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**Effectiveness of Corporate  
Sociopolitical Activism on  
brand related outcomes: an  
Italian perspective**

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## **Abstract**

Corporate Sociopolitical Activism (CSA) refers to a firm's public demonstration – in terms of actions or statements - over sociopolitical issues, such as LGBTQ+ rights, racial justice, gender equality, immigration, or abortion. Differently from those characterising the CSR landscape, sociopolitical issues are not unanimously shared by the population and yield polarised responses. As noted in academia, the partisan nature of sociopolitical issues suggests that CSA is a riskier form of activism than CSR, with the potential to strengthen or hamper the relationships with customers. After providing a qualitative investigation of CSA - building on existing literature, and illustrating some practical examples as well as a case study – the aim of the dissertation is to offer an Italian perspective on the impact of CSA on branding constructs. In particular, Value congruence has been considered as a starting point to lay out a theory-driven causal model including Attitude toward the Advertisement, Brand Attitude, Brand Image and Brand Equity. Using the Structural Equation Modelling framework, the model has been statistically tested with data collected from 211 questionnaire responses. Empirical results confirmed model fit and causal relationships, showing that Value Congruence was a key antecedent to Attitude toward the Advertisement, which in turn had a significant positive influence on Brand Attitude. Brand Attitude was found to enhance both Brand Image and Brand Equity. Importantly, significant indirect effects of Value Congruence on Brand Attitude, Brand Image and Brand Equity were observed.



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*“Silence isn’t neutrality,  
it is supporting the status quo”*

**Yuval Noah Harari**

## **Introduction**

We are living in a world that is facing an unprecedented number of environmental and societal challenges. Trust in traditional institutions has fallen (Edelman, 2018; Edelman, 2020), and people are placing mounting expectations on companies to take a stance on current issues (Accenture, 2019). Despite the social component of corporate behaviour has wide-ranging historical roots (Carroll, 2008), this call to action has reached its highest peaks, and in recent times companies are emerging as full-fledged catalysts for change with the fiduciary duty to solve societal imbalances and fill the void left by governments (Schmidt, et al., 2021). In this context, the decade of the 2010es marked an increasing involvement of brands on divisive, emotionally charged, and contentious sociopolitical issues: from Starbucks pledging to hire refugees in opposition to an immigration ban, Gillette promoting a series of ads targeting toxic masculinity, Ben & Jerry’s regularly voicing up for LGBTQ+ rights, to the influential 2018 Nike’s “Dream Crazy” campaign in support for racial justice. The rise to prominence of this phenomenon has become even more tangible in the last few years considering, for instance, the multitude of brands championing for Black Lives Matter movement after the murder of George Floyd, or the support toward LGBTQ+ rights during the Pride Month. Eschewing the traditional wisdom that companies should abstain from such matters (Korschun et al., 2019), nowadays firms’ engagement in sociopolitical issues is becoming ubiquitous.

Corporate Sociopolitical Activism (CSA) refers to a firm’s public demonstration (statements and/or actions) of support for or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue (Bhagwat, et al., 2020), such as LGBTQ+ rights, racial justice, gender equality, immigration, or abortion. If Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) involves issues with a high degree of consensus on which customers are generally united (e.g., environmental protection or child labour), sociopolitical issues are not unanimously

shared by the population and yield sharp divisions (Nalick, et al., 2016). Consistently, the partisan quality of sociopolitical activism raises the level of risk and uncertainty beyond that of traditional CSR activities, as it has the potential to strengthen or hamper the relationships with customers. This has been the case with Nike's 2018 "Dream Crazy" campaign, whereby the public support toward black rights elicited strongly polarised responses - with some customers burning their Nike shoes in protest, and others celebrating the political signal. Nonetheless, tolerating the risk to alienate some categories of customers (Vredenburg, et al., 2020), brands are nowadays seemingly comfortable addressing contested and polarized sociopolitical issues, fuelling the interest also in the academic field.

The current study contributes to the emerging stream of research concerning Corporate Sociopolitical Activism. The framework of investigation can be broadly severed into two main parts. The first part of the dissertation (Chapter 1 and Chapter 2) is qualitative, and it offers a theoretically grounded understanding of CSA building on existing literature. The second part (Chapter 3, Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) is quantitative, and it constitutes the fundamental part of the dissertation - investigating whether the exposition to a case of sociopolitical activism elicits favourable brand outcomes. In fact, if existing research has explored how brands leverage sustainability and CSR in their positioning strategies to understand the impact they have on consumers, only very little academic studies have examined these relationships when it comes to CSA. In particular, no studies providing an Italian perspective on the phenomenon have been found.

Chapter 1 starts with a historical review of the development of the CSR concept in the management literature, starting from the early conceptualisations of the 50es to the full institutionalisation of today. The objective of this initial analysis is to define the key dimensions and the multiple nuances that nowadays characterise CSR, and to lay the foundations to enter on its recent and marketing oriented evolution: Brand Activism. The social dimension of Brand Activism will provide room to introduce Corporate Sociopolitical Activism.

Chapter 2 explores Corporate Sociopolitical Activism under different nuances. Digging into existing literature, it provides a definition of the phenomenon, a clarification of what issues are regarded as sociopolitical as well as the chief conceptual differences



with other activities (CSR and CPA). Importantly, it offers a three folded perspective on the possible explanations guiding firms' engagement into sociopolitical issues. The chapter is complemented by a set of real life examples and a final analysis of the influential Nike's 2018 "Dream Crazy" campaign, considered here as a tenet of Corporate Sociopolitical Activism.

Chapter 3 is the introductory part for the empirical analysis. Switching the focus to a marketing interpretation of CSA, the primary objective of this chapter is to lay out a theory driven causal model bridging Value Congruence, Attitude toward the Advertisement, Brand Attitude, Brand Image and Brand Equity. All causal relationships are grounded on existing literature.

Chapter 4 illustrates the research method employed, providing an overview of measurement items, stimuli selection, questionnaire structure as well as sample and data collection.

Chapter 5 starts with a quick overview of Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), the statistical framework adopted to carry out the analysis. Subsequently, results of the study are presented in three stages: (i) measurement model, illustrating the relationships between measured variables and latent variables and assessing their validity and reliability; (ii) structural model, indicating the fitness of the general model presented; (iii) hypothesis testing, focusing on the relationships between the latent variables to observe whether theoretical hypothesis are supported.

Finally, the remainder part of the study (Chapter 6) is devoted to the discussion of results, theoretical contributions and some possible practical implications.



# Chapter I

## From CSR to CSA

The chapter starts with a historical review of the development of the CSR concept in the management literature, starting from the early conceptualisations of the 50s to the full institutionalisation of today. The objective of this initial analysis is to define the key dimensions and the multiple nuances that nowadays characterise CSR, and to lay the foundations to enter on its recent and marketing oriented declination: Brand Activism. Differences and similarities between CSR and Brand Activism are highlighted. Finally, the social dimension of Brand Activism will provide room to introduce the main topic of the dissertation, Corporate Sociopolitical Activism (CSA). It is in fact maintained that CSA is the best concept to circumscribe and to focus specifically on the sociopolitical connotations of Social Brand Activism. Moreover, it conflates previous academic contributions of the early 2010es on overlapping topics such as Corporate Sociopolitical Involvement or Corporate Social Advocacy.

### 1.1 CSR through an historical lens

The social component of corporate behaviour is not new, and it has long and wide-ranging historical roots<sup>1</sup>. However, as noted by Carrol, the first examples of more significant CSR-related activities can be traced back to the Second Industrial Revolution. The initiatives were initially labelled under the term *Corporate Philanthropy*, broadly defined as corporate donations and actions that provided benefits to the general community or community groups where the company operated. These paternalistic activities included, for example, the so called “Pullman Experiment”<sup>2</sup> by George Pullman, or the creation of the Civic Federation of Chicago - an organization promoted by a

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<sup>1</sup> For Chaffee (2017) forms of social responsibility can be traced back to Romans, with social entities such as asylums, homes for poor or hospitals; or to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries when the English Crown saw corporations as an instrument for social development. According to Wren (2005), philanthropic activities by business leaders encompassed patrons of arts, builders of churches or providing money for community project.

<sup>2</sup> An industrial community town built in 1893 in the south of Chicago. The town, modelled by the industrialist George M. Pullman with the most advanced standards of housing, lightening and maintenance, was created to improve the living and housing conditions of his employees and their families.

coalition of business leaders to favour better working conditions. Finally, other cases of corporate philanthropy can be found in R.H. Macy Company of New York City, that donated funds to an orphan asylum (Heald, 1970) or other corporates' support to the YMCA movement (Carroll, 2008).

Notwithstanding the significance of these cases, it is fair to stress that during those times philanthropy was circumscribed only to few isolated virtuous firms. Rather, most of the companies and businessmen were still acting with the exclusive aim of maximizing profits of the company, increasing internal wealth as much as possible without considering the possible related societal outcomes. Considering this, Eberstadt offered an interesting take on how CSR laid its foundations: in his view, the evolution of CSR was not the result of intrinsic or extrinsic philanthropic ideals, but a response to what he regards as the "culmination of corporate irresponsibility" (Eberstadt, 1973) dominating the USA during the first 1920s - that eventually contributed to the collapse of the economic system. In fact, in the early 1900s large corporations began to dominate the American economy, with few firms holding the power of governments. The entire economy was concentrated into the hands of few corrupted businessmen, leaders that defied the rules of market pricing, cheated stockholders and with no considerations of the possible micro and macro impact of their activities on the society. A predictable consequence<sup>3</sup> was that the overall economic system collapsed in the Great Depression, leading to business failures, massive unemployment, and related social upheavals. Thus, Eberstadt perspective suggested that the events brought, among others, to a reconfiguration of the economic and management system, and most notably the socioeconomic tangible outcome got business managers to renewed awareness about the corporate responsibility on the society. Consistently, Robert Hay and Ed Gray posited that the changes emerged in the business field and society in the period between 1920s and 1930s, opened on to what they dubbed as "trustee management phase", in which managers started to take responsibility for stakeholder's wealth and other claims, such as customers, employees and the community (Hay & Gray, 1974).

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<sup>3</sup> Together with other macroeconomic situations and causes that contributed to the crisis

As businessmen progressively came into contact with social workers – be it for the socioeconomic upheavals that followed their operations, internal philanthropic interests (as in the cases mentioned in the first part of the paragraph) - new views on corporate responsibility began to emerge (Carroll, 2008), and this growing trend was later confirmed in a poll run by Fortune in 1946, that asked businessmen if their sphere of responsibility covered a wider spectrum than the mere profit result. The poll reported that 93.5% said “yes”, sealing that during the late 1940es corporate responsibility was becoming increasingly salient.

Accordingly, the decade of the 50es marked the start of the production of the first formal writings on CSR, when the discipline got some definitional constructs, especially from USA scholars. One of the firsts to articulate a definition was Howard Bowen<sup>4</sup>, who provided that:

*<< It (SR) refers to the obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of actions that are desirable in terms of objective and values of our society.>> (Bowen, 1953)*

Bowen recognised that corporates, especially large ones, held strong economic power in a country. Their actions could potentially have a concrete effect on the society; thus, it was an obligation and responsibility for business leaders to pursue those activities that had a desirable societal impact. Some years later, another influential contribution came from Frederick, whose definition of CSR is stated below:

*<<Social responsibility in the final analysis implies a public posture toward society's economic and human resources and a willingness to see that those resources are utilized for broad social ends and not simply for the narrowly circumscribed interests of private persons and firms.>> (Frederick, 1960)*

The author outlined social responsibility as a firm's “public posture”, referring to a general position and a role of companies to take the distance from the mere private and economic interests to assume the responsibility to achieve broad societal ends. Sticking with the definition, the term “willingness” hinted a conceptual distance with the idea of

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<sup>4</sup> Regarded by Carroll as the “Father of Corporate Responsibility” (Carroll, 1999) due to his contributions and works.

obligation staged by other scholars of that time (see Bowen's definition of CSR), suggesting that CSR could go beyond a mere constraint imposed by a legal entity. Reflecting the vibrant context of social movements concerning anti-war protests, civil rights and the first anti-pollution oppositions, during the decade of the 1960s CSR was analysed under different perspectives and nuances. For example, a crucial contribution came from Davis (1960), who introduced an argument on CSR that proved to be far ahead of his times: socially responsible business decisions had the potential to create a positive long-run payoff for the company. This strategic and competitive slant on CSR became then widely influential in the following years and, as we will see throughout the dissertation, understanding the strategic implications of CSR is still investigated in academia.

The social movements of the late 60s all over the world<sup>5</sup> strengthened the idea that companies had to take a stand on societal problems, and another important trigger that brought awareness among institutional actors, a milestone for CSR, was the report "Limits to growth", published in 1972 by the Club of Rome<sup>6</sup>. Again, in those years the topic of social responsibility reached significant step forwards at the managerial and, foremost, the institutional level. Companies started, for example, to be recommended to undertake some managerial changes, including: (i) forecast and planning for CSR; (ii) social performance assessment; (iii) organizing for CSR; (iv) institutionalization of corporate social policy and strategy. At an institutional and legislative level, the phenomenon turned even more concrete, with initiatives that mandated companies to comply with federal laws related to the environment, employment discrimination or worker safety. Likewise, the decade was dotted with a rising number of definitions and opinions. These reinforced social expectations were reflected, for instance, in the contribution by the Committee for Economic Development (1971), stating that:

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<sup>5</sup> Protests of 1968 or other significant events like the oil of spill of Santa Barbara that eventually contributed to the creation of the first Earth Day in 1970

<sup>6</sup> A group of scientists, economists and business leaders from all over the world. The report, a research led by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, shed light on the lack of resources with respect to the future need of the population, making clear that resource consumption was sharply increasing at a rate that was unsustainable for the planet and pointing out the need for responsible business practices and new regulatory frameworks (Agudelo, et al., 2019)

*<<Business is being asked to assume broader responsibilities to society than ever before and to serve a wider range of human values. Business enterprises, in effect, are being asked to contribute more to the quality of American life than just supplying quantities of goods and services. Inasmuch as business exists to serve society, its future will depend on the quality of management's response to the changing expectations of the public.>>*  
(Committee for Economic Development (CED), 1971)

Here we can find a shift in corporate's role from supplying goods and services to contributing to the quality of life of the society, a new form of responsibility between firms and society that they labelled under the term "social contract" (Committee for Economic Development (CED), 1971). As they function only by public consent, the claim of the Commission was that in order to survive businesses had to act responsively and accordingly to the expectations of the public. On the same page was the contribution by Sethi, who provided a relevant distinction between social obligation, social responsibility and social responsiveness. The first refers to company's actions performed to comply with legal and economic constraints and, thus, are proscriptive. Differently, corporate social responsibility has a prescriptive nature, and is better defined as:

*<<Social responsibility implies bringing corporate behaviour up to a level where it is congruent with the prevailing social norms, value and expectation of performance.>>*  
(Sethi, 1975)

Finally, he also set forth a third dimension, social responsiveness, defined as a proactive adaptation – and a preventive behaviour - of the company to societal needs. Overall, staging the idea of CSR in terms of adaptation, congruency and performance expectations was coherent with the concept of "legitimacy" articulated by Votaw (1973), suggesting a conception of CSR as a mean to achieve a sense of belonging, or being proper, or valid to operate within a certain socioeconomic domain. As we will see, this perspective is particularly useful to analyse CSR adopting, for example, a stakeholder theory viewpoint, in which the company operates to fulfil and meet the expectations of different corporate-related groups (employees, customers, NGOs, investors, legislators...). In the last part of the decade, Carrol (1979) came up with a basic definition on CSR, building on the framework of other scholars and embracing, in few words, some of the multiple nuances of the definitions hitherto proposed (that is,

mandatory and voluntary dimensions of CSR and the new expectations endorsed by the responsible firms):

*<<The social responsibility of businesses encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point of time.>>*  
(Carroll, 1979)

Besides hinting at some elements of what was later conceptualised as the “triple bottom line” of corporate social responsibility, two other takeaways are particularly relevant in the definition. First, Carrol explicitly referred to the economic responsibility, claiming that by carrying out its economic activity the company was doing something for the society as well. Second, it was remarked that the responsibilities of companies change according to a given point of time. Thus, the concept of CSR is fluid, it changes in line with different historical periods and will change also in the future.

The ethical upheavals between the 1980s and 1990s<sup>7</sup> paved the way towards a further conceptualisation and business application of CSR. The cumulation of events – combined with those happened in the decades before - provided the conditions for the penetration of the sustainability issue into the mass culture, with people seeing a clearer picture on how corporate behaviour could potentially harm their lives. The magnitude of the sustainable concern was also reflected in the creation of institutional actors, such as European Commission’s Environment Directorate-General (1981), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (1988) or the publication of environmental report including the report “Our Common Future” (1987), which provided a definition of sustainable development (1987). At the same time, it is worth to highlight another relevant political and economic phenomenon involving US and UK during that period, that eventually contributed to the shaping of CSR concept for the following years. In fact, as noted by scholars (Wankel 2008; Pillay 2015), the high levels of inflation suffered by these two countries in the early 1980s, led Reagan and Thatcher administrations to reduce the legislative pressure on corporations, fostering a free market environment over state level interventions. With governments with a lower power on corporate behaviour, firms were required to answer to the growing

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<sup>7</sup> Among others, the scandals included the Union Carbide Bhopal Explosion in India in 1984, the case of companies doing business in support of apartheid in South Africa or the Chernobyl disaster in 1986



expectations of different groups to keep up with the societal needs of the time (Agudelo, et al., 2019). This context gave way to an intensification of the use of the term stakeholder – that became widely used in the academia - and a better consideration and analysis of their impact to the business (a conceptualisation of stakeholder theory reached significant step forwards). Among scholars, the increased salience of the sustainability concern - and the adoption of the stakeholder theory framework - contributed to a development and evolution of a different concept of CSR, that increasingly started to be defined embracing a stakeholder standpoint. This can be appreciated, for example, in the 1992 contribution of the Business for Social Responsibility (BSR), an American non-profit organization:

*<< [...] Through socially responsible business policies and practices, companies can achieve viable, sustainable growth that benefits stakeholders as well as stockholders. By providing tools, training, tools and custom advisory services, BSR enables its members to leverage corporate social responsibility as a competitive advantage. >>* (Business for Social Responsibility, 2006)

During the 1990s, the interest in CSR kept growing, in parallel with the increased concern on sustainability by the international community, manifested at several levels<sup>8</sup>. The concept of sustainable development, initially defined in 1987 as the development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”, gained wide appeal. A relevant contribution relying on this idea came from Elkington (1994), who introduced the concept of the “triple bottom line”. As a sustainability accounting framework that takes into account the social, environmental and economic impact of the firm, companies had to find the right balance among these three dimensions. The Triple Bottom Line Approach turned out to be very popular by the end of the 1990s, and the consideration of the economic, environmental and social dimensions has remained relevant (Agudelo, et al., 2019). Besides this, in those times still there was little consensus about the rationale for enterprise level sustainability. In fact, for some managers CSR was merely a legal requirement, for others a moral mandate and for still others it represented only a cost to get the legitimacy to

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<sup>8</sup> Creation of the European Environment Agency in 1990, UN environment and development Summit or the adoption of Kyoto Protocol in 1997

operate inside the business ecosystem<sup>9</sup>. The strategic implications of CSR, though in some cases suggested by scholars, had been mostly overlooked, and little times considered as a concrete business opportunity for managers. By the end of the 1990s this was about to change. The increased globalisation process opened on to new market opportunities, to a soaring number of possible competitors, to a higher reputational risk caused by visibility growth and to the need to counteract the expectations of a wider number of possible stakeholders. As noted by Carrol (2015), this permitted corporations to understand that being socially responsible could potentially help them to face these challenges, and the focus shifted on figuring out how the interrelation between CSR and strategy could work.

Thus, the decade of the 2000s marked significant steps forwards in this sense, with scholars putting their effort on shedding light on the possible strategic implications of CSR<sup>10</sup>. For example, building on the “triple bottom line” approach, the claim of Hart & Milstein (2003) was that the creation of sustainable value by the firm (economic, social and environmental) acts as a key driver to boost shareholder value. In short, the model -moving between internal/external side of the company and the present/future view - puts together the 4 key benefits for turning sustainable: (i) reduced costs and risk reduction (internal, present perspective); (ii) increased reputation and legitimacy of the company among the possible stakeholders (external, present perspective); (iii) anticipation of future needs of the society and company’s repositioning (internal, future perspective); (iv) the identification of unserved markets and overlooked stakeholders for new growth opportunities (external, future perspective). Another contribution was presented by Jones & Murrell (2001), who demonstrated that the recognition of firm’s social performance by the public acts as a signal of the perceived business performance by shareholders. On the whole, the strategic dimension of CSR turned out to be of paramount importance. This can be seen in Werther & Chandler (2005) work which - in

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<sup>9</sup> The theory of the business ecosystem was coined by business strategist James Moore in 1993. It stems from the idea of biological ecosystems, and refers to network of actors—including distributors, suppliers, customers, government agencies, competitors and so on— creating a constantly evolving relationship in which each entity must be flexible and adaptable in order to survive, as in a biological ecosystem. The theory has many affinities with stakeholder theory, though they are slightly different (see Stanczyk, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> This holistic combination resulted in the creation of the term SCSR (Strategic Corporate Social Responsibility)

describing the role of CSR to get legitimacy in the context of globalised brands – provided that:

*<<CSR (moved) from being a minimal commitment...to becoming a strategic necessity.>>*  
(Werther & Chandler, 2005)

The two authors thus conceived CSR as something essential for enterprises, a strategic top-down approach to attain a sustainable competitive advantage. Consistently, Porter & Kramer (2006) stressed the necessity to adopt a holistic approach to lay out the corporate strategy, considering the interdependence between the firm and the society. In doing so, SCSR (Strategic CSR) served as a mean to enhance firm's competitiveness and create shared value for the society. The two authors then further conceptualized the notion of shared value, defined as:

*<<policies and operating practices that enhance the competitiveness of a company while simultaneously advancing the economic and social conditions in the communities in which it operates. Shared value creation focuses on identifying and expanding the connections between societal and economic progress>>* (Porter & Kramer, 2006)

pointing out also that the ultimate goal of the companies was not to maximise profits, but to create shared value through a rigorous understanding of societal needs and the benefits or harms connected with firm's products or services.

Finally, the decade of the 2010s reinforced the idea of the social contract between firms and society. The Paris Agreement, the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development and the UN Development goals called for a further institutionalisation of CSR, with countries creating new policies and regulations that firms had to comply with and a consolidated stakeholder's sensitivity on the theme (amplified through traditional media and the explosion of new media). Likewise, this interest was clearly manifested in academia, where the output of research on CSR and related concepts in databases had more than doubled (Agudelo, et al., 2019). Among these works, Trapp (2012) presents what she dubs as the "third generation" of CSR, in which corporations are seen as institutions and have a concern for global issues that are not necessarily directly relevant to their core business or to the local community, but to all of humankind. Consistently, Chandler (2016) highlights that firms should act without the interest on maximising profits but the

shared value and, in order to be successful, need to implement SCSR in their day-to-day operations, decision making process or corporate culture. More importantly, during the decade - as we will see in the next paragraph - CSR saw a marketing oriented evolution to what Kotler and Sarkar (2018) define as “Brand Activism”.

## **1.2 Understanding CSR**

As seen throughout the historical analysis, there emerged a multitude of definitions, declinations, and nuances of CSR<sup>11</sup>. Sometimes consistent -other times less- with one another, in any case the concepts seemed to be always in the making according to the different historical times sociopolitical and economical context. Thus, coming up with a clear and distinct definitional construct of CSR is challenging, and its related understandings and practices are in constant flux (Trapp, 2012). Nonetheless, it is important for the purpose of the present dissertation to provide a comprehensive (but inevitably partial) and satisfying understanding of the concept, capable of taking into account most of the aspects emerged hitherto.

