability of the ABP scale to capture consumer perceptions of an activist brand. Furthermore, we observe that BA cannot merely be an active brand communication on a controversial issue, and it needs to manifest itself in "real action".

#### 4. Scale description

Descriptive statistics (Table 10) for the two subscales constituting the consumer ABP scale, which contained the purified seven ABP items, are based on a pooling of all four samples ( $N = 1233$ ; see Appendix A5 for sample characteristics). In addition to the standard descriptive statistics, Table 10 includes information on the correlation of each ABP subscale with sociodemographic characteristics. The actual scores obtained on the ABP subscales cover the entire range that is theoretically possible, which indicates that the ABP measure does not suffer from "range restriction" problems and is capable of differentiating among respondents with different perceptions of authenticity of an activist brand and a brand's public commitment to BA.

The average level of the ABP subscales is not considerably different

**Table 10**  
Descriptive statistics of the consumer ABP scale.

	Authenticity of brand activism	Public commitment to brand activism
Number of items	5	3
Theoretical range	5–35	3–21
Actual range	5–35	3–21
M	4.8354	5.4063
SD	1.14777	0.96694
Min.	1	1
Max.	7	7
Coefficient of variance	1.317	0.935
Correlation with age	–0.082**	–0.001
Correlation with education	–0.044	–0.008
Correlation with income	–0.026	–0.018

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

Note: see Appendix for correlation of ABP subscales with sociodemographic characteristics.

from one dimension to the other. However, a closer inspection of [Table 10](#) reveals that public commitment to BA has a stronger effect on consumers' perceptions of activist brands than the authenticity of brand activism. Furthermore, the results indicate a low negative correlation of authenticity of BA with age, suggesting that the importance of a brand's authentic engagement in BA more strongly manifests among younger consumers. In contrast, the results indicate that age is not significantly related to public commitment to BA. Level of education and income level are not significantly related to the two ABP dimensions. Finally, we made no attempt to combine the two ABP subscales into an aggregate measure so as to generate an "overall" ABP score in [Table 10](#). As mentioned previously, BA has different levels, and when using the ABP measure, the individual scores on its subscales should be reported and compared separately.

## 5. Discussion

BA has emerged as an increasingly popular phenomenon in recent years ([Bhagwat et al., 2020](#); [Korschun, Martin, and Vadakkepatt, 2020](#); [Shortall, 2019](#)), and it has attracted a promising stream of research (e.g., [Bhagwat et al., 2020](#); [Hydock, Paharia, and Blair, 2020](#); [Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020](#); [Parcha and Westerman, 2020](#)). Our contribution to the literature on BA is threefold. First, we develop a context-free measurement instrument to capture consumer perceptions of activist brands. Second, we provide psychometric evidence on the dimensionality, reliability, and validity of the ABP scale and suggest that the construct consists of two distinct dimensions that can be employed in substantive research on consumer perceptions of activist brands. While the authenticity dimension addresses consumers' perceptions of genuineness, reliability, and authenticity of brand activist engagement, the public commitment dimension pertains to the publicity of a brand's commitment to its stance on and engagement around a controversial issue. Building on the extant literature on BA and fresh qualitative data, we identify a number of distinct key manifestations of BA and show that the brand-related constructs used to measure BA in previous studies only partially capture the construct. Finally, we confirm previous studies (e.g., [Hambrick and Wowak, 2021](#); [Jones, Willness, and Madey, 2014](#)) on the positive effect of BA on brand attitude, brand reputation, and brand trust and propose a nomological network that relates the ABP construct with other brand-related constructs.

