AUTHENTICATING BRAND ACTIVISM:

NEGOTIATING THE BOUNDARIES OF FREE SPEECH TO MAKE A CHANGE

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Abstract

Activist brands commonly engage in controversies to redefine which opinions and ideas are acceptable to express publicly. We conceptualize this practice as free speech boundary work, that is, negotiating the social norms defining which opinions and ideas are acceptable to express publicly. Thus, how can activist brands negotiate the boundaries of free speech to authenticate their activist positioning? By conducting a comparative case study of 18 activist brands, we identify three controversial strategies –creating monstrous hybrids, challenging the establishment, and demonstrating exemplarity– each of them challenging the boundaries of free speech through a distinct mechanism. The results show that whether these strategies authenticate brands' activism depends on their ability to communicate brands' moral competency, defined in terms of moral sensitivity, moral vision, and moral integration. This research contributes to the literature on brand activism by proposing an integrative framework that articulates the mechanisms underlying the reformative power of controversial brand activism. Second, we contribute to the literature on brand activism authentication by introducing a competency-oriented view that reveals the heterogeneous and multidimensional nature of activism authenticity and expands our conception of the spectrum of moral territories with which activist brands can engage.

Keywords

Brand activism, free speech boundary work, controversial branding, moral competency, brand morality, economies of worth

1. INTRODUCTION

Many brands strive to position themselves as activists, that is, moral actors promoting social, legal, business, economic, political, and environmental reform through their communication and practice (Sarkar and Kotler 2018). Brand activism can transform markets and society by "shaping what is considered right/wrong, good/bad, or worthy/unworthy in the industries in which [brands] operate" (Wieser, Hemetsberger, and Luedicke 2019, p. 153). With nearly two-thirds of consumers expecting brands to work to improve the state of society, brand activism can also be profitable (Accenture 2018). Brand activism differentiates from CSR-oriented competitors (Gaines-Ross 2017; Sarkar and Kotler 2018; cf. Bhagwat et al. 2020), enhances favorable brand attitudes and brand trust (Bhattacharya and Sen 2004; Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020), heightens brand edginess and resonance (Holt and Cameron 2010), fosters purchases (Edelman 2018), and commands price premiums (Sarkar and Kotler 2018).

Brands that position themselves as activists commonly engage in controversies with the aim of redefining which opinions and ideas are acceptable to express publicly (Vredenburg et al. 2020; Bhagwat et al. 2020). Examples abound, from sanitary towels brand Nana breaking the taboo of female genitalia in its feminist campaign "viva la vulva", to Lush whistleblowing about unethical undercover police investigation practices, Ben & Jerry's giving a voice to minorities stifled by the American government, and Starbucks condemning Donald Trump's attacks on Muslims and immigrants as hate speech to be censored. We conceptualize this practice as free speech boundary work, that is, negotiating whether social norms defining which opinions and ideas are acceptable to express publicly, should be created, tightened, maintained, loosened, or suppressed (Midtbøen, Steen-Johnsen, and Thorbjørnsrud 2017).

Free speech boundary work is a double-edged sword for activist brands. Successful negotiation of free speech boundaries generates widespread praise: brand audiences view activist brands' behavior as a confirmation of their commitment to reform moral judgments (Schöps, Wegerer, and Hemetsberger 2017; Wieser et al. 2019). Yet, audiences can also condemn activist brands' behavior as inauthentic (Vredenburg et al. 2020) and accuse brands of "woke washing" (Eilert and Nappier Cherup 2020, p. 461; Sobande 2019, p.1; Moorman 2020, p. 390), impacting negatively their financial results (Bhagwat et al. 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020) and potentially damaging the moral reform they are supporting.

While knowing how to negotiate the boundaries of free speech is essential for activist brands' authentication, current knowledge of how activist brands do it is fragmented, the practices described remaining tactical (Holt and Cameron 2010; Wieser et al. 2019) and bounded to specific issues, such as body positivity (Schöps et al. 2017) or vulgarity (Brown and Schau 2001). Thus, prior literature lacks an integrative framework to explain the process through which brand activism unfolds in the contemporary public space. To address this gap, we ask: How can activist brands negotiate the boundaries of free speech to authenticate their activist positioning?

To address this question, we conducted a qualitative study, employing a comparative case study approach (Holt 2004; Eisenhardt 1989). We rely on archival data of 18 activist brands associated with 113 controversies and operating in diverse markets, from fast-moving consumer goods to service and non-profit brands. Data include media articles, blog posts, academic articles, case studies, ads, brand content, and social media posts.

We identify three *controversial strategies*, each of them challenging the boundaries of free speech through a distinct mechanism. Creating monstrous hybrids blurs the boundaries of free speech, challenging the establishment shifts its boundaries, and demonstrating exemplarity

introduces new boundaries to free speech. To successfully authenticate brand activism, controversial strategies must display moral competency that is, an ability to pass accurate moral judgements. Stakeholders assess the moral competency of controversial strategies based on the proficiency they manifest in three *moral skills*: moral sensitivity that is, brands' ability to recognize the moral content of situations, moral vision that is, brands' insight into the future of morality, and moral integration that is, brands' ability to pursue their moral beliefs in all situations. Stakeholders judge brands as true activists if their strategies demonstrate competency in all skills. Stakeholders judge brands as deviant, opportunistic, or conformist if they demonstrate poor sensitivity, integration, or vision respectively.

Our research contributes to prior literature in two ways. First, we articulate the mechanisms of free speech boundary work underlying the reformative power of controversial brand activism. We extend prior understanding of brand activism by proposing an integrative framework that brings coherence to presently fragmented knowledge and introduces a new strategy to conduct brand activism. In doing so, we expand our understanding of the role of market actors in free speech and illuminate free speech as variable (vs. fixed) and as a responsibility (vs. a right). Second, we extend the understanding of brand activism authentication by introducing a competency-oriented view that conceives authenticity as a more heterogeneous and multidimensional phenomenon than previously believed and expends the spectrum of moral territories with which activist brands can engage.

2. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Defining Brand Activism

Similar to entrepreneur activism (Esper et al. 2017), investor activism (Kish and Fairbairn 2018), and corporate sociopolitical activism (Bhagwat et al. 2020), brand activism represents a form of market-based activism that challenges conceptions of good in markets' socio-technical arrangements. Brand activism consists of business efforts centered on a brand that aims to "promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to make improvements in society" (Sarkar and Kotler 2018, p. 554).

Based on a critical review of the literature on marketplace activism, we introduce three markers that delineate an activist brand: an activist brand is (1) a moral subject (2) that reforms dominant moral judgments (3) to promote social benefits. First, activist brands are *moral subjects*, in that their stakeholders perceive them as "purpose- and values-driven" entities (Vredenburg et al. 2020, 447) having a moral "conscience" (Sarkar and Kotler 2018, p. 707) that can be used to influence the morality of others (Hoppner and Vadakkepatt 2019). Second, activist brands *reform moral judgments*, challenging existing judgments and promoting alternative ones. This entails acting like "moral entrepreneurs" (Wieser et al. 2019, p. 151) and performing "ideological edgework" (Schöps et al. 2017, p. 475). Activist brands are therefore more radical than responsible brands that follow corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020). Third, activist brands explicitly aim to *promote social benefits* by working to make markets more conducive to justice, freedom, and happiness (Westermann-Behaylo, Rehbein, and Fort 2015). Activist brands can focus on social, legal, business, economic, political, or environmental social benefits (Sarkar and Kotler 2018). They can promote those benefits through both intangible messaging work and the implementation of tangible changes in the way the organization they are embedded in operates (Vredenburg et al. 2020). Promoting social benefits differentiates activist brands from controversial brands. While controversial brands also

challenge judgments, they do not explicitly claim to do so for moral reasons (Brown and Schau 2001; Giesler 2012; Laermer and Simmons 2007).

Brand activism has recently generated much academic interest as evolutions in consumer culture seem to increasingly impose activism as a point of parity for many global brands (Hoppner and Vadakkepatt 2019). While prior literature has established that reforming moral judgments is central to being an authentic activist brand (Vredenburg et al. 2020; Moorman 2020), the process underlying authentic moral reform remains unclear, as we expose in the next section.

2.2 Activist Brands' Reform of Moral Judgments

Activist brands can reform their audience's moral judgment either through a persuasive or a controversial pathway. Early research on activist brands, based on a cultural branding perspective, focuses on the persuasive pathway through which brands shift moral judgments about products in a category by arousing feelings of inspiration among consumers (Moorman 2020). For example, Clearblue inspired many women to re-evaluate pregnancy test devices, from intrusive objects of medical knowledge to empowerment tools enabling women to claim control over their bodies (Holt and Cameron 2010). To persuade consumers, activist brands develop "cultural authority" (Moorman 2020, p. 389). Brands do so by offering cathartic moral innovations that allow consumers to overcome contradictions between the "dominant ideology" (Holt and Cameron 2010, p. 187) of a product category and their life experiences. Over time, this persuasion work can transform the moral norms of an entire product category (Holt 2004).

While the persuasive pathway is very attractive, its scope tends to be limited. The range of examples in the literature seems to indicate that cultural authority is an option for brands looking to reform moral judgments in product categories, but not for brands looking to engage with moral

issues unrelated to their product categories. This has become problematic over the last decade as participating in broader societal conversations is increasingly growing into a point of parity for brands (Hoppner and Vadakkepatt 2019).

A growing stream of research highlights that activist brands can also reform moral judgments through a controversial pathway (Bhagwat et al. 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020). In this pathway, activist brands engage in controversies, public debates where different actors oppose their views (Blanchet and Depeyre 2016). Brands can focus on nurturing existing controversies (Eilert and Nappier-Cherup 2020) by demonstrating "support or opposition to one side of a partisan issue" (Moorman 2020, p. 389). Brands can also focus on generating new controversies by making shocking statements or revelations around societal issues (Scholz and Smith 2019). In both cases, brands are orchestrating public discussions of what ideas and opinions are "right/wrong, good/bad, or worthy/unworthy" (Wieser et al. 2019, p. 153) to express in the public space.

