

**FROM INTERNAL ACTIVISM TO BRAND ACTIVISM:
A STUDY OF IDEOLOGICAL AND PERFORMATIVE ALIGNMENTS IN THE RETAIL SECTOR**

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Abstract

Mobilizing the concepts of brand activism and internal branding, we question how internal employee social activism enables brand activism particularly in the retail sector. Conducting qualitative interpretive research, we show that branding societal transformation is reinforced and enabled by employee's social activism through ideological and performative alignments but also challenged by the risk of misalignments.

Key words: sustainable retailing, retail branding, brand activism, internal branding, internal activism.

**DE L'ACTIVISME INTERNE À L'ACTIVISME DE MARQUE :
UNE ÉTUDE DES ALIGNEMENTS IDÉOLOGIQUES ET PERFORMATIFS DANS LE RETAILING**

Résumé

En mobilisant les concepts d'activisme de marque et de branding interne, nous interrogeons la manière dont l'activisme interne sociétal des employés favorise l'activisme de marque, notamment dans le secteur de la distribution. Cette recherche interprétative qualitative montre que la transformation sociétale de la marque est renforcée et favorisée par l'activisme sociétal des employés, à travers des alignements idéologiques et performatifs challengée néanmoins par des risques de désalignements.

Mots-clés : retailing durable, retail branding, activisme de marque, branding interne, activisme interne

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Managerial abstract

This research provides managerial tools to retailers that are implementing a sustainable transformation and wonder how to adapt their brands in this process. While exploring the link between internal activism and brand activism, this study highlights the crucial role of internal branding in the construction of sustainable brands and for the overall corporate sustainable transformation.

First, we recommend managers in the retail sector to rely on their brand to conduct a sustainable corporate transformation. Internal employee activists who advocate for societal change have an impact on the brand and its capacity to be “a force for good” (Spry et al., 2021). They translate the brand societal engagement and activism into concrete and material evidences supported by sustainable products and services. Our findings reveal the difficulty for the retail brand to undergo such a transformation. Some of our respondents argue that the retail ecosystem, which is composed of many intermediaries, prevents them from being able to be agile in making decisions leading to the reduction of the carbon impact of products and services. This implies to abandon certain suppliers and find others able to develop eco-designed products or change the process of production. Nevertheless, other respondents argue that the retail brand represents the best way to implement change and have a societal positive impact. They can rely on their retail brand to develop innovative and sustainable offers, set their own margins to be profitable, select new suppliers and develop collaborations with other stakeholders that offer sustainable solutions.

Second, we recommend to implement an internal branding process to help the retail brand endorse its status of “force for good” (Spry et al., 2021). We use the conceptual framework of internal branding that highlights the crucial role of employees in brand management and sustainable brand transformation (Garas et al., 2018; Merrilees and Miller, 2008). Employees contribute to build the brand and deliver it to consumers and other external stakeholders (de Chernatony et al., 2003). Therefore, relying on literature contributions defining a link between organizational culture and corporate branding, we focus on investigating how the brand transformation towards sustainability occurs from inside the company. The efforts and engagement of employees who advocate for societal change is crucial because their decisions and practices impact the transformation of the brand towards sustainability. Thus, we recommend companies to implement an internal branding process. It enables to study the different phases of brand construction and reveals how employees understand and contribute to deliver brand’s societal engagements even when they don’t have marketing strategic roles.

Finally, our findings highlight that employees position themselves differently according to brand activism campaigns and how they reflect their vision of the defended social causes. Some of them express their wish to work for a company that is invested in avoiding to harm the environment and society and are dissatisfied with the contradictions between external brand activism and the internal organizational status-quo. They advocate for the causes to be defended and try to convince their colleagues to participate in the transformation. Through their efforts, they can contribute to find product innovative solutions and advocate for sustainability. Their internal activism for social change has consequences for the brand as it impacts the tangible aspects of the brand (de Chernatony et al., 2003). Implementing an internal branding process can therefore be relevant as it enables to gather different employees working in different departments who are engaged in implementing a sustainable transformation. We recommend to implement an internal branding process integrating internal and external stakeholders to contribute to the sustainable transformation of the brand from upstream (developing solutions to impact products or services) to downstream (making the brand endorse the societal engagements).

