Brand Activism's Effect on Political Polarization

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, our political landscape has witnessed a surge in divisiveness, reaching a 50-year high in political polarization within Congress. Notably, there has been a decline of over 130 moderates in elected offices compared to the 1970s. This escalating trend is reflected in the growing perception of individuals from opposing parties as close-minded, dishonest, unintelligent, and immoral (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Simultaneously, brands have increasingly taken public stances on various social issues such as abortion, gun control, LGBTQ+ rights, Black Lives Matter, and conflicts between Israel and Palestine. For example, in 2018, Delta Airlines cut ties with the National Rifle Association (NRA) after a school shooting left 17 people dead (Dantes, 2018), and in 2017, Nike publicly supported players in the National Football League (NFL) for kneeling during the national anthem at their games as a protest against racial injustice (Wiener-Bronner, 2017). This trend has not been without consequences, as opposition to these corporate stances has led to negative reactions, often resulting in boycotts (Jost et al., 2017). While it is commonly associated with conservatives expressing discontent over brands embracing liberal positions, the phenomenon is bidirectional. In a recent example, progressive liberals have initiated boycotts against brands like Starbucks and McDonald's for their support of Israel during the war against Hamas (Zahn, 2023).

In this age of increased brand activism, it is imperative that we understand its impacts on society. The question at the forefront of this study is whether companies, through their active participation in social and political discourse, are shaping a more cohesive national conversation that fosters unity or if, conversely, they are contributing to the escalation of polarization by amplifying extremes in individual beliefs. This study seeks to address a notable gap in current research, as the majority of existing literature predominantly explores the effects of brand activism on the firms themselves, neglecting the broader societal implications. We examine individuals' political identity strength in the presence and absence of brand activism from the opposing side, exploring how their actions reverberate through the social fabric, influencing public attitudes, behaviors, and the overall tenor of national conversations.

This study contributes to the literature in several key ways. First, we show brand activism as a catalyst for heightened political extremism and polarization. Second, we uncover the mechanism through which this occurs. This is critical, given the profound societal and policy implications associated with increased ideological divides. Our study explores whether identity threat is the underlying mechanism for the increased polarization due to activism. In fact, we find that identity threat does not explain the increased polarization, and consumers reaffirm

their beliefs when they hear supporting activism. This has several implications for policy. By shedding light on this connection, the researchers are leading future studies to find reasoning for this psychological phenomenon.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand Activism

Brand activism is defined as "public speech or actions focused on partisan issues made by or on behalf of a company using its corporate or individual brand name" (Moorman, 2020). The United States saw a shift in the national conversation following the death of George Floyd, who died at the hands of police brutality in 2020. On X, formerly known as Twitter, there were 3.4 million original posts containing "#BlackLivesMatter," accounting for 13% of all posts on the international platform and 15.5% of all engagement in this period (Wirtschafter, 2021). Consumers began to expect companies to speak out in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. Hundreds of companies released statements, including Reebok who shared a message addressed to the black community, saying "We are not asking you to buy our shoes. We are asking you to walk in someone else's." Even international brands, such as Cotton On, a fashion retailer based in Australia, took a stand. Taking it a step further, YouTube donated $1 million to show "solidarity against racism and violence" (Mirzaei, 2020).

While more uncommon, some companies do engage in conservative activism. In 2012, Former Chick-fil-A CEO Dan Cathy vocalized his opposition to same-sex marriage, citing his Christian values (Wong, 2013). In 2021, it was reported that the National Christian Charitable Foundation (NCF) was funding against the Equality Act, which would make discrimination against LGBTQ+ people illegal in most settings. Some of their biggest donors include Cathy and Hobby Lobby, a large U.S. crafts store (Bixby, 2021).

Brand activism often attracts criticism and backlash. One of the most memorable examples recently is when Bud Light partnered with transgender influencer Dylan Mulvaney. This sparked outrage across social media from conservative consumers, including singer Kid Rock who posted a video of him using a gun to shoot up cases of Bud Light. The brand saw sales fall the week following Mulvaney's post (Wheless, 2023). After Amazon's public support for BLM, CEO Jeff Bezos shared a screenshot of one of the many emails he received from angry customers. It was filled with profanity and horrific racial slurs, vowing to never purchase from Amazon again (Day, 2020). This can also be observed on the liberal side. Since October 2023, progressive liberals have been boycotting a number of brands, including Starbucks and McDonald's, who have expressed support for Israel during their war against Hamas following the October 7th attack (Zahn, 2023).