We conceptualize the mechanism of moral judgment reform through controversy as *free speech boundary work*. While free speech is the right to communicate publicly opinions and ideas unrestrained (Lipschultz 2000; Midtbøen et al. 2017), it is always bounded by social norms defining what can and cannot be said in public. Free speech boundary work is the practice of negotiating whether social norms delineating free speech should be created, tightened, maintained, loosened, or suppressed (Midtbøen et al. 2017). Rooted in the communication perspective of free speech theory (Maussen and Grillo 2014; Midtbøen et al. 2017; Wessel-Aas, Fladmoe, and Nadim 2016), this definition of free speech boundary work includes defining its formal boundaries (i.e., laws characterizing what constitutes for example defamation, copyright violation, or the right to privacy) enforced through lawsuits and censorship, but also its informal boundaries (i.e., mores

and customs characterizing what constitutes, for example, taboo, obscenity, or vulgarity) enforced through various forms of social disapprobation such as “pressure, self-censorship, exclusion and stigma” (Midtbøen et al. 2017, p.16; Greenawalt 1989).

Prior research articulates several tactical practices used by activist brands to define and negotiate the boundaries of free speech. These studies tend to be case-based, revealing practices that are generally bound to specific moral objects. For example, some garment brands like American Apparel sparked moral debate around female embodiment by generating “provocative visual performances of the body” (Schöps et al. 2017, p 474) and engaging in “femvirtising” (Sobande 2019, 121). Other garment brands have challenged the boundaries of vulgarity by disseminating ads with sexually explicit content or disrespecting religious beliefs (Brown and Schau 2001). While a few studies adopt a broader angle, the practices this stream identifies remain scattered. For example, research recommends that brands try “capering” (i.e., experimenting with risk; Mills, Patterson, and Quinn 2015), engage in “flyting” (i.e., ritualized exchange of insults; Scholz and Smith 2019), use “cultural jujitsu” (i.e., fight market leaders by presenting them as Goliaths oppressing the small David brand; Holt and Cameron 2010), or perform “protestainment” (i.e., deploying rhetorical tactics focused on the stylization of a leader figure; Wieser et al. 2019). Finally, most studies use a single-brand case and study one or a limited number of controversies, limiting variation in the data observed and, thus, the breadth of theorization (Stake 2013).

In summary, prior research shows that authentic activist brands reform moral judgments through persuasion by developing their cultural authority but also through controversies by negotiating the boundaries of free speech. Yet, knowledge on how brands practice free speech boundary work remains limited in scope and fragmented. Prior literature lacks an integrative framework to explain how activist brands negotiate the boundaries of free speech. To complement

this gap, we need to understand how social actors form moral judgments about the worth of public speech and action.

2.3 The Social Formation of Moral Judgments Through the Economies of Worth

To understand how activist brands negotiate the boundaries of free speech, we need to understand how brands and their stakeholders form moral judgments (Kleiser et al. 2003; Lo, Tsarenko, and Tojib 2019) about what can be said during public debates. The economies of worth (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) provides a conceptual lens to do so. This theory characterizes moral judgment as a social process of justification unfolding during public debates or moral controversies and relying on orders of worth (Demers and Gond 2020; Dionne, Mailhot, and Langley 2019). Orders of worth are moral worlds that individuals leverage to justify their moral stance (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Dionne et al. 2019). Each order of worth consists in a set of principles to judge what is worthy and unworthy, integrated around a higher-order principle.

Prior research has identified eight common orders of worth based on extensive empirical work and studies of different strands of moral philosophy (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Cloutier and Langley 2013; Dionne et al. 2019; Patriotta, Gond, and Schultz 2011). In short, when using the *inspired* order of worth, social actors judge an entity's moral worth primarily according to its creativity, passion, and grace. In the *domestic order*, judgments of moral worth are based on alignment with traditions and hierarchy. The *fame order* values public recognition and others' opinions. In the *civic order*, moral worth is judged with respect to laws and contribution to collective interests and well-being. The *market order* values competitiveness and the free circulation of products. In the *industrial order*, judgments of moral worth are made according to efficiency, performance, and productivity. In the *green order*, the moral worth judgments are

founded on sustainability and renewability. Finally, the *project order* situates worth in interconnectedness and autonomy.

Social actors, such as organizations, brands, and public figures, often disagree on the applicability of orders of worth, generating conflicts as they evaluate the worth of actors, objects, or actions publicly debated according to diverging criteria (Cloutier and Langley 2013; Patriotta et al. 2011). Social actors engage in evaluative moves (Dionne et al. 2019) during conflicts, debating strategies whereby they leverage principles from the different orders of worth to justify their beliefs about what is morally worthy or unworthy.

In summary, the theory of the economies of worth offers a conceptual vocabulary to understand how social actors collectively construct moral judgments when different evaluations of moral worth are debated. In our study, we draw on this vocabulary to analyze how brands utilize orders of worth to influence the formation of moral judgments among their audiences about the boundaries of free speech. We now turn to our empirical study.

3. METHODOLOGY

To address our research question, we used a comparative case study approach (Eisenhardt 1989; Holt 2004; Miles and Huberman 1994; Yin 2003), selecting 18 cases of brands attempting to achieve an activist positioning. We observed not only multiple controversies but also multiple brands, allowing for a more complete and robust theorization of the phenomenon (Stake 2013). Gathering controversies across brands maximizes variation, enabling cross-case comparisons to overcome the idiosyncrasies of individual cases (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007; Yin 2003).

3.1 Sample

We sampled activist brands negotiating the boundaries of free speech through theoretical sampling by relying on three steps. First, we searched Google and the Nexis database for brands that position themselves as activists, using labels such as “prosocial,” “responsible,” “engaged,” or “activist.” While these labels can describe a wide range of positionings, they were necessary as social and market actors use them at times to describe activist brands. We then manually analyzed the data to eliminate CSR brands and focus on activist brands using the three markers identified in the literature review.

Second, because we focus on the controversial brand activism pathway, we narrowed down the search to brands described in the Nexis database as generating controversies, using various keywords such as “controversial,” “polemic,” “dispute,” “contentious,” “scandalous,” “censor,” “conflict,” and “love and hate” brands. We excluded brands that were the object of reputation crises, service failure crises, and word-of-mouth-oriented controversies, that is, brands that passively endure controversies. Rather, we focused on brands that either created new controversies or leveraged existing controversies by joining or adding to the public debate. We arrived at a sample of 48 brands.

Third, we reduced the sample to focus on the brand cases most conducive to theory development. To do so, we followed recommendations to select the richest cases by focusing on the ones displaying the most notable and complex controversies (Blanchet and Depeyre 2016). We evaluated controversy significance by its number of mentions in English-speaking media listed in the Nexis database. We also searched for polar types (i.e., extreme cases) to gain maximum contrasting across cases and, thus, develop a theory that is more robust and less context-sensitive (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). To do so, we selected brands that have positioned themselves as activists for various lengths of time and engaged in controversies at

various frequencies. We also selected cases maximizing variation across product categories and times (from 1982 to 2020) as social norms about the nature and scope of activism change over time and across industries (Moorman 2020; Tengblad and Ohlsson 2010). We finally selected 18 brand cases engaged with 113 controversies spread over 38 years (see Appendix 1 for details).

3.2 Data collection

We relied on publicly available archival data, as controversies are debates that take place in the public domain. Specifically, for each brand, we collected media data (articles from newspapers, magazines, and blogs), academic sources (case studies and qualitative academic articles), and public company data (ads, press releases, and employee interviews), which we complemented with social media data (mainly Twitter and Facebook) when key events of the controversy unfolded on these platforms, for example when a Tweet or Facebook post was at its origin. In this plural dataset, we observed how the different social actors involved in the controversies, including brands and consumers, but also media, regulators, states, and representatives of civil society, qualified and evaluated the brands. This dataset included both direct expressions of the social actors' moral positions in the controversies and synthetic descriptions of controversies, to include more retrospective views.

While Nexis was instrumental in identifying media data, we used Twitter's and Facebook's advanced search for major social networking sites and Google as a complement. We first searched the databases with the case sampling keywords to identify the controversies in which the brand had been involved. Then, we completed specific searches to optimize data collection around each controversy. In total, we compiled a dataset of 113 controversies, described in 1181 media articles, 88 academic sources, 615 pieces of brand material, and 33 social media threads (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 Dataset overview

Type of data	Search tools	Dataset size	Purpose of data
Media data: • Generalist media • Specialized marketing press • Blogs	Nexis	1181 articles	To identify the different social actors involved in controversies, their assessment of the brand, and the history of controversies
Social media posts: • Twitter • Facebook	Twitter advanced search, Facebook advanced search	33 threads	To gain more granular details of consumer assessment of brands in specific controversies
Brand content: company reports, press releases, ads, brand content, and product information	Google	615 pieces	To capture the brands' navigation strategies
Academic sources: • Teaching case studies • Research outputs	EBSCO, ProQuest, and JSTOR (integrated search), the casecentre.org	88 pieces	All

3.3 Data analysis

We analyzed the data iteratively from June 2019 to June 2020. Each brand was analyzed independently by at least two of the three authors. We adapted the principles of comparative case study analysis for theory building (Eisenhardt 1989; Holt 2004) to the analysis of controversies (Blanchet and Depeyre 2016; Dionne et al. 2019). First, we developed coarse genealogies of brand controversies (Holt 2004), decomposing each brand's history into temporal brackets (Langley 1999) based on our unit of analysis: brand controversies. For our purposes, controversies started when a media article discussed a brand's behavior as unacceptable and ended when debates over the behavior of the brand abated. This process resulted in a list, organized chronologically, of all the controversies the brands experienced. If brands had engaged with multiple controversies, we

also qualified the links among the controversies (e.g., whether the object of controversy was similar or different).