FROM INTERNAL ACTIVISM TO BRAND ACTIVISM: A STUDY OF IDEOLOGICAL AND PERFORMATIVE ALIGNMENTS IN THE RETAIL SECTOR

Introduction

Retailers interact with their social environment (Balan, 2020) and in the last decades they have increasingly expressed their capacity as well as their responsibility to significantly tackle societal preoccupations (Vhatkar et al., 2024). From an historical perspective, retail has represented a positive force for society while enabling consumers' access to better quality goods (Berman and Evans, 2018). As social actors they generate employment and play a key economic role especially for the local economies. That is, retail represents the largest private-sector employer with 2,9 million employees in the UK, 4,6 million sales staff in the USA¹ and almost 10% of total employees in France². Moreover, their stores and commercial environments have become crucial places for social interactions while having a transformative value that can vehicle consumers' well-being (Balan, 2020). They also offer, through their retail places and spaces, cultural resources to customers that facilitate community interactions and enable them to pursue existential goals (Arnould, 2005; Penaloza, 1998).

Nevertheless, retailers are nowadays struggling to hold an additional societal role that prioritizes critical social issues such as environmental sustainability, inclusion or poverty. Holding this societal role induces organizational decisions and impacts the brand management (Golob and Podnar, 2019). As in many industries, retailers are increasingly facing the challenge to incorporate their corporate social and environmental responsibilities and commitments at the heart of their branding strategy and management and to reposition the brand as responsible (Kumar and Christodouloupoulou, 2014; Polonsky and Jevons, 2006; Vallaster et al., 2012). Retail brands follow the path of a majority of brands that are increasingly trying to embrace a societal role by addressing societal challenges through activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Incorporating sustainable practices and CSR initiatives positively influences the retail brand's equity (Flores-Hernández et al., 2020).

Because companies and brands are interconnected, brand management is affected by brand managers' decisions as well as organizational and corporate decisions. Scholars who explore the link between organizational culture and corporate brands argue that an organizational cultural change towards sustainability has an impact on brand performances (Balmer and Greyser, 2002). While doing so, they develop the concept of internal branding which depicts the employees' efforts and contributions to brand management (Garas et al., 2018; Merrilees and Miller, 2008). Internal stakeholders and employees play a major role to brand management from the inside. Their internal activism for social change may have consequences for the brand (de Chernatony et al., 2003).

In this present research we explore how retail brand's societal engagement and activism is held by the employees who perform a role to bring societal change. We raise the following questions: How is brand activism initiated from within the company? What is the link between internal activism and brand activism?

Literature Review: employees' role in brand activism

¹ <https://www.marketingsociety.com/blog-post/recognising-retails-role-social-change>

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<https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2736981#:~:text=L'emploi%20salarié%20du%20commerce%20de%20détail%20tiré%20par%20le%20commerce%20alimentaire,-Arnaud%20Rousset%2C%20division&text=Le%20commerce%20de%20détail%20occupe,de%20l'emploi%20du%20secteur.>

To meet consumers' increasing demands and to take a stance in societal debates, managers construct brands that convey societal values (Spry et al., 2021). They implement brand activism, which is defined as the public demonstration of a brand's commitment to social, environmental and/or political causes (Larcker et al., 2018; Sarkar and Kotler, 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020). An activist brand can use resources such as advertising to raise awareness for social issues, influence consumers' attitudes to gain support (Gilbert et al. 2021).

However, the manifestation of brand activism can go beyond advertising and it can be integrated in other material branding aspects such as product and assortment, pricing, distribution (Verlegh, 2024). Therefore, brand activism is the result of business efforts and organizational transformations where managers determine to what extent an opinion can be publicly expressed by the brand without taking commercial risks (Sibai et al., 2021). It entails risks such as boycott (Sarkar and Kotler, 2018), inauthentic commitment (Beverland and Cankurtaran, 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020) or misalignment between brand declared intentions and brand practices (Golob and Podnar, 2019; Moorman, 2020). A brand, considered as a societal actor whose meanings are co-constructed by multiple stakeholders (Holt, 2004), is *in primis* shaped and constructed at an organizational level.

Recently, Verlegh (2024) has studied the link between brand societal engagement activism and the employees' sphere. Schaefer et al. (2019) demonstrate that when a brand takes a stand and communicates it, employees evaluate it positively. Roth et al. (2022) highlight the importance of aligning the organization's stance and the employees' opinion, demonstrating that an alignment has a positive effect on the employees' well-being at work. Verlegh (2024) calls for more research to study the effect of brand activism on employees; in particular, focusing on investigating the potential misalignment between the brand's societal engagement and employees' opinion and the political misalignment between the CEO activism and employees (Podnar and Golob, 2024).