A first layer of analysis emerged throughout the chapter is the distinction between CSR as an obligation or as a set of actions that embody a degree of voluntarism. For some scholars it is sufficient to present CSR as a legal requirement, involving activities that are compliant with a set of laws and rules specific to the normative domain in which the company operates (more than one if the company is, for example, an MNC). Conversely, for other scholars it is stressed that CSR has a voluntary nature, a degree of voluntarism that goes beyond the coercive forces of law and holds a component of willingness. With this perspective, the implementation of national or supranational CSR-related directives or the compliance with a pre-established set of rules seem not to be sufficient to classify a company as socially responsible; likewise, they are morally asked to do something more. Finally, still others, such as Carroll, decide to include both components, writing about the legal requirements connected with CSR but also highlighting a discretionary aspect. Provided that some studies attempted to shed light on this point<sup>12</sup>, it is here

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<sup>11</sup> Without considering, in addition, all many other definitions presented in the academia.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Dahlsrud (2008) systematically examined 37 definitions on CSR presented until 2008, focusing on which aspects emerged most frequently. The study concluded that, among others, the voluntariness dimension of CSR - described in the definitions in phrases like ‘based on ethical values’

claimed that an interesting way to analyse this “dilemma” is to consider a second relevant dimension of CSR, that is, stakeholders. As noted earlier, the concept of stakeholders consolidated during the 80es, and CSR scholars started to implement it in their definitions. Defined as those groups affected - directly or indirectly - by firm’s activities and vice versa (employees, customers, suppliers, political action groups, environmental groups, local communities, the media, financial institutions, governmental groups), stakeholders play a crucial role for the survival of the company, in which managers have to cope with the different needs of each group, without which the companies cease to exist (Freeman). A stakeholder theory perspective on CSR suggests that, if it is true that companies must act within a set of rules provided by law, addressing stakeholder’s needs equally represents a crucial condition for companies – that is, a sort of obligation- in order to get the legitimation to operate and survive in the business ecosystem. This means that all CSR-related actions operated by companies transcending the legal requirements can be both interpreted as volunteer (viewing the term obligation in *strictu sensu*, since the company is not legally required to do so) or as an obligation itself (in *latu sensu*, only to survive in the business ecosystem). Moreover, as new regulations and CSR standards are being constantly produced by nationals and supranational normative domains, the scope of legal responsibilities is expanding and absorbing ethical/volunteer responsibilities. Thus, overall, trying to draw up distinct boundaries between CSR practices undertaken in response to an obligation (be it legal, competitive or both) or for intrinsic voluntary reasons is challenging and, probably, short sighted. On the whole, Corporate social responsibility can be broadly defined as the engagement of the firm in activities that are beneficial to the society, either in response to some explicit obligations or for intrinsic ethical motives.

A second element of analysis is that in recent times - more than ever – CSR has become paramount, is pervasive and it has also competitive components. This opens on to the third dimension of CSR, the strategic one. This component, emerged in multiple parts of the previous paragraph, has been keenly analysed by scholars from the 2000s onwards, and still today is very important. As noted earlier, adopting responsible behaviours has

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or ‘beyond legal obligations’ or ‘voluntary’ – has been progressively and widely accepted by scholars and, thus, it is a characterising component of the definition.

a wide range of benefits. The strategic rationales for CSR can be summarized as follows. First of all, it gives the possibility to create sustainable value, in the short run and also in the long run (reducing risks, boosting innovation, etc... see Hart and Milstein, 2003). Second, relying on stakeholder theory, it is a way to counteract the increasing pressure of stakeholders for the responsible performance of the company, and it thus allows to reduce the overall corporate risk and to be more competitive in the business ecosystem. It also has a direct impact on legitimation, that is, the conformation with social norms, values and expectations of the society and, likewise, the stakeholders. The effect is reflected, for example, from a financial standpoint, in the sense that sustainable companies are those that, nowadays, receive the most consistent financial backing by investors, and turning sustainable is an opportunity to attract them<sup>13</sup>. From a marketing perspective, as we will see later on, CSR has a positive impact on the brand reputation, perceived product value, product performance and on the brand in general (creating a sort of “benevolent” halo effect). A third strategic rationale is connected with agency theory, that is, the relationships between the agents of the company (managers) and the principals (shareholders). Considering the scandals arisen in the past, managers – acting on their own interest and not the one of shareholders – decide to pursue the elimination of risk (reputational, and legal consequences) concerning the social and environmental damages that may arise from their lines of action. Thus, CSR represents a safe harbour for managers as they consider the possible strategy to implement.

The third important component of CSR is that it encompasses the social, environmental and economic dimensions. The social dimension is the one scholars referred to most when drawing up their definition of the concept. Described as the relationship between the business and the society - represented by phrases like ‘contribute for a better society’ or ‘integrate the social concerns in their business operations’ –, it was used to mention the general problems and needs of the society. Nevertheless, as the environmental-related problems became ubiquitous in society’s sensitivity, there allegedly emerged the necessity to distinguish them in an own separate dimension and, conversely, the social dimension started to assume a more specific meaning. Thus, the

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<sup>13</sup> A tangible example is represented by Tesla that, though in constant financial loss, is receiving solid support by investors. See more on <https://www.theverge.com/2019/7/24/20708462/tesla-q2-earnings-loss-model-3-elon-musk>

social dimension refers to the social issues connected with human development and welfare (e.g., no child labour, employee training, community health), with equity (e.g., equal opportunities, no-discrimination, fair wage system and benefits) and ethical values (e.g., human rights, intergenerational values); whilst the environmental dimension deals with aspects like air emissions, biodiversity preservation, global warming and waste production. Finally, being sustainable involves also the economic aspect. As underlined by Carroll, the idea is that the company, as an economic agent, still has to fulfil its economic and financial duties, but can also benefit the society carrying out its strategy of long term growth and business operations. Economic responsibility includes returning money to the investors, obtaining maximum profits, achieving leadership positions in the market or guaranteeing customer satisfaction and loyalty (Gonzalez-Rodriguez, 2015).

On the whole, the dimensions of CSR can be summarized as follows:

- **Obligation/volunteer dimension:** in accordance with the meaning that we impute to the term obligation, CSR-related actions of the company transcending the legal requirements can be both interpreted as obligation or volunteerism. More specifically, adopting a narrow standpoint of the term, these should be considered as voluntary actions; whilst if we adopt a broader view (more strategic, relying on stakeholder theory and the business ecosystem perspective) they can still fall into the obligation domain. Overall, CSR refers to firms' recognition of their role – responsibility – over societal problems, and the implementation of related lines of action (be it for a legal obligation, a strategic one or for discretionary ethical reasons) that ultimately have a positive outcome for the society.
- **Stakeholder dimension:** CSR-related actions are undertaken to fulfil the needs of many different stakeholders. These include employees, customers, suppliers, political action groups, environmental groups, local communities, NGOs, financial institutions, governmental groups, that together legitimate – or hamper – the company to operate and survive in the business ecosystem.
- **Strategic dimension:** CSR incorporates a wide array of strategic rationales: it creates sustainable value either in the short-medium run and especially in the

long run, it enhances the competitiveness of the firm (higher profits, larger market share, lower costs, differentiation), it reduces overall corporate risks (thus, attracting investors), it strengthens reputation and legitimation for the stakeholders (contributing to an isomorphic alignment with their expectations and values), and it provides guidelines for managers to lay out new strategic moves (agency theory).

- **Economic, environmental and social dimensions:** a sustainable company contributes to sustainable development by living up to simultaneously social, environmental and economic benefits. This entails that an enterprise has to preserve its profitability and to be a wholesome economic agent, at the same time it has to account and improve social-related problems (thus, considering the impact of its operations in the community) and environmental concerns of the society.

### **1.3 Responsibility in modern times: Brand Activism**

In Kotler and Sarkar's "Brand Activism: from purpose to action", the authors contend that CSR is not enough anymore. Back in 2018, the Edelman Trust Barometer<sup>14</sup> - a compounded benchmark derived from surveys to verify trust across different levels of the population – shed light on an important takeaway: when it comes to driving change on societal problems, people have lost faith in authority figures and institutions, as well as media and NGOs. Conversely, 54% of respondents claimed that they believe it is easier to get brands address social problems rather than the government; 46% believe that brands have better ideas to solve a country's problem rather than a government; 53% believe that brands can do more to solve societal ills than government; 76% of respondents they expect CEOs to lead the fight for the change, managing to improve the economic and social conditions where the company operates, 84% of respondents want CEOs to join conversations involving issues such as jobs, economy, automation, globalization, global warming, discrimination, healthcare or immigration. On the same

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<sup>14</sup> Edelman Trust Barometer on: <https://www.edelman.com/trust-barometer> and [https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2018-10/2018\\_Edelman\\_Earned\\_Brand\\_Global\\_Report.pdf](https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2018-10/2018_Edelman_Earned_Brand_Global_Report.pdf)



page, the 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer reports that 85% of consumers rely on brands to do the right thing for the society.

Consistently with Trapp (2012), the reports confirm a shift in responsibility from formal institutions to firms. Today - in a world that is facing an unprecedented multitude of societal and environmental challenges – trust has dramatically dropped, and companies are in charge of filling the void left by governments and boost societal change. In other words, the claim of Kotler and Sarkar (2020) is that what matters now is action, that is, showing that your brand lives and behaves in the real world to positively change it. There occurs a definition of brand activism:

*<<brand activism consists of business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society >> (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020)*

Brand activism is conceived as a natural evolution beyond CSR (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020), with some conceptual differences. Brand activism stems from a marketing-oriented perspective on the responsibility of the company on society: the focus is shifted to consumers and people, and how they perceive the signals of the company (the brand) on the problems of the society. As CSR and ESG programs are too slowly transforming companies across the world (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020), brand activism is more focused on action rather than purpose, and how the brand behaves - its tangible impact in the world - is paramount. The two authors hold that while CSR is corporate-driven, Brand Activism is a society-driven concept. The mindset on reality switches from inside-out to outside-in: the company no longer self-regulates its business model according to society's problems and ethical standards, but it has to (pro)actively detect and gather problems of the world to concretely improve it - including those problems with little or no operational relatedness with the business.

Overall, being an activist for a brand means to be driven by a fundamental concern for the biggest and most urgent problems facing the society (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). Further, the authors bring forth the categories comprised on Brand Activism:

- **Environmental activism:** it covers areas such as ecocide, land-use, air pollution, water pollution, emissions, biodiversity preservation. Thus, an environmental

activist brand is one that actively tries to preserve the ecosystem, embeds sustainable practices in its business activities, designs its supply chain around a circular economy or uses clean and renewable resources. The concept overlaps significantly and falls into the same category of the environmental declination of CSR, but it further deepens its range taking stronger, more proactive and concrete actions (such as, encouraging also public awareness and education). In this sense, a leading example of environmental activism is represented by Patagonia<sup>15</sup>, that for 30 years is concretely fighting for the environment and taking solid stances for its preservation.

- **Economic activism:** it encompasses wage, tax policies and in general corporate actions that impact with inequality and wealth redistribution, answering question such as “Do we support local small businesses, local communities and entrepreneurs?” or “Do we pay a fair share of taxes or escape tax responsibilities?” or “Do our employees get paid enough?” or finally “Do we balance our economic interest with public health?”. The economic activism is thus presented as a hybrid between the social and economic declinations of CSR: the business that still has to be profitable, but the focus is on how the economic aspect might produce macro and micro societal outcomes.
- **Legal activism:** it focuses on the impact of laws and policies to corporate aspects such as tax, citizenship or employment laws. Being a legal activist means respecting employment and labour laws, supporting the rule of law, respecting laws of transparency or get the senior management participate in the development of an institutional legal framework for a just society. As suggested by Bowen in his definition, the legal aspect is one of the responsibilities of companies - as an actor operating in a specific normative domain, the company has to comply with laws. In this case, though, the company needs also to find a way to be more active, contributing to the shaping of a better legal framework.
- **Workplace activism:** it deals with corporate governance in all its aspects, including workers compensation, workplace inclusiveness, supply chain management, CEOs fair wages, work safety or democratic workplace. The focus

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<sup>15</sup> Visit <https://www.patagonia.com/activism/>

is internal on the company, and again the concept can be assimilated with the social component of CSR.

- **Political Activism:** it copes with aspect such as lobbying, voting, voting rights and democracy, covering questions such as “Is the company supporting a transparent and open government?”, “Does the company oppose gerrymandering?”, “Are lobbying activities transparent?” or finally “Do we support democracy?”.
- **Social activism:** the social activism is the broadest category, and it involves societal and community issues such as Education, Social Security, Consumer Protection, Healthcare or Equality. Thus, for instance, the company must be committed to race, gender, sexual equality, it has to stand for immigration policies, respect human rights, protect the privacy of people and in general create a higher standard of social condition.

Figure 1.1 shows the six forms of activism presented, with the attempt to integrate them with the three declinations of CSR (economic, environmental and social) highlighted in the previous sub-paragraph. As noted, Brand Activism is seen as a natural evolution of CSR, but the former is more focused on action and delves into its concepts in a deeper way. In fact, it is here maintained that the 3 main tenets of CSR - environmental, social and economic dimensions – are incorporated in Brand Activism in a new, more concrete and tangible fashion, taking also into account also the two elements of political and legal activism.

Another point Kotler and Sarkar set forth is that even though Brand Activism should be driven by values, vision and purpose, it is possible – as for CSR – to shed light on its strategic implications. At a theoretical level, to explain this relationship the authors rely of the concept of *reputational economy*, whereas for companies “reputation is considered as the new currency on which everything else will depend. On a company level it drives

**FIGURE 1.1**  
**Bridging CSR with Brand Activism**



*Source:* Personal elaboration building on Kotler and Sarkar (2020) framework

whether people say good things about you” (Stephen Hahn- Griffith’ interview<sup>16</sup>, Reputation Institute for a deeper understanding). Companies that have a good reputation operate with integrity to improve people lives around the world, promoting diversity, inclusiveness and sustainability, and, in doing so - achieving high reputation and trust - it follows that they end up being prized with better financial outcomes. Providing a more practical view, when it comes to leading sustainability efforts, Unilever is considered a virtuous example<sup>17</sup>: the company does not invest in digital platforms that create division in society, it fights fake news through influencer marketing, it reduces environmental footprint at each stage of the supply chain, promotes circular economy and launched social programs such as Unilever Sustainable Living Plan. The company, thus, has a well-recognized reputation of being a full-fledged activist brand. At a financial level, in 2018 Unilever’ Sustainable Living Brands (Dove, Knorr, Lipton among others) has been awarded with a +69% growth faster than the rest of the business, and overall, they

<sup>16</sup> “How do companies earn top marks for reputation?” Biz Blog see more on <https://bis.lexisnexis.co.uk/blog/categories/governance-risk-and-compliance/reputation-interview>

<sup>17</sup> Unilever named industry leader in Dow Jones Sustainability Index see more on <https://www.unilever.com/news/press-releases/2018/unilever-named-as-an-industry-leader-in-djsi.html>

deliver 75% of business growth<sup>18</sup>. Another leading example on the financial impact related to Brand Activism is represented by Nike's spot of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of their *Just Do It* campaign with Colin Kaepernick: the event received more than \$43 million worth of media exposure (in the 24 hours following the launch) and recorded +31% sales in the 4 days following the announcement. As a polarising event with strong sociopolitical implications, the case will be fully deepened in the next part as a case study for Corporate Sociopolitical Activism.

#### **1.4 From Brand Activism toward CSA**

Brand Activism inevitably stems from the antecedent and broader idea of Corporate Social Responsibility: CSR can be presented as a business activity that seeks business and societal benefits simultaneously, and Brand Activism advance the same overarching objective. Given that they fall into the same domain, they nonetheless present some theoretical differences that collectively provided scholars room to analyse the two concepts in their own separate way. There emerges that Brand Activism can be regarded as the natural evolution of CSR, a more marketing-oriented concept that bridges together all firm's active commitments towards a better society. It follows that Brand Activism is a society-driven concept, that instead of acting inside-out (as for CSR) it works outside-in, with firms assimilating issues from without and changing accordingly, even when the problems have little or no operational relatedness with the business. Then, as noted, Brand Activism can be severed in its six dimensions: (i) environmental activism; (ii) economic activism; (iii) workplace activism; (iv) political activism; (v) legal activism and (vi) social activism.

Social activism embraces areas that overlap significantly with the social dimension of CSR, but it has a wider ranging scope – including social and community aspects such education, social security, consumer protection, healthcare, human rights, inclusiveness, and equality. It thus incorporates problems with a great societal consensus, such as child labour and education, as well issues connected with race, gender, sexual equality or immigration policies. The peculiarity of the latter is that, still

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<sup>18</sup> "The ROI of Brand Activism: Unilever's Latest Findings" see more on <http://www.activistbrands.com/the-roi-of-brand-activism-unilevers-latest-findings/>

nowadays, these problems might be emotionally charged, polarising and divisive in the society, and public opinion may be split.

Regarded as sociopolitical issues, this specific kind of activism had already been conceptualised by scholars few years before under the names “Corporate Sociopolitical Involvement” (Nalick et al. 2016) or “Corporate Social Advocacy” (Dodd et al, 2014). The concept of sociopolitical involvement and advocacy advanced by these authors can thus be regarded as a precursor of what Kotler and Sarkar later consolidated in the broader concept of Brand Activism, and more specifically, it refers to a specific subset of social brand activism. The product of this chronologic order is that academic studies on corporate activity dealing with controversial sociopolitical issues has been first analysed under different names - Corporate Sociopolitical Involvement, Corporate Social Advocacy or Corporate Political Involvement – to finally, with the influence of Kotler and Sarkar’s recent work, being predominantly embedded under the broader concept of “Brand Activism” (as for the case of Vredenburg et al. (2020), who circumscribe Brand Activism only to the controversial sociopolitical aspects of the activity). Nonetheless, as noted earlier, Brand Activism is a vast concept that embraces different dimensions, and for the purpose of this dissertation it becomes key to distinguish its sociopolitical connotations. We rely, then, on a new satisfactory term emerged recently in an influential paper by Bhagwat et. al (2020): “Corporate Sociopolitical Activism”, an expression that conflates all the previous contributions and specifically focuses only to corporate stances for or against contented sociopolitical issues. Chapter 2 will delve into Sociopolitical Activism.

## Chapter II

### Corporate Sociopolitical Activism

Chapter 1 moved along CSR and Brand Activism to introduce the concept of Corporate Sociopolitical Activism. The aim of chapter 2 is to provide a qualitative perspective on the phenomenon, which can be defined at first glance as corporate public stances - in the form of actions or statements - for or against sociopolitical issues. Even though academia has not thoroughly explored this form of activism (as in the case of CSR), the chapter builds on the academic contributions that emerged prominently from the 2010s onwards, keeping in consideration also the emergent literature on Brand Activism. Explanations leading companies to undertake sociopolitical activism will be set forth. In particular, a multiple theoretical framework is presented, adopting stakeholder theory, agency theory and considering institutional factors. Finally, to provide readers with a more practical perspective, concrete examples and a final case study will be outlined.

#### 2.1 What is Corporate Sociopolitical Activism?

Though businesses have long been recognized for their force on shaping and influencing the political and social issues (Nalick, et al., 2016) in recent times their influence has become pervasive. With an increased economic power comparable to the one of wholesome national economies (Roach, 2007) – and in parallel with the trust vacuum in government and traditional authorities - firms are now seen as institutions (Trapp, 2012), ultimately becoming real activists towards problems the society is facing. As noted in chapter 1, they thus entered onto the “natural evolution of CSR” (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020), Brand Activism, that encompasses many areas, from economic, legal, political, environmental and social. In the area dealing with social activism, businesses have been increasingly asked to respond to stakeholders’ mounting pressures and expectations to take side on hot and emotionally charged sociopolitical issues. In this context, as we will fully explore in the next paragraphs, from the 2010s on, there occurred many cases of sociopolitical activism undertaken by corporations, as demonstrated by the studies conducted by McKinsey consulting (2009)<sup>19</sup> - that shed light

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/leadership/tackling-sociopolitical-issues-in-hard-times-mckinsey-global-survey-results>

on the increasing involvement of US brands on issues such as the same-sex marriage, gun control, immigration, transgender rights. Accordingly, the phenomenon has gained momentum in the academic field and, even though the body of research is far lower than the one related with CSR, researchers have provided the first definitional constructs, have analysed the nature of this form of activism and have started figuring out its possible strategic implications.

Bhagwat et. al (2020) define Corporate Sociopolitical Activism (CSA) as a *“firm’s public demonstration (statements and/or actions) of support for or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue”* (Bhagwat, et al., 2020); Nalick et.al (2016) use a different name, Corporate Sociopolitical Involvement (SPI), to express firms’ recent participation in sociopolitical issues that are *“divisive, unsettled, emotionally charged, or contested”* (Nalick, et al., 2016) and generally lack normative or institutional consensus; Wettstein & Baur (2016) refer to the concept of Corporate Political Advocacy to express *“[businesses] voicing or showing explicit and public support for certain individuals, groups, or ideals and values with the aim of convincing and persuading others to do the same”* (Wettstein & Baur, 2016); and finally Dodd & Supa (2014) define Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA) as *“[CSA] refers to an organization making a public statement or taking a public stance on social-political issues”* (Dodd & Supa, 2014).

As noted in the end of Chapter 1, from this point on this study will only refer to Bhagwat et al. (2020) notion of Corporate Sociopolitical Activism (regarded as a product of previous concepts such as SPI, CSA or CPA with the recent influence of Brand Activism). However, it can be maintained that the core concept is consistent throughout all the definitions: Corporate Sociopolitical Activism is a form of activism pursued by companies through which they take a stand on contested sociopolitical issues.

According to Nalick et al. (2016), CSA can take the form of:

- Public statements, such as CEO or top tier management figure’s interviews where they intentionally or unintentionally express support to or boycott certain values
- Proactive and organized corporate actions, related mostly to the marketing mix strategy of the company (for instance, fixing certain product characteristics, such



as the packaging to express affiliation with certain community groups, undertaking communication campaigns, like advertisings, delivering specific values for/against sociopolitical issues) or branding elements (sometimes in accordance with certain events or manifestations, as for the case of the Pride Month where many famous brand logos implemented the LGBTQ+ flag)

- Internal changes (switch in employment policies or benefits) and changes dealing with business practices or operations (such as choosing certain locations or expanding onto geographic areas connected with a specific ideological bent).
- Donations to charitable associations to express affiliation with certain groups or organisation of events.

Table 2.1 provides a list of CSA cases.