Second, we mapped out the different components of each controversy through coding, analytical writing, and visual diagrams (Blanchet and Depeyre 2016; Dionne et al. 2019). In that stage, we identified the objects of controversies (behaviors, people, actions, or things) and the actors involved. We also articulated how the different actors, including brands, evaluated the controversial object and justified their evaluation. We took inspiration from the vocabularies offered by Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) and Patriotta et al. (2011) to qualify how actors mobilized orders of worth. When analyzing visual data produced by brands, we focused on the composition of the scenes (characters, objects, and background and the relationships between them) and the relationship between the scenes and the surrounding text. We then related these codes to the vocabulary of orders of worth. We further pondered on the context in which these written and visual justifications were performed. Third, we conducted cross-case analyses within and across brands to find a structure that reflected all cases.

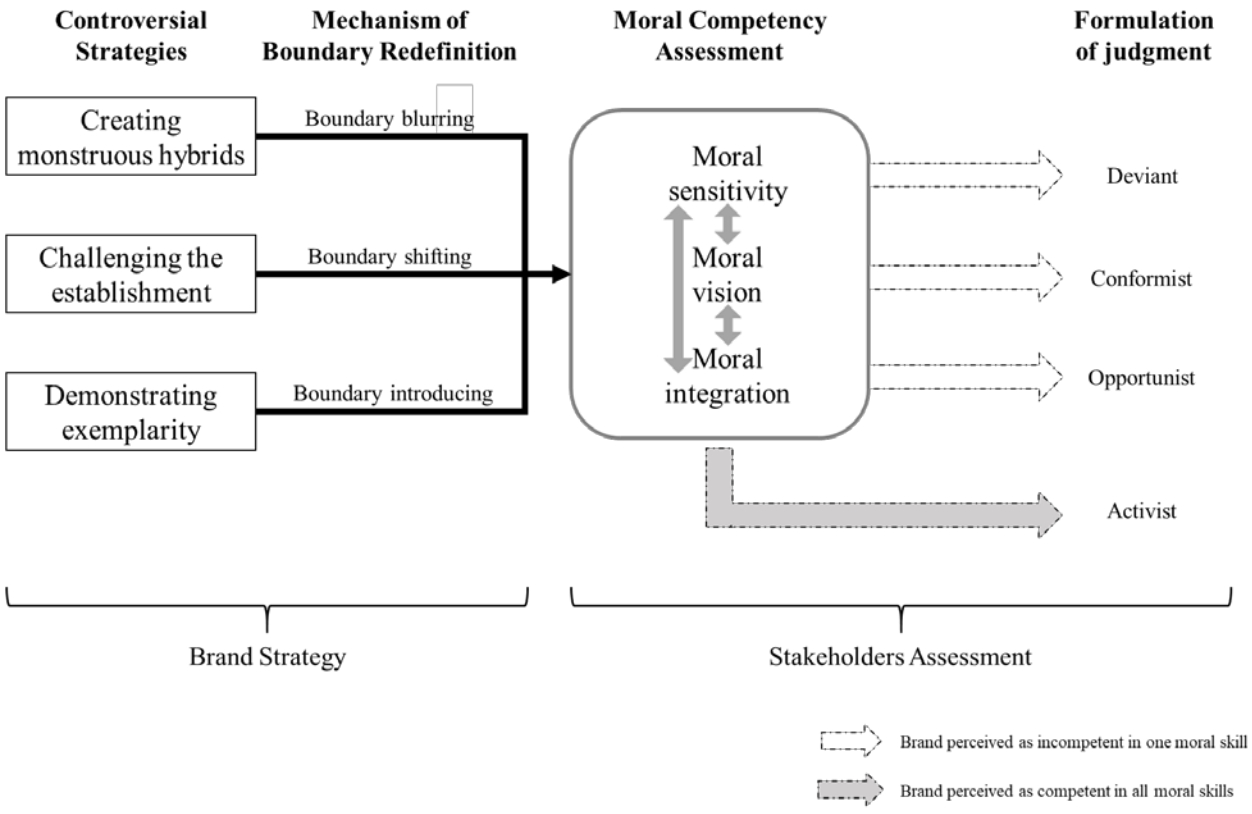
As we moved iteratively through the stages of data analysis, we moved from an emic analysis to an etic analysis of brand controversies through a process of abductive reasoning, systematically comparing data and matching theory, framework, data source, and data analysis (Dionne et al. 2019; Roux and Belk 2019; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). In doing so, we raised the analysis to a more abstract and interpretive level and developed our overarching conceptual model.

4. FINDINGS

Our interpretive analysis of 113 brand controversies reveals how brands negotiate the boundaries of free speech controversies to authenticate their activist positioning (see Figure 1 for an

overview). We identify three *controversial strategies*, each of them challenging the boundaries of free speech through a distinct mechanism. To successfully authenticate brand activism, controversial strategies must display *moral competency*. Stakeholders assess controversial strategies based on the competency they manifest in three *moral skills*: moral sensitivity, vision, and integration. Stakeholders judge brands as true activists if their strategies demonstrate competency in all skills. Stakeholders judge brands as deviant, opportunistic, and/or conformist, if they demonstrate poor sensitivity, integration, and/or vision respectively. We explain our findings using vignettes crafted from our dataset. For more illustrations, see Appendix 2 and 3.

FIGURE 1 How Brands Negotiate the Boundaries of Free Speech to Authenticate their Activist Positioning



4.1 Controversial Brand Strategies

In our analysis of the ads, press releases, case studies, and media data depicting brands' public behavior during controversies, we identified three controversial strategies that brands use to justify their activism to stakeholders, each of them challenging the boundaries of free speech in a specific way: *creating monstrous hybrids* blurs the boundaries of free speech, *challenging the establishment* shifts its boundaries, and *demonstrating exemplarity* introduces new boundaries.

4.1.1 Creating monstrous hybrids

To justify their activist positioning, brands can create monstrous hybrids, that is, they create objects (e.g., products, ads, press releases, or statements) whose elements are part of several orders of worth and/or hold different moral standing simultaneously. Monstrous hybrids open debates about what can be said in the public space, while preventing stakeholders from coming to a definite conclusion, thereby blurring free speech boundaries. Monstrous hybrids' unusual take on worth creates disquiet (Boltanski and Thevenot 2006) and raises new controversies that question the suitability of certain free speech boundaries. At the same time, those objects' moral ambiguity makes it difficult for discussants to conclude about the acceptability of creating such objects, preventing the redefinition of the boundary.

Creating monstrous hybrids is a common practice that can be traced back to the golden days of United Colors of Benetton, one of the earlier examples of controversial brand activism. Over the years, Benetton has spoken up through its advertising about various social problems, such as racism and religious hate. Across its campaigns, Benetton's images have shocked audiences in an attempt to decry the normalization of violent opinions and ideas and motivate viewers to respond to the social problems at hand with more love, generosity, and solidarity.

In its famous 1992 advertising campaign, for example, Benetton shows a man lying on his deathbed surrounded by his family, with the brand reduced to a logo at the bottom (see Figure 2). The image depicts a domestic scene, as the man is photographed in his room at home and surrounded by his brokenhearted family assembled for his wake. Yet this man is David Kirby, a well-known gay activist and AIDS victim. By focusing its campaign on this particular man, Benetton introduced a definite civic dimension (gay rights activism) to what could have otherwise been a domestic drama (family tradition). Furthermore, the imagery brings about an inspired dimension (religious grace) as it has explicit religious tones, as David Kirby strikingly resembles iconic representations of Jesus Christ, an arm that resembles that of a priest holds his hand, the family members' positions and expressions are reminiscent of a lamentation of Christ, and a religious icon hangs on a wall in the back. Depicting a gay activist and AIDS patient as Jesus Christ is generally morally daring, but even more so at the time, as homophobia was strong and AIDs was heavily stigmatized as the "gay plague" (*New York Magazine* 1982[1]). The ad is a monstrous hybrid in two ways. First, it combines symbols of three different orders of worth, hybridizing civic, domestic, and inspired moral justifications. Second, by depicting a person of "low worth" in the domestic order of the time as the worthiest person in the inspired order, this ad creates a character that is worthless and worthy at the same time.

[1] We follow conventions and refer to the media sources of the data by name and year of publication. To enhance readability and avoid broken hyperlinks, we excluded those sources from the list of references.

FIGURE 2 The AIDS–David Kirby Campaign by Benetton

The campaign's ambiguity triggered a global controversy, widely reported in the media (Brough 2001). This controversy attracted various stakeholders with justifications rooted in different moral worlds, from fashionistas (fame) to Roman Catholic organizations and the Vatican (inspired), AIDS and gay activist groups (civic), competitors (market), and Kirby's family (domestic). This complex debate generated a lengthy "dialogue" blurring the boundaries around the taboo "conflict and pain" (Tymorek 2010, p. 20) of the LGBT community and AIDS patients.

Activist brands usually initiate new controversies when creating monstrous hybrids. Some brands in our sample (e.g., Benetton, FCUK, Russell Brand, Breitbart News) have often used this strategy. These brands are often referred to as "controversial" rather than "activist." Nonetheless, we argue that these brands emerge in our data as a particular type of activist brands that are driven by moral purpose and take on the role of the critical moral actor who raises questions about what can and cannot be said publicly, without giving a straightforward response. They seem to embrace

critical moral archetypes, such as that of the jester (Hackley, Brown, and Hackley 2012) or the anarchist (Portwood-Stacer 2012), whose production of moral chaos is redeemable.