Brand activism is inherently controversial because of its high probability of damaging relationships with stakeholders who disagree with the stance, with investors often reacting

negatively (Bhagwat et al., 2020). A recent report found that both Democrats and Republicans are likely to approve "companies that speak out on issues that are important to their employees and customers." In the same survey, when asked if they approve of "companies that speak out on social and political issues," both groups were less likely to approve the company, with Republicans who watch Fox News having a significantly lower approval than Republicans who do not. LGBTQ+ equality and a woman's right to choose were rated the least appropriate issues for a company to take a stance on by Republicans (Meck & Canter, 2023). In America, 45.5% of liberals and 29.2% of conservatives reported boycotting a product for political reasons in a twelve-month period (Jost et al., 2017).

We have seen how brand activism can affect firms and consumer attitudes towards the firms, both positively and negatively (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Garg & Saluja, 2022; Wheless, 2023). There has yet to be literature exploring how it affects consumers' political beliefs and identities, and whether it contributes to political polarization.

Political Polarization

Political polarization is a way to describe the population's divide between groups in politics (Weber et al., 2021). Political polarization has become a noticeable problem in recent years. Pew Research Center found that in Congress, Republicans and Democrats are the most polarized they have been in 50 years. Both parties have moved farther away from the center, but Republicans have become much more conservative than Democrats have become liberal. In March 2022, there were only about two dozen moderates in Congress, a stark contrast from the early 70's when there were over 160 moderates (DeSilver, 2022).

The escalating trend of ideological polarization is not only on the rise; concurrently, there is a surge in heightened animosity towards individuals affiliated with opposing political parties. This phenomenon can be described as pernicious polarization which is defined as "polarization that divides societies into "Us vs. Them" camps based on a single dimension of difference that overshadows all others" (McCoy & Somer, 2018). Research has shown that political animosity increases when the strength of political identities increases (Brandt & Vallabha, 2023), with a primary political goal to "defeat and even humiliate the opposition" (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018). More people in each party are viewing their opponents as close-minded, dishonest, unintelligent, and immoral. In 2022, the majority of Republicans and Democrats view the people in the opposite party as immoral (Pew Research Center, 2022). These phenomena increase with the consumption of partisan media by affirming their beliefs and criticizing those with the opposite (Garrett et al., 2014). Additionally, studies have

discovered an increase in discrimination based on political party, surpassing instances of discrimination based on race (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

Polarization can be beneficial in society and democratization to a certain degree. It can mobilize the public and create activists, making political protests more effective as a way to produce institutional reform. It also encourages the formation of political parties, a necessary component of democratic societies (LeBas, 2018). In response to the rising amounts of activists, corporations find themselves more compelled to participate in brand activism (Weber et al., 2021). However, severe polarization can lead to democratic erosion. Citizens can perceive the other group as preventing their own political efforts, making them feel powerless and less willing to cooperate. As more people begin to feel less satisfied with their current democracy, they may intentionally or unintentionally embrace authoritarian action in an effort to protect their own democracy (Somer & McCoy, 2018). As political polarization intensifies, the heightened interactions between individuals from opposing sides can lead to a psychological phenomenon known as identity threat.

Political Identity Threat

Henri Tajfel, the social psychologist who pioneered the social identity theory, defines social identity as: "The individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of the group membership" (Tajfel, 1972, p. 31, as cited in Tajfel, 1982). A group membership is based on categories such as sex, nationality, religion, political affiliation, etc. This differs from personal identity, which features more specific attributes of a person (1982). A part of one's social identity is their political identity, a socially constructed and flexible label (Baba, 2013) to describe a person's sense of who they are politically (Sinnott & Rabin, 2021). This identity comes from their political ideology, defined as a "set of beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved" (Erikson & Tedin, 2003).

When a person's confidence about their identity is subtly threatened, it can lead to one's self-view and behavior being more consistent. They use self-bolstering behavior to restore confidence in their self-view. In a study on consumer behavior, it was found that consumers with a strong sense of self-view that was temporarily doubted choose products that better align with their self-view (Gao et al., 2009). Research indicates that reactions to threats vary based on whether an identity is interdependent, characterized by its communal nature intertwined with others, or independent, distinguished by its autonomous, unique, and bounded characteristics

(Markus & Kitayama, 1991). A threat to an interdependent identity was found to result in an associative response motivated by the desire to belong, as well as the activation of additional identities that were not under threat. In contrast, a threat to an independent identity resulted in a dissociative response motivated by the desire to maintain positive self-worth (White et al., 2012).