## 6. Theoretical contributions

Our study makes several contributions to the research on BA. First, building on existing literature, we propose a definition of consumer perceptions toward activist brands. Second, we reflect on the similarities and differences between BA, CSR, corporate philanthropy, and CRM. In doing so, we highlight the controversial nature of the issues BA is connected to as the main distinction between BA and related constructs (e.g., [Bhagwat et al., 2020](#); [Eilert and Nappier Cherup, 2020](#); [Hydock, Paharia, and Blair, 2020](#); [Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020](#); [Nalick et al., 2016](#)). Third, we develop a parsimonious, non-context-specific activist brand perception scale that offers a valid and reliable measurement instrument for use in marketing research. The scale captures the authenticity and public commitment of an activist brand. Finally, our nomological validity tests provide empirical support for the theoretical assumption that consumer perceptions toward activist brands positively affect brand attitude, brand reputation, and brand trust (e.g., [Hambrick and Wowak, 2021](#); [Jones, Willness, and Madey, 2014](#)). Overall, the consumer ABP scale offers a new measurement instrument for research on BA and provides a better understanding of the construct and consumers' perceptions of activist brands.

### 6.1. Managerial implications

The present study offers useful insights for marketing practitioners as

well. First, the broad inspection of BA through the development of the ABP construct suggests that, while consumers expect brands to engage in activism around different controversial issues, BA comes with considerable risks for the company. Our findings show that, when engaging in brand activism, activist brands need to be authentic and publicly communicate their stance on the issue. In this sense, brands should carefully consider the issues they want to support and make sure that these align with their core values. For instance, Patagonia is an example of a true activist brand. The company's values and business are focusing on the climate crisis, and the company demonstrates that its core goal goes beyond the immediate business interest of the company ([Patagonia, 2022](#)). A more controversial example refers to Ben & Jerry's and their activism around LGBTQ + rights, especially given the fact that Ben & Jerry's is also present in some countries where religion does not support same-sex marriages and relationships. Given that controversial issues are frequently country-specific, brands need to be particularly careful about the authenticity of their activist actions and their public commitment to the controversial issue, to minimize consumer skepticism toward their activism. Although substantial risks are associated with BA, brands need to bear in mind that not taking a stance may be misinterpreted as actually taking a stance ([Moorman, 2020](#)).

Furthermore, we show that consumer perceptions toward activist brands influence brand attitude, its reputation, and brand trust. This further emphasizes the need for activist brands to be authentic in their activism and publicly communicate their stance on divisive topics. In addition, we observe that the importance of ABP dimensions differs between younger and older consumers. More precisely, as age decreases, the importance of the authenticity of BA increases. Thus, when engaging in activism, brands should consider the demographic characteristics of their target consumers, emphasize the authenticity of their activist engagement, and show public commitment to their BA when targeting younger consumers.

In sum, brands need to determine the relevance of controversial issue they aim to address for their target market and assure that there is a long-term match between the issue and their core values. By doing so, brands also need to pay particular attention to the demographic profile of their consumers and assure that their activist engagement is authentic and publicly communicated.

### 6.2. Limitations and future research

This study is not without limitations. First, scale development was based on convenience samples of native English-speaking internet workers with different national backgrounds. However, as the importance of BA differs among countries ([Schlegelmilch and Saracevic, 2022](#)) and the aim of our ABP scale is to capture consumer perceptions of activist brands independent of the country in which they operate, a conventional random-sampling approach was not feasible. Future research could focus on specific countries to compare consumer perceptions of activist brands between countries.

A second limitation is that the scale was not tested on real activist brand examples. As consumer perceptions toward activist brands might differ depending on the controversial issue the brand takes a stance on, or the industry it operates in, comparing perceptions of real activist brands would be a fruitful future research avenue for which the new consumer ABP scale can provide a valid and reliable measurement instrument to capture consumers' perceptions. Future research could also draw on the ABP scale to understand the role of the focal controversial topic of BA in driving consumer reactions. Another important question, which future research may consider to address is the potential backlash effect between activism at a product brand and at a corporate brand level. The ABP scale may be utilized to understand how it affects the corporate brand if a product brand fails to be perceived as an activist brand, and vice versa.