4.1.2 Challenging the establishment

To justify their activist positioning, brands can also challenge the establishment by opposing two parties of unequal moral standing (a powerful party deemed more worthy vs. a weak party deemed less or unworthy) and criticizing the moral judgments underlying the powerful party's discourse. Challenging the establishment shifts the boundaries of free speech by moving the line that defines what can be said publicly on a topic. This relocates weak parties' critique of the powerful within the boundaries of free speech and powerful parties' responses past those boundaries.

To challenge the establishment, brands can argue that the subjects are *evaluated using the wrong order of worth*, claiming that subjects' worthiness is different if evaluated through the right lens. Nike's support of U.S. football player Colin Kaepernick illustrates this approach. Quarterback Kaepernick became a subject of controversy in 2016 when he kneeled during the national anthem before National Football League games, in support of the social movement denouncing racist police brutality. The league censored this "unpatriotic" behavior (*New York Times* 2019) by discontinuing his contract. While detractors condemned the player for his lack of civism, Nike championed him by making him the face of its now-famous 30th-anniversary campaign. Nike avoided the moral territory of civism (betraying the collective interest of the nation) and framed Kaepernick as an inspired icon (being passionate), encapsulating the spirit of his action under the slogan, "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything" (*The New Yorker* 2018). In doing so, Nike contributed to redefining the social norms defining the boundaries of sportsmen's political expression, to include gestures promoting racial equality.

Brands also often challenge the establishment by arguing that *an order of worth has been misused*. For example, Starbucks is a brand that prides itself on promoting social justice, around issues such as LGBT and worker rights. In recent years, Starbucks has critiqued unfair discourses from the establishment in various controversies, one of which is the U.S. response to the refugee crisis in 2017. Amid ongoing turmoil related to the government response to the increasing numbers of refugees trying to immigrate, President Trump fired up the national debate by signing an executive order titled "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States," which indefinitely suspended the entry of citizens of eight Muslim countries. Howard Schulz, Starbucks' CEO, reacted two days later with a public letter responding to the president's order extolling the general public to reposition the line defining what constitutes hate speech:

> We are living in an unprecedented time, one in which we are witness to the conscience of our country, and the promise of the American Dream, being called into question… I am hearing the alarm you all are sounding that the civility and human rights we have all taken for granted for so long are under attack… There are nearly three quarters of a million hardworking people contributing to our communities and our economy because of this [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals] program. At Starbucks, we are proud to call them partners and to help them realize their own American Dream… We have a long history of hiring young people looking for opportunities and a pathway to a new life around the world… [and welcoming] those fleeing war, violence, persecution and discrimination.

In this letter that triggered a large boycott (*Fortune* 2017), Starbucks denounced the inappropriate worthiness state attributed to immigrants, by arguing that the vocabulary of the civic order of worth has been misused. Grounding his discourse in the civic order, Schulz indicated that the American president, one of the highest civic symbols in the country, was tearing citizens apart by damaging the country's national consciousness and founding myths. He further reevaluated shunned illegal Mexican immigrants as value-creating citizens able to live the "American dream" and Middle Eastern illegal immigrants as dignified citizens aspiring to find "opportunities and a pathway to a new life." Thus, he highlighted flaws in current evaluations of the president and

immigrants. Through this critique, Starbucks' CEO contributed to redefining the social norm defining what is acceptable for an American President to say, to exclude blanket condemnation or stigmatization of Muslims and immigrants as hate speech.

Challenging the establishment extends the practice of cultural jujitsu that denounces the popularity of market leaders and presents them as brutes unfairly dominating the product category by imposing their interests violently on small players (Holt and Cameron 2010). First, while cultural jujitsu exploits a conflict within the product category, challenging the establishment leverages an existing controversy outside the product category. Doing so significantly broadens the range of contexts where brands can transform society by challenging the boundaries of free speech. Second, brands are not limited to the order of civism (e.g., laws and regulations, political figures such as government representatives and bodies, political activists, etc.) to shift boundaries but can use the full range of orders of worth, opening up more ways for brands to challenge moral standings.

4.1.3 Demonstrating exemplarity

The third strategy that justifies brand activism during controversies is demonstrating exemplarity, in which brands present themselves as striving to imagine better ways of thinking and living morally (Han et al. 2017; Moberg 2000). In doing so, brands introduce new boundaries of free speech, that is, they pioneer new social norms delineating what can be said in public spaces. While shifting boundaries expands or reduces the scope of statements which should be restrained by existing free speech boundaries, delineating boundaries articulates a new boundary. It also represents the opposite of blurring boundaries which weakens existing boundaries. Oatly, a brand that sells oat-based alternatives to dairy products, has used this strategy well.

In 2014, Oatly demonstrated exemplarity by rolling out a billboard ad campaign with a simple two-fold message presenting the brand as introducing Sweden to a novel moral principle. One side of the billboards showed an Oatly milk carton with the brand name and "oat drink" written in large print; the other side showed a slogan, "It's like milk, but made for humans" (Ledin and Machin 2019, p. 6). The slogan articulates a negative moral principle: "thou shalt not drink cow's milk." Negative moral imperatives are typically opposed to positive imperatives. For example, the opposite of "thou shalt not kill" is commonly "thou shalt help and love others." Yet, in this advertisement, the negative moral rule is the consumption of the brand's flagship product. Verbally, Oatly's milk is only related to milk to increase the contrast with it ("It's like...but"). Visually, the oat milk carton is at the opposite end of the picture or on a separate billboard, representing a mirror opposite of the slogan. In essence, the ad invites viewers to conclude that Oatly is a living example of the positive moral imperative "thou shalt drink plant-based milk," a moral exemplar. In ad commentaries, the brand elaborated, explaining how its moral commitment is rooted in the need to protect animals and nature (i.e., green order).

Demonstrating exemplarity is not a fundamentally adversarial strategy. In contrast with the two previous strategies denunciating the failings of morality, demonstrating exemplarity involves constructing a moral alternative in the present. It makes the moral alternative more tangible and inspires stakeholders to gain firsthand experience of what improved morality feels like. However, the moral prefiguration that activist brands' moral exemplarity implies is often provocative in itself. Indeed, the very attempt to live following different standards is often experienced as unacceptable behavior by others, as the literature on concrete utopias and anarchism shows (Kinna 2017). Furthermore, committing to a different ethical code here and now motivates activists to maintain their positions rather than seek compromise, heightening controversies (Dinerstein

2016). Activist brands, therefore, commonly become enmeshed with controversies when demonstrating exemplarity.

The Oatly campaign triggered a controversy dubbed the "milk war," during which Oatly fought for the utilization of the moral principles articulated in their campaign and the definition of new social norms defining what can be said about milk. The moral principles of the campaign were at odds with the moral Zeitgeist in Sweden, where the provision of milk is commonly viewed as a public good, with schools providing free milk to all children (Ledin and Machin 2019). When the Federation of Swedish Farmers sued the brand for depicting the practice of drinking cow's milk negatively, the court decision reaffirmed existing boundaries of free speech about milk drinking by ordering the brand to "stop implying that cow milk is either unhealthy or not fit for human consumption" and "to stop referring to its own product as milk" (*The Outline* 2019). Instead of settling the controversy, it magnified it, sparking a large-scale public debate, in the media and on social media, in Sweden and internationally. Oatly responded by publishing the lawsuit on its website to show that the brand was being "squashed," in the brand's creative director's own words, for telling the "truth" about "the concept of milk," and contributing to "what the planet needs to ensure its future" (*The Challenger Project* 2016). The brand then followed up with advertising campaigns, packaging messages, booklets, and social media messages re-asserting that the brand remains an example to follow, reprimanding the Federation of Swedish Farmers along the way for its refusal to admit that its product is "totally out of sync with what the planet needs to ensure its future" (*The Challenger Project* 2016). In this controversy, Oatly thus invited Swedish consumers to awaken to the harm that drinking dairy products do to animals and the environment, and subsequently condemned and tried to censor previously unrestrained discourses promoting milk as a public good.

As brands gain experience in demonstrating exemplarity, they generally *embed their actions within a network of exemplary relations*. To do so, activist brands often choose to support other actors viewed as moral leaders, such as non-governmental organizations, pre-existing social movements, and even other brands that also strive to be exemplary. Activist brands help these moral leaders disseminate their messages through their products, shops, and communications and provide them financial assistance through sales redistribution partnerships. While this activity might seem similar to cause-related marketing partnerships, we argue the two should be distinguished because they rely on different moral ontologies. Cause-related marketing often relies on a utilitarian view of morality, in which brands attempt to be good by reducing the harm they do (e.g., Brønn and Vrioni 2001). By contrast, when demonstrating moral exemplarity, brands try to lead moral reform by example and strive to build relationships here and now that are equally exemplary, in line with the principles of prefigurative politics (Breines 1980).

The epitome of exemplarity through relational embedment is attained when activist brands present themselves as the leaders of a social movement. For example, four years after Oatly was redefined as an activist brand, it began referring to itself as the leader of an environmentalist movement dubbed the "post-milk generation" (Oatly on Facebook, October 2018). The company fostered the movement via its social media and media relations (*Awario* 2020; *Vegconomist* 2019) and mobilized it by launching, for example, a petition to make legally compulsory the labeling of carbon dioxide emissions generated by food production (*Vegconomist* 2019).

In summary, the strategy of demonstrating exemplarity has an inverse relationship with markets compared to that of activist brands using the persuasive path. In the persuasive path, brands appropriate moral innovation emerging from outside markets and translate them to make them market-relevant (Holt and Cameron 2010). By contrast, brands emerge here as

experimentalists living on the edge of moral improvement, fostering prefigurative exploration of moral standards and ethical life. Activist brands deploying this strategy leverage their market power to generate, rather than exploit, moral innovation outside markets.