**TABLE 2.1**  
**Sample of CSA activities in recent times**

YEAR	COUNTRY	FIRM	ISSUE	CSA ACTIVITY
2012	US	Chick-fil-A	Same sex marriage	CEO Dan Cathy made clear sustain for the “traditional family,” opposition to gay marriage legislation, and support for anti-gay marriage advocacy groups
2015	China	Alibaba	Same-sex marriage	Alibaba paid for 10 couples to travel to the U.S. to get married
2015	China	Ctrip	One-child policy	Company provided interest-free loans for employees that could be used to pay government fines for having more than one child
2015	US	Amazon, eBay	Racial justice	Companies removed the confederate flag merchandise
2015	US	Doritos (PepsiCo)	LGBTQ+ rights	Doritos announced a new limited-edition flavor, Doritos Rainbows chips, the “first Doritos product in history made up of multiple, rainbow-colored Doritos chips inspired by the Pride flag.”
2015	US	Whataburger	US gun reform	After open-carry law in 16 states, the company’s CEO released a statement forbidding guns in the restaurants
2016	US	Target	LGBTQ+ rights	Target formally announced a policy of allowing transgendered persons to use own choice bathrooms

2016	US	Bud Light	Same-sex marriage	The brand championed homosexual weddings inclusivity through a series of ad
2017	US + worldwide	Starbucks	Immigration	Starbucks' CEO says it plans to hire 10,000 refugees over five years in the 75 countries where it does business.
2018	US	Nike	Racial Justice	Nike sided with Colin Kaepernick to express public support toward Black Lives Matter Movement through "Dream Crazy" campaign
2019	Italy	Gucci	Abortion	Gucci's artistic director Alessandro Michele took a stand against laws prohibiting abortion in the US, via an interview
2019	US + worldwide	Gillette	Gender discrimination	Advertisement and donations to charities addressed toxic masculinity
2021	Italy	Idealista	LGBTQ+ rights	To celebrate the Pride Month, the company launched an ad (social and tv) showing two homosexual guys on their first exit
2021	Italy	Ikea	Gender discrimination	Social media ad to put the spotlight on couple's housework disparity and how communication reinforces this dynamic (
2021	Italy + worldwide	Diesel	LGBTQ+ rights	Diesel has launched on its social media channels a short film titled 'Francesca.', featuring the story of young transgender
2021	Worldwide	Lego	LGBTQ+ rights	The company dedicated a new set of bricks "Everyone is Awesome" to celebrate the LGBTQ+ community. Moreover, it strengthened its commitment to create a more inclusive workplace
2021	Worldwide	Microsoft	LGBTQ+ rights	Launch of a global ad "Together we can" to support LGBTQ+ community
2021	Worldwide	Victoria's Secret	Gender discrimination	The company wiped out its iconic models to reposition the brand on a new identity represented by a panel of strong and successful women, symbols of women "empowerment"

Source: Nalick et. al (2016), Bhagwat et. al (2020) and personal research; Note: references at the end of the dissertation

## 2.2 Defining sociopolitical issues

At first glance sociopolitical issues can be severed in its two components, as they are: (i) social issues, that evoke different emotional feelings and passions across various social groups inside the population; (ii) political issues, in the sense that they can be discussed in political agendas. Sociopolitical issues are salient unresolved social matters on which societal and institutional opinion is split (Nalick, et al., 2016), yielding divisive and – sometimes – polarised responses by the public. Moreover, they have a dynamic and unstable nature, as they are constantly in the making according to historical time (what is nowadays perceived as a sociopolitical issue might be different to what will be a sociopolitical issue in the next years), across geographic areas, cultures, religions and ethnic/demographic backgrounds, political and institutional environments. Going in further details, Nalick et al. (2016) come up with 3 key elements that together identify sociopolitical issues:

- **Lacking societal consensus:** differently from other social issues<sup>20</sup>, sociopolitical issues lack consensus inside specific social domains. These issues deal with unsettled social matters that are controversial as they challenge established norms derived from dominant socio-cultural, historical, ethnic views (Haider-Markel & Meier, 1996), and they usually come to light via informal institutions, like small communities, informal groups or new progressive opinion leaders. From small epicentres, they manage to spread across the population, facilitated in recent times by the spread of new medias, to get increasing attention and salience in the society. Interestingly, Heider-Markel & Meier noted that, frequently, politicians not directly concerned with these issues build upon them to build their political reputation and to lay out their political agenda, usually resulting in battle lines that split the society (Nalick, et al., 2016), reinforcing the polarised views on the problem.
- **Low information rationality:** sociopolitical stances may often lack concrete factual information and reasoning to be supported. Their intangible (in the sense

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<sup>20</sup> Like poverty or ecology. They are sometimes regarded as sociopolitical issues too, as they present also political features, but for the purpose of the present dissertation sociopolitical issues are only those that lack, at least in part, consensus among society

that they are linked with own personal ideals) and high partisan nature leads individuals feel that they are experts in the field, to finally avoid any different source of information. This vicious process is reinforced also by situations of information asymmetry and low information structures. The new phenomenon of social media echo chambers represents a fitting example: closed systems (in this case, social media like Facebook, Instagram or Reddit), where beliefs and opinions are constantly amplified and reinforced due to the communication mechanisms that are typical of that specific system. Here, people get stuck with information that confirm their views<sup>21</sup>, as they lock themselves inside self-confirming newsfeeds of like-minded people where their beliefs are relentlessly reinforced and seldom challenged. As a result, echo chambers yield polarised and extremist views of the society. Low information rationality is also impaired with the concepts akin to social epistemology, situated cognition and situated affectivity, in which human affectivity – and likewise cognition and epistemic characteristics of people - is profoundly framed and modulated from without so that the affective and cognitive dispositions of an individual fall in line with those prevalent in the specific social domain where the agent lives (Slaby, 2016). As a result of this social psychologic phenomenon, people usually get stuck with their own views of the world and stagnant opinions, wiping out any possible different point of view.

- **Evolving viewpoints and issue salience:** at a macro-level there is a shifting consideration of the society on sociopolitical issues. The debate that they elicit and their salience usually follow a dynamic pattern, as they increase and decrease according to different historical times, events, social and political factors that gradually switch societal views on the issues. Two possible outcomes are expected: (i) the issue remains unsettled for entire generations and generally ousted, with the potential to attract renewed attention following new sociocultural changes; (ii) the issue becomes less divisive and gradually is implement into established social norms, a point where the society reaches a

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<sup>21</sup> The phenomenon has been keenly analysed by behavioural economics scholars, that in this case shed light on the confirmation bias

high level of consensus on the issue. Hence, sociopolitical issues move back and forth along spectrums of salience and levels of divisiveness (Nalick, et al., 2016).

In general – provided these characteristics – sociopolitical issues are in constant flux, they change in different historical moments and in accordance with social and political backgrounds, cultural habits, geographic spaces and, broadly, societies. As a result, the complex nature of sociopolitical issues excludes any of their possible punctual, absolute and univocal identification: to give substance to a sociopolitical issue, it is a key and necessary condition to frame it considering the aforementioned parameters. One simple and intuitive way to do so - though inevitably imperfect - is adopting the geopolitical standpoint of the *nation*, where cultural habits of people, social norms and beliefs can be better identified in a coherent whole, with also a peculiar and institutionalised national political situation. Thus, the first logical step to analyse a sociopolitical issue is to consider the nation where it might be salient, understanding that, for instance, salient sociopolitical issues in the United States might be different from those that are affecting China, Palestine or Australia – and what is perceived as an issue in one of these countries might not be in another. Then, the point of view of the nation must inevitably be paired with a temporal dimension, as an issue that was extremely salient for a nation in the past can gradually morph into national norms, thus not considered a sociopolitical issue anymore. Bearing in mind this important premise, it is possible to come up with a possible list of sociopolitical issues characterising nowadays landscape. In the US, for instance, sociopolitical issues involve domains such as immigration (that gained renewed salience and debate throughout Donald Trump administration's anti-immigration policy), racial justice (Black Lives Matter movement proliferated in recent times after George Floyd murder by a policeman), LGBTQ+ rights, U.S. gun reform, gender discrimination, health care related issues (such as, Covid19 vaccine's advocacy) or abortion. Part of these domains characterise well developed European nations, that share similar features when it comes to immigration, gender discrimination or transgender rights debates – though with different levels of magnitude. In France, for instance, the problem of gender pay gap is particularly vivid<sup>22</sup>, whilst in Italy the

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[https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/aid\\_development\\_cooperation\\_fundamental\\_rights/2020\\_factsheet\\_on\\_the\\_gender\\_pay\\_gap.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/aid_development_cooperation_fundamental_rights/2020_factsheet_on_the_gender_pay_gap.pdf)

sociopolitical debate stems from immigration policy, transgender rights or other health related issues (such as euthanasia). Conversely, considering countries that are more conservative, less progressive – more in general without a western like cultural model - sociopolitical issues change accordingly, so that in China CSA might deal with class discrimination or one child policies (the latter one till 2015, then the policy has collapsed).

### **2.3 Differentiating CSA to other corporate non-market activities**

Though they are inevitably interlinked and they share similar features, according to Nalick et al. (2016) and Bhagwat et al. (2020) CSA can be distinguished to other firm non-market activities: CPA and CSR.

Corporate Political Activity (CPA) is defined as the corporate attempt to shape political institutions and sway political actors in a way that results beneficial to the firm (Bhagwat, et al., 2020). Hence, it involves firms' investments in political processes to obtain policy based competitive advantages: lobbying, political donations, campaign contributions or government membership on company's boards with the objective to attract favourable public outcomes – ranging from lessening government regulation, winning government contracts, creating competitive barriers, building up favourable trade policies. The expected benefits of this activity thus encompass: (i) reduced environmental/institutional uncertainty (for example, managing governmental policies that might be at odds with firm's strategic objectives); (ii) reducing transaction costs (higher information power and favourable contracts to achieve private interests); to finally achieve (iii) long term financial sustainability. The connection between CPA and performance outcomes has already been assessed in academia; for instance, Marsh (1998), Hilmann et al. (1999), collectively provide empirical evidence of the positive impact of CPA on financial measures such as market returns and stakeholders returns. Scholars rely on these characteristics to draw up a three folded distinction between CSA and CPA. A first substantial difference stems upon the financial aspect: if Corporate Political Activity is intended to enhance a financial payoff, Bhagwat et al. (2020) highlight that Corporate Sociopolitical Activism is first of all aimed at promoting a sociopolitical cause, and the activity can be diametrically misaligned with regulators, institutions, policy makers and stakeholders – with an overall effect on firm value that is not absolute

and might differ significantly. More specifically, the authors highlight that investors react negatively to CSA when the sociopolitical stance of the company deviates significantly from the values of key stakeholders, conversely they reward the activism when it is perceived as closely aligned with their values. Similarly, consumers reward CSA when it resonates with their personal values and, when not, they boycott the brand. A second difference lies on the fact that CPA involves activities that are directly related with firm's core business, whilst CSA is undertaken through activities that have little or no relatedness with traditional business operations (Nalick et al., 2016). Finally, also the manner of involvement is different, in that while firms may pursue CSA in a highly publicized extent (advertising above all), firms execute CPA quietly (Lux, et al., 2011). On the other hand, Bhagwat et al. (2020) note the high degree of partisanship as a touchpoint between the two activities, where both sociopolitical issues and politics receive a low societal consensus and split the public opinion.

As noted in the previous paragraphs, CSR covers a wide spectrum of actions – prescribed by law or discretionary - that together advance social good and are beneficial for the society. A chief difference between CSR and CSA regards the nature of the issues that they cover: sociopolitical issues are perceived as controversial, polarising with a high degree of partisanship across stakeholders, whereas CSR environmental and social issues are not contested and involve high societal consensus. While CSR is intended to improve the relationships with stakeholders, when it comes to CSA the overall effect is fragmented, for the activity might enhance the relationships with some categories of stakeholders or hamper the relationships with other ones. As a result, the two activities differ in terms of risk - and the strategic implications might differ too. As noted earlier, research has proved that CSR brings together a wide array of competitive benefits: from a better firm reputation, higher consumer trust, public long term loyalty to a strengthened legitimation to operate in the industry. Conversely, the strategic benefits connected with CSA and the links to financial performance are variable (though with some positive signals, as for Nike), and research is still investing it. A second important difference stressed by Bhagwat et al. (2020) is that CSR might require a high level monetary investment that, in the case of CSA, is usually not necessary. In fact, the scope of activities that CSR requires finds a direct manifestation on firm operations - for

instance if the company wants to improve its environmental and social performance it might be required to change its machinery, raw materials, implement a new procurement system as well as changing working policies – whilst, as noted in the previous part, CSA usually involves activities with little or low financial investment (e.g. advertising, promotions, small changes in the packaging). Differently from CPA, the degree of publicization of can either be high (social marketing activities or cause advertising) or low (silent implementation of internal policies). Differences between CSA and CPA, CSR are integrated in table 2.2.

**TABLE 2.2**  
**CSA, CSR, CPA differences**

ACTIVITY	DEFINITION	MANNER OF INVOLVEMENT	LEVEL OF INVESTMENT	TYPE OF ISSUES	OPERATIONAL RELATEDNESS	EXPECTED OUTCOMES
CSR	Firm's recognition of their role – responsibility – over societal problems, and the implementation of related line of actions that have a positive outcome for the society	Low or high publicity	High	Not contested social and environmental issues with high societal consensus	Medium-High	Competitive benefits, financial boost and improved stakeholders' relationship
CPA	Corporate attempt to influence political actors in beneficial ways for the firm (Nalick et al., 2016)	Low publicity	Variable	Restricted to the business and policy-based	High	Favourable policy outcomes that enhance performance measures
CSA	Firm's public demonstration (statements and/or actions) of support for or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue (Bhagwat et al., 2020)	High publicity	Low-Medium	Contested and controversial sociopolitical issues with low societal consensus	Little or null	Harm or foster relationship with stakeholders, financial outcomes are variable and still to be fully verified

*Source:* Nalick et. al (2016), Bhagwat et. al (2020) and personal elaboration



## **2.4 Three theoretical interpretations for Corporate Sociopolitical Activism**

Activism is an activity that is nowadays considered paramount for businesses, and for consumers brands are full-fledged actors carrying a set of ethical values to share with (Brand Activism). However, sociopolitical activism endorses a different nature, and with respect to other issues, it was noted that sociopolitical issues are more partisan and polarising. Unlike CSR or CPA, academia has not yet thoroughly explored the link between CSA and performance. On this point, Bhagwat et al. (2020) demonstrated that the financial outcome is variable and is highly dependent from stakeholders' expectations. Hence, all things considered, CSA seems to be an uncertain activity that, if not properly managed, may result beneficial or detrimental for the company. Then, why do businesses engage in Corporate Sociopolitical Activism? The next sections will try to shed light on this point, providing first a theoretical perspective building upon stakeholder and agency theories, and considering enabling institutional factors. Then, a practical case study will close the chapter.

### **2.4.1 Corporate Sociopolitical Activism and stakeholder theory**

Chapter 1 showed that historically the emerging literature on Corporate Social Responsibility has been progressively shaped by stakeholder theory, finally concluding that nowadays it represents a key dimension to analyse CSR and to fully grasp its implications. As a product of CSR, Corporate Sociopolitical Activism can be, in the same way, framed along stakeholder theory, to get a deeper understanding on why firms decide to engage in sociopolitical issues.

Stakeholder theory is a theory of organizational management and business ethics that stresses the interconnection of businesses with a constellation of persons and groups - the stakeholders – defined as those actors that “have, or claim, ownership, rights, or interests in a corporation and its activities, past, present, or future.” (Clarkson, 1995). When stakeholders have similar interest or claims in the firm, they can be clustered into homogenous groups, from employees, media, NGOs, shareholders, investors to customers. *Primary stakeholders* are those that have a high level of interdependence with the company: shareholders, employees, customers and public stakeholders (key governmental and institutional actors), agents that holistically guarantee the

functioning of the corporate system (Clarkson, 1995); *secondary stakeholders* are not strictly essential for the survival of the company - namely NGOs, medias or other interest groups - but they eventually have the power to influence societal opinion for or against their activities. The product of this close entanglement is that: (i) real success for companies lies in the satisfaction of its entire stakeholder ecosystem, a necessary condition to get the *legitimacy* to be an actor in a socially constructed system of norms, values and beliefs; thus (ii) stakeholders affect how the firm perceives its social environment and influence what issues the business decides to act on (Clarkson, 1995). In other words, the company needs to undertake an isomorphic adaptation to its stakeholder ecosystem set of expectations and values.

In light of these considerations, it follows that one external driver for firms to engage in Corporate Sociopolitical Activism relates to the interactions and interpretations of relevant stakeholders. For instance, Dodd and Supa (2014) – though framing their discourse on Strategic Issues Management and not directly through stakeholder theory – view CSA as an organizational activity that permits or denies companies to be legitimized to operate into a stakeholders’ ecosystem, with the potential to attract some groups or isolate others. Nalick et al. (2016) rely on the dynamic nature of sociopolitical issues to provide two stakeholder-related perspectives on CSA:

- **Risk taking on perceived future stakeholder benefits:** as sociopolitical issues move dynamically along a spectrum of salience, the firm views CSA as having greater future benefits than costs. This perspective considers CSA as a possible good investment that can yield positive results, as executives bet that in the medium long run the majority of stakeholders will support firm’s position. In other words, they anticipate that the issue will become a priority for a much larger set of stakeholders, then they invest and position the company on the issue with the ultimate and strategic goal of building trust, reputation and support. In short, while a position may be difficult to justify based on divided opinions at present, the firms is proactively investing in its future legitimacy (Nalick et al., 2016). In line with this perspective, the authors also stress that CSA can be seen as a way for companies to deliberately target particular categories of people: by leveraging on sociopolitical issues, they align with specific set of

values as a mean to finally attract or repel stakeholders. Thus, *ex ante*, the company perceives stakeholders that support its sociopolitical position as more valuable than those that boycott firm's actions.

- **Stakeholder pressure recognition:** stakeholders press into engagement for or against sociopolitical issues, and firms recognize that continued neutrality may harm the business. If the former perspective was proactive, this kind of pressure is reactive, with businesses that act *ex post*. As Nalick et al. (2016) note, groups that usually charge companies with mounting pressures are often part of social movements and organizations. Their aim is to contest pre-established norms and uncontested beliefs to boost the awareness of the public and raise turmoil among institutional actors, and recognizing the social and political power of companies, they ask them to foster change. The strategic rationale for this adaption is that these movements might have generated: (i) normative changes in the institutional environment (i.e.: considering CSR, national and supranational governments have released new regulations over the years; or the emergence of CSR standards); (ii) a new set of expectations of key relevant stakeholders - such as employees or consumers – that shaped their demand and required companies to implement structural and operational changes in order to gain legitimacy in the eco-system. It is worth to highlight also that the increased pressure on companies might have been exacerbated with the rise of social media, that opened the possibility to create with ease solid and cohesive coalition groups or gave the possibility to opinion leaders to gain a wider mediatic exposure, influencing people beliefs and likewise consumer behaviour.

#### **2.4.2 Corporate Sociopolitical Activism and agency theory**

The stakeholder theory perspective on CSA suggests that firm's engagement on this activity is driven by a strategic rationale (built trust, reputation and legitimacy to operate in a certain business domain), and more precisely it is a reactive or proactive managerial response to pressures coming from external actors. On the other hand, Nalick et al. (2016) claim that the engagement on sociopolitical issues can be triggered also by internal forces to the firm, that is, the executives ideological bent. Thus, this kind of activism is not prompted by strategic and external motives, but it is the reflection of

managerial ideals. As such, they might disregard competitive reasons and can contrast with the interests of other stakeholders, most notably the shareholders. This is a typical case of what scholars consider an *agency problem*. In short, the *agency problem*, or *principal-agent problem*, occurs when an actor (the agent) is able to make decisions on behalf of - thus with a possible impact on - another entity (the principal). It is a product of the 1960s and 1970s massive literature on risk sharing, that was absorbed and deepened in the broadest *agency theory*. In his influential paper, Eisenhardt (1989) describes the agency problem as a contract problem that arises when the interest of the agent and the interest of the principal are in conflict, and this is usually generated by a different attitude towards risk preferences. Thus, managers should have a fiduciary duty to act in accordance with shareholders' interests - maximizing profits. In light of these preliminary considerations, CSA can be an agency problem for three main reasons. The first stems from an ideological nature, as shareholders and investors with a different ideological view on firm's sociopolitical stance might decide to withdraw the financial support for the firm. Similarly, they might also disinvest not because their ideological position is opposed to the firm, but because they foresee a negative market response by consumers. A third point noted by Nalick et al. (2016) is that shareholders perceive that due to CSA firm's resources are embezzled to other alternative allocations, such as strategy and operations, and again they foresee a negative performance by the business.

Notwithstanding the relevance of these points, the authors also stress that powerful CEOs are increasingly disregarding these concerns, and they decide to point out their sociopolitical stand without considering the possible implications for the firm. Regarded as CEO activism, the rise to prominence of this phenomenon - where important executives are championing public opinions on complex social and political debates - has occurred only in recent years. As found by the Edelman Trust Barometer in 2018, people trust in traditional institutions has dropped in favour to brands, giving rise to Brand Activism. In the same way, the report shows also that the responsibility has shifted towards CEOs: 56% of the public have no respect for executives that remain silent on important social issues, 64% believe that CEOs should drive the change rather than waiting for governments, and 79% want CEOs to be visibly aligned with company's

vision and values<sup>23</sup>. Be it for ideological will or for, as stressed in the report, mounting pressures exerted by the public, the output of executive's ideological positions is rocketing, and is thus physiological that their ideological bent might collide with the business interests of shareholders. It is the case of Apple CEO Tim Cook or former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz who both said that their sociopolitical public opinion was not economically motivated and that dissenting shareholders could "sell their shares", or other executives like former Goldman Sachs CEO Lloyd Blankfein or Ctrip International's James Liang who voiced out their opinion regardless the operational relatedness with the firm and the related business implications<sup>24</sup>.

#### **2.4.3 Corporate Sociopolitical Activism and institutional factors**

Besides stakeholder and agency perspectives, Nalick et al. (2016) underline that firm's engagement in sociopolitical activism is contingent on a number of institutional factors. In fact, the institutional environment in which the company operates - such as legislative, social and political considerations - has a profound shaping on the activity of the business and its related spectrum of action. Moreover, the authors note that institutional factors directly affect managerial ideologies and the influence of stakeholders, thus they come before and underpin stakeholder theory and agency theory considerations.

A list of institutional factors is presented:

- **Political system:** the first factor is represented by the general political set up in which the company operates. Governments might - via regulations, policies or sanctions - enable or suppress any form of social or political activism expressed by the firm. Likewise, governments can allow or deny stakeholders or other coalition groups to form and communicate, opening or closing them the possibility to join the social and political process smoothly, and diametrically giving them voice to express their considerations on business actions. Thus, the political system acts as a moderator for Corporate Sociopolitical Activism, and

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<sup>23</sup> Edelman Barometer 2018 available at: <http://edl.mn/2DvVfej>

<sup>24</sup> Regarding the business implications, a study conducted by the KRC Research Report (2016) has shown a positive correlation if the issue is tied with company's operations, with age acting as a moderator (millennials usually are more favourable towards CEOs activism).

more specifically in the case for centralised or totalitarian governments, where stakeholders and other actors' voice is trivial, CSA is fairly less likely to occur.

- **Sociocultural considerations:** while business donation or participation in social causes is usually perceived as benign (Nalick et al., 2016), we noted in paragraph 2.2.2 that sociopolitical issues have a controversial nature and its engagement might defy societal expectations. Firms' willingness to engage in CSA, the intensity and related modalities are thus commensurate with the sociocultural fabric of a particular domain. Ethnocentrism - the social tendency to frame foreign cultures on the base of their own's - usually create mistrust on foreign brands and their credibility, turning people less prone to accept their engagement on sociopolitical issues. Another social aspect is the age profile of the population: as we will see in the next chapters, younger generations have higher expectations on firm's responsibility to drive change and take a stand over sociopolitical issue. The levels of education and teaching modalities can support the exchange of diverse social and political perspectives, encouraging the expression of minority viewpoints, and de-emphasizing partisan uniformity (Levy et al., 2019). Thus, educational considerations are correlated with social and political open-mindedness of the consumers and stakeholders, making companies more inclined to engage in CSA. Finally, other factors can be considered, such as religious beliefs, lifestyle patterns, racial and ethnical inclusion or social mobility dispositions, which together can contribute to conservative or liberal societies.
- **Governance structure:** another institutional factor relates to the ownership structure of companies. Businesses can be severed into internally owned firms (managers and directors not only have managerial discretion but also own the firm) and externally owned firms (where the owners have no managerial duties, such as S.P.A in Italy). In parallel, firms can also have: (i) concentrated ownership, if the number of owners is limited; (ii) diffused ownership, when the number of owners is extensive. Nalick et al. al (2016) underline that in the case of externally owned businesses with diffused ownership, each owner has a small amount of stake in the firm. Thus, managerial power is higher, and management is more likely to engage in CSA. The same goes with concentrated internally owned firms:

the authors note that lone or limited managers with high levels of ownerships tend to be more outspoken to take a stance on sociopolitical issues. On the whole, the greater amount of power to managers, the greatest the probability to engage is CSA.

- **Executive exposure:** managers with great visibility and social influence may leverage their status to express their ideology and take a stand on sociopolitical issues. Prominent business figures of big tech companies, for example, usually receive media attention and have an influential voice within a society, especially when western cultures are considered. This view is impaired with the concept of CEO activism presented in the previous paragraph, as managers are increasingly asked to voice their opinion and drive the change along with their companies. In general, firms with influential and high visible executives are more likely to be associated with CSA activities
- **Technological set-up:** the development of technologies, especially the proliferation of digital media channels, has opened the possibility for companies and executives to express their opinions on sociopolitical issues with limited or no costs. The combination of changing media and the desire of executives to openly express their opinions has created an increased opportunity for CSA (Nalick et al., 2016). On the other hand, as communication is basically free, stakeholders are allowed to join the sociopolitical debate smoothly, to form coalition groups and more in general to judge business actions more directly. The downside of this ideological liberalisation is that social media can foster ideological polarisation (for instance, echo chambers and cognitive redundancy described in the paragraph 2.2.2), making Corporate Sociopolitical Activism too risky for firms.

#### **2.4.4 Bridging the three perspectives**

The three perspectives presented in the previous paragraphs holistically provide a series of explanations guiding firms' engagement in CSA. It is easy to note that each theory alone is not sufficient to fully explain business actions and cannot be considered in an independent way: there is a tight interconnection and a dynamic interplay among each

perspective. As already pointed out, institutional factors underpin agency and stakeholders' considerations. For instance, we noted that the political set-up of a country can foster or hamper groups' possibility to enter the sociopolitical debate smoothly, thus moderating the pressures they can exert to companies; media proliferation and technology access provide room for stakeholders to shape their opinions and form coalitions groups more freely, or give the possibility to executives to express their ideological bent with more ease.