Social identities have shown to play a role in consumer behavior. People gravitate towards brands and products that they associate with their identities (Escalas & Bettman, 2005, Forehand et al., 2002). People also infer others' identities based on the purchases they make (Berger & Heath, 2007), and this happens more with social-identifying products, in contrast to utilitarian (Shavitt & Nelson, 2000). Even when buying gifts for friends, consumers experience identity threat and display this self-bolstering behavior (Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011). In addition, people with higher developed political identities are more likely to behave in ways that reaffirm their political identity, when compared to avoiding information that could possibly cause an identity crisis (Sinnott & Rabin, 2021). Someone who possesses a stronger social identity will react more defensively to the threat and will evaluate it more negatively than someone who identifies on a weaker level (de Hoog, 2013).

Researchers studied gamers' reactions to a scientific study about the harmfulness of video game violence and how it affected their social identity as gamers. Their three studies found that the participants' social identity did feel threatened by these scientific findings. In response to their identity threat, the participants reaffirmed their identity by posting negative comments online, discrediting the research. The stronger they aligned themselves with the gamer identity, the more likely they were to engage in this self-affirming behavior. However, the researchers believe there are other factors than just identity threat that motivate them to publicly discredit the research. They predict that they could also be motivated by the fear of this research impacting policymaking, such as restricting or banning the sales of certain video games (Nauroth et al., 2015).

Drawing parallels to Nauroth and colleagues' study on gamers, we hypothesize a similar outcome in our exploration of individuals' responses to brand activism. Given the inherent connection between political beliefs and policy change, we anticipate that, akin to the potential fear observed in gamers, the concern of brand activism influencing policy decisions could serve as a motivating factor for engaging in self-affirming behavior. This suggests a broader pattern where identity threat, combined with apprehensions about policy impacts, may play a dual role in driving individuals towards actions aimed at safeguarding their perceived identities.

After reviewing the relevant literature, we posit that brand activism not only triggers identity threat, but also contributes to an escalation in political polarization. This hypothesis rests on the premise that the pronounced societal engagement of corporations in political and social issues contributes significantly to the deepening ideological divides, fostering an environment where individuals perceive a threat to their core identities. Hence, we hypothesize:

H$_1$: Brand activism will make consumers more polarized in their political identities. Liberal activism will push conservatives further right. Conservative activism will push liberals further left.

METHODOLOGY

We conducted an experiment to explore if brand activism increases political extremism. The survey was taken by TCU students through the Behavioral Lab in the Neeley School of Business, as well as through a convenience sample. There were 396 participants who finished the survey. It was only administered to individuals who live in the United States and are over the age of 18. Table 1 shows the political identifications among all participants, with 102 liberals and 302 conservatives. Table 2 shows the age demographics, and Table 3 shows the gender demographics of all participants.

Table 1. Political identifications.

	Frequency	Percent
Extremely liberal	8	1.7%
Moderately liberal	38	8.3%
Somewhat liberal	56	12.2%
Somewhat conservative	110	24%
Moderately conservative	155	33.8%
Extremely conservative	37	8.1%
Missing	54	11.8%

Table 3. Gender demographics.

	Frequency	Percent
Male	141	30.8%
Female	252	55%
Other	1	.2%
Prefer not to say	2	.4%
Missing	62	13.5%

Table 2. Age demographics.

	Frequency	Percent
18 – 25 years old	374	81.8%
26 – 35 years old	3	0.7%
36 – 45 years old	5	1.1%
46 – 55 years old	7	1.5%
56 – 65 years old	3	0.7%
65+ years old	5	1.1%
Missing	60	13.1%

First, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: liberal, conservative, or control. Participants who were assigned to the liberal activism were given a scenario of a hypothetical company vowing to stop selling guns in all of their stores in support of

stricter gun control laws. Those who were assigned to the conservative condition were given a scenario of the same company vowing to start selling guns in their stores in support of the Second Amendment. The participants assigned to the control condition were given a scenario of the same company saying they are adding pharmacies to all of their stores. Then, they were asked to rate how favorably they view the store, how favorably they view the store's decision, and how likely they would be to shop at that store.