Adopting the theoretical lens of internal branding helps to understand the connection between employees and branding (Balmer and Greyser, 2002; de Chernatony et al., 2003; Hatch and Schultz, 2003). Internal branding studies the role of employees to branding because they contribute to the construction of the brand as they experience and champion it internally to deliver a branded customer experience externally (de Chernatony et al., 2003; Hatch and Schultz, 2003). Current literature contributions reveal that '*people behind the brand*' produce, enact, experience and deliver brand promises to customers and other external stakeholders (Aurand et al., 2005; Mahnert and Torres, 2007). As regards the societal transformation, employees may engage in internal activism while advocating to stimulate change (Carrington et al., 2024). Podnar and Golob (2024: 95) define this employees' activism as "a process by which individuals, groups, or institutions exert pressure on other individuals, organizations, or institutions to change policies, practices, or conditions that they perceive as problematic or unacceptable".

However, we lack knowledge about the link between internal activism and brand activism and the role and contribution of employees in the construction of activist brands. Therefore, we raise the following questions: How is brand activism initiated from within the company? What is the link between internal activism and brand activism? We investigate these research questions for retail branding as retail brands represent major economic and social actors.

Methodology

We conducted qualitative interpretive research combining in-depth interviews and secondary data. We have selected seven retail brands experiencing a societal transformation,

seeking to reach the status of activist and operating in different global industries (fashion, food, home appliances, home furnishings, stationery and vehicle equipment). The selected brands belong to retailers that have declared implementing CSR policies and have undertaken a societal transformation and circularity practices (i.e. second hand, repair or renting). Moreover, they all have ambitious carbon impact reductions of -20% or -30% within 3 to 5 years.

We conducted 31 in-depth interviews (McCracken, 1988) with managers working in different departments (strategic marketing managers, brand managers, product managers, communication managers, strategic and operational CSR managers) having different hierarchical roles within the company and who are involved in the construction of the brand. They contribute directly or indirectly to the brand's societal engagement construction through the tangible aspects of the brand (services, products, ingredients, formula, packaging...) or intangible aspects (positioning, identity, reason why). The interview guide is composed of questions that explore the corporate culture and the brand purposes and meanings, how CSR corporate strategies impact the daily work and routines, how marketing and CSR managers collaborate and diffuse the CSR culture inside the company. We have further explored how the societal transformation is implemented both at the organizational and branding levels. Secondary data favors a better understanding of the cultural context of the different brand cases (history, market positioning, strategic orientations, societal involvement...).

A multi-method approach through several cases enables data triangulation (Clarke and Braun, 2014; Flick, 2018; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Miles and Huberman, 1994). We analyze the textual data by using the theoretically oriented coding and categorization process of constant comparison (Point and Fourboul, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Our thematic data analysis was carried out using the research questions and insights from the literature to guide our analysis. Data interpretation was based on hermeneutic principles; findings and theorization emerged through triangulation between authors, leading to iterative refinement of the study's conclusions (Flick, 2018; Thompson, 1997).

Findings

Respondents position themselves differently according to brand activism campaigns and how they reflect their vision of the defended social causes. A first group composed of CSR managers and marketing practitioners represent early internal social activists. They campaign internally for the brand to hold a stronger position with the aim to initiate more significative changes and advocate for the causes to be defended while trying to convince their colleagues to actively participate in the transformation. A second group of employees is composed of reluctant employees who express disagreement with the brand socio-political position. This disagreement either reflects a form of climate skepticism or a rejection of any responsibility for environmental and social disasters which should not interfere with their job. A third group is composed of employees who perceive the CSR transformation as inevitable but do not express a clear-cut opinion.

Depending on the employee's profile we identify two forms of alignment or misalignment between employees' convictions and practices with brand activism: ideological and performative. Ideological alignment represents an agreement between employees' personal convictions and beliefs and the brand external activism. Ecological efforts, gender equality, diversity inclusion represent examples of causes they can agree with or not. Considering that brand activism vehicles "*marketplace morality*" (Grayson, 2014; Kirmani, 2015), the ideological alignment entails that employees and their brand share a socio-political opinion and together advocate for a social change. However, a misalignment may occur when employees do not adhere to the societal engagement displayed by the company as explained by Léo (CSR manager, Vehicle equipment):

“Out of 100% of the collaborators, we can count 33% who are convinced of everything that's happening and know all the elements, who are trained, who want to be trained, who want to learn, who want to organize, who want to raise awareness among others, so we'll say they're a bit like our ambassadors. Then, there are 33% who are not skeptical but more in mistrust, they seek to be convinced, they seek to understand, they are not necessarily trained, they are a bit in doubt, in incomprehension, in all these elements. And there are the remaining 33% who are totally resistant, who don't want to hear about it, who say: I don't care, it's not for me, it's none of my business, I'm in my center, I do what I have to do and that's it, I don't touch anything else”.