Conversely, it is worth to underline that also stakeholders and executive perspectives can contribute to the shaping of an institutional domain. First of all, influential groups such as NGOs or relevant national and international movements have the power to challenge existing norms, seeding society with new ideologies and creating moral dialogue among societal actors. As stressed by Spaiser et al. (2021) on their analysis of the normative challenges posed by the movement *Fridays for Future*, this passage is key because it lays the foundations for issues to enter the political debate and influence policy makers, as they receive a message repeatedly and are more likely to believe it represents the majority opinion. It follows that political decision makers are in the position set the conditions right for social change, and in particular they can: (i) endorse the new normative framework, (ii) implement new regulatory policies; or (iii) make norm violations more tangible and more severe. Thus, the changed institutional fabric might generate more favourable conditions for companies to engage in CSA.

In the same way, the political influence exerted by big corporates' executives in specific countries is undeniable, and it occurs that activist CEOs team together to raise political awareness and drive concrete institutional changes. On this point, two leading examples can be mentioned - the first related to environmental sustainability and the second more politically oriented: (i) before Paris 2015 UN climate change negotiations, the CEOs and executives of 79 major companies – PepsiCo, Allianz, Nestlé, Ikea among others – cosigned an open letter asking government leaders to create a significant accord calling them “to take bold action at the Paris climate conference (COP 21) in December 2015 to secure a more prosperous world for all of us”<sup>25</sup>; (ii) in 2017, nearly 100 CEOs of tech

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/11/open-letter-from-ceos-to-world-leaders-urging-climate-action/>



companies cosigned an amicus brief to sway federal judges to overturn Trump's executive ban of 7 Muslim majority countries from entering the United States<sup>26</sup>. Again, the political turmoil derived from this activism might instil institutional changes and, likewise, create more favourable conditions for CSA.

With a more theoretical orientation, also Nalick et al. (2016) provide other examples of how stakeholder, agency and institutional perspectives are integrated and the related criss-cross interactions:

- **Executive ideological bent and future stakeholder benefits:** we noted that in the stakeholder related perspective the firm bets that a sociopolitical issue will become a priority for the majority of stakeholders, forecasting a positive investment. Nonetheless, this view is particularly liable of management biases: as executives might be more concerned with certain stakeholder groups rather than others, it gives them priority to tackle the sociopolitical issues that are closer to this category, sometimes letting aside the possible strategic implications. Thus, the personal biases of executives and their affiliation with particular stakeholders have a direct effect on firms' engagement in CSA and related modalities.
- **Executive ideological bent and stakeholder pressure:** as noted earlier, there are institutional environments in which executives' positions are highly visible, they have a solid political influence and receive a strong mediatic exposure. In other words, it is easier to get a glimpse of their sociopolitical stances. In parallel, social movements and coalition groups usually exert mounting pressures on targets that display a particular sensitivity to their causes. It follows that once managers express a position over an issue, they are more likely to be targeted by interest groups and eventually are expected to keep supporting that and other new sociopolitical issues. This reinforcing dynamic entanglement may instigate CSA.
- **Stakeholder pressure and future stakeholder benefits:** the last example occurs within the stakeholder perspective. Since the salience of sociopolitical

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattdrange/2017/02/06/nearly-100-tech-companies-join-forces-to-oppose-donald-trumps-immigration-ban/?sh=d847fbe374a2>

issues is dynamic, the authors note that stakeholder pressure and future stakeholder benefits will converge at a specific point of time. This happens when the opinion of a society changes from highly divided to a general acceptance, thus companies understand the necessity to take a position and CSA is more likely to occur.

## **2.5 The case for CSA: Nike and Colin Kaepernick**

*“When Nike decided to make Colin Kaepernick the face of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of their Just Do It campaign, they became an overnight poster child for brand activism”* (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020)

In the previous paragraphs, a qualitative perspective on CSA has been presented, building on academic frameworks to provide a theoretical view on the topic and a sketch of practical examples to make the phenomenon more tangible. The final part of chapter 2 is akin to this second aspect, as it concretely delves into the 2018 Nike and Colin Kaepernick case study – widely regarded as a leading example of brand activism. Consistently with the final considerations on chapter 1 on the connection between Brand Activism and CSA, and in relation to the sociopolitical connotations of the case, it is here maintained that it marks a fitting and significant tenet for CSA. The paragraph starts with some contextual indications, from the sociopolitical turmoil associated with the *Black Lives Matter* movement, Nike’s activism and its political influence, to the controversial *#TakeaKnee* protest endorsed by Colin Kaepernick. Then, the campaign will be thoroughly explored, with a focus on its financial implications and, foremost, marketing outcomes.

### **2.5.1 Brands and Black Lives Matter**

*Black Lives Matter* was created in 2013 in the US as a sociopolitical response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a white man accused of killing of Trayvon Martin, a black teenager<sup>27</sup>. The following year the protest became even more prominent after the murder of another black teenager by a police officer. As stated in the movement’s

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/us/george-zimmerman-verdict-trayvon-martin.html>

website, the mission report that: “[...] *We are working for a world where Black Lives are no longer targeted for demise... We affirm our humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression [...]*”<sup>28</sup>.

In the following years, the sociopolitical turmoil – as well as the race and racial tensions exacerbated during Donald Trump’s mandate - made the issue particularly salient, with the public highly divided.

Consistently, political advertising was being intensively scrutinized by consumers, and by 2018 engaging with Black Lives Matter was proving tricky for brands (Avery and Pauwels, 2019). Two examples in point: (i) in 2017, Pepsi entered the racial justice debate with an ad starring television star Kendall Jenner during a *Black Lives Matter* demonstration<sup>29</sup>. More specifically, the ad showed her attempt to solve the tension between policemen and African American protesters by sharing a Pepsi. The campaign was highly criticized and deemed as an emblematic failure for tackling a very emotionally charged sociopolitical issue; (ii) in 2015, Starbucks was ridiculed when they decided to uptake a program which instructed baristas to write #Racetgether on coffee cups as a mean to instil conversations on racial issues among its customers<sup>30</sup>.

### **2.5.2 Nike’s situational factors and Just Do It campaign**

Despite its strong market position all over the world, 2018 had not been an easy year for Nike. More than ten executives left the company for sexual harassment allegations and gender discrimination<sup>31</sup>, and amid #MeToo movement<sup>32</sup> protests, the brand found itself in a media firestorm. The events had also a major financial backlash: in North America, fiscal year 2018 (ending on the 31st of May) recorded a sales decrease of - 2% and earnings drop of -7%<sup>33</sup>. Moreover, Nike was losing ground to its historical competitor Adidas as the bestselling shoe in the US. Despite a smooth growth in the first

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<sup>28</sup> <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/business/kendall-jenner-pepsi-ad.html>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-31932351>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/28/business/nike-women.html>

<sup>32</sup> A grassroots initiative started in the US to give voice to women victim of sexual abuses and sexual harassment

<sup>33</sup> [https://s1.q4cdn.com/806093406/files/doc\\_financials/2018/ar/docs/nike-2018-form-10K.pdf](https://s1.q4cdn.com/806093406/files/doc_financials/2018/ar/docs/nike-2018-form-10K.pdf)

quarter of FY2019, the company had to find a way to position the brand at customers' forefront.

From a marketing standpoint, Nike was approaching its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the iconic Just Do It campaign. The tagline had been at the core of the brands' communication strategy as a mean to consistently inspire people towards action: Just Do It had the capability to be relatable and resonate with everyone, from people who were no confident at all with sports to Olympic athletes, thus it increasingly became one of the world's most recognizable and loved taglines.

Consistently with the idea of action and inclusivity, the advertising campaigns of the brand encouraged people to push beyond their boundaries, to achieve unattainable results and that - no matter who you are - it was crucial to keep moving. In light of these considerations, Nike was no stranger to political branding (Avery & Pauwels, 2019). For instance, amid AIDS crisis, the 1995 Just Do It campaign featured the HIV positive athlete Ric Munoz<sup>34</sup> ; the "Let me play" campaign pulled in the political agenda the topic of gender discrimination in sport educational programs<sup>35</sup>. In 2017, for the Black History Month the brand ran the "Equality" campaign to promote equality in sports and in the broader society<sup>36</sup>. During the same year, the campaign "What will they say about you?" featured a Muslim woman participating in athletics wearing the hijab to tackle the anti-Muslim sentiment<sup>37</sup>.

### **2.5.3 Colin Kaepernick and the #TakeaKnee protest**

Back in 2011 Nike signed American NFL footballer Colin Kaepernick to an endorsement deal. Letting sporting talent considerations aside, what made the athlete a prominent and controversial figure in the American culture was the protest he began in 2016. To support the *Black Lives Matter* movement, Kaepernick decided to oppose to the tradition of standing during the national anthem before the match and, conversely, he took a knee. As explained in an interview, the athlete did not want to "[...] show pride in

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/03/02/business/media-business-advertising-nike-real-world-ad-with-runner-who-hiv-positive.html>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/1995/oct/10/if-you-let-me-play-sports-nike-ad-uses-powerful/>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/nikes-equality-campaign-takes-a-stance-on-diversity-and-opportunity-2017-2?r=US&IR=T>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/08/fashion/nike-pro-hijab-muslim-athlete.html>

a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color”<sup>38</sup>. The protest suddenly gained momentum and was later endorsed by other athletes (in a collective movement widely dubbed as the #TakeaKnee protest); moreover, it gained the attention in the wider social sphere as well as in the political landscape as the former president Donald Trump publicly condemned his action. On the whole, Kaepernick’s protest proved to be highly polarising along racial, generational and political lines (Avery & Pauwels, 2019): 59% of white Americans were against the protest whilst 82% of black Americans supported it<sup>39</sup>; 56% of Americans under age 45 thought it was the right thing to do, and 59% of 45+ Americans reported that it was wrong. From a political point of view, 87% of Republicans were opposed, conversely 72% of Democrats were in favour. Even within the NFL the figure of Kaepernick progressively became controversial: at the end of 2016, the athlete signed out of his contract with San Francisco 49ers to become a free agent, but the following year no teams decided to sign him for the season. In light of this, on November 2017 the player initiated a legal action against the NFL for alleged conspiracy of the league. In the broader societal context, the protest represented a mean not only to support the rights of black people, but also to publicly take a stand against the politics of Donald Trump. The magnitude of the #TakeaKnee protest became so high that Kaepernick was anointed by GQ Magazine as the Citizen of the Year<sup>40</sup> and Amnesty International awarded him as its Ambassador of Conscience<sup>41</sup>.

Concerning Nike’s position, in 2017 the brand expressed its support for the athlete remarking that - consistently with the core values, company’s culture and its tradition of being loyal to sponsored athletes<sup>42</sup> - *“(Nike) supports athletes and their right to freedom of expression on issues that are of great importance to our society”*<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> <https://www.thecut.com/2018/09/nike-colin-kaepernick-ad-protests.html>

<sup>39</sup> [https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/\\_/id/17604958/san-francisco-49ers-qb-colin-kaepernick-most-disliked-player-nfl-according-poll-e-poll-marketing-research](https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/17604958/san-francisco-49ers-qb-colin-kaepernick-most-disliked-player-nfl-according-poll-e-poll-marketing-research)

<sup>40</sup> [https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/\\_/id/21398735/colin-kaepernick-named-citizen-year-gq-magazine](https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/21398735/colin-kaepernick-named-citizen-year-gq-magazine)

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/04/colin-kaepernick-ambassador-of-conscience/>

<sup>42</sup> For instance, the brand supported Kobe Bryant during his rape trial or tennis player Maria Sharapova after she failed a drug test

<sup>43</sup> <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/09/nike-kaepernick-ad-protests.html>

#### 2.5.4 Nike and Colin Kaepernick campaign: “Dream Crazy”

As noted earlier, Nike decided to feature Colin Kaepernick for its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Just Do It campaign. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September 2018 a social media post on Kaepernick’s Twitter page showed the face of the athlete staring directly into the eyes of the viewers, with a caption reporting “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything. #JustDoIt”. Within few hours, the post attracted millions of users that got a glimpse of the unofficial statement of the brand new Nike’s campaign. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of September, Nike officially published on its social media accounts the spot entitled “Dream Crazy”<sup>44</sup>. Narrated by Kaepernick and starring well know sponsored athletes (such as LeBron James or Serena Williams) and unknown athletes who managed to overcome personal challenges, the key message was to encourage everyone to believe on their “crazy” goals and to reach your objectives even when they seem insurmountable. To amplify its coverage, the ad was aired during the NFL opening season game and was run during all the games of that weekend. In addition, it was putted up on the billboards of New York and San Francisco.

Given the sociopolitical connotations of the advertising, mediated by the political division associated with the figure of Colin Kaepernick, Nike was taking a public stand against President Donald Trump (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). It followed that the campaign suddenly gained momentum in media and elicited a polarised response by the public.

In terms of earned media:

- Within one hour, the ad campaign “Dream Crazy” had more than 5 million views on YouTube (Avery & Pauwels, 2019).
- One month later, the ad collected 80+ million views on Twitter, YouTube and Instagram (Avery & Pauwels, 2019).
- Social media mentions of Nike after the announcement soared by more than +3.460% between Sep.2<sup>nd</sup> – Sep.4<sup>th</sup> <sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup> See the ad on [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WW2yKSt2C\\_A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WW2yKSt2C_A)

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.brandwatch.com/blog/react-nike-colin-kaepernick-just-do-it-ad/>

- In the wake of the campaign, Nike earned around 170.000 followers on Instagram, and the ad drew a record in terms of likes and comments<sup>46</sup>.
- In terms of traffic generation, figure 2.1 shows that the week of campaign is still associated with the highest volume of search for the brand.

**FIGURE 2.1**  
**“NIKE” TRAFFIC VOLUME from 2016 to 2021**



Source: Google Trends

Concerning the emotional response, as noted earlier the campaign proved to be highly polarising, with both a positive and negative sentiment manifested by the public:

- In a poll published by CNN<sup>47</sup>, 35% of people from 18 to 35 declared to support Nike’s position while 32% opposed it; similarly in the bracket 35-44 where 52% were in favour to the campaign compared to 37% against it; whilst only 26% aged 65+ were supportive. Widening the scope, 41% of the plurality of poll respondents claimed to be opposed to the company’s choice of selecting Kaepernick, against 37% who supported the move. When it comes to sociocultural considerations, the poll reported that the majority of African Americans as well college educated Americans backed the ad, on the same page 86% of black people were in favour to the campaign. From a political standpoint, percentages reflected those highlighted in the previous sub-paragraph, as 64% of Democrats supported the move, in turn 74% of Republicans opposed to it.

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/nike-stock-price-reaches-all-time-high-despite-colin-kaepernick-ad-boycott/>

<sup>47</sup> <https://money.cnn.com/2018/09/13/news/companies/nike-colin-kaepernick-just-do-it-national-anthem-nfl-football/index.html>

- Tracking studies<sup>48</sup> regarding ad effectiveness and brand outcomes reported a gender difference in terms of emotional response metrics, as women were generally more engaged and happier. The same was for African Americans and Hispanic men. Finally – and consistently with the previous considerations – metrics regarding purchase intention, brand recommendation or brand reputation after seeing the ad showed the widest gap between millennials and older generations: charts below collectively provide an holistic view about the public response to the ad, in Figure 2.2 viewers are severed in four age-generational groups and measures the advertising effectiveness and dispositions towards the brand after watching it; in Figure 2.3 the same measures are adopted to consider the differences across ethnic groups.
- Per Brandwatch<sup>49</sup>, after Kaepernick announcement Nike’s social conversation sentiment (a platform measure based on social mentions to set forth consumers’ disposition towards a brand) dropped from 90% of positive sentiment to 28.5%. Additionally, #Nike and #JustDoIt were trending, as well as #BoycottNike and #NikeBoycott that respectively recorded 710 million and 462 million of impressions. Further, the ideological polarisation around the move was manifested on social media, as feeds were filled with people posting videos of Nike’s products being destroyed to boycott the brand<sup>50</sup>.

Alongside with ad effectiveness and brand related considerations, analysts shed light also on the financial implications associated with the campaign:

- Per Apex Marketing, the financial value of social media buzz within 24 hours after the unofficial campaign statement by Kaepernick was around \$43 million

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<sup>48</sup> <https://adage.com/article/cmo-strategy/nike-ad-age-s-marketer-year-2018/315795>, <https://blog.realeyesit.com/colin-kaepernick-ad> and [https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/nikes-colin-kaepernick-ad-insights-its-impact-michael-wolfe/?trk=aff\\_src.aff-lilpar\\_c.partners\\_pkw.10078\\_net.mediapartner\\_plc.Skimbit%20Ltd.\\_pcrid.449670\\_learning&veh=aff\\_sr\\_c.aff-](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/nikes-colin-kaepernick-ad-insights-its-impact-michael-wolfe/?trk=aff_src.aff-lilpar_c.partners_pkw.10078_net.mediapartner_plc.Skimbit%20Ltd._pcrid.449670_learning&veh=aff_sr_c.aff-)

[lilpar\\_c.partners\\_pkw.10078\\_net.mediapartner\\_plc.Skimbit%20Ltd.\\_pcrid.449670\\_learning&irgwc=1](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/nikes-colin-kaepernick-ad-insights-its-impact-michael-wolfe/?trk=aff_src.aff-lilpar_c.partners_pkw.10078_net.mediapartner_plc.Skimbit%20Ltd._pcrid.449670_learning&irgwc=1)

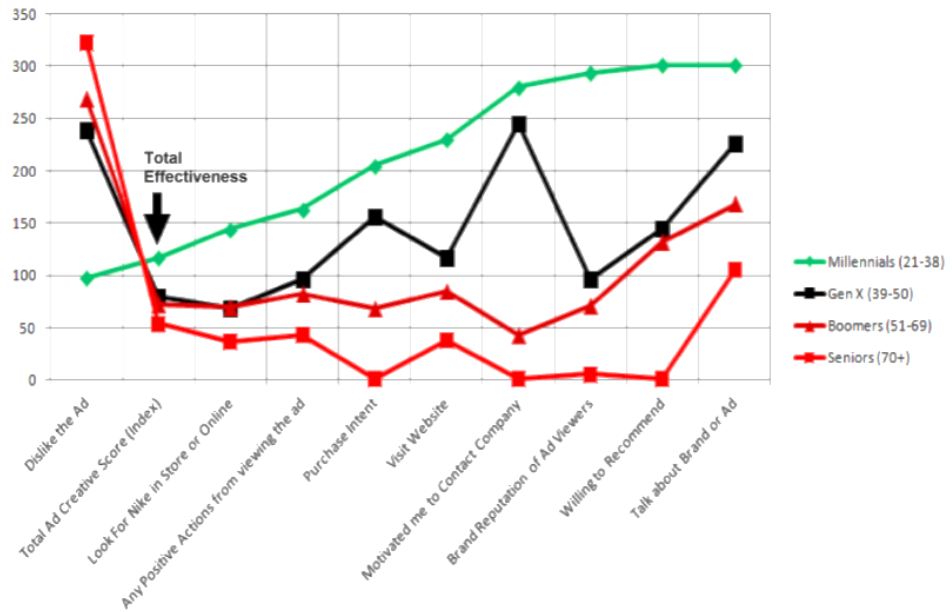
<sup>49</sup> <https://www.brandwatch.com/blog/react-nike-colin-kaepernick-just-do-it-ad/>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/nike-advert-with-colin-kaepernick-has-people-burning-products-2018-9?r=US&IR=T>



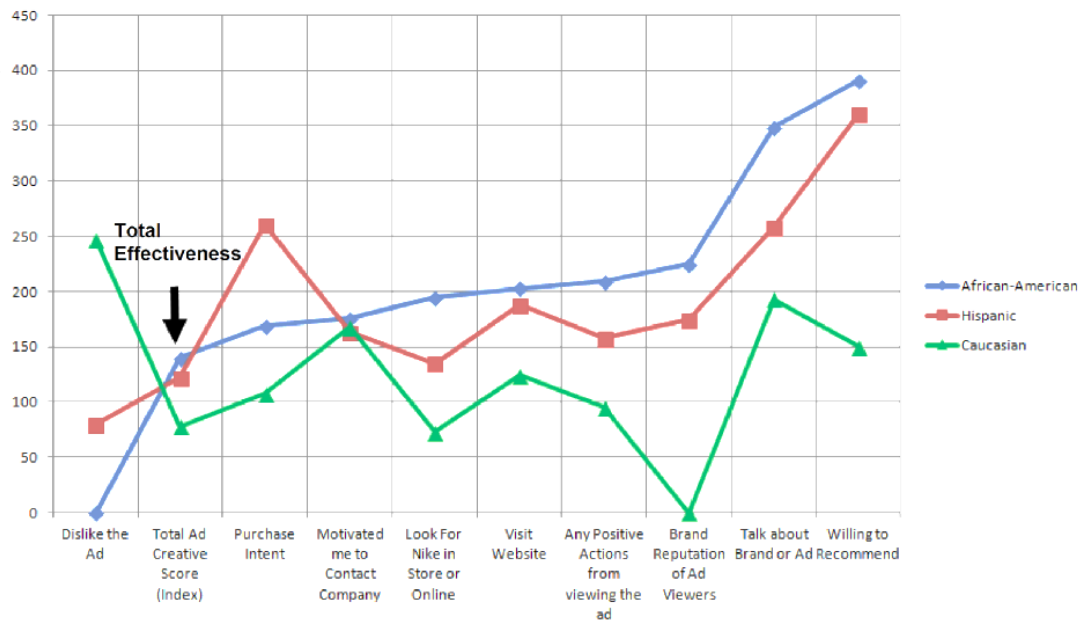
dollars<sup>51</sup>. In the following three days media exposure was estimated \$163.5 million worth <sup>52</sup>.

**FIGURE 2.2**  
**Ad effectiveness and brand's dispositions across age groups**



Source: Advertising Benchmark Index, Note: adv effectiveness index is shown

**FIGURE 2.3**  
**Ad effectiveness and brand's dispositions across ethnic groups**



Source: Advertising Benchmark Index; Note: adv effectiveness index is shown

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-09-04/kaepernick-campaign-created-43-million-in-buzz-for-nike-so-far>

<sup>52</sup> <https://sports.yahoo.com/colin-kaepernicks-nike-commercial-big-hit-consumers-according-industry-group-035831547.html?guccounter=1>

- Nike's sales soared +31% in the four day period after Kaepernick announcement (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). Consistently, comparing a time window of ten days before and after the announcement, Reuters reported a +61% increase of online sold out items<sup>53</sup>.
- In terms of market capitalization, an initial sales drop of -3% was followed by a perpetual increase: on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September price per share was \$79.60 and related total capitalization worth of \$127 billion, by the end of the month the values rocketed to \$84.72 per share and \$135.6 billion of company's market capitalization<sup>54</sup>. In the 14 months after the announcement, Nike' stock risen over +18% adding a total of \$+26.2 billion value to the company (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020).

### 2.5.5 Case study final considerations

Following the initial contextual factors and the response to the campaign, case study takeaways and final considerations are presented.

First of all, we build on the theoretical framework presented by Nalick et al. (2016) to lay out which conditions constituted a rationale for Nike's move.

Concerning the institutional factors:

- **General political mechanism:** as noted in paragraph 2.4.3, the political system acts as a moderator for Corporate Sociopolitical Activism, and more specifically in the case for centralised or totalitarian governments - where stakeholders and other institutional actors' voice is trivial - CSA is fairly less likely to occur. This was – and still is - not the case of the US, where a democratic political system opens the possibility for companies, stakeholders and other interest groups to form, recruit, communicate, and actively participate in all matters in the social and political process with minimal fear and intimidation (Nalick, et al., 2016).

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<sup>53</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nike-kaepernick/nikes-kaepernick-ad-spurs-spike-in-sold-out-items-idUSKCN1LZ2G4>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.nasdaq.com/market-activity/stocks/nke>

Focusing on political activity, for instance, US businesses spend billions of dollars each year on lobbying or other political actions to influence political policies or shape political issues. In other words, it is a common practice for companies to enter the political debate and manage the political environment on which they operate, be it via CPA - as noted above - or other forms such as engaging directly with consumers. On this latter point, an example is provided by Patagonia that created a space in its stores for customers to sign petitions opposing President Trump's order of discontinuing protections of large swaths of federal parklands<sup>55</sup>. In parallel with this practice, the sociopolitical polarisation fostered by President Trump enhanced the general level of governmental mistrust, asking companies to take a side and drive societal changes concretely. To sum up, the political mechanism typical of the US, the political turmoil associated with Trump's administration and the perpetual political/institutional hybridisation of US companies, proved to be a fertile soil for CSA.