Furthermore, the ABP scale may help provide insights into the importance of BA engagement for domestic vs. international brands. In

addition, future research may focus in more detail on consumers' ability to differentiate between BA, CSR, corporate philanthropy, and CRM. While these constructs are conceptually closely related (Cammarota et al., 2023; Schlegelmilch and Saracevic, 2022), researchers could provide further insights into when consumers interpret a brand's actions as BA compared to CSR (e.g., Patagonia, Moorman, 2020). Overall, the new ABP scale should motivate further research on the role of BA in the consumer-brand relationship.

#### *CRedit authorship contribution statement*

**Selma Saracevic:** Writing – original draft, Methodology,

Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Bodo B. Schlegelmilch:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Investigation, Conceptualization.

#### **Data availability**

Data will be made available on request.

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## **Appendix**

### *Appendix A1*

Full initial list of items of the brand activism perception scale and its progression through until the end of the scale development process.

#### **1. Initial pool of items (46)**

##### **Controversiality of issues (6)**

1. An activist brand supports a political issue.
2. An activist brand supports a social issue.
3. An activist brand supports an environmental issue.
4. An activist brand supports a workplace issue.
5. An activist brand supports an economic issue.
6. An activist brand supports a legal issue.

##### **Extent of activity of brand engagement; Brand's commitment to the controversial issue (7)**

1. An activist brand supports a controversial sociopolitical issue with its actions.
2. An activist brand supports a controversial sociopolitical issue with its statements.
3. An activist brand actively supports an issue.
4. An activist brand committedly supports an issue.
5. An activist brand is committed to its activist engagement.
6. An activist brand is committed to the issue.
7. An activist brand puts a lot of effort into the issue.

##### **Publicity of brand engagement (7)**

1. An activist brand publicly advocates its stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue.
2. An activist brand is clear about its stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue.
3. An activist brand is open about its stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue.
4. An activist brand expresses its stance on a controversial topic in different media.
5. An activist brand publicly expresses its stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue.
6. An activist brand publically communicates its stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue.
7. An activist brand is not silent about its stand on a controversial sociopolitical issue.

##### **Brand transparency in terms of its activism (4)**

1. An activist brand accurately informs about its stance on a controversial issue.
2. An activist brand accurately communicates its stance on a controversial issue.
3. An activist brand provides consumers with essential information about its activist engagement.
4. An activist brand truly communicates its stance on a controversial issue.

##### **Credibility of brand's activist engagement (3)**

1. An activist brand demonstrates its activism through real action.
2. An activist brand has a strong reputation – is associated with the issue.
3. An activist brand has a reliable stance (support or opposition) on a controversial topic.

##### **Activist engagement of different brand representatives (2)**

1. Within an activist brand, employees are involved/engaged in its activism.
2. Within an activist brand, CEO is involved/engaged in its activism.

##### **The match between a brand's core values and the controversial issue Brand genuineness in terms of its activism (5)**

1. An activist brand's core values match the controversial issue it takes a stance on.
2. An activist brand has similar values to the controversial issue it takes a stance on.
3. An activist brand is genuine about its activist engagement.
4. An activist brand is true to its stance on a controversial issue.
5. An activist brand is authentic in its activist engagement.

##### **Consistency of brand's activist actions; Continuity of brand's activist actions; Brand's past experience with the controversial topic (7)**

1. An activist brand is completely dedicated to its activist engagement.
2. An activist brand is fully engaged in the controversial issue.
3. An activist brand continuously supports an issue.
4. An activist brand is continuously engaged in an issue.
5. An activist brand is consistent about its activist actions.
6. An activist brand does not change its stance on a topic over time.
7. An activist brand communicates its stance on a controversial topic over a longer period.

##### **Frequency of brand's activist actions (5)**

1. An activist brand is frequently engaged in activist actions.
2. An activist brand engages daily in its activist actions.
3. An activist brand engages weekly in its activist actions.
4. An activist brand is engaged in activist actions over months.

