From Brand Activism to Shared Power

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Brand activism is typically designed, controlled, and communicated by the brand, even when it addresses the experiences of communities outside the organization. Advocacy groups, employees, consumers, and affected communities may appear in campaigns or receive financial support, yet they often have limited influence over how an issue is defined, what actions are pursued, or how success is evaluated. This creates a central tension between firms and society such that brand activism may amplify important issues while continuing to concentrate decision-making power within the firm.

This track examines how brand activism can move from brand voice to shared power through co-creation and stakeholder governance. Rather than focusing only on whether a brand's position is authentic, we ask whether relevant stakeholders have a meaningful role in shaping the initiative, determining its priorities, allocating resources, and evaluating its outcomes. Brand activism becomes more meaningful when firms do not merely advocate for communities, but allow those communities to shape what the advocacy means and what the company actually does.

Co-created brand activism may take many forms. Community organizations may help define the problem and desired outcomes and advocacy partners may shape campaigns, funding, and resource-allocation decisions. Employees can contribute to public positions and related internal policy changes while external stakeholders may share responsibility for monitoring progress and evaluating impact. These arrangements represent different levels of stakeholder involvement, ranging from consultation to collaboration, shared decision-making, and stakeholder governance. They also raise important questions about who participates, what authority they hold, what resources they control, and how responsibilities are distributed.

The track will investigate when co-creation improves the legitimacy, relevance, accountability, and social impact of brand activism, as well as the tensions it may create. Collaboration can introduce competing priorities, slower decision-making, disagreement over messaging, unequal access to corporate resources, and ambiguity over who legitimately represents an affected community. Stakeholder participation may also remain symbolic when brands solicit input without having meaningful influence. We will examine whether participation changes actual decisions, whether stakeholders receive appropriate recognition and compensation, what risks they assume, and what accountability mechanisms govern the relationship.

Consumers are central to these questions. They increasingly encounter brands that take positions on social and political issues, but their responses depend on more than the message itself. Consumers evaluate whether a brand has acted authentically, whether affected communities had meaningful influence, whether the initiative produces tangible benefits, and whether the brand's commitments are sustained over time. These evaluations may shape perceptions of legitimacy, trust, identification, moral approval,

boycott or support behavior, and broader judgments about whether markets can contribute to social change. The track will also consider how co-created activism affects the well-being and agency of consumers and communities, particularly when consumers are invited to participate in a broader activist initiative.

Several illustrative cases may include a technology company publicly promoting an AI-powered future while working with local residents, environmental-justice organizations, tribal governments, and public officials to shape how data centers address water access, energy use, land, employment, and community investment. For instance, this may look likea brand developing a racial-justice initiative with civil-rights organizations and affected communities rather than relying primarily on advertising; or a company working with LGBTQ+ organizations and employees to determine whether, where, and how it should take a public stance. Other cases may examine environmental brands allowing conservation partners to influence funding and policy priorities or consumer brands collaborating with workers, disability advocates, or Indigenous communities to shape organizational practices and public advocacy. These cases raise questions about message ownership, partner selection, representation, local knowledge, and whether brands are genuinely sharing power or merely speaking on behalf of affected communities.

The track is open to relevant external stakeholders, including advocacy organizations, community leaders, and practitioners with experience in brand community partnerships. Their perspectives will be especially valuable for challenging academic assumptions and grounding discussions in the lived realities of communities affected by brand activism.We particularly encourage applications from junior scholars, including doctoral students interested in this topic and faculty within the first three years after receiving their Ph.D. Where possible, at least one track membership position will be allocated to a doctoral student.

The track's primary goal is to develop a framework for co-created brand activism that distinguishes consultation, collaboration, shared decision-making, and stakeholder governance, while identifying when each approach is appropriate. The framework will consider implications for the following: community well-being, consumer responses, organizational accountability, and the durability of activist commitments.The primary post-conference goal is to develop a conceptual manuscript for consideration in the conference-associated special issue at the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*. Additional outputs may include a practitioner-oriented framework such as *Havard Business Review* and follow-up empirical projects.