- **Sociocultural considerations:** we noted that firm's willingness to engage in CSA, the intensity and related modalities are commensurate with the sociocultural fabric of a particular institutional domain. As a federal republic consisting of 50 different states, US is dotted with a multitude of beliefs, identities, lifestyles, ideologies or dispositions. Thus, coming up with a dominant and distinct sociocultural pattern is implausible: differences could be drawn across states, for instance in terms of liberal or conservative sidedness; and, moreover, the same or other sociocultural parameters can fluctuate within states. Nonetheless, some factors have to be considered. According to Pew Research, by 2015 Americans have become more racially and ethnically diverse than in the past<sup>56</sup>. Amid sociopolitical polarisation and government mistrust, the problem concerning racial inclusion and black rights had started to be tackled by companies. Further, another factor to consider was the demographic, in that young Millennials surpassed US adults as the age profile with the largest share in the population.

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<sup>55</sup> <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2017/12/04/anti-trump-patagonia-message/921542001/>

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/31/10-demographic-trends-that-are-shaping-the-u-s-and-the-world/?amp=1>

This point is associated with three particular considerations: (i) as we will see in depth in the following lines, younger generations are those who most likely hold liberal views on many social and political issues (Pew Research); (ii) Millennials, post-Millennials, Gen Zers are on track to be the best educated and most diverse generation yet<sup>57</sup>- and education level is usually associated with social and political open mindedness (on this point, see Levy et al. introduced in paragraph 2.4.3); (iii) a large share of Millennials is unaffiliated to religious beliefs and claim to be “religious none” (Pew Research), suggesting the increase of less conservative positions. To wrap up, US sociocultural factors - calling for the need of a business intervention and opening to more liberal views by some actors of the society - might have favoured Nike’s CSA.

- **Governance structure:** Nalick et al. al (2016) underline that when it comes to externally owned businesses with diffused ownership, managerial power is higher and management is more likely to engage in CSA. As a public company listed in NYSE with an average of 1.28 billion outstanding shares<sup>58</sup> (by the time the paragraph is being written), this is the case for Nike.
- **Technological set-up:** Technologies have created a capacity for millions, or even billions of people to learn about and react to events. The flow of information exchanged among companies, stakeholders, interest groups as well as politicians was massive, and digital channels (social media above the others) catalysed the magnitude of racial justice issues and Black Lives Matter movement in the broader social sensibility. Further, it enhanced the momentum associated to the #TakeaKnee protest. In other words, technology facilitated societal awareness around the sociopolitical issue also making protest groups more cohesive and effective.

In terms of executive ideological bent, we described that CSA might stem from the personal ideological inclinations of the management. In an historical context when CEO Activism saw its surge – in fact, from 2015 on and more prominently after the start of Trump’s administration, US witnessed dozens of CEOs speaking up on sociopolitical

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<sup>57</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/11/6-demographic-trends-shaping-the-u-s-and-the-world-in-2019/>

<sup>58</sup> <https://finance.yahoo.com/quote/NKE/key-statistics?p=NKE>

issues (see Gaines-Ross, 2017) – some might infer that “Dream Crazy” was a mean for managers to take an ideological side through the brand. What is more, given Nike’s financial conditions of that time, the allocation of corporate resources to a risky and unusual campaigns might have constituted an agency problem. Nonetheless, it is here contended that there is no sufficient evidence to classify the campaign as only a product of executive ideals: in fact, as noted above, Nike’s involvement in social and political causes had wide ranging historical roots, and in relation also with the emotional fervour of JustDolt campaigns, the move appears to be consistent with the values of the brand and its tradition of political branding.

Finally, we also consider stakeholders’ related factors:

- **Stakeholder pressure recognition:** as explained earlier, it is a reactive perspective by which stakeholders push for the engagement on a specific sociopolitical issue, and in parallel firms recognize that continued neutrality may harm the business. On this point, there are few considerations to lay out. First, “Dream Crazy” campaign was run in a period when the issue of black rights and racial discrimination was particularly prominent: from the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement to the #TakeaKnee protest and other contextual political factors, stakeholders were placing mounting pressures to take a stand. Second, in relation to the endorsement deal signed with Colin Kaepernick, Nike was expected to live up to its tradition of supporting sponsored athletes. Another point concerns the media firestorm that occurred in 2017 when ten of company’s executives were forced to leave after sexual harassment and gender discrimination allegations. Alongside the backlash that poured out from a financial standpoint, the brand was indirectly pressured to make up its mistakes, demonstrate the real values of the company and finally reconnect with its customer base and the broader public. In other words, the company had to find a way to regain legitimacy in the business ecosystem.
- **Risk taking on perceived future stakeholder benefits:** this strategic view conceives CSA as a possible good investment that can yield positive results, as executives bet that in the medium long run the majority of stakeholders will support firm’s position. Further, it contends that CSA can be seen as a way for

companies to deliberately target particular categories of people: by leveraging on sociopolitical issues, they align with specific set of values as a mean to finally attract or repel stakeholders. Evidence supports that this kind of reasoning is well fitting to explain Nike's move. With "Dream Crazy" the brand specifically aligned with racial inclusive values to take distance from a share of its customer base: as stressed by Nike's former brand planning and marketing insights *"in launching its new campaign Nike is risking alienating a huge segment of its US customer base, perhaps as much as half... So, this campaign will scatter part of the Nike tribe, of loyal American patriots and people who serve or have served in our armed forces, government or institutions that rely closely on a healthy government and a national image [...]"*<sup>59</sup>. Besides ideological considerations, this move was clearly driven also by a strategic rationale. In fact, as noted by the leading marketing expert and professor Scott Galloway, *<<Nike registers \$35B in revenues - \$15B domestically and \$20B abroad. Two-thirds of Nike consumer are under the age of 35. A younger consumer who can afford \$150 Flyknit racers likely has a substantial disposable income and lives in a city. The term for this cohort? Progressive. Of the \$20B international customer base, how many believe that US is currently a "beacon on a hill and is handling race issues well? I'll speculate, none. Nike has risked \$1-3B in business to strengthen their relationship with consumers who account for \$32-34B of their franchise. The math? Nike just did it.>>*<sup>60</sup>. This consideration finds confirmation if we take into the account the financial improvements that Nike consistently maintained from the moment of the campaign on (see previous paragraph), that allowed the company to retrieve and sustain its position as the US leading footwear apparel.

On the whole, Nike's "Dream Crazy" campaign can be regarded as a leading case for Corporate Sociopolitical Activism. US contextual factors, the political polarisation, the controversies associated with the problem - the general growing momentum that black rights and racial justice were receiving in those times - clearly qualify the issue as

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<sup>59</sup> <https://www.brandingstrategyinsider.com/analyzing-nikes-controversial-just-do-it-campaign#.W9odjtVKiUk>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.marketingjournal.org/stand-for-something-brand-activism-at-nike-christian-sarkar-and-philip-kotler/>

sociopolitical. Few enabling mechanisms for Nike's move have been highlighted, with institutional factors (US political set-up, sociocultural considerations, governance structure and technology) and stakeholder related motives above the others. Alongside these, the financial, marketing and brand related implications have come under scrutiny. As for the firsts, after the campaign analysts suggest that the company resulted in a better in a better financial position. In terms of emotion generation and brand perception, there is enough evidence to claim the "Dream Crazy" elicited a different response according to age-profile, sociocultural factors and political ideologies, with measures such as purchase intent, brand attitude or brand reputation changing accordingly.

In light of these final considerations, the aim of the second part of the dissertation is to provide a clearer picture on the effect of Corporate Sociopolitical Activism on brand related outcomes. As will be noted, there is in fact a lack of published research as to the implication of this growing phenomenon on brands, especially considering the Italian situation.





## Chapter III

### **The effects of Corporate Sociopolitical Activism: a marketing perspective**

Chapter 2 provided a qualitative overview on CSA. Building on academia, a definition of the phenomenon, a clarification of which issues are regarded as sociopolitical, and three theoretical perspectives have been outlined. The chapter then presented a set of practical case studies and a specific focus on Nike's "Dream Crazy" campaign.

The second part of the dissertation is quantitative, and its objective is to provide a deeper understanding of how CSA can have an impact brand-related constructs. If research has explored how brands leverage sustainability and CSR in their positioning strategies to understand the effects it has on consumers – observing constructs such as corporate reputation (Hur et al. 2013; Hsu 2012; Lai et al. 2010; Fatma et al. 2015), brand equity (Staudt et al. 2014; Fatma et al. 2015), brand attitude (Ramesh et al. 2018, del Mar García-De los Salmones&Perez, 2017), brand image (Ramesh et al. 2018) or behavioural intentions (Ramesh et al. 2018, del Mar García-De los Salmones&Perez, 2017) - only very little academic studies have examined these relations when it comes to CSA. In particular, no studies providing an Italian perspective on the phenomenon have been found.

Chapter 3 is aimed to bring forth a conceptual framework with a causal model. The selection of the constructs, the development of hypothesis and the general model are theoretically grounded on existing literature, in particular the structure of the model is the result of an analysis of the papers linking Corporate Social Responsibility and marketing outcomes, with proper adaptations and considering the potential differences that arise when CSA is considered.

#### **3.1 Constructs presentation and hypothesis development**

The chapter starts with a theoretical presentation of the marketing constructs that will compose the general model: Value congruence, Attitude toward the advertisement, Brand attitude, Brand image and Brand equity. On the basis of existing literature, hypothesis will be developed accordingly.

### 3.1.1 Value congruence

As described in chapter 2, sociopolitical issues are salient and unresolved social matters on which societal opinion is usually split and polarised. Bhattacharya and Elsbach (2002) and Bhagwat et al. (2020) note that stakeholders' responses to CSA activities are highly variable, and foremost they depend on which sociopolitical values they support. It stands to reason that value congruence can be considered as a starting point to assess the impact of Corporate Sociopolitical Activism on marketing-related constructs. As such, an overview of the literature on value congruence (or value congruity) is presented.

Provided that a *value* is described as a stable belief that a specific state of existence or mode of conduct is socially or personally preferable to others (Rokeach, 1973), value congruence has usually been conceptualised in many and consistent ways. For instance, Kalliath et al. (1999) define value congruence as "*The degree to which an individual and a company share the same values*" (Kalliath, et al., 1999). Similarly, Cazier et al. (2017) contend that "*Value congruence (...) refers to the match of values held by consumers with those projected by the company*" (Cazier, et al., 2017). As this research is marketing oriented, a satisfying definition is the one provided by Zhang and Bloemer (2008), for which value congruence refers to the similarity between consumers' personal values and the perception of brand values.

Studies on value congruence have been conducted for decades (You & Hon, 2021), and the fields of research on the topic span from organizational literature, social psychology and marketing relationship. Concerning organizational literature, academia focused on the fit of values between employees and the culture of the company, for instance understanding that a good degree of fit results in better job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Kalliath et al., 1999). An extensive body of literature on congruence has been developed in the social psychology field. Stemming from this research, two theories are particularly significant: (i) *congruity theory* and (ii) *similarity attraction theory*. Congruity theory, developed by Osgood and Tannenbaum in 1955, holds that a person is more likely to develop positive attitudes towards an object when an individual perceives that it is consistent with the values that he believes and supports. The similarity attraction theory posits that people prefer to sustain relationships with

similar others that support their self-esteem and maintain balance in their self-identity (Lee & Jeong, 2014). Academic investigation dealing with value congruence and marketing outcomes is usually theoretically grounded on social psychology – with scholars that rely on the afore presented concepts of *similarity attraction theory* and *congruity theory* (or other theories such as *social identity theory*) to form hypotheses. Though there is a consensus on the scarcity of studies on external communication and value congruence (You & Hon, 2021), or on brand and consumers (Zhang & Bloemer, 2008), some papers can be mentioned. Zhang and Bloemer (2008) find that when it comes to service brands, value congruence has a significant and positive effect on key relationship outcomes such as trust, affective commitment, satisfaction and loyalty. Consistently, Lee and Jeong show empirical evidence that congruity plays a key role in influencing customers' online brand experiences and their responses, such as brand trust and brand satisfaction (Lee & Jeong, 2014). In studies dealing with celebrity endorsement, Pradhan et al. (2016) and Arora et al. (2021) observe that brand personality and consumer personality congruence have considerable influence on brand related outcomes. You and Hon (2021) demonstrate that value congruence positively influences behavioural intention, especially WOM intention, suggesting and stressing that consumers support companies whose salient communicated values are compatible with their own (You & Hon, 2021). Taken together, these studies provide wide support on the importance of value congruence in marketing research.

As noted in the first lines of the paragraph, it can be inferred that – as CSA is an activity rooted in ideologies and values – the relevance of congruence between the values transmitted by the company and those of the consumers is even more prominent. Trayner (2017) claims that in our polarised, politicized and value-driven world where companies and executives are increasingly taking a stand on sociopolitical issues, value congruence represents a powerful way to engender consumers' positive attitudes and loyalty. Vredenburg et al. (2020) hold that a positive or negative response to CSA activities depends, among other factors, on whether a brand's stance on the cause threatens or affirms consumers' values, in that they might perceive the activity as a threat to their identity and well-being. Per Bhagwat et al. (2020), the effect of CSA on consumers' engagement depends on whether consumers feel a sense of congruence

between their values and the firm's; consistently Dodd and Supa (2014) and Schmidt et. al (2021) provide evidence on the positive link between value congruence and marketing outcomes in the context of sociopolitical activist brands. From a more practical standpoint, Nike's "Dream Crazy" case study and related data illustrated in chapter 2 can be considered to further support this evidence. In fact, boycott, backlash and negative brand-related responses occurred for market segments who were politically distant from the values shown by the brand in the advertising (Chapter 2, paragraph 2.5).

### **3.1.2 Attitude toward the advertisement**

The second construct assessed in the chapter is *attitude toward the advertisement*. The selection of the construct has been guided by the research methodology and survey design adopted, as well as by the fact that - at the time this dissertation is being carried out - Corporate Sociopolitical Activism initiatives are not well widespread in the Italian landscape. As such, it could be inferred that Italian consumers are still not familiar with the phenomenon, especially when particular demographic segments are considered. Hence, to get the audience in touch with ease to a case of sociopolitical activism, an experimental condition where respondents are exposed to a sociopolitical advertising has been employed. Further discussion on this point can be found in chapter 4, where survey design and methodology are presented.

Attitude toward the ad is a research topic that - especially in the decade of the 1980es - has progressively captured the attention of marketing and advertising researchers (Muehling & McCann, 1993). A starting point of analysis is the definition of what an *attitude* is. Bettman (1979) adopts a cognitive and behavioural standpoint, for which *attitudes* can be regarded as a heuristic towards an object that results from the limited cognitive capabilities of the human actor. Similarly, Lutz (1991) defines an attitude as a "filter" from which consumers evaluate an object, per Banyte et al. (2007) it is a "[...] *permanent and at the same time purposeful, gradual and more or less intensive and motivated consumers' intention to react to a particular object*" (Banyte, et al., 2007). According to Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) it is also a "*consistent reaction in a favourable or unfavourable manner or learned tendency on a certain object*" (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Shifting the focus to the subject of analysis, the advertising in this case, there emerges

that Attitude toward the advertising (Aad) is a “*predisposition to respond in a consistently favourable and unfavourable manner to a particular advertising stimulus during a particular exposure occasion*” (MacKenzie, et al., 1986). Though it has received wide consensus in academia, the definition is anchored to a permanent, stable, and unchangeable evaluation of the individual to the advertisement that, moreover, works *ex ante*. In other words, it is contended that the definition is not able to capture the instinctive nature of evaluation, and that, as suggested by Solomon et al. (2009), attitudes can be created or changed as people engage in new experiences. To embrace also this dynamic nature of attitudes, we rely on the conceptualization of Ad Attitude suggested by Mitchell and Olson (1981), interpreted as the individual’s evaluation of the overall advertising stimulus. On the same page, Phelps and Thorson (1991) define Aad as “*a viewer general liking or disliking of an advertisement*” (Phelps & Thorson, 1991), and Gardner (1983) as a “*generalized affective reaction to the ad*” (Gardner, 1983). Thus, adopting this standpoint of the conceptualization, Aad is interpreted as a situationally-bound construct that has its apical impact during or immediately after consumers’ exposure to the ad.

Another point raised by Muehling and McCann (1993) is that amid this multitude of definitions, an inherent dichotomy characterising Aad can be observed: in fact, the construct presents a cognitive and an emotional/affective dimension. Accordingly, definitions and conceptualizations that focus on only one of the dimensions are *unidimensional* (for instance, Gardner (1983) presented above), whilst those that stage Aad along the two dimensions are *multidimensional*. Shimp (1981) proposes that Aad consists of both a cognitive and an emotional dimension. The cognitive dimension represents the consumer’s conscious response to the and its executional elements (usefulness of the message and the information in it, source characteristics, setting evaluation), whereas the emotional component reflects consumers’ non volitional and emotional feelings (happiness, joy, anger...).

Leveraging on the affective/emotional component of Aad, some connections between CSA and attitude toward the advertisement can be inferred, especially when these considerations are bridged together through the lens of *value* congruence. At first glance, as sociopolitical advertisings champion an ideological stand of a brand on a

sociopolitical issue, they elicit a strong emotional/affective arousal. This can be clearly seen in the case of Nike's "Dream Crazy" spot, where the polarised sentiment of the public has been manifested at several levels, sometimes in a violent way. Research on social psychology and advertising build on congruity theory as a framework for understanding the process of attitude and emotions generation. Osgood and Tannenbaum (1955) explain that a person is more likely to have a positive attitude toward an object when he/she perceives that it is consistent with what he/she holds, and in the context of sociopolitical advertisements this suggests that a consumer forms a positive attitude when the ad transmits consistent values. As noted in the previous paragraph, Zhang and Bloemer (2008) demonstrate that value congruence catalyses affective commitment. Focusing on emotions, Orth and Holančova (2004) - in their study concerning sex-role portrayals in advertising – assume that incongruence with consumer self-schema results in less approving and more disapproving emotional responses. Other theories put together the emotional and cognitive aspects of evaluation claiming that a stimulus is perceived as positive or negative in the measure of how much effort is required to resolve that incongruity (Orth & Holančova, 2004).

Paragraph 3.1 provided the rationale to consider value congruence a starting point of analysis to assess the impact of sociopolitical activism on branding outcomes. This paragraph shows that affective and emotional arousals are, together with cognitive evaluation, a constitutional part of the construct *attitude toward the advertisement*. Academia has reached a wide consensus on the positive link between value congruence and attitude, and - to put further evidence - some papers demonstrate the positive relationship between congruence and emotions. Grounding on these considerations, the first theoretical hypothesis is advanced:

*H1: In the context of CSA advertising, value congruence has a positive influence on Attitude towards the advertisement*

### **3.1.3 Brand Attitude**

As for the case of Aad, scholars usually specify the meaning of *attitude* to conceptualize their definition of Brand Attitude (BA), using in this case the *brand* as the subject of

analysis. Following Mitchell & Olson (1981), Spears & Singh (2004) provide a comprehensive conceptualization stating that “*attitude toward the brand is a relatively enduring, unidimensional summary evaluation of the brand that presumably energizes behaviour*” (Spears & Singh, 2004). As noted by the authors, this definition holds together the characteristics ascribed to attitude and brand attitude that emerged hitherto: (i) the attitude is centred around an object, in this case the brand; (ii) the attitude is a summary evaluation towards the brand and can be imputed to some degrees of goodness or badness; (iii) brand attitude is an internal state and is subjective to the actor considered; and finally (iv) brand attitude endures for at least a short period of time and energizes behaviour. Conversely, Solomon et al. (2009) assert that even though attitudes incorporate a relatively stable disposition towards an object, they ultimately can be created and be changed as people gain new experiences and engage in new touchpoints with a brand. In particular, they contend that marketing communications and advertising are an active attempt to build and change attitudes – in other words, they are a process that conflates with the concept of persuasion. To embrace the long lasting and at the same time dynamic nature of the construct – as well as providing readers with a ready to use definition - this dissertation considers Ramesh et al. (2018) broad conceptualization of Brand Attitude as a “*summary evaluation of a brand*” (Ramesh, et al., 2018). Moreover, it is contended that the definition is particularly fitting for the survey design and data collection method that will be showed in chapter 4.

The relationship between attitude toward the advertisement and brand attitude can be investigated drawing on the long lasting stream of research that postulates Aad as a causal mediator in the process through which advertising influences brand attitude and behavioural intentions. Based on prior theoretical work, MacKenzie et al. (1986) identify 4 possible causal relationships, summarized as follow:

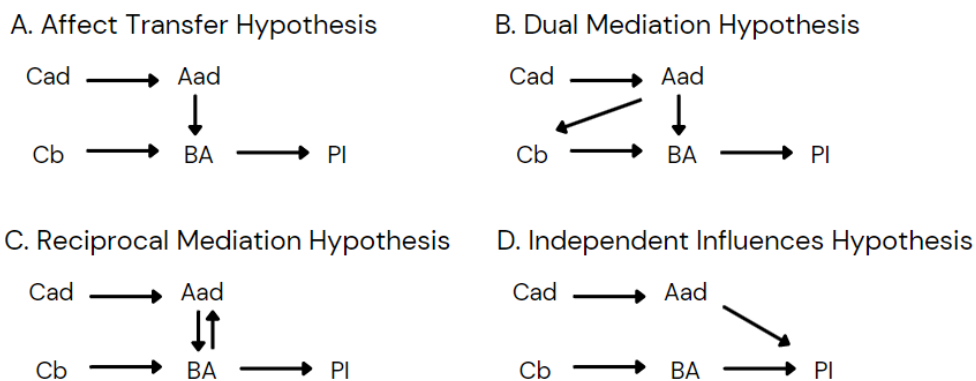
- **Affect transfer hypothesis (ATH):** the affect transfer hypothesis postulates a direct and one-way causal flow from Attitude toward the advertisement to Brand Attitude (Aad → BA).
- **Dual mediation hypothesis (DMH):** this hypothesis specifies a twofold effect of advertisement attitude to brand attitude: (1) akin to the affect transfer, it

assumes a direct effect; in addition, (2) there is also an indirect flow of causation through *brand cognitions* (interpreted as the recipients' perceptions of the brand being advertised).

- **Reciprocal mediation hypothesis (RMH):** it contends a reciprocal and direct causation of the two constructs. As noted by the authors, the relative strength of the reciprocal effect varies across consumers and situations: with new products or brands, the flow moving from Aad to BA will be stronger; whilst for familiar brands the previous exposure will affect the advertising stimulus perception.
- **Independent influences hypothesis (IIH):** this hypothesis assumes no causal relationship between Aad and BA, and each construct affects purchase intention in an independent way.

An overview of the models – complemented with the constructs of cognitions and purchase intention - is exposed in FIGURE 3.1.

**FIGURE 3.1**  
**Models of Aad causal relationships**



Cad = ad cognitions (recipient's perception of the ad)  
 Aad = Attitude toward the advertisement (affective reactions to the ad)  
 Cb = brand cognitions (recipient's perception of the brand)  
 BA = Brand Attitude (affective reactions to the brand)  
 PI = purchase intention

*Source:* MacKenzie et al. (1986)

Few considerations can be made. First of all, the models rely on a unidimensional interpretation of Attitude towards the Ad and Brand attitude, circumscribing the definitions only into their affective component and distinguishing the cognitive aspects in a separate way. This study adopts a different approach, and even though the affective



and emotional aspect of attitude is still of primary interest, it interprets attitudes from a multidimensional standpoint - thus embedding also the cognitive component. It follows that the distinction between the direct and direct-indirect effect characterising, respectively, ATH and DHM models, results more blurred. Second, RMH assumes a reciprocal effect between the two constructs, nonetheless it specifies that when it comes to new brands or new products, there is a stronger prevalence of the one-way flow that Aad exerts on BA. As we will note in chapter 4, this is the case for the survey design and methods that will be adopted. Finally, the study by MacKenzie et al. demonstrate that the IIH model - that excludes Aad and BA causal relationships – is the weakest and worst fitting to explain data.