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5. An activist brand is engaged in activist actions over years.
- 2. Set of items after expert judges (28)**
- Authenticity of brand activism (6)**
1. An activist brand demonstrates its activism through real action.
  2. An activist brand has a reliable stance (support or opposition) on a controversial topic.
  3. An activist brand is genuine about its activist engagement.
  4. An activist brand is true to its stance on a controversial issue.
  5. An activist brand is authentic in its activist engagement.
  6. An activist brand is completely dedicated to its activist engagement.
- Focus of brand activism (5)**
1. An activist brand supports a socio-political issue.
  2. An activist brand supports an environmental issue.
  3. An activist brand supports a workplace issue.
  4. An activist brand supports an economic issue.
  5. An activist brand supports a legal issue.
- Short-term/long-term activist engagement (4)**
1. An activist brand engages daily in its activist actions.
  2. An activist brand engages weekly in its activist actions.
  3. An activist brand is engaged in activist actions over months.
  4. An activist brand is engaged in activist actions over years.
- Value congruence of brand activism (4)**
1. An activist brand's core values match the controversial issue it takes a stance on.
  2. An activist brand has similar values to the controversial issue it takes a stance on.
  3. An activist brand is continuously engaged in an issue.
  4. An activist brand continuously supports an issue.
- Trustworthiness of brand activism (3)**
1. An activist brand accurately informs about its stance on a controversial issue.
  2. An activist brand accurately communicates its stance on a controversial issue.
  3. An activist brand provides consumers with essential information about its activist engagement.
- Public commitment to brand activism (6)**
1. An activist brand supports a controversial sociopolitical issue with its actions.
  2. An activist brand supports a controversial sociopolitical issue with its statements.
  3. An activist brand publicly expresses its stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue.
  4. An activist brand publicly communicates its stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue.
  5. An activist brand is not silent about its stand on a controversial sociopolitical issue.
  6. An activist brand committedly supports an issue.
- 3. Items retained after initial screening (15)**
- Authenticity of brand activism (6)**
1. An activist brand is true to its stance on a controversial issue.
  2. An activist brand is genuine about its activist engagement.
  3. An activist brand has a reliable stance (support or opposition) on a controversial topic.
  4. An activist brand demonstrates its activism through real action.
  5. An activist brand is authentic in its activist engagement.
  6. An activist brand is completely dedicated to its activist engagement.
- Trustworthiness of brand activism (3)**
1. An activist brand provides consumers with essential information about its activist engagement.
  2. An activist brand accurately communicates its stance on a controversial issue.
  3. An activist brand accurately informs about its stance on a controversial issue.
- Public commitment to brand activism (6)**
1. An activist brand publicly communicates its stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue.
  2. An activist brand publicly expresses its stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue.
  3. An activist brand is not silent about its stand on a controversial sociopolitical issue.
  4. An activist brand continuously supports an issue.
  5. An activist brand is continuously engaged in an issue.
  6. An activist brand committedly supports an issue.
- 4. Final list of items after scale purification (8)**
- Authenticity of brand activism (5)**
1. An activist brand is genuine about its activist engagement.
  2. An activist brand is authentic in its activist engagement.
  3. An activist brand is true to its stance on a controversial issue.
  4. An activist brand is completely dedicated to its activist engagement.
  5. An activist brand has a reliable stance (support or opposition) on a controversial topic.
- Public commitment to brand activism (3)**
1. An activist brand publicly communicates its stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue.
  2. An activist brand publicly expresses its stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue.
  3. An activist brand is not silent about its stand on a controversial sociopolitical issue.
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*Note:* At the item generation stage, we approach every identified key manifestation of brand activism from the perspective of consumers, i.e., the focus lies on how do consumers perceive activist brands in relation to the identified manifestations of brand activism (e.g., "controversiality of issues": how do consumers perceive activist brands in relation to the controversial nature of the issue the brand takes a stance on?).

## Appendix A2

Study 1: Detailed description of the demographic profile of the focus group participants.