Overall, these findings contribute to the literature on controversial activist branding, which aims to bring moral reform by negotiating the boundaries of free speech. We offer an integrative framework that organizes existing knowledge on the many activist practices around three controversial strategies and identifies how each strategy negotiates free speech boundaries. Next, we discuss how activist brands' controversial strategies are legitimized during controversies.

4.2 Stakeholders' Moral Competency Judgment

During controversies, brand judgments are shaped and reflected in public opinion debates taking place in the press and on social media. These judgments are promoted by journalists, bloggers, cultural intermediaries, competitor representatives, and other experts (e.g., lawyers, regulators, marketing consultants). Those stakeholders judge activist brands' controversial strategies based on brands' moral competency—that is, brands' ability to pass accurate moral judgements when defending the need to challenge the current boundaries of free speech. Our data indicates that stakeholders judge brands' moral competency on three moral skills: moral sensitivity, moral vision, and moral integration. When a brand lacks moral sensitivity, stakeholders judge the brand as deviant, that is, an actor transgressing the boundaries of free speech. When a brand lacks moral vision, stakeholders judge the brand as conformist, that is, an actor reproducing the boundaries of free speech. When a brand lacks moral integration, stakeholders judge the brand as opportunistic, that is, as an actor manipulating the boundaries of free speech.

4.2.1 Moral sensitivity

Moral sensitivity represents a brand's ability to recognize the moral content of situations. "Moral sensitivity is a necessary component of moral behavior because many difficult decision-making situations are morally ambiguous, in that the embedded moral issues are not blatant and are integrated into the situation with competing concerns" (Jordan 2007, p. 326). Brands demonstrate high sensitivity by raising burning moral issues. For example, many deemed Greenpeace morally sensitive when it denounced reckless drilling near the North Pole by organizing the occupation of an oil storage ring off Greenland in 2010. The occupation triggered widespread awareness and support from the public. When a court order forbade Greenpeace to share audio-visual content produced during the occupation, more than 50,000 people "broke the court order... spreading photographs... across Twitter and social media websites" to reveal the cover-up of a "dangerous practice that could harm a fragile environment" (*The Guardian* 2010).

Conversely, low sensitivity surfaces when brands overlook relevant moral problems, often problems raised by their own actions. For example, in 2014 Greenpeace activists laid down big yellow cloth letters reading "Time for Change! The Future Is Renewable" next to a hummingbird geoglyph near the Nazca Lines, a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation world heritage site in Peru. The stunt was intended to signal to world representatives gathering in Lima for a United Nations climate talk that moving to renewable energy was imperative. As the hummingbird is one of the country's most protected cultural treasures and one of the symbols of Peru, the brand was deemed morally insensitive. The action meant to demonstrate moral exemplarity generated "moral outrage" across Peru, where the behavior was judged "thoughtless, insensitive, illegal, irresponsible... careless and crass" (*The Guardian* 2014).

Poor moral sensitivity nurtures the development of doppelganger brand images (Giesler 2012; Thompson et al. 2006). Specifically, stakeholders stigmatize insensitive brands as *deviant* (Becker 1973) qualifying them as transgressing free speech boundaries. After its 2014 campaign, Greenpeace was thus labeled as an ecofundamentalist organization (Hannesson 2014) which environmentalism motivated totally disrespected holy objects. Peru's deputy culture minister strengthened this deviant image by expressing his country's horror and explaining that the pictograph was so sacred that "nobody can go on these lines without permission – not even the president of Peru!" (*The Guardian* 2014). He qualified Greenpeace's deviance of "extreme environmentalism" as a "slap in the face at everything Peruvians consider sacred" (*BBC* 2014). In other words, Greenpeace's campaign is judged as "blasphemy and intercultural tolerance" (Fladmoe and Steen-Johnsen 2017, p. 79), a transgression of the boundaries of free speech.

Characterizations of brand deviance take different forms depending on the order of worth violated. Brand enemies of domesticity are thus commonly called "offensive" (*Campaignlive* 2001), brands disrupting civic life are "threat[s] to national security" (*The Guardian* 2020) and producers of "hate speech" (Wessel-Aas et al. 2016, p. 19), while adversaries of the environment (green) are defilers legitimizing "profligate pollution" (*Toronto Star* 2013). In our dataset, activist brands are rarely stigmatized for being insensitive to market issues (i.e., destroying competition), industrial issues (i.e., harming productivity), or fame issues (i.e., stopping or stealing others' rightful fame). This may be due to the institutional context in which these brands are typically embedded. Stakeholders regard activist brands as natively sensitive to moral issues in those orders, as brands are conceived as organizational tools whose main purpose is to gain recognition, loyalty, and competitiveness (Kapferer 2012).

Prior research has discussed brands transgressing relational expectations (Aaker et al. 2004; Ward and Ostrom 2006; Weijo, Bean, and Rintamäki 2019) or private arrangements (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). We theorize and observe a different form of transgression, namely transgression of free speech boundaries that transgress moral rather than relational norms. Similar to brand transgression, brand deviance is likely to damage customer satisfaction, customer-brand relationship, and brand equity (Aaker et al. 2004; Ward and Ostrom 2006).

4.2.2 Moral vision

Moral vision captures brands' insight into the future of morality. Moral vision relates to brand vision (de Chernatony 2010) in that it guides the definition of goals and actions. Yet, moral vision guides the definition of ethical and meaningful goals and actions (Sangarakshita 2007) rather than those that serve organizational performance. Brands show a clear moral vision when articulating challenges to free speech that help solve contemporary problems for markets and society. Conversely, brands evidence a poor vision when leading inappropriate or ineffective reforms.

For example, Mattel has attempted many times over the years to shift the boundaries of what can be said about femininity, leveraging the iconic status of its products to curb prejudiced and stereotypical discourses. It has positioned some of the brand's latest product launches (i.e., dolls of various body shapes and skin tones with a varied portfolio of careers) as toys educating children about body positivity and professional gender equality. Yet Mattel's attempts to exhibit a moral vision are regularly condemned for reproducing gender problems. For example, when the brand launched Barbie entrepreneur in an attempt to broaden young girls' inspirational roles, *Forbes* (2014) mocked the brand by offering a fabricated list of future career dolls such as "Silently Enduring Sexual Harassment with the Hope I Will Get a Raise" Barbie and "Making

Less Than My Male Counterparts" Barbie. Journalists further criticized the brand's reformative intent for being stuck in "unhelpful stereotypical career images" (*The Guardian* 2014).

When stakeholders believe that brands lack moral vision, they qualify brands as conformists. We define conformist brands as brands that replicate free speech boundaries —that is, they reproduce the dominant moral judgments of the time about what is acceptable to say publicly. Stakeholders thus consistently describe Barbie as following femininity tastes rather than reforming them through its communications and products. They tend to characterize Barbie as following "kids' tastes in playthings" (*Mindful Marketing* 2016) and by creating "look[s] that sell" by adjusting hair, glamour, and body fitness to beauty trends and "trendy stars" (Tulinski 2017). Critics of Barbie's claims to activism counter that the brand fosters its iconic status by "taking advantage of trends" (*BBC* 2019), thereby failing to change the boundaries of free speech.

We observe that the negative perceptions of brands' moral vision tend to structure and influence consumers' future emotional reactions. There is an emotional stickiness (Ahmed 2014) to moral vision, such that evidencing a moral vision remains enduringly challenging for brands that have initially lacked it. The following extract on responses to Barbie's latest career dolls summarizes the difficulty of changing stakeholders' opinions on the brand's moral vision:

> As much as Mattel has tried to market her as a feminist, Barbie's famous figure has always overshadowed her business outfits. At her core, she's just a body, not a character, a canvas upon which society can project its anxieties about body image… Barbie has all this baggage (*Times* 2016).

For more than 50 years, it has represented Barbie in 200 careers, from an astronaut in 1965 to a surgeon in 1973, a paratrooper in 2000, and a game developer in 2016. Yet stakeholders continue to discard the career dolls as "misfire attempts at inspiring girls" (*Salon* 2014). *Times* (2016) magazine explains above that this is because the brand is symbolically rooted in a morally

conservative ideal of femininity that defines women by their physical appearance. As the brand has a conservative heritage, stakeholders are reluctant to accept its reformist claim.

As the boundaries of free speech change overtime, activist brands must also continuously update their moral vision to avoid stakeholders downgrading them to conformist status. For example, Benetton was acknowledged as an activist brand from the 1980s to the early 2000s. During this period, Benetton launched a series of controversial campaigns promoting racial, religious, and sexual-orientation tolerance and covering issues such as death, AIDs, and famine. These campaigns were assessed as morally forward and reflecting a taboo-breaking moral vision. Yet, in the past decade, many of Benetton's campaigns seem to have fallen in line with the moral Zeitgeist. As a result, reactions to Benetton's later campaigns downgraded Benetton to a conformist brand. For example, in its coverage of Benetton's "Unemployee of the Year" campaign about jobless youth, the *Guardian* (2012) stated: "The chain known for courting controversy in its ads has a new campaign. This time it's less edgy, more wholesomely hollow." The brand is seen as having lost its moral vision and its ability to push moral reforms.