It is no aim of the study to select and uphold one of these models, nonetheless it can be maintained that they provide – excluding IIH model – an overview on the positive causal relationship flowing from Attitude towards the advertisement and Brand Attitude. Further, empirical studies enhance this evidence: MacKenzie et al. (1986) demonstrate that Aad exerts strong positive influence on BA in the context of new brands with low-importance product classes; Laczniack and Carlson (1989) show the strong positive effect of Aad on BA when respondents are less knowledgeable of the brand but highly involved with the ad; Um (2021) provide robust results that attitude toward *femvertising* (a composite term representing advertising dealing with feminist topics) has a significant relationship with attitude toward brand; Del Mar García De los Salmones and Perez (2017) illustrate that Attitude towards CSR advertising is a strong positive mediator of Brand Attitude. On the whole, the second theoretical hypothesis can be thus advanced:

*H2: Attitude toward the advertisement exerts a positive influence on Brand Attitude*

#### **3.1.4 Brand Image**

Ever since its first writings, Brand Image (BI) is a marketing construct that has been conceptualized in many different ways. As noted by Lee et al. (2014) in their analysis of the historical transition of the definition, it can be maintained that the multiple conceptualizations and interpretations of the construct result in incongruence, with its boundaries ill-defined. For instance, between the 1950es and the 1970es the term was used interchangeably with the concept of *product image*, reflecting a historical moment

when branding and its intangible aspects were still at early stages. During the 1980es studies used to put at the forefront the symbolic aspect of branding, and brand image was defined relying on aspects such as mental associations, meanings, messages, character or personality. Research from the 1990es continued in the same direction. Nonetheless, this resulted in definitions that overlapped significantly with other similar constructs such as brand identity, brand associations or brand personality. As a result, coming up with a clear and distinct definitional consensus is challenging: for some scholars BI is a complex multidimensional construct that is triggered by cognitions, emotions, symbols, values and attitudes of consumers (Malik, et al., 2012); for others it is a unidimensional construct that – as noted above – matches with brand associations (Aaker, 1991).

The conceptualization of brand image considered in this study builds on the influential contributions of Aaker and Keller, two notable branding authorities. Their definitions rely on associative network theory, a cognitive model based on associations that comprises links and nodes. In particular, *links* represent the relationships among different *nodes*, and in the case of brand image, the brand is considered as a node linked to many possible other nodes (the associations). According to Aaker (1991), BI represents a consumer's set of associations linked to a specific brand. Further, he relies on the concept of Brand identity - "A unique set of associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain" (Aaker, 1996)- to describe brand image as the "actual associations of a brand hold by the customers". In other words, the dichotomy between strategic aspiration and actual associations provides that brand identity is the image that the company wishes to convey, whereas brand image represents the real consumer's perspective. This interpretation is coherent with Keller (1993), who defines BI as "consumer's perception of a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" (Keller, 1993), and few years later as "Consumer perceptions of any preferences for a brand, measured by the various types of brand associations held in memory" (Keller, 2008). Consistently, other studies conceptualize BI with an association based approach (Biel, 1992; Vazquez et al. 2002; Anselmsson, et al., 2014). Nonetheless, most of these definitions present an inherent problem, in that they assume an already-built familiarity between the customer and the brand for which associations are

retrieved from memory. Considering this, a slightly different approach can be found in Roy & Banerjee (2014), who contend that “(BI) The perception of a brand that is being formed in the process of decoding brand identity facet” (Roy & Banerjee, 2014). In the definition, association is substituted by perception, and without referring to the memory structure of individuals, this conceptualization appears to be slightly more fitting when customers deal with new brands.

As noted, BA is a summary evaluation of a brand (Ramesh et al., 2018), whereas BI can be defined as the consumer’s holistic set of associations/perceptions of a brand. A chief conceptual difference between the two constructs lies in that brand attitude embodies a cognitive evaluative assessment of the consumer that, in the case of brand image, is partly missing. As will be underlined in chapter 4, this aspect provides room to analyse and foremost operationalize the two constructs in a separate way.

Academia explores the causal and hierarchical relationship between BA and BI grounding on Keller (1993), who conceptualizes brand attitude as just one of the various associations used in the formation of brand image. Based on this interpretation, Faircloth et al. (2001) assume and robustly demonstrate that brand attitude - as a type of brand association - has a significant positive direct effect on brand image (Faircloth, et al., 2001). In the context of this study, a positive attitude toward the brand – formed after the evaluation of a sociopolitical advertising stimulus - is likely to exert a positive influence on brand image. In particular, it favours the creation of favourable, strong and unique brand associations. Grounding on these considerations, H3 is advanced as follows:

*H3: A positive Brand Attitude has a positive direct effect on Brand Image*

### **3.1.5 Brand Equity**

Brand Equity is a marketing construct that has been pivotal for strategic marketing researchers and brand management practitioners. As an attempt to summarize and capture the relationship between customers and brands (Wood, 2000), the concept of BE proliferated into multiple meanings and dimensions. Two streams of interpretation are particularly relevant:

- **Corporate-level approaches** conceive the brand as a financial intangible asset, and BE is defined as the total value imputed to the brand when it is sold or included on a balance sheet (Feldwick, 1996). Measuring BE in this way conflates with the process of *brand valuation*.
- **Consumer-level approaches** are focused on the relationships between the brand and the consumer. These approaches are sometimes clustered in the broader definition of *Customer based Brand Equity (CBBE)*, to distinguish them from the asset valuation meaning (Wood, 2000). Inside this category, two further conceptual distinctions can be drawn, for which BE can be described as: (i) a qualitative description of the associations and belief that consumers hold on a brand – in this case Brand Equity comprises the notions of Brand Image and Brand Attitude; (ii) a measure of the strength of consumer’s attachment to a brand – intended as the incremental behavioural effect on consumers that can be ascribed to a brand with respect to a non-branded version of an equivalent product or service.

According to Feldwick (1996) framework, these approaches take the name of *brand value* and – respectively, as for consumer-level approaches – *brand description* and *brand strength*.

The conceptualization used in this study is behavioural and falls into the *brand strength* approach. It follows that Brand Equity is conceived as the “*differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand.*” (Keller, 1993) and as “*consumers' different response between a focal brand and an unbranded product when both have the same level of marketing stimuli and product attributes*” (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Thus, the definitions provide that brand’s descriptive aspects (Brand Attitude and Brand Image) catalyse performance outcomes, and are focused on consumers’ behavioural shift. This view is consistent with Holden (1992), who maintains that brand equity arises from a greater probability of choice by consumers and mostly reflects the willingness to pay a premium price and other aspects such as the likelihood of purchase/purchase intention.

The causal relationship of brand image on brand equity has been keenly explored in different studies. As noted in the previous paragraph, BI is the consumer’s summary set

of associations and perceptions of a brand. Keller (1993) provides that associations that are unique, favourable and strong enhance a positive brand image that, as a consequence, will bias consumer's behaviour towards the brand. Per Pitta and Katsanis (1995), a positive brand image boosts brand's strategic differentiation and positive positioning on a consumer's mind. Faircloth et al. (2001) demonstrate that brand image has a significant and robust positive effect on brand equity, and consistently Lassar et al. (1995) report that premium prices and higher brand equity are positively correlated to a strong brand image. In the context of CSR activities, Ramesh et al. (2018) shed light on the mediating role of brand image on the behavioural intention toward a company, explained by the fact that value-driven positionings generate a distinctive character to the brand – which is ultimately prized with a more positive purchase intention by the consumers. According to these considerations, H4 is derived as follows:

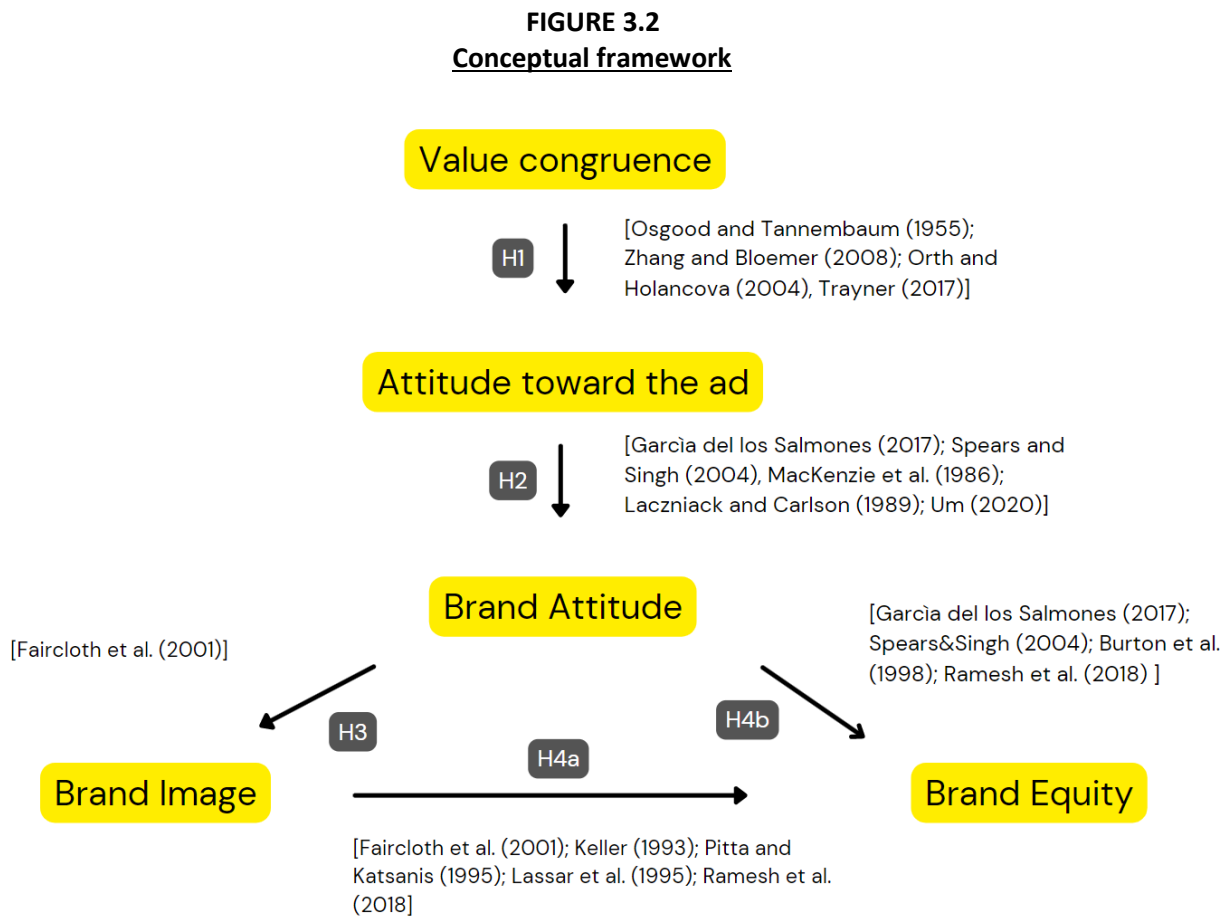
*H4a: Brand Image is positively related to Brand Equity*

Finally, as Brand Equity is here interpreted building on its behavioural component, new considerations on the relationship between BA and BE emerge. At first glance, Burton et al. (1998) contend that, as it points out to consumer's liking or disliking of a brand, BA is a useful cue to understand her/his buying willingness. Further, Spears and Singh (2004) conceptualization of Brand Attitude as a “[...] *relatively enduring, unidimensional summary evaluation of the brand that presumably energizes behaviour*” illustrates the attitude-behaviour link and provides that BA can have a direct effect on the behavioural intention. Consistently, the models concerning Aad causal relationships shown in paragraph 3.2 (FIGURE 3.1), uncover that Brand Attitude exerts a positive direct effect on purchase intention. When it comes to CSR initiatives, Ramesh et al. (2018) confirm that Brand Attitude acts as a mediator with purchase intention; on the same page del Mar García De los Salmones and Perez (2017) adopts the DMH model to demonstrate that Brand Attitude has a strong direct influence on behavioural outcomes. The final hypothesis is thus developed:

*H4b: Brand Attitude is directly positively related to Brand Equity*

### 3.2 Conceptual framework

Combining the hypothesis listed above, the following model is proposed (FIGURE 3.2).



*Source:* Personal elaboration. The causal nexus between constructs and related hypothesis are derived from academic literature. Referral papers are indicated

We noted that CSA is a partisan activity rooted in ideologies and values, and as suggested by Bhattacharya and Elsbach (2002), Trayner (2017), Vredenburg et al. (2020) and Bhagwat et al. (2020), consumers’ related responses depend on which sociopolitical values they support. In light of these considerations, the conceptual model accounts *value congruence* as a proper starting point to assess the impact of sociopolitical advertising on marketing constructs.

Studies by Osgood and Tannenbaum (1955), Orth and Holancova (2004), Zhang and Bloemer (2008) - building on congruity theory, self-schema consistency and their effects on attitude formation, emotional and affective arousals – provide the rationale to posit

that the match of values transmitted in the ad and those hold by the consumer has a positive influence on Attitude towards the advertisement (H1).

Research concerning the causal relationship between attitude towards the advertisement and brand attitude is rich, a long lasting stream of research that demonstrated the positive and direct effect of Aad on BA under various conditions. With evidence enhanced by the studies of MacKenzie et al. (1986), Lacziack and Carlson (1989), Garcia de los Salmones (2017) and Um (2021), H2 propose that a positive attitude toward the advertisement has a positive effect on brand attitude.

The model sheds light on the effect of Brand Attitude on Brand Image. This relationship is demonstrated by Faircloth et.al (2001), for which Brand Attitude – considered as one of brand’s image associations – has a direct positive effect on Brand Image. This suggests that the positive evaluation of a brand is likely to favour the creation of favourable, strong and unique brand associations or perceptions (brand image). In accordance, H3 provides that BA positively affects BI.

Finally, the causal effects on Brand Equity are explored. As a multidimensional construct conceptualized under different approaches, BE is interpreted here focusing mostly on the consumer’s behavioural and intentional shift (for instance, purchase intention or willingness to pay a premium price). Keller (1993), Pitta and Katsanis (1995), Faircloth et al. (2001), Lassar et al. (1995) and Ramesh et al. (2018) strongly demonstrate that a positive brand image can bias consumer’s behavioural intention towards a brand (H4a). Likewise, Burton et. al (1998), Spears and Singh (2004), Garcia de Los Salmones (2017) and Ramesh et. al (2018) confirm that a positive brand attitude can energize consumer’s behaviour in favour to a brand. Building on these works, it is proposed also that BA has a direct effect on BE (H4b).





## Chapter IV

### Research methodology

Chapter 3 presented a causal model grounded on 5 theoretical hypothesis that, collectively, show the possible consequences of a sociopolitical adv on brand-related constructs. Building on existing literature, the study examines these relationships starting from the construct of *value congruence*, passing through *Attitude toward the advertisement*, *Brand Attitude*, *Brand Image* and culminating with *Brand Equity*.

Chapter 4 illustrates the research method employed, providing an overview of measurement items, stimuli selection, questionnaire structure as well as sample and data collection.

#### 4.1 Measurement items

The paragraph exposes the items selected for the measurement of the constructs that compose the model.

##### 4.1.1 Value congruence

This study conceptualizes value congruence as the similarity between consumers' personal values and the perception of brand values (Zhang & Bloemer, 2008).

Academic operationalization for value congruence is vast. As noted by You and Hon (2021), the traditional approach consists of measuring separately the characteristics and values of each individual and those of the company. From the discrepancy between an individual's personal values and the perceived values of the company, a summary degree of value congruence is obtained. With this method, scholars rely on *Schwartz's theory of value* framework, which consists of 57 measurement items that collectively capture human values along personal and social dimensions. Nonetheless this scenario has been discarded, as participants would have to respond to 114 value items (57 for the individual's evaluation and 57 for the company's evaluation) - a lengthy process that might have induced respondents to withdraw the questionnaire. Therefore, value congruence is here operationalized through items based on consensus. Drawing from You & Hon (2021) and Lee and Jeong (2014), the final scale consists of 4 items adapted

to the experimental condition respondents are subjected to, which required the translation of the sentence from English to Italian and the substitution of some terms. Congruence items and related authors are summarized in table 4.1.

**TABLE 4.1**  
**Value congruence: items selected and authors**

ITEM	AUTHOR
(Question: <i>“Dopo aver visto lo spot, in che misura ti trovi d'accordo con le seguenti affermazioni?”</i> )	
I valori trasmessi da questo spot sono simili ai miei valori	You & Hon (2021)
Questo spot rappresenta i principi di cui sono orgoglioso	You & Hon (2021)
Gli ideali promossi dallo spot riflettono la mia visione del mondo	You & Hon (2021)
Supporto pienamente l'intenzione e gli obiettivi legati a questo spot	Lee & Jeong (2014)

*Source:* Personal elaboration building on You & Hon (2021) and Lee & Jeong (2014)

Consistently with the studies, the scale has been operationalized on a 5 points Likert answering-grid ranging from “Decisamente No” (definitely not) to “Decisamente Sì” (definitely Yes).

#### **4.1.2 Attitude toward the advertisement**

This study interprets Attitude toward the advertisement as a situationally-bound construct that has its apical impact during or immediately after consumers’ exposure to the ad. Aad is conceptualized as the individual’s evaluation of the advertising stimulus (Mitchell & Olson, 1981). In a similar fashion, the construct can be defined as *“a viewer general liking or disliking of an advertisement”* (Phelps & Thorson, 1991), or as a *“generalized affective reaction to the ad”* (Gardner, 1983).

The operationalization of attitude toward the advertisement grants upon a rich number of possibilities found in advertising literature. As a starting point, the selection of the items has been guided by Bergkwist and Langnger (2017) who - in their meta-analysis on the construct’s measurement in advertising research - provide an overview of the most used items to measure Aad: on the top ten, we can find items such as “good”, “like”, “interesting”, “likeable”, “appealing”, “attractive” or “irritating”. Besides these

evaluative components, the latter definition by Gardner (1983) presented above suggests that Aad can be measured considering the affective and emotional reactions that arise in response to the advertising stimuli. To fully capture this aspect, other items have been considered following Bhat et al. (1987) and Holbrook & Batra (1987). The results of the assessment are shown in table 4.2

**TABLE 4.2**  
**Attitude toward the ad: items selected and authors**

ITEM	AUTHOR
(Question: <i>“Quali sensazioni hai dopo aver guardato lo spot?”</i> )	
PIACERE	MacKenzie et al. (1986)
APPREZZAMENTO	MacKenzie et al. (1986)
INTERESSE	MacKenzie et al. (1986)
DIVERTIMENTO	Holbrook and Batra (1987)
GRATITUDINE	Holbrook and Batra (1987)
RABBIA*	Bhat et al. (1998)
IRRITAZIONE*	Bhat et al. (1998)
SOSPETTO*	Bhat et al. (1998)

*Source:* Personal elaboration building on existing literature

\*Reversed item

The 8 items scale has been linked to a 5 point Likert answering grid, with responses ranging from “Per niente” (Not at all) to “Molto” (“Very Much”).

#### **4.1.3 Brand attitude**

Brand attitude is considered as a *“summary evaluation of a brand”* (Ramesh, et al., 2018). It is contended that this definition is particularly fitting when respondents have to provide an evaluation of a brand when they have little or no familiarity with it, as it does not put at the forefront prior expositions and touchpoints.

In literature, the operationalization of brand attitude is usually consistent with the one that measures attitude toward the advertisement. Nonetheless, the conceptual and operational difference lies in that the focus shifts from affective and emotional responses after seeing the ad, to the general cognitive subjective evaluation of the brand advertised. Spears and Singh (2004) come up with a 31 items pool that can be adopted to measure BA, a list that results too robust to be handled in a questionnaire. In light of this, 7 final items have been selected (table 4.3).

**TABLE 4.3**  
**Brand attitude: items selected and authors**

ITEM	AUTHOR
(Question: <i>“Dopo aver visto lo spot, trovo che (brand) sia per me un brand”</i> ):	
PIACEVOLE	Spears & Singh (2004)
APPREZZABILE	Spears & Singh (2004)
INTERESSANTE	Spears & Singh (2004)
ACCATTIVANTE	Spears & Singh (2004)
DESIDERABILE	Spears & Singh (2004)
VALIDO	Spears & Singh (2004)
AFFIDABILE	Spears & Singh (2004)

*Source:* Personal elaboration building on existing literature

Consistently with the previous constructs, Brand Attitude scale has been operationalized on a 5 points Likert answering-grid ranging from “Per niente” (Not at all) to “Molto” (“Very Much”).

#### 4.1.4 Brand Image

Brand Image is identified as the consumer's set of associations linked to a specific brand (Aaker, 1991) or as "*The perception of a brand that is being formed in the process of decoding brand identity facet*" (Roy & Banerjee, 2014).

Reflecting the definitional changes and incongruences characterising the construct over the years, BI has been operationalised in a number of ways. Chandon (2003) notes that to measure brand image one can either use/adapt an existing list of brand associations or start from scratch eliciting associations from respondents through qualitative and projective techniques. As the second method lacks systematic standardization (Malik et al, 2012) – and to keep the questionnaire structure simple – the first approach has been adopted. In particular, a number of studies have provided empirical support for the hypothesis that personality based approaches are a viable method for understanding consumers' perception of brand images (Caprara, et al., 2001). In this dissertation, a preliminary selection of items has been built on Aaker (1997) *brand personality list* - a pool of adjectives employed in literature to describe the personality and associations of a brand<sup>61</sup>. After the scrutiny of the list, *daring*, *up-to-date* have been chosen. Further items selection stems from Freling et al. (2011) *brand personality appeal list*<sup>62</sup> (*distinct* and *surprising*); Davies et al. (2004) (*open*, *socially responsible*) and from Caprara et al. (2001) (*authentic*). The final collection of the items is reported in table 4.4

Brand Image scale has been operationalized on a 7 points Likert linear scale to measure the degree of fit between the adjective and the brand. Answers ranged from "Per niente d'accordo" (Totally disagree) to "Pienamente d'accordo" (Fully agree).

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<sup>61</sup> It measures to what extent each adjective describes the brand. Adjectives are clustered into 5 main dimensions: (i) sincerity (down to earth, honest, wholesome, cheerful), (ii) excitement (daring, spirited, imaginative, up-to-date); (iii) competence (reliable, intelligent, successful); (iv) sophistication (upper class, charming); (v) ruggedness (outdoorsy, tough).

<sup>62</sup>Brand Personality Appeal is a concept that summarizes if a brand's set of associations is appealing for a consumer, and they represent a useful method to measure whether a respondent holds a positive Brand Image or not

**TABLE 4.4**  
**Brand Image: items selected and authors**

ITEM	AUTHOR
<i>(Question: "Nel complesso, penso che (brand) sia un brand *adjective*"):</i>	
AUTENTICO	Caprara et al. (2001)
PROGRESSISTA	Aaker (1997)
APERTO	Davies et al. (2004)
CORAGGIOSO	Aaker (1997)
SORPRENDENTE	Freling et al. (2011)
AL PASSO CON I TEMPI	Aaker (1997)
RESPONSABILE	Davies et al. (2004)
DISTINTO	Freling et al. (2011)

*Source:* Personal elaboration building on existing literature

#### **4.1.5 Brand Equity**

Brand equity is defined "*as consumers' different response between a focal brand and an unbranded product when both have the same level of marketing stimuli and product attributes*" (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). It is a consumer-based behavioural view of the concept for which, as suggested by Keller (1993) and Aaker (1992), Brand Equity enhances choice behaviour and willingness to pay a premium price.

The operationalization of the construct follows Yoo & Donthu (2001). The authors develop the OBE scale (Overall Brand Equity), an original four item unidimensional measure of brand equity focusing on the differential effect of consumer's response between the focal brand and an equivalent unbranded counterpart. The scale is composed of 4 items: (i) "It makes sense to buy Brand X instead of any other brand, even if they are the same"; (ii) "Even if another brand has the same features as Brand X, I would prefer to buy Brand X"; (iii) "If there is another brand as good as X, I prefer to buy

X”; (iv) “If another brand is not different from X in any way, it seems smarter to purchase X”. Amongst these options, 3 items have been selected. To further capture the behavioural shift, 2 additional items were collected. The willingness to pay a premium price was adapted from Perrini et al. (2010), and the intention to suggest the brand to other people was derived from You and Hon (2021).