		N =	%
<b>Focus group 1 (International group)</b>		8	
Nationality	Austria	1	12.5
	Australia	1	12.5
	Belarus	1	12.5
	Germany	2	25
	Russia	2	25
	USA	1	12.5
Gender	Male	4	50
	Female	4	50
Age of focus group participant	21	2	25
	22	2	25
	27	1	12.5
	35	1	12.5
	47	1	12.5
	Level of education	Secondary education	2
	Postsecondary/higher education (college or university)	6	75
<b>Focus group 2 (Domestic: Austrian/German group)</b>		8	
Nationality	Austria	1	12.5
	Germany	7	87.5
Gender	Male	2	25
	Female	6	75
Age of focus group participant	21	1	12.5
	22	1	12.5
	23	2	25
	24	3	37.5
	25	1	12.5
Level of education	Secondary education	1	12.5
	Postsecondary/higher education (college or university)	7	87.5
<b>Focus group 3 (International group)</b>		7	
Nationality	Canada	1	14.29
	Italy	1	14.29
	Slovakia	1	14.29
	USA	4	57.14
Gender	Male	2	28.57
	Female	5	71.43
Age of focus group participant	19	1	14.29
	20	1	14.29
	21	1	14.29
	23	1	14.29
	26	1	14.29
	74	1	14.29
Level of education	Secondary education	3	42.86
	Postsecondary/higher education (college or university)	4	57.14
<b>Focus group 4 (International group)</b>		6	
Nationality	Bangladesh	1	16.67
	Brazil	1	16.67
	Germany	1	16.67
	India	1	16.67
	Kazakhstan	1	16.67
	Turkey	1	16.67
Gender	Male	4	66.67
	Female	2	33.33
Age of focus group participant	21	1	16.67
	24	3	50
	28	2	33.33
Level of education	Secondary education	1	16.67
	Postsecondary/higher education (college or university)	5	83.33
<b>Focus group 5 (Domestic: Austrian/German group)</b>		6	
Nationality	Austria	4	66.67
	Germany	2	33.33
Gender	Male	3	50
	Female	3	50

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Age of focus group participant	20	1	16.67
	24	4	66.67
	25	1	16.67
Level of education	Secondary education	1	16.67
	Postsecondary/higher education (college or university)	5	83.33

Appendix A3

Study 1: Interview outline with focus group participants during the stage of construct definition and content domain

- What are examples of controversial issues today? Please think about political, social, environmental, workplace, economic, legal issues.
- Have you ever come across the terms “corporate activism” or “brand activism”?
- How would you describe “brand activism”?
- Do you think companies should take a stance in addressing controversial issues?
- What would you expect companies to do?
  - o CEO publicly comments on issues.
  - o Companies change how they do business.
  - o Companies change what they sell.
  - o Companies change their marketing approach.
  - o Anything else
- How would you characterize/describe an activist brand?
- What is the role of individual brands in addressing controversial issues?
  - o Are there issues brands should not get involved in?
  - o Why?
  - o Why not?
- Would you expect brands to act differently in different industries?
  - o Why?
  - o Why not?
- What can brands do to build trust in the market/society?
- How important is it to you that brands take a stance on controversial issues?
- Can you think about a brand that is associated with certain societal issues?
- Does this influence the brands you like / the way you shop?
- Do you think that brands should follow (social) trends or create them?
- What would be the best way to do it? Examples?

Note: The above format provided a structure for each focus group discussion. Sub-questions were used to probe deeper to obtain concrete examples, illustrations and other insights.

Appendix A4

Measurement of brand Attitude, brand Reputation, and brand trust

Construct	Operationalization	Source
Brand attitude	Measured on a seven-item seven-point differential scale: 1. 1 = “An activist brand is a bad brand”; 7 = “An activist brand is a good brand” 2. 1 = “I dislike an activist brand”; 7 = I like an activist brand” 3. 1 = “I feel negative toward an activist brand”; 7 = “I feel positive toward an activist brand” 4. 1 = “an activist brand is awful”; 7 = “An activist brand is nice” 5. 1 = “An activist brand is unpleasant”; 7 = “An activist brand is pleasant” 6. 1 = “An activist brand is unattractive”; 7 = “An activist brand is attractive” 7. 1 = “I disapprove of an activist brand”; 7 = “I approve of an activist brand” Respondents rated their overall impression of an activist brand.	Bruner, Hensel, and James (2005)
Brand reputation	Measured on an eight-item seven-point differential scale: 1. Not reputable/highly reputable 2. Not trustworthy/trustworthy 3. Usually wrong/usually correct 4. A follower/a leader 5. Last with new products/first with new products 6. Ignorant/knowledgeable 7. Not reputable/reputable 8. Unreliable/reliable Respondents rated their overall opinion of an activist brand.	Bruner, James, and Hensel (2001)
Brand trust	Measured on a four-item seven-point scale (1 = “strongly disagree”; 7 = “strongly agree”): 1. I trust an activist brand. 2. I rely an activist brand.	Bruner, Hensel, and James (2005)