4.2.3 Moral integration

Moral integration characterizes brands' "wholeness of moral character" (Kaldjian 2019, p. 392), or brands' ability to pursue their moral beliefs in all situations (Li, Zhang, and Yang 2018). Brands' levels of moral integration manifests through moral coherence across audiences and consistency over time. For example, when Indiana allowed companies to refuse services to same-sex couples in 2015, Salesforce.com challenged the establishment and supported the LGBT community. The brand threatened to pull all its employees out of the state and "move its general conference and its 6,000 attendees from Indianapolis" (*Fortune* 2015). This move was hailed as a

sign that the brand shows civic worth and does not hesitate to "take a stand on controversial topics" if it "helps society" (Reuters 2019). By contrast, when the brand collaborated with the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Agency in 2019 in strict enforcement of the Mexican border, leading to the separation of children from their parents, the brand's actions were viewed as lacking moral integration and damaged Salesforce's activist image. For example, its employees wrote a collective letter demanding that managers "speak out against its [the agency] practices" and "re-examine [their] contractual relationship" with it because the practices were "irreconcilable" with the brand's heritage of "standing up to injustice" and went against the brand's "core value of Equality" (*USA Today* 2019).

When stakeholders believe that brands lack integration, they dismiss brands as opportunists, manipulating the boundaries of free speech to serve personal interest rather than reform morality. Depending on the issue debated, stakeholders can use different labels to condemn brands' opportunist speech, denouncing their "woke washing" when they manipulate free speech boundaries about social justice (Sobande 2019), "green washing" for environmental issues (Manrai et al. 1997), "rainbow washing" for LGBT issues (*Ad Age* 2019), or "blue washing" for global democracy and human rights issues (*Commondreams.org* 2000), as well as broader terms such as "purpose washing" (*Ad Age* 2020).

Stakeholders may frame opportunistic brands as market actors pretending to seek moral reform while really serving the usual market purpose of enhancing product desirability and price. For example, Salesforce provocatively flirted with Buddhist spirituality in 2003. When celebrating the attainment of the milestone of 100,000 customers, the company designed a poster promoting its "100,000 enlightened subscribers who have been freed from the boundaries of software" (IDG News Service 2003) illustrated with a picture of a praying Dalai Lama. The brand's monstrous

hybrid was largely condemned as failing to demonstrate inspired worth, simply "trying to package his holiness" and "shameless commercialism" (IDG News Service 2003).

Stakeholders may also frame opportunistic brands as fame-seeking actors disguised as moral reformists, something for which the British activist-comedian Russell Brand was condemned (Mills et al. 2015). From denouncing Hugo Boss's past connection with the Nazi regime while owning suits from the brand, to campaigning against the cost of housing in London while renting a £76,000-per-year flat from tax-dodging landlords, to claiming to sell ethical sweatshirts following the highest standards while producing some of them in exploitative Bangladesh factories, Russell Brand's behavior has repeatedly been characterized as inconsistent with his efforts to present himself as a radical left-wing, anti-capitalist actor. Russel Brand's attempts to negotiate the boundaries of political correctness, offense, and taboo are deemed too inconsistent to reflect moral competency. These inconsistencies were interpreted as revealing the comedian's obsession for being known, with media characterizing Russell Brand as a "grade-A hypocrite" (*Breitbart News* 2015), a vain man whose referencing of others always "returns neatly to anecdotes about himself" (*The Guardian* 2013), and an anti-capitalist who have no problem with profit when it comes to producing a "documentary about himself" (*Daily Mail* 2016).

Overall, we find that brands are praised as true activists when their justifications convince stakeholders that they possess all three moral skills. For example, the cosmetics brand Lush aims to be an ethical, fair, and sustainable brand and uses its campaigns to negotiate various boundaries of free speech. It is commonly perceived as a brand that brings "activism to the high street" (*Creative Review* 2019) and is not afraid to take on "political causes" (*Brand Channel* 2018) and "controversial subjects" (*Marketing Week* 2020). *The Next Web* (2019) reports that Lush has become "an ethical champion without bragging about it" and that, in "driv[ing] change,

challeng[ing] norms and creat[ing] a cosmetic revolution" (moral vision), it has repeatedly shown its activist ethos in "a lifelong journey of constant striving" where its managers "practiced what they preached" (moral integration). *The Next Web* further praises Lush's refusal to use "ethical labels" for the brand's products as a sign of deep moral attunement, reporting that "not to damage people or (the) planet with their trade practices" should be standard practice rather than "a special mention" or a "marketing label" (moral sensitivity).

As different stakeholders evaluate brands differently during controversies, we find that public opinion often polarizes around two groups (Luo, Wiles, and Raithel 2013; Ramírez, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas 2019). Specifically, brand defenders staunchly authenticate brands as activists, while brand critics deauthenticate brands' positioning as deviant, opportunist, or conformist. For example, when Nike chose Colin Kaepernick as the face of their anniversary campaign, 37 sources claim that the brand was an activist, 22 sources claim that it was an opportunist, and 51 sources report the high polarization of public opinion around those two opinions. We further observe that brand polarization intensity (i.e., the level of integration of opinions around two opposing groups) and the strength of emotions expressed in each group's evaluations (Luo et al. 2013) depend on the moral skill debated. Controversies are more polarized when stakeholders debate brands' moral sensitivity and integration and less polarized when they debate brands' moral vision. This suggests that a lack of vision is morally more acceptable than a lack of sensitivity or integration for activist brands.

In summary, these findings explain how stakeholders judge whether it is morally acceptable for brands to negotiate free speech boundaries by raising controversies. This is an important question for marketers, policymakers, and the public, but little is currently known about the topic. Our study extends the literature (Bhattacharjee et al. 2013; Lee and Kwak 2016;

Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020) by offering a framework showing that stakeholders' assessment of controversial branding practices acceptability is based on brands' perceived moral competency.

5. DISCUSSION

By analyzing 113 controversies related to 18 brands that define themselves as activists, we theorize how brands negotiate the boundaries of free speech through three controversial strategies: creating monstrous hybrids, challenging the establishment, and demonstrating exemplarity. We further indicate that their effectiveness depends on the perceived moral competency with which they are enacted, captured by moral sensitivity, vision, and integration. These findings provide novel insights for the theorization of brand activism.

In contrast to original theorizations of brand activism emphasizing brands' opportunities to reform through persuasive practices (Holt 2004), recent research is more focused on conceptualizing activist brands' engagement with controversy. This stream of research defined different types of controversial brand activism (Moorman 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Extant research has also investigated the outcomes of controversial brand activism, concluding that, in many cases, controversial brand activism leads to negative financial and branding outcomes because it is too divisive (Bhagwat et al. 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020). We contribute to the emergent conversations about the conditions under which activist brands' use of controversies leads to positive outcomes (Bhagwat et al. 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Specifically, we explain how activist brands reform moral judgments through free speech boundary work, that is, the active negotiation of the social norms defining what can be said in public. Our investigation of controversial activism as free speech boundary work extends theorizations of controversial activist branding and activist brand authentication.

5.1 Controversial Activist Branding as Free Speech Boundary Work

We extend prior understanding of brand activism by articulating free speech boundary work as the mechanism underlying the reformative power of controversial brand activism. Our framework contributes to prior research in two ways: we integrate as-of-yet fragmented knowledge on controversial brand activism practices and we introduce a new strategy to conduct brand activism. It also expands our understanding of the role of market actors in relation to free speech.

First, our framework organizes the fragmented practices identified in prior research based on how they challenge the boundaries of free speech. This integrative work allows us to understand how to relate controversial branding practices to one another and to envision new strategies and practices for activist brands. For example, applying our framework to prior studies, we find that shock advertising, capering, and flyting (Mills et al. 2015; Moraes and Michaelidou 2017; Scholz and Smith 2019) belong to blurring the boundaries of free speech by creating monstrous hybrids. Protestainment (Wieser et al. 2019) and cultural jujitsu (Holt and Cameron 2010) emerge as cases of shifting free speech boundaries by challenging the establishment.

This integration also helps answer the question of whether controversial branding can serve a social purpose. While some research has solely focused on the impact of controversial branding on brands' market performance (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020), critical research has challenged the acceptability of this practice (Schroeder 2000; Sobande 2020). Despite the important concerns associated with woke washing, our framework also suggests that controversial branding practices, even when performed with manipulative purposes, can have positive externalities by contributing to other stakeholders efforts negotiate the boundaries of free speech.

Second, our integrative framework brings to light a new way to advance moral reform through controversy with specific implications for free speech: creating new boundaries to free speech by demonstrating moral exemplarity, that is, presenting oneself as striving to imagine better ways of thinking and living morally. This complementary controversial strategy opens an understanding of brands not as actors appropriating moral innovation emerging from outside markets (Holt and Cameron 2010) or jumping on the bandwagon of market moralization (Vredenburg et al. 2020), but rather as visionary moral actors from within the confines of the market prefiguring more moral ways of living within and outside markets.

With this framework, we also expand our understanding of the role of the market in regulating free speech. Prior marketing literature has depicted free speech as a fairly fixed right that marketers simply use and which boundaries are defined by legal actors (Cain 2011; Abril, Olazábal, and Cava 2009; Sleeper 2018). In contrast, we suggest that brands and market actors can contribute to (re)defining the boundaries of free speech through boundary blurring, shifting, and introducing. We illuminate new ways of revising free speech boundaries but also the risks and responsibilities for brands that engage in such debates. Specifically, we highlight the role of activist brands as social actors who can influence free speech boundaries by shaping what is considered as acceptable to be said in public. By emphasizing brands' contribution to shaping the boundaries of free speech, we reveal the need to consider free speech as a responsibility of market actors. Marketers' ability to engage in and shape public debates is a privilege to use responsibly when free speech boundaries are sound. It may even become a duty when free speech boundaries are unfair. We suggest that more research could adopt this perspective to understand how market actors can overcome the status quo where free speech is viewed as a fixed right and use commercial speech to make markets better.