**TABLE 4.5**  
**Brand Equity: items selected and authors**

Item (Question: “ <i>In Che Misura Ti Trovi d'accordo Con Le Seguenti Affermazioni?</i> ”):	AUTHOR
Trovo ragionevole affidarmi a (brand) rispetto a un altro brand, sebbene offrano lo stesso prodotto/servizio	Yoo & Donthu (2001)
Se un altro brand presenta le stesse funzionalità di (brand), preferisco affidarmi a (brand)	Yoo & Donthu (2001)
Se un altro brand non differisce da (brand), trovo più saggio affidarmi a (brand)	Yoo & Donthu (2001)
Rispetto a un altro brand, sarei disposto a pagare di più per affidarmi a (brand)	Perrini et al. (2010)
Consiglierei (brand) a un amico/famigliare	You & Hon (2021)

*Source:* Personal elaboration building on existing literature

Items were collected the scale on a 5 points Likert answering-grid ranging from “Decisamente No” (definitely not) to “Decisamente Si” (definitely Yes).

#### **4.2 Survey design and stimuli selection**

To evaluate the impact of Corporate Sociopolitical Activism on brand-related outcomes, the study employed an experimental condition where participants were randomly exposed to an advertising stimulus.

In the first part of the dissertation, we noted that CSA can take various forms – from CEO’s public statements to company’s donations to specific associations or other actions related to the marketing mix. The decision to opt for a communication element, the advertising, builds on the fact that it represented the easiest way to prompt the audience with a case of sociopolitical activism. In fact - at the time this dissertation is being carried out – the development of CSA in Italy seems not to be as prominent as in

other countries, such as the USA (see table 2.1). In light of this, the logical inference was to assume that Italians have a scarce familiarity with this type of activism, especially when particular categories of people – for instance, elder demographics, people who are still bound to a traditional media usage or simply those less interested in following recent marketing trends - are considered. Furthermore, this methodology is consistent previous studies such as del Mar García-De los Salmones & Perez (2017) or Orth & Holancova (2004).

The selection of the advertising stimuli has been conducted along two trajectories of choice. First of all, the message transmitted had to be sociopolitical, meaning that it had to respect the requisites that qualify an issue into this category. As noted in chapter 2, Nalick et al. (2016) observe that sociopolitical issues are (i) social issues, salient unresolved social matters on which societal and institutional opinion is split; and (ii) political issues, in the sense that they can be discussed in political agendas. Plus, they yield polarised responses by the public and evoke different emotional feelings and passions across various social groups inside the population. In the Italian context, these issues span on topics such as LGBTQ+ rights, immigration, racial justice or covid19 regulations. The second driver of selection covered the familiarity of the audience with the brand being advertised. It was in fact contended that, independently from ad execution, effects enhanced by strong brand familiarity or solid brand reputation would have significantly influenced consumers' responses to the questions. Hence, to best isolate the effect of sociopolitical activism, it was deemed wiser to exclude cases of CSA undertaken by strong and high reputational brands (for instance, Coca Cola, Nike or Ikea).

After the assessment of a panel of possible alternatives, two final stimuli were prosed:

- **Idealista | “Ciao papà”<sup>63</sup>**: During the Milan Pride Week 2021, Idealista<sup>64</sup> promoted an advertising campaign in support for LGBTQ+ rights (figure 4.1). In

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<sup>63</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2UjqhdZdg0>

<sup>64</sup> “Idealista” is a Spanish based brand that carries its business in Spain, Italy and Portugal. It operates in the Real Estate Services industry and provides an online metasearch engine for real estate buyers and sellers.



particular, it adopted an ironic perspective to celebrate the love between two teenage boys as a *new normal*.

**FIGURE 4.1**  
**Idealista: frame of the spot**



Source: YouTube

Aired in Italian television and promoted in the social media channels of the brand<sup>65</sup>, the spot yielded a polarised response by the public, receiving both positive and negative reactions<sup>66</sup>

- **Bud Light | “Join the party”<sup>67</sup>:** In honour of June 2016 Pride Month, Bud Light<sup>68</sup> celebrated same-sex marriage. Similarly to Idealista, the brand interpretes the theme with an ironic key, in this case relying on famous comedians to show the normality of homosexual weddings (figure 4.2). Following the ad, Bud Light hampered the relationships with some of its core drinkers and offended some categories of customers<sup>69</sup>, qualifying the case as sociopolitical. The spot did not air

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<sup>65</sup> <https://www.idealista.it/news/immobiliare/blog-di-idealista/2021/06/18/154499-idealista-celebra-il-pride-con-un-sogno-di-normalita>

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/in-edicola/articoli/2021/06/30/il-pride-di-idealista-e-gli-insulti-da-medioevo-una-bandiera-arcobaleno-li-seppellira/6240773/>

<sup>67</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QG0-1Jc3Llw>

<sup>68</sup> Sub-brand of Budweiser (the leading brand of the American brewing company Anheuser-Busch).

<sup>69</sup> <https://nymag.com/article/2016/06/bros-are-threatening-to-boycott-bud-light-over-this-gay-marriage-ad.html>

in Italy, and in operative terms this required the need to add Italian subtitles to guarantee a complete understanding by the audience.

**FIGURE 4.2**  
**Bud Light: frame of the spot**



*Source:* YouTube

Both cases fall into the category of sociopolitical issues concerning LGBTQ+ rights. The first one deals with homosexual love and family acceptance, the second regards same-sex marriages. The decision to focus only on this theme is motivated only by a major availability of CSA cases on the issue, thus giving leeway for a better selection. Conversely, it was found that CSA tackling other issues such as immigration, racial justice, abortion, or health related issues (for instance, covid 19 vaccination) were: (i) absent or scarce, especially in the Italian landscape; (ii) carried out by major and strong brands (for instance, “Dream Crazy” racial justice leading case by Nike or, when it comes to immigration in Italy, Benetton<sup>70</sup>); (iii) performed in non-advertising formats (CEO activism or other subtle forms of activism, such as Gucci’s 2019 fashion show where the brand took a stand pro-abortion<sup>71</sup>).

After being prompted with the advertising, questionnaire structure followed the conceptual model presented, assessing attitude toward the advertisement, attitude

<sup>70</sup> [https://www.adnkronos.com/spot-benetton-con-migranti-lega-insorge\\_q2n1XytQDVaNzjGcSVWfC](https://www.adnkronos.com/spot-benetton-con-migranti-lega-insorge_q2n1XytQDVaNzjGcSVWfC)

<sup>71</sup> [https://www.repubblica.it/d/2019/05/29/news/gucci\\_cruise\\_2020\\_sfilata\\_roma\\_alessandro\\_michele-291131717/](https://www.repubblica.it/d/2019/05/29/news/gucci_cruise_2020_sfilata_roma_alessandro_michele-291131717/)

toward the brand, brand image and brand equity, respectively. To gain further insights on the Italian situation, these sections were followed by two qualitative questions that asked participants some general opinions about Corporate Sociopolitical Activism. Finally, participants were asked to self-identify demographic information to include: age, gender, education and region of residence (see APPENDIX I for the questionnaires in detail)

The online questionnaire was administrated with Google Forms, and the study link was distributed to a random national sample of Italian consumers. To assure respondents were randomly exposed to only one advertising stimulus, a redirect online tool<sup>72</sup> developed by Fergusson (2016) was employed.

#### **4.3 Sample and data collection**

Questionnaire administration took place on Jan 7<sup>th</sup> and the questionnaire remained accessible until Jan 16<sup>th</sup>. Consistently with del Mar García-De los Salmones & Perez (2017), the sample was chosen by convenience, although age and gender variables were controlled to ensure an equal representation. Sample size consisted of 211 questionnaires (101 for Bud Light; 110 for Idealista). Following data cleaning, no answers have been excluded. The aggregate sample profile that emerged showed: (i) a slight major representation of females over males (54.9% vs 42,7%); a (ii) similar distribution across 35-54 and 18-24 age classes (30.3%; 27%). Finally, the sample weighted toward a high school diploma qualification (38.8%), nonetheless this data accounts also for bachelor's students who have not achieved their degree yet (detailed demographic profile is provided in APPENDIX II)

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<sup>72</sup> <https://www.allocate.monster/>



## Chapter V

### Data Analysis and Results

After an initial overview of Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), results of the study are presented in three stages: (i) measurement model, illustrating the relationships between measured variables and latent variables and assessing their validity and reliability; (ii) structural model, indicating the fitness of the general model presented; (iii) hypothesis testing, focusing on the relationships between the latent variables to observe if theoretical hypothesis are supported.

The analysis has been carried out with STATA/MP 17.0.

#### 5.1 Structural Equation Modelling: overview

Structural Equation Modelling, or SEM, is a general modelling framework that integrates a number of different multivariate statistic techniques. Among these, it combines factor analysis and path analysis (Hox & Bechger, 1999).

*Factor analysis* is a technique used to cluster a large number of exogeneous variables (or items) into a fewer number of factors (or latent constructs). There are typically two types of factor analysis that can be conducted: (i) Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), which assumes that any exogenous variable can be associated with any factor – widely used if relationships among variables and factors are not based on prior theory; (ii) Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), used in this study, which assumes, *ex ante* and building on existing literature, that a factor is already paired with a subset of specified exogenous variables – with the overall objective to test whether items are correctly associated with their respective latent construct. Thus, CFA is used to confirm or reject the measurement theory, and it generally constitutes the measurement part of SEM to examine the relationships between latent constructs and related items.

*Path analysis* is a technique to assess the effects and dependencies of a set of variables on others via multiple causal pathways. Statistically, it implies a series of structured linear regression equations among variables that are measured only by single indicators. Further, causal relationships have to be theory-driven and grounded on existing

literature. In operative terms, path analysis is represented diagrammatically using a standardised notation, whereby boxes represent variables and single headed arrows trace the nature of the relationships.

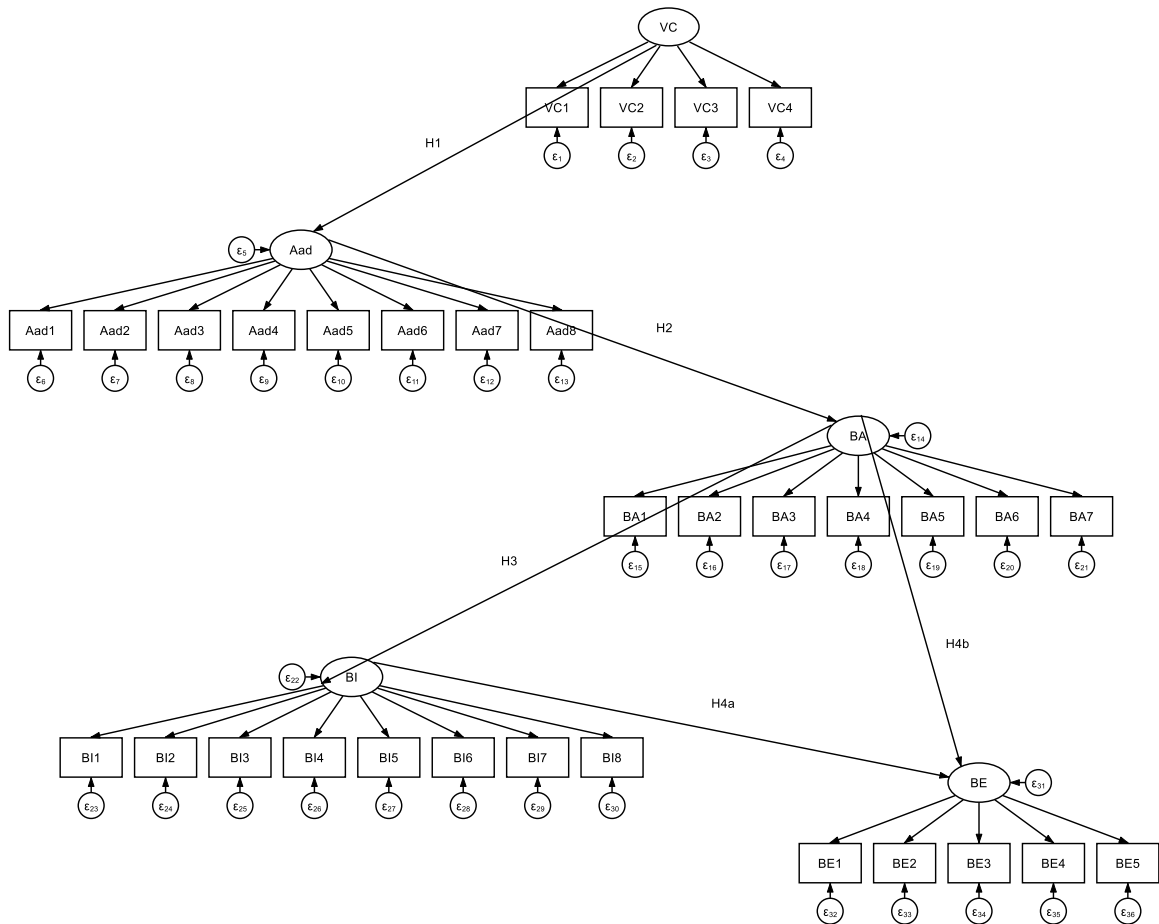
In the context of SEM, factor analysis (in our case, CFA) is used to assess the goodness of the measurement model, while path analysis studies the relationships among the latent variables that compose the general model. Hence, Structural Equation Modelling can be interpreted as a path analysis extended with latent constructs (Norman & Streiner, 2003). It follows that the graphical representation characterising path analysis can be applied also to SEM, with the following notation: (i) observed variables (measured variables) are represented by a rectangle; (ii) latent variables (endogenous) are represented by an ellipse; (iii) single headed arrows are employed to show causal relationship between variables, with the arrow tail as the source of the causal relationship; (iv) double headed arrows represent correlations or covariances. Further, single headed arrows are associated with a value which represents the regression coefficient (unstandardized or standardized).

Considering chapter 3 and chapter 4, the model has been specified as follows:

- Observed variables: exogenous variables which are directly measured and correspond to the answers to each single item comprised in a specific construct (presented in tables 4.1 – 4.5)
- Latent variables: endogenous variables which regress on a group of exogenous variables and correspond to the theoretical constructs presented in chapter 3 to form the hypothesis (Value Congruence, Attitude toward the Advertisement, Brand Attitude, Brand Image and Brand Equity).
- Single headed arrows: represent the paths and have been drawn in conformity to the hypothesis formed in chapter 4.

The initial structural model to test is graphically represented in figure 5.1.

**FIGURE 5.1**  
**Model representation**



*Source:* STATA

A final SEM operative indication deals with sample size requirements. Sample size can be referenced to the of observations (participants) per item. As a rules of thumb, Schreiber (2008) reports 5-10 observations per item, provided that each latent variable is represented by multiple indicators. In this study, this meant that sample size had to range between 160 and 320 observations. With 211 questionnaires collected, sample size requirements were satisfied.

## 5.2 Reliability and validity of measures

Since all the scales were adopted from existing literature, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis has been carried out to test the adequacy of each multi-item scale in capturing its

respective construct. The measurement model had 5 latent variables and 32 indicators, and the output of reliability and validity assessment is provided in table 5.1. The reliability of the constructs was evaluated relying on Cronbach's Alpha coefficients: ranging from .811 to .961, coefficients proved to be well above the threshold value of

**TABLE 5.1**  
**Construct measure reliability and validity**

<b>Construct</b>	<b>ITEM</b>	<b>MEAN</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b><math>\gamma</math></b>	<b>CR</b>	<b>AVE</b>	<b><math>\alpha</math></b>
<b><i>Value Congruence (VC)</i></b>	VC1	3,611	1,005	0,917	0,938	0,790	0,937
	VC2	3,365	1,067	0,915			
	VC3	3,526	1,052	0,888			
	VC4	3,739	1,088	0,834			
<b><i>Attitude Toward The Ad (Aad)</i></b>	Aad1	2,948	1,139	0,865	0,807	0,412	0,811
	Aad2	3,379	1,037	0,859			
	Aad3	3,076	1,084	0,824			
	Aad4	3,024	1,181	0,684			
	Aad5	2,763	1,159	0,772			
	Aad6 ***	4,706	0,703	0,149			
	Aad7 ***	4,777	0,604	0,102			
	Aad8 ***	4,540	0,857	0,182			
<b><i>Brand Attitude (BA)</i></b>	BA1	3,001	0,990	0,898	0,950	0,730	0,950
	BA2	3,213	1,008	0,879			
	BA3	3,062	0,991	0,850			
	BA4	2,967	1,097	0,801			
	BA5	2,659	1,045	0,856			
	BA6	3,019	0,999	0,868			
	BA7	2,812	0,981	0,824			
<b><i>Brand Image (BI)</i></b>	BI1	4,114	1,596	0,796	0,953	0,752	0,961
	BI2	5,085	1,744	0,915			
	BI3	5,313	1,717	0,934			
	BI4	5,171	1,753	0,893			
	BI5	4,246	1,758	0,816			
	BI6	5,227	1,706	0,877			
	BI7	4,616	1,791	0,869			
	BI8	4,678	1,821	0,831			



<b>Brand Equity (BE)</b>	BE1	2,640	0,982	0,855	0,911	0,672	0,915
	BE2	2,720	1,061	0,850			
	BE3	2,735	1,062	0,824			
	BE4	2,081	0,919	0,755			
	BE5	2,702	1,074	0,810			

*Notes:* \* Reversed item; \*\* Dropped Item; CR= Composite Reliability;  $\gamma$ = factor loading; AVE= Average Variance Extracted;  $\alpha$  = Cronbach Alpha

.70 indicated by Hair et al. (2010) and Nunnally & Bernstein (1994)– confirming the reliability of the scales to measure. The internal consistency of the constructs was measured through Composite Reliability index. Values ranged from .807 to .953, above the limit .7 set by Bagozzi & Yi (1988).

Convergent validity was assessed observing standardised lambdas and Average Variance Extracted. AVE for Value Congruence, Brand Attitude, Brand Image and Brand Equity exceeded the value of .5 recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981), and factor loadings of each item were close or well exceeded the value of .7 provided by Bagozzi & Baumgartner (1994). Conversely, the construct Attitude toward the Ad (Aad) resulted problematic on items Aad6, Aad7 and Aad8, with mean values rather distant to the others and unsatisfactory standardised loadings (also with p-values > .05). As a result, items Aad6, Aad7, Aad8 have been dropped. This might be explained by the fact that - with this experimental condition - sentiments of annoyance, anger and suspicion were too radical to be elicited even by people with a negative attitude toward the advertising. Following this modification, AVE for Aad construct reached the new value of .645 (CR=.900;  $\alpha$ =0,8985). Discriminant validity was scrutinized considering method of heterotrait monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations (Henseler, et al., 2015), described by Voorhees et al. (2016) as a standard for publications in marketing research. The formula to compute the calculation is the following (figure 5.2), and data input is provided in ANNEX III containing the extended correlation matrix across all variables.

**FIGURE 5.2**  
**HTMT formula**

$$HTMT_{ij} = \frac{1}{K_i K_j} \cdot \sum_{g=1}^{K_i} \sum_{h=1}^{K_j} r_{ig,jh} \left( \frac{2}{K_i(K_i-1)} \cdot \sum_{g=1}^{K_i-1} \sum_{h=g+1}^{K_i} r_{ig,ih} \cdot \frac{2}{K_j(K_j-1)} \cdot \sum_{g=1}^{K_j-1} \sum_{h=g+1}^{K_j} r_{jg,jh} \right)^{\frac{1}{2}}$$

*Source:* (Henseler, et al., 2015)

In this formula, the HTMT ratio is derived from the average of heterotrait correlations (cross items correlations) divided by the root square of (average of construct 1 monotrait correlations x average of construct 2 monotraits correlations). Discriminant validity is achieved when HTMT<0.85 (Henseler, et al., 2015). The output of the analysis, reported on table 5.3, show each HTMT ratio satisfying this cutoff value.

**TABLE 5.3**  
**Discriminant validity: HTMT ratios**

CONSTRUCT	VC	AAD	BA	BI	BE
VC					
AAD	0.7913				
BA	0.6112	0.8124			
BI	0.3667	0.5188	0.6221		
BE	0.4834	0.6414	0.7180	0,5573	

### 5.3 Structural model

After reliability and validity considerations, the structural model fitness was tested.

Structural Equation Modelling practitioners usually rely on a set of model fit indices. Chi-squared ( $\chi^2$ ) is the fundamental measure of fit used to compute other fit statistics. However, as noted by Hox & Bechger (1999), the measure per se is not reliable as it is highly sensitive for sample size, therefore  $\chi^2/df$  (degrees of freedom) is usually considered as a better measure. RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error Approximation) (Steiger, 1990) is one of the most widely reported measures of fit, and it is an absolute

index of the difference between the observed covariance matrix per degree of freedom and the hypothesized covariance matrix proposed in the model (Chen, 2007). Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) is an index of the average of standardized residuals between the observed and the hypothesized covariance matrices, and it is a particularly valuable measure for its relative independence to sample size (Chen, 2007). The Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) measures how much of the actual input matrix is predicted by the estimated model. Finally, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) (Bentler, 1992) is an incremental fit measure comparing the improvement of the model with respect to an independent or null model, where no relationships among variables are specified.

Guidelines for model fit adopted in this study are provided in the following table (table 5.4).

**TABLE 5.4**  
**Guidelines for model fit**

	THRESHOLD VALUE	AUTHOR
$\chi^2/DF$	<3 acceptable fit <2 good fit	(Schermelleh-Engel, et al., 2003)
RMSEA	0.08<x<0.1 neither good nor bad 0.05<x<0.08 acceptable fit <0.05 good fit	(Cangur & Ercan, 2015)
SRMR	<0.1 acceptable fit <0.05 good fit	(Schermelleh-Engel, et al., 2003)
CFI	>0.95 good fit >0.90 acceptable fit	(Schermelleh-Engel, et al., 2003)
GFI	>0.80 acceptable fit	(Browne & Cudeck, 1992)

Results initially revealed a slight unsatisfactory fit of the SEM model to data ( $\chi^2/df= 2,66$ ; RMSEA= 0,089; SRMR= 0,061; CFI=0.902), foremost when the RMSEA index is considered. The investigation of modification indices indicated a significant error term covariance between some paired within construct's variables. In particular, improvements were suggested for BI2 and BI3, BI5 and BI8, and BE2 and BE3 variables, suggesting the need to add covariances among these pairings to improve the goodness

of fit of the model. Within-construct error terms correlations can be justifiable and is more accepted than across latent variable correlations, however it should be done with caution and should be motivated (Hooper, et al., 2008). In this case, the rationale to add these modifications is represented by the conceptual proximity of some substances that measure constructs, as well as question wording similarities of some items.

After modifications, the structural model fit qualified as acceptable across all indices ( $\chi^2/df= 2,28$ ; RMSEA=0,078; SRMR=0,054; CFI=0,925; GFI = 0,8742), suggesting that the model is able to explain the observed data in a satisfactory fashion.

#### **5.4 Hypothesis testing**

After the assessment of the measurement and structural model, hypotheses were tested considering the results of the regression analysis ( $\beta$  and p-values).

In an experimental condition where subjects were exposed to a sociopolitical advertising, H1 predicted that the congruence of values between those transmitted in the ad and those hold by the respondent had a positive influence on Attitude toward the sociopolitical advertisement. Results confirmed that Value Congruence has a positive and significant effect on Attitude toward the Advertisement ( $\beta=0,7849$ ;  $p<0,01$ ; CI 95%). Hence, H1 was supported.