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Construct	Operationalization	Source
	3. An activist brand is an honest brand.	
	4. An activist brand is safe.	

Appendix A5

Scale description: Detailed description of the demographic profile of the participants in ABP scale development process.

Sample based on the pooling of all four samples (Study 2—6)		N = 1233	%
Nationality	Austria	33	2.68
	Australia	17	1.38
	Canada	3	0.24
	France	27	2.19
	Germany	25	2.03
	Greece	6	0.49
	Iran	3	0.24
	Ireland	38	3.08
	Israel	4	0.32
	New Zealand	9	0.73
	Pacific Island	3	0.24
	Pakistan	5	0.41
	Philippines	3	0.24
	Poland	15	1.22
	Scotland	63	5.11
	Singapore	5	0.41
	Slovenia	12	0.97
	South Africa	92	7.46
	UK	802	65.04
	USA	65	5.27
Zimbabwe	3	0.24	
Gender	Male	592	48
	Female	631	51.2
	Transgender	2	0.2
	Non-binary/Non-conforming	6	0.5
Level of education	Prefer not to say	2	0.2
	Elementary/primary education	13	1.1
	Secondary education/Postsecondary/higher education (college or university)	822	66.7
Income level (€)	Under 15.000	241	19.5
	15.000 – 24.999	203	16.5
	25.000 – 34.999	165	13.4
	35.000 – 49.999	224	18.2
	50.000 – 74.999	209	17
	75.000 – 99.999	113	9.2
	100.000 and over	78	6.3
Age	18	4	0.3
	19	36	2.9
	20	135	10.9
	21	87	7.1
	22	66	5.4
	23	40	3.2
	24	47	3.8
	25	41	3.3
	26	26	2.1
	27	25	2
	28	38	3.1
	29	36	2.9
	30	43	3.5
	31	27	2.2
	32	22	1.8
	33	26	2.1
	34	27	2.2
	35	36	2.9
	36	28	2.3
	37	33	2.7
	38	25	2
39	27	2.2	
40	20	1.6	
41	21	1.7	
42	18	1.5	
43	17	1.4	
44	14	1.1	

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Sample based on the pooling of all four samples (Study 2—6)	N = 1233	%
45	7	0.6
46	10	0.8
47	14	1.1
48	15	1.2
49	18	1.5
50	21	1.7
51	10	0.8
52	13	1.1
53	11	0.9
54	11	0.9
55	10	0.8
56	5	0.4
57	5	0.4
58	12	1
59	11	0.9
60	15	1.2
61	2	0.2
62	9	0.7
63	7	0.6
64	12	1
65	8	0.6
66	4	0.3
67	5	0.4
68	9	0.7
69	2	0.2
70	3	0.2
71	6	0.5
72	3	0.2
73	4	0.3
74	5	0.4
79	1	0.1

Appendix A6

Correlation of ABP subscales with sociodemographic characteristics (N = 1233).

Correlation with	Variable type	Correlation test	Authenticity of brand activism		Public commitment to brand activism	
Age	Ratio	Pearson's	-0.082**	p = 0.004	-0.001	p = 0.977
Education	Ordinal	Spearman's	-0.044	p = 0.126	-0.008	p = 0.791
Income	Ordinal	Spearman's	-0.026	p = 0.353	-0.018	p = 0.534

\*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01.

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