The activist brand is the result of organizational performative processes (Golob and Podnar, 2019). When employees manage the organizational transformation that enables the construction of an activist brand, a performative alignment occurs. It concerns the recognition that strong efforts have to be made to develop more virtuous practices, to abandon some products or services judged as polluting and harmful and to contribute in parallel to do better for social good, as revealed by Sylvie (Product development manager, Home furnishings):

“It's definitely a change of DNA, that's what we explain to the teams. It's a new way of doing the job and it has to be understood especially as some people still see "the CSR thing" as the extra thing that they have to do. Throughout all stages of product development, you have to think through this prism. Everyone has to integrate it in each category and that's a bit of a challenge. It entails a really complex diagnosis and all the different arising issues on which for the moment we're not necessarily going to communicate about. It's a complete shift, it's a bit of a matrix subject, there are battles and commitments that impact the entire offer.”

The performative misalignment represents the reluctance or difficulties that employees encounter in their daily activities to contribute to the brand activism. As per Sylvie, this contribution from the inside, at the level of the product range, induces a huge effort for the product managers to “rethink” the product at every step of its production, purchasing or distribution. At the operational level, the retail brand is anchored within the retail industry characterized by a long value chain composed of suppliers, transporters and other intermediaries. While arguing that the role of a retail brand is to endorse the retailers’ societal engagements, respondents admit that this mission is very tricky as they feel of not having a direct control of the brand sustainable transformation as they depend on their suppliers’ abilities to produce sustainable products. Difficulties arise because reaching the objectives of carbon impact reduction induces in many cases to change the supplier. This is very problematic because it means to end a long-lasting commercial relationship, it takes time and fragilizes the economical results as shared by Stéphane (Category manager, Stationery):

“Reaching the 90% target of eco-responsible products for some of my categories seems very complicated and it would put me in a difficult position, which is not very fair. Then, there are some suppliers who are not ready for this transition so we will have to delist them even though they were good partners. Hence, my choices are dictated by CSR, even if in the long term it is positive, in the short term it sometimes puts a spanner in the works. Afterwards, the message is not new, we have been knowing the CSR objectives for a while. And this message affects everyone, it will be a common objective for suppliers and distributors, in B to B and B to C. Everyone is concerned and must adapt.”

However, in other cases products managers argue that the private label represents a means to support the environmental commitment because they can select suppliers who are capable of producing sustainable items or collaborate with them to develop innovative and less polluting products:

“What we're asked to do is build durable products that are practical to use and co-constructed with the customer. So, the company has evolved a lot in terms of private label. For example, when I joined the company fifteen years ago, we often bought a carpet from a factory in China and put the logo on the packaging. It was the private label; so, these were extremely profitable products, obviously, but that didn't feed the brand, and the brand didn't feed the product. We have evolved a lot in that regard, and fortunately so. We have challenged the adaptation of our offering to meet sustainability goals, even more so for the private label because the company's desire is to say that the private label offering must be the response to the corporate promise. We can say we have the best offer in the world, we can say we are sustainable but if we don't have private label products that meet all of that, we're out of the game.” (Nicolas, Marketing manager, Vehicle equipment)

Managers rely on their retail brand to be able to have the control of suppliers, of the production process to have the required freedom to develop sustainable products. This freedom is hindered when the retailer deals with large unavoidable manufacturers' brands.

Contributions

Brand activism represents a way for a brand to express its vision of society and its position on social or political issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020); it requires employees' efforts and commitment due to the fundamental organizational changes underlying its status (Golob and Podnar, 2019; Polonsky and Jevons, 2006; Vallaster et al., 2012). Hence, brand activism is reinforced or challenged through ideological and performative alignments with employees' convictions. Alignments, paradox and socio-political disagreements are nested within the internal ecosystem. We argue that internal activism represents an area for exploration to understand how activist brands emerge and perform.

We highlight specificities of retail brand activism due to the large ecosystem of stakeholders (consumers, suppliers, consultants and partners, front office sale store and headquarters' employees, policy makers...). Disagreements may emerge among them depending on their convictions and personal agendas, some willing to maintain the status-quo while others seeking and instilling change. Scholars distinguish between progressive activism, which advocates for societal change, and regressive activism, which resists such changes (Moorman, 2020). In this research, we highlight that internal regressive activism may compromise brand activism.

We contribute to Verlegh's (2024) analysis of upstream (mis)alignments, occurring when a company launches an activist brand, by shedding light on the employees' side. We argue that employees are the ones who build the commitment towards the brand's cause from the inside. Furthermore, we identify an additional (mis)alignment between the ideological position and the performative perspective. To build the brand societal engagement to the selected cause, employees need to adhere to the ideology driven the societal cause and translate it into concrete organizational actions to attain brand social objectives.

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