Secondly, the participants were asked to rate on a scale how conservative or liberal they identify as and how important of an issue gun rights/control is to them. Based on whether they identified as liberal or conservative, the researchers used an adapted version of Leach and colleague's social identification scale to establish and measure in-group identification (Leach et al., 2008). Following the change made by Nauroth and colleagues, we added the item "When somebody criticizes liberals/conservatives, it feels like a personal insult" to better measure how the individual sees this identity as a crucial part of who they are.

RESULTS

Table 4. Conservative comparisons.

Based on estimated marginal means

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Least Significant Difference (equivalent to no adjustments).

Dependent Variable			Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.b	95% Confidence Interval for Differenceb	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
I feel a bond with conservatives.	Liberal	Conservative	-0.219	0.124	**0.080**	-0.463	0.026
		Control	-0.012	0.128	0.924	-0.264	0.240
	Conservative	Liberal	0.219	0.124	**0.080**	-0.026	0.463
		Control	0.206	0.126	0.103	-0.042	0.455
	Control	Liberal	0.012	0.128	0.924	-0.240	0.264
		Conservative	-0.206	0.126	0.103	-0.455	0.042

			Mean Diff	Std. Error	Sig.b	Lower	Upper
I feel solidarity with conservatives.	Liberal	Conservative	-.306*	0.1366	**0.025**	-0.573	-0.039
		Control	-0.184	0.1440	0.189	-0.459	0.091
	Conservative	Liberal	.306*	0.1366	**0.025**	0.039	0.573
		Control	0.122	0.1388	0.377	-0.149	0.393
	Control	Liberal	0.184	0.1440	0.189	-0.091	0.459
		Conservative	-0.122	0.1388	0.377	-0.393	0.149

Table 4 continued. Conservative comparisons.

Based on estimated marginal means

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Least Significant Difference (equivalent to no adjustments).

			Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.b	95% Confidence Interval for Differenceb	
Dependent Variable						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
	Liberal	Conservative	-.374*	0.1445	**0.011**	-0.660	-0.087

I feel committed to conservatives.		Control	-0.010	0.1500	0.947	-0.304	0.284
	Conservative	Liberal	.374*	0.1445	**0.011**	0.087	0.660
		Control	.364*	0.1477	**0.014**	0.073	0.654
	Control	Liberal	0.010	0.1500	0.947	-0.284	0.304
		Conservative	-.364*	0.1477	**0.014**	-0.654	-0.073
I am glad to be conservative.	Liberal	Conservative	-.286*	0.1334	**0.034**	-0.550	-0.022
		Control	0.008	0.1388	0.953	-0.264	0.280
	Conservative	Liberal	.286*	0.1334	**0.034**	0.022	0.550
		Control	.294*	0.1366	**0.032**	0.026	0.562
	Control	Liberal	-0.008	0.1388	0.953	-0.280	0.264

			Mean Diff.	Std. Error	Sig.	Lower	Upper
		Conservative	-.294*	0.136	**0.032**	-0.562	-0.026
I think that conservatives have a lot to be proud of.	Liberal	Conservative	-0.127	0.128	0.324	-0.380	0.126
		Control	-0.059	0.132	0.655	-0.319	0.201
	Conservative	Liberal	0.127	0.128	0.324	-0.126	0.380
		Control	0.068	0.130	0.603	-0.189	0.324
	Control	Liberal	0.059	0.132	0.655	-0.201	0.319
		Conservative	-0.068	0.130	0.603	-0.324	0.189
It is pleasant to be conservative.	Liberal	Conservative	-0.074	0.131	0.571	-0.333	0.184
		Control	-0.019	0.135	0.887	-0.285	0.247
	Conservative	Liberal	0.074	0.131	0.571	-0.184	0.333

	(I)	(J)	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
		Control	0.055	0.133	0.679	-0.207	0.317
	Control	Liberal	0.019	0.135	0.887	-0.247	0.285
		Conservative	-0.055	0.133	0.679	-0.317	0.207
Being conservative gives me a good feeling.	Liberal	Conservative	-0.217	0.119	**0.071**	-0.452	0.018
		Control	-0.082	0.123	0.503	-0.324	0.160
	Conservative	Liberal	0.217	0.119	**0.071**	-0.018	0.452
		Control	0.134	0.121	0.268	-0.104	0.373
	Control	Liberal	0.082	0.123	0.503	-0.160	0.324
		Conservative	-0.134	0.121	0.268	-0.373	0.104

Table 4 continued. Conservative comparisons.