5.2 Brand Activism Authentication: A Competency-Oriented View

Authentication is problematic for activist brands. For brands using the persuasive path, activism authentication is a function of their ability to convey adequately and charismatically the cultural codes of the subculture or social movement from which they borrow their ideology (Holt 2004; Holt and Cameron 2010). For brands using the controversial path, Vredenburg et al. (2020) explained the (dis)authenticating effects of brands' activist engagement in terms of optimal congruence. They characterized optimal congruence based on several criteria: (1) level of incongruence between the brands' moral territories and the cause promoted, (2) level of threat that the brands' stance represents for consumers' identities, (3) level of deviation of the brand from the norm. Our research extends this understanding of controversial brand activism authentication by introducing a competency-oriented view. In doing so, we enrich current theorizations by revealing that activism authenticity is a more heterogeneous and multidimensional phenomenon than previously believed. Our empirical research indicates that whether a brand's controversial move is authenticating depends on its perceived moral competency, which consists of moral sensitivity, moral vision, and moral integration.

The competency-oriented view on activism authenticity revises current understandings of what activist brands can or cannot do. The perspective based on fit or optimal incongruence defines a fixed and objectifiable moral territory within which brand activism will be judged authentic and outside of which it is seen as inauthentic. In contrast, the competency-oriented view we advance opens a much broader spectrum of moral territories brands can engage with. We do not mean to say that all stakeholders would converge in judging a controversial move as a display of authentic activism – controversies rarely resolve in consensus. Rather this suggests that brands

can persuade some stakeholders to engage in moral rationalization (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020) and reinterpret the brands' apparently immoral actions as moral on any moral territory.

This competency-oriented view offers a framework that explains how stakeholders judge the morality (Kleiser et al. 2003; Lo et al. 2019) of controversial branding practices. Research celebrating controversial branding practices surfaces as assuming that brands are fundamentally morally competent (Luo et al. 2013; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020). By contrast, the creation of doppelganger brand images (Giesler 2012; Thompson et al. 2006) captures perceptions of free speech boundary transgression resulting from a lack of moral sensitivity, while condemnations of brands' communications as green or woke washing (Dahlin et al. 2020; Eilert and Nappier Cherup 2020) signals opportunism resulting from poor moral integration, and accusations of being a follower who develops products and communications that sell or please indicate inadequate conformists resulting from a limited moral vision.

5.3 Managerial Implications

This work unearths some important managerial implications for brand managers' strategic engagement in activism through controversy. Our findings provide insights into how managers of activist brands can reform moral judgments in society effectively and morally.

We uncover three strategies that can help managers use controversies to communicate their brands' reformist commitment effectively. Brands can use our first strategy to break taboos, revitalize public interest around important but displaced causes (e.g., environmentalism), or bring to light emerging values in public debates (e.g., gender non-binariness). To do so, brands should ignite controversies by creating monstrous hybrids with ambiguous moral worth to blur the social norms defining what can be said in public spaces. Second, brand managers could challenge the moral establishment, bringing to light the flaws in the moral judgments promoted by powerful

social actors. This strategy positions activist brands as agents who rebalance morality by shifting the boundaries of free speech to render them fairer. As challenging the moral establishment often involves taking a stance in existing controversies, this strategy also allows brands to render the reforms they defend topical and contemporary. The third strategy, demonstrating exemplarity, focuses on activist brands as moral innovators prefiguring the future of morality. This strategy introduces new boundaries to free speech and is, therefore, more relevant for the more radical activist brands whose moral positions are novel and only shared by a small minority. Brands can demonstrate moral exemplarity by pioneering moral precepts, supporting emerging moral leaders whose values align with theirs, or even creating their own social movement.

Our research also offers a reading grid to audiences' responses helping brand managers diagnose the potential ethical flaws of their controversial programs, and then take corrective action. Activist brands accused of deviance will benefit from reflecting on which boundaries of free speech they are engaging with, and whether transgressing these boundaries is relevant to their moral project. If not, those brands should aim to develop moral sensitivity by exploring what harm their programs do and whether that harm could be avoided. Activist brands rejected as conformist should reflect on whether their symbolic actions intend to reform or reproduce some boundaries of free speech. If their actions intend to reform some boundaries, brand managers should refine the brands' moral vision to clarify the reformist intention and update the content of their controversial programs to ensure the programs illuminate that vision. If the brand no longer intends to reform boundaries, they should consider dropping their activist positioning and, as such, their engagement with controversy as well. Finally, brands viewed as opportunists should ensure strategic encroachment of their values in all aspects of the organization to guarantee moral integration. Doing so includes ensuring that their strategies are aligned with their other actions.

5.4 Future Research

In this study, we focused on how brands can negotiate the boundaries of free speech to authenticate their activist positioning. Yet we found in our dataset that brands diverge not only in terms of the level of moral competency they display during one controversy but also over time and across controversies. Because we approached our dataset by adopting brand controversies as the unit of analysis, we did not elaborate on moral skills development and loss. Future research could examine how brands develop and lose moral skills over time, to help brands decide whether to move toward an activist positioning, a relevant concern as various stakeholders (including consumers) are increasingly demanding a moral commitment from brands. Investigating moral skills development and loss would also be useful for well-established brands that might be struggling to shed a non-activist heritage (e.g., Barbie) and for new brands that might want to adopt activist principles from the beginning (e.g., Lush). More generally, analyzing brand trajectories across controversies is a key avenue for future research to understand how brands can move across activist and activist-adjacent (deviant, opportunistic, and conformist) positionings.

In our sample, we observe that some activist brands, such as Lush and Greenpeace, chose to specialize while others adopted a generalist activist positioning (e.g., Starbucks, Benetton). Specialist activist brands often select one order of worth and stick with this realm of morality to negotiate the boundaries of free speech over time, an approach that enables them to gain historical credibility. Conversely, generalist activist brands often engage with different moral orders, contributing to reforming several areas of society. Moving beyond a brand's moral territory is difficult and can lead to accusations of lack of vision and integration, as we have shown in our findings. Yet the payoffs can be great, as being able to change several orders provides solid

anchors to authenticate the brand's activism. Future research could explore these two approaches to brand activism and delineate the conditions under which either is preferred.

Finally, it is important to investigate how to regulate markets, so that brands cannot manipulate free speech. As brands become savvier in manipulating the free speech boundaries to authenticate their positioning, how can regulators ensure that healthy, useful democratic dialogue emerges in public discourse? Future research could examine if and how regulators, whether government agencies or professional bodies, can ensure that marketers do not manipulate the principles of activism authentication. This line of research is important for the future of brand activism, to avoid the development of rampant cynicism about brands as moral actors.

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APPENDIX 1 List of sampled brands

Brand (category)	**Data set**	**Controversies details**
Barbie (Toys)	100 articles, 39 pieces of brand content, 3 academic sources, and 4 social media threads.	*5 controversies:* 2014 – Entrepreneur Barbie; 2016 – Fashionista Barbie (diverse bodies); 2017 – Hijab Barbie; 2018 – Frida Kahlo Barbie; 2019 – Gender-neutral Barbie
Benetton (Fashion)	102 articles, 94 pieces of brand content, 19 academic sources, 3 social media threads	*15 controversies:* 1982 – Ebony & Ivory (fighting racism); 1991 – Destereotyping homosexuality; 1991 – Cross-shaped headstones at a WWI cemetery in France before the start of the Gulf War; 1991 – The "Priest and Nun" ad; 1991 – "Baby, we'll get through this" ; 1992 – Liberian soldier with a kalashnikov, holding a human thigh bone behind his back; 1992, 1993 – Aids Campaign; 1992 – A boat overcrowded with Albanians; 1993 – Ad depicting genitalia; 2000 – "Looking Death in the Face"; 2004 – "UnHate"; 2008 – Tibet and china dialogue; 2012 – Unemployee of the Year; 2018 – Migrants rescued from the Mediterranean
Ben & Jerry's (FMCG)	62 articles, 16 pieces of brand content, 2 academic sources, and 5 social media threads	*6 controversies:* 2009-2013 – Same sex campaigns; 2010 – Schweddy Balls; 2012 – Jeremy Lin; 2014 – Hazed & Confused; 2017 – Black Lives Matter; 2018 – Pecan Resist
Biocoop (Retail)	98 articles, 37 pieces of brand content, and 2 social media threads	*7 controversies:* 2012 – Farmer by vocation; 2013 – Protect farmers; 2014 – Don't buy; 2015 – Most eco-friendly campaign ever; 2016 – Ordinary hero; 2017 – Fear; 2019 – Stop glyphosate
Breitbart (Media)	61 articles and 13 pieces of brand content	*9 controversies*: 2011 – Weiner Texting scandal; 2013 – Friends of Hamas story; 2014 – Pelosi & Cyrus campaign; 2016 – Climate change denial; 2016 – Yannopoulos controversy; 2016 – Kellogg; 2017 – Podolski; 2017 – Muslim mob Germany; 2017 – Northern Cal wildfires
CrossFit (Experience)	50 articles, 8 pieces of brand content, 5 academic sources, and 4 social media threads	*4 controversies:* 2015 – Coke as open diabetes; 2018 – Anti-LGBT comments; 2018 – Sexism from a gym owner; 2020 – Black Lives Matter
Diesel (Fashion)	80 articles, 68 pieces of brand content, and 2 academic sources	*8 controversies:* 1991-2001 – Finally It All Makes Sense; 2008 – Safe for work; 2010, 2012 – Be stupid; 2013 – I am not what I appear to be; 2016 – Digital obsession; 2016 – Advertising on porn sites; 2018 – Hate Couture
FCUK (Fashion)	82 articles, 50 pieces of brand content, and 1 academic source	*8 controversies:* 1997 – FCUK Fashion; 2000 – FCUK safe; 2002 – Vive le FCUK; 2004 – FCUK fragrance; 2009 – FCUK puzzle; 2015 – #mindFCUK; 2016 – Retro revival of FCUK; 2018 – FCUK plastic