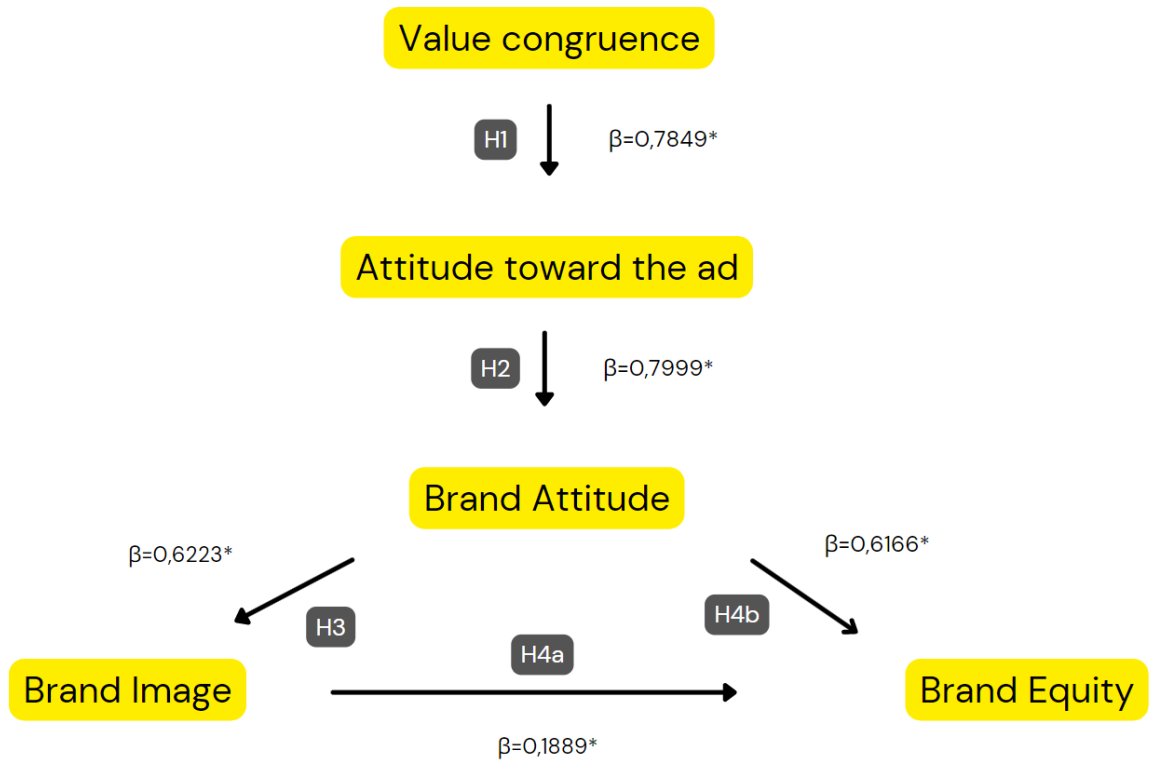
H2 tested whether Attitude toward the Advertisement was positively associated with Brand Attitude, and regression data displayed a significant positive influence ( $\beta=0,7999$ ;  $p<0,01$ ; CI 95%). Therefore, H2 resulted supported.

H3 and H4b examined the influence of Brand Attitude on, respectively, Brand Image and Brand Equity, assuming a positive effect of the first on the seconds. In both cases, hypothesis proved to be supported (H3:  $\beta=0,6223$ ;  $p<0,01$ ; H4b:  $\beta=0,6166$ ;  $p<0,01$ ; CI 95%).

Finally, H4a assumed Brand Image to be positively related with Brand Equity. Again, results showed a significant and positive effect ( $\beta=0,1889$ ;  $p<0,01$ ; CI 95%), though weaker than the relationships seen above.

Results are graphically represented in the following figure (figure 5.2), whereas table 5.5 provides also cross constructs total and indirect and indirect effect.

**FIGURE 5.2**  
**Final model representation**



*Notes: standardised estimates are shown, \* indicates  $p < 0,01$ , CI 95%*

**TABLE 5.5**  
**Indirect and total effects**

	INDIRECT	TOTAL
VC → Aad	0	0.7849 *
VC → BA	0.6279 *	0.6278 *
VC → BI	0.3737 *	0.3937 *
VC → BE	0,4611 *	0.4611 *
AAD → BA	0	0.7999 *
AAD → BI	0.5017 *	0.5017*
AAD → BE	0,5875 *	0.5875*
BA → BI	0	0.6223 *
BA → BE	0.1213 *	0.7343*
BI → BE	0	0.1889*

*Notes: standardised estimates are shown, \* indicates  $p < 0,01$ , CI 95%*

## 5.5 Additional findings

The questionnaire included also a qualitative section asking participants whether they believed that companies should engage in CSA and, additionally, which related modality they regarded as best (see ANNEX I for details).

Results put forward a general favourable disposition toward CSA, with 61.14% of respondents supporting firm's engagement in sociopolitical issues. Conversely, 22.27% of the sample oppose to this form of activism, and 16.59% claim to be uncertain. Data can also be interpreted considering the demographic profile. When it comes to gender, females appear to be more supportive with respect to males (66.67% and 55.56%). As for the age ranges, results are compatible with the sociocultural considerations highlighted in chapter 2. It follows that GenZ is the most sensitive generation, with 71.43% of favourable responses (58.97% for 25-34; 55.38% for 35-54; 58.69% for 55-64 age range), and this difference turns even more prominent when negative responses are considered (in fact, only 0.071% of GenZers are contrary to CSA, compared to 35+ people with 31.90%).

Considering the preferred manner of involvement, following Nalick et al. (2016), respondents were prompted with four different proposals: (i) modification of branding elements (also in accordance with specific events, for instance during the Pride Month); (ii) communication activities (for instance a spot with a sociopolitical message); (iii) CEO Activism; (iv) other demonstrations (such as donations or outreach events). Responses significantly weighted toward communication activities (38.46%) and other demonstrations (37.02%), followed by CEO Activism (13.46%), and modification of branding elements (7.2%).

## Chapter VI

### Conclusions

#### 6.1 General discussion

The first part of the study aimed to provide a qualitative investigation of the emerging phenomenon of Corporate Sociopolitical Activism.

Conceptually derived as a product of Sarkar and Kotler's (2018) Brand Activism and the academic contributions of the early 2010es on overlapping topics such as Corporate Social Advocacy (Dodd & Supa, 2014) or Corporate Sociopolitical Involvement (Nalick, et al., 2016), the research identified Corporate Sociopolitical Activism as a *"firm's public demonstration (statements and/or actions) of support for or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue"* (Bhagwat, et al., 2020). Following Nalick et al. (2016), sociopolitical issues have been described as salient unresolved social matters on which societal opinion is split, that in the context of western cultures coincide with problems such LGBTQ+ rights, racial justice or immigration. Chief differences between CSA and other non-market activities have been set forth. For instance, it was highlighted that CSA is perceived as an activity much riskier with respect to CSR, and the uncertainty of this form of activism stems from the partisan quality of sociopolitical issues, which have the potential to elicit polarising outcomes. Then, building on Nalick et al. (2016), three complementary explanations for firms' engagement in CSA have been provided. First of all, contextual institutional factors – the general political system, governance structure, executive exposure, technological set-up and the sociocultural fabric - are quintessential in this understanding, in the sense that they enhance or suppress firm's capability to assimilate, manage and take a stand on contested sociopolitical issues. Second, the rise of CEO Activism signifies that CSA can also stem from firms' internal drivers, that is, the executives ideological bent. For Nalick et al. (2016), this represents an agency problem as managers, motivated by ideological reasons, might disregard the strategic implications of their actions and publicly express support for a partisan issue. Finally, CSA can be explained strategically through stakeholder theory. In this interpretation, the engagement in sociopolitical issues is seen as a reactive or proactive response to latent

or perceived pressures coming from stakeholders. Importantly, the three explanations have to be considered complementary and should not be approached *per se*. To close the qualitative section, this three-folded framework of analysis has been adopted to scrutinize the recent and influential 2018 Nike's "Dream Crazy" campaign, considered as a fitting and significant tenet for CSA. In stepping up in support for racial justice, the campaign received polarised opinions, and if analysts agree that the company resulted in a better financial position after the move, brand related outcomes varied across age-profile, sociocultural considerations, and political affiliation.

The assessment of the effects of Nike's "Dream Crazy" campaign on branding outcomes paved the way for the focal part of the study, that addressed the research need to understand the implications of Corporate Sociopolitical Activism on brands. It was in fact noted that if research has already explored how brands leverage sustainability and CSR in their positioning strategies, only very few studies have examined this relationship when it comes to CSA. In particular, no studies offering a perspective in the Italian context have been found.

To do so, a literature-grounded causal model has been designed. Given the ideological partisanship and the contentious connotations of sociopolitical issues – as well as supported by existing research and Nike's case study takeaways – it was inferred that Value Congruence had to be considered as a starting point of analysis to assess the causal sequential impact of CSA on selected branding constructs, namely Attitude toward the Advertisement, Brand Attitude, Brand Image and Brand Equity. Two main rationales have guided the set-up of the experimental condition. First of all, it was noted that the phenomenon of sociopolitical activism in Italy is still in its early stages. Hence, to get the audience exposed to a CSA with ease, the study relied on an advertising stimulus. Second, it was contended that the selection advertisements by brands with low brand familiarity was the best method to isolate the effect of the sociopolitical stance on the evaluation of a brand, and Idealista and Bud Light were considered as fitting cases. Then, the causal model has been empirically tested with the statistical framework Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) on a total of 211 questionnaire responses. The empirical results confirmed the fitness of the model to data, and foremost corroborated the causal effects and the hypothesis advanced. Value



Congruence was found pivotal for the evaluation of the advertisement ( $\beta=0,7849$ ), indicating that an alignment of values was associated with a better evaluation of the sociopolitical advertisement. In an equivalent fashion, a positive attitude toward the advertisement sparked a significant effect also on Brand Attitude ( $\beta=0,7999$ ), suggesting that the evaluation of the relatively unknown sociopolitical brand stemmed directly from the evaluation of the ad just witnessed. Finally, a twofold causal path from Brand Attitude to Brand Equity was proposed. On the one hand, a positive Brand Attitude was expected to improve directly Brand Equity (intended in its customer-based perspective and referring to the consumer behavioural and intentional shift toward the brand). The hypothesis was confirmed ( $\beta=0,6166$ ), hence a positive evaluation of the sociopolitical brand resulted in a significant intention to opt for it. On the other hand, in the mediation path, Brand Attitude was supposed to first enhance Brand Image. The hypothesis found confirmation ( $\beta=0,6223$ ), in that a positive evaluation of the brand elicited strong, favourable and unique brand associations, and vice versa. Following this, it was posited that a positive Brand Image could heighten Brand Equity. The hypothesis was confirmed ( $\beta=0,1889$ ), nonetheless the relationship resulted weaker with respect to the others, denoting that the strength and favourability of brand associations do not always result in significant effects on Brand Equity.

Finally, indirect effects have come under scrutiny. Importantly, Value Congruence was found to have robust indirect effects for each construct and, in particular, the sequential causal mediation path bridging Value Congruence to Brand Equity showed a positive and significant indirect effect ( $\beta=0,4611$ ), suggesting that the alignment of values between the respondent and the sociopolitical advertising can have a spark on behavioural intentions.

## **6.2 Theoretical contributions**

The first part of the dissertation relied on existing literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of Corporate Sociopolitical Activism. As a consequence, the theoretical contribution of this study mostly lies in the quantitative section, as it addresses the research need to understand the impact of taking a sociopolitical stance on branding outcomes and provides an Italian perspective on this relationship.

Results are compatible with the academic research underpinning the theoretical casual model. First of all, a positive relationship between Value Congruence and Attitude toward the Advertising has been advanced on the basis of social psychology and marketing literature, in particular relying on Congruity Theory (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955). Data showed Value Congruence as a key antecedent to Attitude toward the Advertisement, in accordance with the studies conducted by Orth & Holancova (2004) and Zhang & Bloemer (2008). Furthermore, it empirically confirms Trayner (2017), who provided that, in a polarised society, value congruence represents a powerful way to engender consumers' positive attitudes. The causal relationship linking Attitude toward the Advertisement and Brand Attitude - suggested by del Mar García-De los Salmones & Perez (2017); MacKenzie et al. (1986) and Spears & Singh (2004) – found wide support, and data is in line with the results achieved Um (2021) in the context of *femvertising*. Additionally, data is consistent with the study by Laczniak & Carlson (1989), who demonstrated a strong positive effect of Aad on BA when respondents are less knowledgeable of the brand but highly involved with the ad. The positive causal flow bridging Brand Attitude and Brand Image was supported, confirming the results by Faircloth et al. (2001) and - following reliability and validity output - the reasonableness and correctness to conceptualize and operationalize these two constructs in a separate way. Results are also in accordance with Burton et al. (1998), del Mar García-De los Salmones & Perez (2017) and Spears & Singh (2004), who advance that Brand Attitude is an important driver for behavioural and intentional shifts (Brand Equity). Interestingly, though the effect of Brand Image on Brand Equity was significant and coherent with previous contributions (Faircloth, et al. (2001); Keller (1993); Ramesh et al. (2018); Pitta and Katsanis (1995); Lassar et al. (1995)), in the context of this study data suggests Brand Attitude as a stronger antecedent to Brand Equity.

On the whole, study findings also provide a possible integrated framework to assess why and how, in the context of CSA advertising, Value Congruence can affect Brand Equity through a sequential full mediation path.

### **6.3 Practical implications**

A critical question for managers or marketing practitioners is whether and how they should engage in CSA activities.

As noted in the first section of the dissertation, companies are emerging as full-fledged catalysts for change in a historical time when trust in traditional institutions has fallen (Edelman 2018, Edelman 2020), and ideological polarisation is ubiquitous. Among many societal ills, it was highlighted that consumers are increasingly expecting brands to take a stance and engage also in hot and emotionally charged sociopolitical issues (Bhagwat, et al., 2020; Vredenburg, et al., 2020). Study findings provide that these considerations can be extended to the Italian situation, with the majority of respondents that claim to be favourable to sociopolitical activism. In this sense, an important takeaway is that consumers are acknowledging the social, political and cultural role of companies. For managers and practitioners, this suggests that, as brands exist in a broad social and cultural context, showcasing the sociopolitical orientation and belonging of a company can potentially be essential to evolve with times and become relevant.

However, this study demonstrated that sociopolitical activism should be handled carefully. In line with the ideological and partisan quality of sociopolitical issues, value congruence was found paramount to understand the possible outcomes resulting from the exposition to a sociopolitical advertisement from a relatively unknown brand. This confirms that consumers expect brands to act in alignment with their own values (Schmidt, et al., 2021). The strategic implication for managers is that adopting a sociopolitical stance might engender polarising brand outcomes, in the sense that it has the potential to enhance or hamper the relationships with consumers (in line with Nalick et al, 2016, on the possible strategic implications of CSA). Thus, managers who are concerned about the possible impact of CSA should be cognizant of how much the stance taken by the company deviates from customers' values. Coherently, understanding deeply core target values, and championing a sociopolitical stand that matters to people represents a means for companies to create a significant connection with customers and, potentially, an opportunity for growth.

#### **6.4 Limits and future research**

The study has several limitations which provide also some possible new research directions.

First of all, the idea behind selecting two possible advertisements in the experimental condition was to enhance the generalizability of the findings - reducing the effect given by some possible underpinning contextual factors inside the same ad. The two stimuli were selected for their proximity in terms of tone of voice, sociopolitical message (LGBTQ+ rights) and low brand familiarity. Nonetheless they present some differences considering, among others, the industry in which the brand operates or product category. Other possible differences and insights might emerge, for instance, after a semiotic analysis of the ad. Hence, a more careful analysis is recommended to better cluster experimental stimuli and sharpen study findings.

Second, the experimental condition and questionnaire structure might have engendered a series of response biases. Social desirability bias drives respondents to answer in a way that makes them look favourable and socially desirable (Furnham, 1986). Even though complete anonymity has been stressed in the introductory section, this might have induced some distortions in the answers. Another problem stems from question order bias (Blankenship, 1942), as value congruence was front-of-mind for participants when they had to respond to the other questions that followed. Future, more directed research should seek to address and better counteract these possible biases.

Third, this study investigates the impact of CSA on brand-related constructs through value congruence. Nonetheless, this method can be considered sub-optimal in the sense that it is not able to tackle directly whether a sociopolitical brand performs better than a non-sociopolitical brand. Other studies could explore this difference relying, for instance, on a sociopolitical and non-sociopolitical manipulation of a fictional brand in the experimental condition, as done by Schmidt, et al. (2021) and Staudt, et al. (2014) (though the latter concerned a CSR and non-CSR manipulation).

Fourth - as stressed by Staudt, et al. (2014) or Vredenburg, et al. (2020) - perceived authenticity should be considered as a relevant predictor for CSA effectiveness. However, in light of the experimental condition and contextual factors – little or no brand familiarity, low prominence and salience of sociopolitical activism for Italian consumers – this aspect has been neglected. New possible avenues of research could complement value congruence and perceived authenticity to see the relative impact of each factor.

Finally, additional research could replicate the study considering other possible sociopolitical issues, to see the consistency of results.



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## ANNEX I Questionnaires

### Option A (Idealista)

## Attivismo sociopolitico

Ciao, sono uno studente di Management dell'Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia.  
Per la mia tesi di laurea, sto effettuando una ricerca che indaga l'impatto dell'attivismo sociopolitico sulla percezione di un brand.  
Il questionario è completamente anonimo e i dati verranno elaborati esclusivamente in modo aggregato: non è possibile risalire all'identità del rispondente, pertanto sentiti libera/o di rispondere con totale sincerità.  
Il tempo di completamento stimato è di circa 4 minuti.  
Grazie mille per la collaborazione!  
(Per informazioni sulla ricerca, contattare [elena.rocco@unive.it](mailto:elena.rocco@unive.it))

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### Idealista

Quello che segue è uno spot di Idealista.  
Ti chiediamo di prendere visione del video, e di rispondere successivamente alle domande che seguiranno



(Se hai problemi con la visualizzazione, per favore visita <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2UjghdZdg0> e torna al questionario)

## Prima parte



Descrizione (facoltativa)

Dopo aver visto lo spot, in che misura ti trovi d'accordo con le seguenti affermazioni? \*

	Per niente	Poco	Abbastanza	Molto	Moltissimo
I valori trames...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Questo spot ra...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Gli ideali promo...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Supporto piena...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Quali sensazioni hai dopo aver guardato lo spot? \*

	Per niente	Poco	Abbastanza	Molto	Moltissimo
Piacere	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Apprezzamento	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Interesse	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Divertimento	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Gratitudine	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rabbia	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Irritazione	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sospetto	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Dopo aver visto lo spot, trovo che Idealista sia per me un brand: \*

	Per niente	Poco	Abbastanza	Molto	Moltissimo
Piacevole	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Apprezzabile	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Interessante	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Accattivante	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Desiderabile	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Valido	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Affidabile	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Seconda parte



Descrizione (facoltativa)

Nel complesso, penso che Idealista sia un brand... \*

1= Per niente d'accordo      7= Pienamente d'accordo

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
AUTENTICO	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
PROGRESS...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
APERTO	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
CORAGGIO...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
SORPREN...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
AL PASSO ...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
RESPONS...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Che si DIS...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

In che misura ti trovi d'accordo con le seguenti affermazioni? \*

	Per niente	Poco	Abbastanza	Molto	Moltissimo
Trovo ragionev...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Se un altro bran...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Se un altro bran...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rispetto a un al...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Consiglierei Ide...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Terza parte: pareri finali



Prima di terminare, un paio di domande personali sull'attivismo sociopolitico dei brand.

Ritieni che i brand dovrebbero prendere posizione riguardo tematiche sociopolitiche quali diritti LGBTQ+, immigrazione, giustizia razziale o di genere?

- Sì
- No
- Non saprei

Tra quelle elencate, quale modalità ritieni più opportuna per questo genere di attivismo?

- Attività di branding (ad esempio, creare la versione arcobaleno del logo in occasione del Pride Month)
- Attività di comunicazione (ad esempio, lo spot appena visto)
- Dichiarazioni pubbliche da parte di CEO e amministratori a supporto di determinate ideologie (ad esempio,...
- Altre manifestazioni di supporto (ad esempio, donazioni ad associazioni, organizzazione di eventi di sensi...
- Altro...

## Demografica

A quale fascia d'età appartieni? \*

 ▼

In quale genere ti identifichi? \*

- Donna
- Uomo
- Non binario
- Preferisco non rispondere

Qual è il livello più alto di istruzione che hai conseguito?

- Scuola media
- Diploma superiore
- Laurea triennale
- Laurea Magistrale
- Laurea a ciclo unico
- Master/Dottorato
- Altro: \_\_\_\_\_

Indica la tua regione di residenza

 ▼

## Option B (Bud Light)

### Attivismo sociopolitico

Ciao, sono uno studente di Management dell'Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia. Per la mia tesi di laurea, sto effettuando una ricerca che indaga l'impatto dell'attivismo sociopolitico sulla percezione di un brand. Il questionario è completamente anonimo e i dati verranno elaborati esclusivamente in modo aggregato: non è possibile risalire all'identità del rispondente, pertanto sentiti libera/o di rispondere con totale sincerità. Il tempo di completamento stimato è di circa 4 minuti. Grazie mille per la collaborazione! (Per informazioni sulla ricerca, contattare [elena.rocco@unive.it](mailto:elena.rocco@unive.it))

 paniz.971@gmail.com (non condiviso) [Cambia account](#) 

### Bud Light

Quello che segue è uno spot di Bud Light. Ti chiediamo di prendere visione del video, e di rispondere successivamente alle domande che seguiranno



(Se hai problemi con la visualizzazione, per favore visita <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QG0-1Jc3Llw&t=5s> e torna al questionario)

## Prima parte



Descrizione (facoltativa)

Dopo aver visto lo spot, in che misura ti trovi d'accordo con le seguenti affermazioni? \*

	Per niente	Poco	Abbastanza	Molto	Moltissimo
I valori trasmess...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Questo spot ra...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Gli ideali promo...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Supporto piena...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Quali sensazioni hai dopo aver guardato lo spot? \*

	Per niente	Poco	Abbastanza	Molto	Moltissimo
Piacere	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Apprezzamento	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Interesse	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Divertimento	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Gratitudine	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Irritazione	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rabbia	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sospetto	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Dopo aver visto lo spot, trovo che Bud Light sia per me un brand: \*

	Per niente	Poco	Abbastanza	Molto	Moltissimo
Piacevole	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Apprezzabile	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Interessante	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Accattivante	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Desiderabile	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Valido	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Affidabile	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Sezione 3 di 6

## Seconda parte



Descrizione (facoltativa)

Nel complesso, penso che Bud Light sia un brand... \*

1= Per niente d'accordo      7= Pienamente d'accordo

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
AUTENTICO	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
PROGRESS...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
APERTO	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
CORAGGIO...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
SORPREN...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
AL PASSO ...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
RESPONS...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Che si DIS...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



In che misura ti trovi d'accordo con le seguenti affermazioni? \*

	Per niente	Poco	Abbastanza	Molto	Moltissimo
Trovo ragionev...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Se un altro bran...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Se un altro bran...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rispetto a un al...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Consiglierei Bu...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Dopo la sezione 3 Continua alla sezione successiva

Sezione 4 di 6

## Terza parte: pareri finali



Prima di terminare, un paio di domande personali sull'attivismo sociopolitico dei brand.

Ritieni che i brand dovrebbero prendere posizione riguardo tematiche sociopolitiche quali diritti LGBTQ+, immigrazione, giustizia razziale o di genere?

- Sì
- No
- Non saprei

Tra quelle elencate, quale modalità ritieni più opportuna per questo genere di attivismo?

- Attività di branding (ad esempio, creare la versione arcobaleno del logo in occasione del Pride Month)
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- Altre manifestazioni di supporto (ad esempio, donazioni ad associazioni, organizzazione di eventi di sensi...
- Altro...

Dopo la sezione 4 Continua alla sezione successiva

## Demografica

A quale fascia d'età appartieni? \*

 ▼

In quale genere ti identifichi? \*

- Donna
- Uomo
- Non binario
- Preferisco non rispondere

Qual è il livello più alto di istruzione che hai conseguito?

- Scuola media
- Diploma superiore
- Laurea triennale
- Laurea Magistrale
- Laurea a ciclo unico
- Master/Dottorato
- Altro: \_\_\_\_\_

Indica la tua regione di residenza

 ▼

**ANNEX II**  
**Sample profile in detail**

Variable	Sample size (211)	%
<b>Age profile</b>		
18-24	57	27%
25-34	39	18,5%
35-54	64	30,3%
55-64	46	21,8%
65+	5	2,3%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	90	42,7%
Female	116	54,9%
Non Binary	2	0,95%
Rather not say	3	1,4%
<b>Qualification</b>		
Secondary school	8	3,8%
High school	82	38,9%
Bachelor	45	21,3%
Master's degree	27	12,8%
One cycle Bachelor	24	11,37%
Phd/Master	22	10,4%
Other/Rather not say	3	1,4%
<b>Region of residence</b>		
Abruzzo	0	0%
Basilicata	1	0,47%
Calabria	1	0,47%
Campania	1	0,47%
Emilia Romagna	7	3,31%
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	21	9,95%
Lazio	10	4,74%
Liguria	0	0%
Lombardia	17	8,05%
Marche	3	1,42%
Molise	0	0%
Piemonte	6	2,84%
Puglia	3	1,42%

Sardegna	1	0,47%
Sicilia	2	0,95%
Toscana	5	2,36%
Trentino Alto-Adige	4	1,89%
Umbria	0	0%
Valle d'Aosta	0	0%
Veneto	122	57,8%
(Esteri)	3	1,42%