Based on estimated marginal means

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Least Significant Difference (equivalent to no adjustments).

Dependent Variable			Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.[b]	95% Confidence Interval for Difference[b]	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
I often think about the fact that I am conservative.	Liberal	Conservative	0.038	0.169	0.821	-0.295	0.371
		Control	0.012	0.174	0.944	-0.330	0.355
	Conservative	Liberal	-0.038	0.169	0.821	-0.371	0.295
		Control	-0.026	0.172	0.879	-0.364	0.312
	Control	Liberal	-0.012	0.174	0.944	-0.355	0.330
		Conservative	0.026	0.172	0.879	-0.312	0.364
The fact that I am conservative is an important part of my identity.	Liberal	Conservative	0.037	0.175	0.832	-0.306	0.381
		Control	0.069	0.180	0.701	-0.285	0.423

	Conservative	Liberal	-0.037	0.175	0.832	-0.381	0.306
		Control	0.032	0.177	0.857	-0.317	0.380
	Control	Liberal	-0.069	0.180	0.701	-0.423	0.285
		Conservative	-0.032	0.177	0.857	-0.380	0.317
Being conservative is an important part of how I see myself.	Liberal	Conservative	-0.070	0.180	0.697	-0.424	0.284
		Control	-0.146	0.185	0.432	-0.510	0.219
	Conservative	Liberal	0.070	0.180	0.697	-0.284	0.424
		Control	-0.076	0.183	0.679	-0.435	0.284
	Control	Liberal	0.146	0.185	0.432	-0.219	0.510
		Conservative	0.076	0.183	0.679	-0.284	0.435

When somebody criticizes conservatives, it feels like a personal insult.	Liberal	Conservative	-0.108	0.178	0.543	-0.460	0.243
		Control	0.029	0.184	0.874	-0.332	0.391
	Conservative	Liberal	0.108	0.178	0.543	-0.243	0.460
		Control	0.138	0.181	0.447	-0.218	0.494
	Control	Liberal	-0.029	0.184	0.874	-0.391	0.332
		Conservative	-0.138	0.181	0.447	-0.494	0.218
I have a lot in common with the average conservative person.	Liberal	Conservative	-0.133	0.1444	0.356	-0.417	0.151
		Control	-0.101	0.1499	0.496	-0.394	0.191
	Conservative	Liberal	0.133	0.1444	0.356	-0.151	0.417
		Control	0.032	0.1466	0.826	-0.256	0.320

			Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.b	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
	Control	Liberal	0.101	0.149	0.496	-0.191	0.394
		Conservative	-0.032	0.146	0.826	-0.320	0.256

Table 4 continued. Conservative comparisons.

Based on estimated marginal means

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Least Significant Difference (equivalent to no adjustments).

Dependent Variable			Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.b	95% Confidence Interval for Differenceb	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
I am similar to the average conservative person.	Liberal	Conservative	-0.151	0.146	0.302	-0.438	0.136
		Control	-0.094	0.150	0.531	-0.389	0.201
	Conservative	Liberal	0.151	0.146	0.302	-0.136	0.438
		Control	0.057	0.148	0.702	-0.234	0.348
	Control	Liberal	0.094	0.150	0.531	-0.201	0.389

Statement	Group	Comparison	Mean Diff	Std. Error	Sig.	Lower	Upper
		Conservative	-0.057	0.148	0.702	-0.348	0.234
Conservative people have a lot in common with each other.	Liberal	Conservative	-0.080	0.129	0.538	-0.334	0.175
		Control	-0.050	0.133	0.709	-0.311	0.212
	Conservative	Liberal	0.080	0.129	0.538	-0.175	0.334
		Control	0.030	0.131	0.820	-0.228	0.287
	Control	Liberal	0.050	0.133	0.709	-0.212	0.311
		Conservative	-0.030	0.131	0.820	-0.287	0.228
Conservative people are very similar to each other.	Liberal	Conservative	0.029	0.145	0.843	-0.257	0.314
		Control	-0.006	0.149	0.966	-0.300	0.287
	Conservative	Liberal	-0.029	0.145	0.843	-0.314	0.257

			Mean Difference	Std Error	Sig	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
		Control	-0.035	0.1447	0.811	-0.324	0.254
	Control	Liberal	0.006	0.1449	0.966	-0.287	0.300
		Conservative	0.035	0.1447	0.811	-0.254	0.324

Table 5. Liberal comparisons.