Gate Foundation (Non-profit)	20 articles, 2 pieces of brand content, and 3 academic source	*2 controversies:* 2007-onwards – Promoting "corporate globalization"; 2019 – Modi Goalkeepers Award
Greenpeace (Non-profit)	101 articles, 42 pieces of brand content, 18 academic source, 2 social media threads	*10 controversies:* 1980s-2010 – Ban on seal products; 1980s – Opposition to DDT use; 1990s – Anti-whaling campaign; 1995 – Brent Spar; 2006-2017 – Greener Electronics & Apple; 2007 – Kingsnorth court case; 2010-2011 – Cairn & Greenland indigenous; 2011 – Scottish court ban; 2010 – 2018 Indian government; 2014 – Nazca Lines; 2016 – Open letter from Nobel laureates
Iceland (Retail)	25 articles, 17 pieces of brand content, and 4 social media threads	*2 controversies*: 2018 – I'm A Celebrity; 2018 – Ran Tan
Lush (Retail)	53 articles, 31 pieces of brand content, 3 academic sources and 2 social media threads	*5 controversies*: 2008 – Support Sea Shepherd; 2010 – Anti fox hunting; 2011 – Support OneWorld; 2012 – Fighting Animal Testing; 2018 – Paid to lie
Nike (Fashion)	87 articles, 53 brand content and 13 academic sources	*4 controversies:* 1995 – Ad with HIV-positive long-distance runner; 2018 – Colin Kaepernick; 2019 – Hong Kong protests; 2019 – Pull US flag shoe design days before the Fourth of July
Oatly (FMCG)	24 articles, 9 pieces of brand content, 7 academic sources, and 2 social media threads	*2 controversies:* 2014 – It's like milk, but made for humans; 2018 – Waste disposal criticism
Renova (FMCG)	29 articles, 28 pieces of brand content, 3 academic sources, and 1 social media thread	*4 controversies:* 2003 – Pleasure of being clean; 2005 – Amor Causa; 2013 – Sexiest toilet on Earth; 2017 – 4D sensual magic
Russell Brand (Celebrity)	90 articles, 34 pieces of brand content, 4 academic sources, and 3 social media threads	*11 controversies:* 2001 –Osama bin Laden costuming; 2002 –pornographic broadcast; 2008 – Police hoax; 2008 – Telephone pranks & Sachsgate; 2008 –Bush the retard; 2013 – David Cameron the wanker; 2013 – Hugo Boss is nazi; 2014 –Nigel Farage is Enoch Powell; 2014– Queen is a Nazi; 2015 – The minute of bullshit ; 2016 – Jihadi John machine
Salesforce.com (B2B)	45 articles, 12 pieces of brand content, and 1 social media thread	*4 controversies*: 2003 – Dalai Lama as a pitchman; 2005 – Hire actors to protest Siebel; 2018 – Contract with CPB; 2019 – Sued for human trafficking
Starbucks (Experience)	72 articles, 62 brand content, and 5 academic sources	*7 controversies:* 2012 – Support for same-sex marriage; 2013 – Against carrying guns into their stores; 2015 – #RaceTogether; 2015, 2016 – War on Christmas / Holiday cups; 2017 – LGBT / Holiday cups; 2017 – Hiring refugees

Note: FMCG = fast-moving consumer goods, B2B = business-to-business.

APPENDIX 2 Controversial Activist Strategies

Strategy	Definition	Illustrative data
Creating Monstrous Hybrids	Creating objects that simultaneously belong to several orders of worth or hold different moral standings.	In its spycops campaign, Lush denounced male undercover British police officers' romantic engagements with female social activists to gather evidence and get them arrested. Lush's video first depicts a romantic dinner with a man eating in the woman's home in a cozy Victorian house, with dimmed light and traditional interior (domestic order). The stage then morphs into a police station where the man in law enforcement uniforms interrogate the woman (civic order) (*Campaign* 2018) Toilet paper brand Renova raises the taboo of human excrement. In the Beatitudes campaign, Renova associated the toilet paper commodity (market order), with scenes reproducing the religious iconography of the Beatitudes with a commentary on the need for emancipation through solidarity and love (inspired order) (Insead case study 2004). Breitbart article titled "Spanish Police Crack Gang Moving Migrants on Jet-Skis" discussed illegal gang border smuggling activities (low worth civic order). The article became controversial because it included a picture of international footballer Lukas Podolski on a jet-ski (high worth in fame) (*The Guardian* 2017).
Challenging the Establishment	Opposing parties of unequal standing and criticizing the moral judgments underlying the powerful party's statements.	Organic retailer brand Biocoop joined the glyphosate debate by questioning the French government's investment in collective well-being. Biocoop posted: "The government has broken its promise to ban glyphosate within 3 years. Contrary to the government however, this herbicide keeps its promises. It's highly regrettable that Glyphosate has been the one to keep its promises" (Biocoop Facebook page 2019). Ben & Jerry's "cannot be silent in the face of President Trump's policies that …roll back decades of [social] progress…on racial and gender equity, LGBTQ rights, and refugee and immigrant rights... it is important to... consciously choose not to be complicit in the normalization of fear, bigotry and hate by remaining silent" (Ben & Jerry's website 2018). In 2015, Crossfit joined the debate on sugary drinks that raise the risk of diabetes by attacking soda icon Coca Cola. It posted an image of a Coca Cola bottle with the words "Open Diabetes" and the commentary: "Make sure you pour some out for your dead homies #CrossFit #sugarkills" (CrossFit Official Twitter Account 2015).
Demonstrating Exemplarity	Presenting the brand as striving to imagine better ways of thinking and living morally here and now.	In the early 2000s, Greenpeace started to do more than denouncing big corporations and foster sustainable entrepreneurship. Specifically, Greenpeace co-developed Greenfreeze, a refrigerant that does not deplete the ozone layer or contribute to global warming (*BBC* 2000). While the technology eventually became widely adopted, transforming the refrigeration industry from the inside, many environmentalists decried then the venture as a "heretic" and "sell-out" move, while industry actors denounced it as "unacceptable" and "dangerous" (Stafford and Hartmann 2013, p 169). Starbucks has been suppressing Christmas references from its Winter holidays cups since 2015, replacing them by symbols of unity, community and love in an effort to remain inclusive during the festive season. Starbucks' spokesperson Sanja Gould explained: "We intentionally designed the cup so our customers can interpret it in their own way." This has triggered large debates with American conservatives condemning the behavior as an "attack on Christian values" (*Eater* 2015). In the 1990s, fashion brand FCUK casted itself as a rebellious exemplar through its very name, and its advertising campaigns such as "FCUK advertising" or "FCUK fashion" that subverted the rule of advertising and fashion. It exhorted consumers to follow its lead and shift rules around the celebration of rebellious individuality and self-expression.

APPENDIX 3 Stakeholders' Assessment of Brands' Moral Competency

Moral Skill	Definition	Illustrative Data
Moral Sensitivity	Ability to recognize the moral content of situations.	Iceland's "Rang Tan" TV commercial about the threat of palm oil farming to orangutan's survival was banned for being too political. As a result, Iceland took it on YouTube with a petition. Celebrity James Corden who signed it wrote to his 10 million Twitter fans: "This commercial was banned from TV for being too political. I think everyone should see it" (*Express* 2018) After Crossfit's CEO Greg Glassman tweeted, "It's FLOYD-19" in response to a post from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation classifying racism and discrimination as a public health issue, Twitter users qualified the brand as "tone-deaf, racist, and insensitive to current events and George Floyd" (*Business Insider* 2020) When Breitbart claimed a mob had set fire to a church in Dortmund on New Year's Eve chanting Allahu Akbar, media and German politicians condemned the brand for disseminating "fake news" that "exaggerated and distorted events… involving Syrian refugees." (*The Independent* 2017). The Gates Foundation's decision to award to India's prime minister Narendra Modi for his commitment to suppressing open defecation in India was contested, because many consider Narendra Modi's policies to "promote the disenfranchisement, detention and deportation of Muslims in Assam and Kashmir" (*The Guardian* 2019).
Moral Vision	Insights into the future of morality.	FCUK "is daring, it is bold, it is rebellious and it is walking on the wild side of things" (*The Straits Times* 2002) Ben & Jerry's "made it clear just how serious it is about racial justice when, in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, the company put out a statement that garnered attention… for its starkness amid a sea of corporate platitudes. " (*Fortune* 2020). Starbucks is "setting the moral direction in its approach to Covid-19 pandemic" (*Blasting News* 2020) "As shocking as Diesel advertisements can be, they more often than not manage to rise above a purely attention-getting level… by containing a serious point of social concern or… by causing us to ponder the meaning of life. No other clothing company would appear to offer such a philosophical discourse." (Ted Polhemus, Diesel World Wide Wear, 1998) Nike's campaigns "promote rebellion" while "implicitly selling conformity" looking sadly "like deep-level satire" (*Vox* 2018).
Moral Integration	Ability to pursue their moral beliefs in all situations.	"The best marketing embodies the message it's trying to impart. And in the case of French organic food retailer Biocoop, that means trying to be as environmentally friendly as possible in all of its activities-even producing its ad campaigns. The brand challenged Fred & Farid to produce ads in a way that had the least impact on the planet. And the Paris agency responded by rethinking almost every element of the production process." (Web publication by Tim Nudd 2015) Lush "also does not do businesses with suppliers who uses animals for testing, and staff have also been banned from flying within the UK mainland in a stance against climate change" (*The Sun*, 2018) "Nike promotes itself as a so-called social-justice champion, but when it comes to Hong Kong, it prefers checking its social conscience at the door" (Mike Pence quoted in *Reuters* 2019) "Iceland's long relationship with Greenpeace suggests the campaign is not cynical opportunism" (*Inews* 2018)