Based on estimated marginal means

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Least Significant Difference (equivalent to no adjustments).

Dependent Variable			Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.[b]	95% Confidence Interval for Difference[b]	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
	Liberal	Conservative	0.337	0.2411	0.165	-0.141	0.815
		Control	0.075	0.2311	0.745	-0.383	0.534
I feel a bond with liberals.	Conservative	Liberal	-0.337	0.2411	0.165	-0.815	0.141
		Control	-0.262	0.2227	0.252	-0.712	0.189

			Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	Lower	Upper
	Control	Liberal	-0.075	0.231	0.745	-0.534	0.383
		Conservative	0.262	0.2227	0.252	-0.189	0.712
I feel solidarity with liberals.	Liberal	Conservative	.503*	0.2444	**0.042**	0.019	0.986
		Control	0.144	0.2334	0.538	-0.320	0.609
	Conservative	Liberal	-.503*	0.2444	**0.042**	-0.986	-0.019
		Control	-0.358	0.2330	0.122	-0.814	0.098
	Control	Liberal	-0.144	0.2334	0.538	-0.609	0.320
		Conservative	0.358	0.2330	0.122	-0.098	0.814
I feel committed to liberals.	Liberal	Conservative	0.377	0.2251	0.136	-0.121	0.875
		Control	0.183	0.2241	0.450	-0.295	0.661

	Conservative	Liberal	-0.377	0.251	0.136	-0.875	0.121
		Control	-0.194	0.236	0.413	-0.664	0.275
	Control	Liberal	-0.183	0.241	0.450	-0.661	0.295
		Conservative	0.194	0.236	0.413	-0.275	0.664
I am glad to be liberal.	Liberal	Conservative	0.425	0.253	**0.097**	-0.078	0.928
		Control	0.073	0.243	0.766	-0.410	0.556
	Conservative	Liberal	-0.425	0.253	**0.097**	-0.928	0.078
		Control	-0.325	0.239	0.144	-0.827	0.122
	Control	Liberal	-0.073	0.243	0.766	-0.556	0.410
		Conservative	0.325	0.239	0.144	-0.122	0.827

Dependent Variable			Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.b	95% Confidence Interval for Differenceb	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
I think that liberals have a lot to be proud of.	Liberal	Conservative	0.225	0.256	0.382	-0.284	0.733
		Control	-0.058	0.246	0.815	-0.546	0.430
	Conservative	Liberal	-0.225	0.256	0.382	-0.733	0.284
		Control	-0.282	0.241	0.245	-0.762	0.197
	Control	Liberal	0.058	0.246	0.815	-0.430	0.546
		Conservative	0.282	0.241	0.245	-0.197	0.762
It is pleasant to be liberal.	Liberal	Conservative	0.211	0.252	0.403	-0.288	0.711

		Control	0.168	0.2422	0.489	-0.312	0.648
	Conservative	Liberal	-0.211	0.2552	0.403	-0.711	0.288
		Control	-0.044	0.2337	0.855	-0.515	0.427
	Control	Liberal	-0.168	0.2422	0.489	-0.648	0.312
		Conservative	0.044	0.2337	0.855	-0.427	0.515
Being liberal gives me a good feeling.	Liberal	Conservative	0.123	0.2422	0.611	-0.357	0.604
		Control	0.008	0.2332	0.971	-0.452	0.469
	Conservative	Liberal	-0.123	0.2422	0.611	-0.604	0.357
		Control	-0.115	0.2228	0.615	-0.568	0.337
	Control	Liberal	-0.008	0.2332	0.971	-0.469	0.452

			Mean Diff.	Std. Error	Sig.	Lower	Upper
		Conservative	0.115	0.228	0.615	-0.337	0.568
I often think about the fact that I am liberal.	Liberal	Conservative	0.256	0.282	0.367	-0.304	0.816
		Control	0.344	0.271	0.207	-0.194	0.882
	Conservative	Liberal	-0.256	0.282	0.367	-0.816	0.304
		Control	0.088	0.266	0.741	-0.440	0.616
	Control	Liberal	-0.344	0.271	0.207	-0.882	0.194
		Conservative	-0.088	0.266	0.741	-0.616	0.440

Table 5 continued. Liberal comparisons.

Based on estimated marginal means

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Least Significant Difference (equivalent to no adjustments).

Dependent Variable		Sig.b	95% Confidence Interval for Differenceb

			Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
The fact that I am liberal is an important part of my identity.	Liberal	Conservative	0.245	0.330	0.460	-0.410	0.900
		Control	0.199	0.317	0.532	-0.430	0.827
	Conservative	Liberal	-0.245	0.330	0.460	-0.900	0.410
		Control	-0.046	0.311	0.882	-0.664	0.571
	Control	Liberal	-0.199	0.317	0.532	-0.827	0.430
		Conservative	0.046	0.311	0.882	-0.571	0.664
Being liberal is an important part of how I see myself.	Liberal	Conservative	0.380	0.328	0.249	-0.270	1.031
		Control	0.140	0.315	0.658	-0.485	0.764
	Conservative	Liberal	-0.380	0.328	0.249	-1.031	0.270

		Control	-0.241	0.309	0.438	-0.854	0.373
	Control	Liberal	-0.140	0.315	0.658	-0.764	0.485
		Conservative	0.241	0.309	0.438	-0.373	0.854
When somebody criticizes liberals, it feels like a personal insult.	Liberal	Conservative	-0.016	0.300	0.959	-0.612	0.581
		Control	0.407	0.288	0.161	-0.165	0.980
	Conservative	Liberal	0.016	0.300	0.959	-0.581	0.612
		Control	0.423	0.283	0.139	-0.139	0.985
	Control	Liberal	-0.407	0.288	0.161	-0.980	0.165
		Conservative	-0.423	0.283	0.139	-0.985	0.139
	Liberal	Conservative	0.241	0.280	0.390	-0.314	0.796

I have a lot in common with the average liberal person.		Control	0.322	0.268	0.233	-0.210	0.855
	Conservative	Liberal	-0.241	0.2800	0.390	-0.796	0.314
		Control	0.081	0.2663	0.759	-0.442	0.604
	Control	Liberal	-0.322	0.2668	0.233	-0.855	0.210
		Conservative	-0.081	0.2663	0.759	-0.604	0.442

Table 5 continued. Liberal comparisons.

Based on estimated marginal means

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Least Significant Difference (equivalent to no adjustments).

Dependent Variable			Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.[b]	95% Confidence Interval for Difference[b]	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
	Liberal	Conservative	0.271	0.2866	0.344	-0.296	0.839

I am similar to the average liberal person.		Control	0.423	0.274	0.126	-0.121	0.968
	Conservative	Liberal	-0.271	0.286	0.344	-0.839	0.296
		Control	0.152	0.269	0.574	-0.383	0.686
	Control	Liberal	-0.423	0.274	0.126	-0.968	0.121
		Conservative	-0.152	0.269	0.574	-0.686	0.383
Liberal people have a lot in common with each other.	Liberal	Conservative	0.103	0.246	0.675	-0.384	0.591
		Control	0.239	0.236	0.314	-0.230	0.707
	Conservative	Liberal	-0.103	0.246	0.675	-0.591	0.384
		Control	0.135	0.232	0.561	-0.325	0.595
	Control	Liberal	-0.239	0.236	0.314	-0.707	0.230

		Conservative	-0.135	0.232	0.561	-0.595	0.325
Liberal people are very similar to each other.	Liberal	Conservative	0.189	0.254	0.459	-0.316	0.694
		Control	0.390	0.244	0.113	-0.094	0.875
	Conservative	Liberal	-0.189	0.254	0.459	-0.694	0.316
		Control	0.201	0.240	0.403	-0.274	0.677
	Control	Liberal	-0.390	0.244	0.113	-0.875	0.094
		Conservative	-0.201	0.240	0.403	-0.677	0.274

Figure 1 displays conservatives' mean responses to question 3 ("I feel committed to conservatives") on the social identification scale. Conservatives who were assigned to the conservative condition identified more strongly in their conservative identity than those in the control and liberal condition, with a 0.014 statistical significance between the conservative and liberal condition (see Table 4). Figure 2 displays liberals' mean responses to question 3 ("I feel committed to liberals") on the social identification scale. There is no statistical significance, but liberals assigned to the liberal condition identified more strongly in their liberal identity than those in the conservative and control condition.
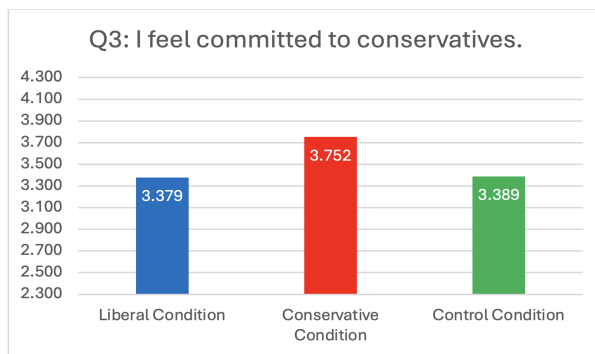
Figure 1. Conservative means across three conditions.
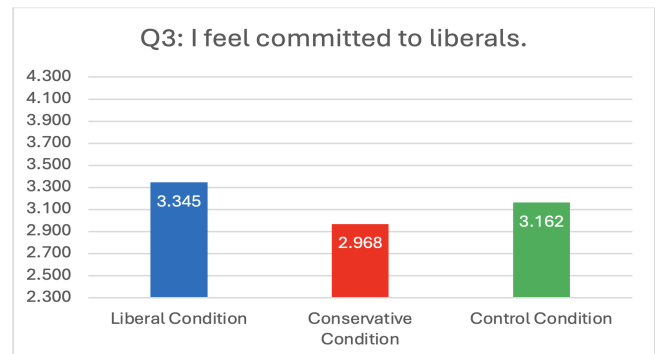
Figure 2. Liberal means across three conditions.

Figure 3 displays conservatives' mean responses to question 3 ("I am glad to be conservative") on the social identification scale. Conservatives who were assigned to the conservative condition identified more strongly in their conservative identity than those in the control and liberal condition, with a 0.032 statistical significance between the conservative and liberal condition (see Table 1). Figure 4 displays liberals' mean responses to question 3 ("I am glad to be liberal") on the social identification scale. There is no statistical significance, but liberals assigned to the liberal condition identified more strongly in their liberal identity than those in the conservative and control condition.
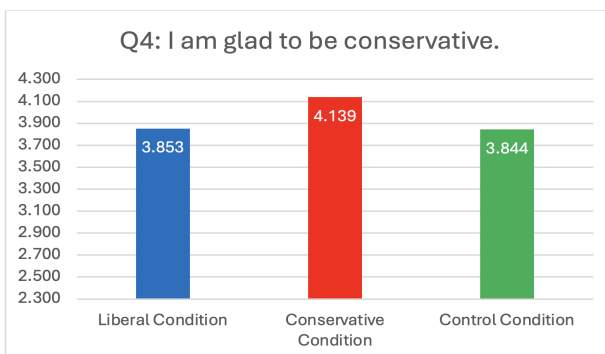
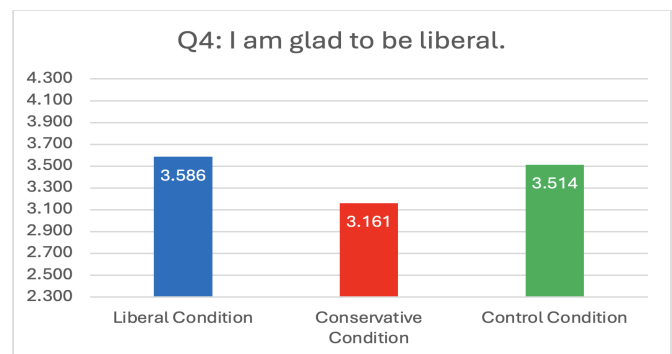Figure 3. Conservative means across three conditions.

Figure 4. Liberal means across three conditions.

There was a significant effect on conservatives' political identities in the presence of conservative activism, contrary to what was hypothesized. There was a similar effect for liberals, although not significant.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

As the phenomenon of brand activism gains momentum among companies, its implications for the political landscape become increasingly significant. This trend involves businesses advocating for or against political, social, or environmental issues, thereby extending their influence beyond traditional corporate activities. Understanding how this activism impacts individuals and society as a whole is crucial, especially given the context of our findings, which suggest a notable effect on personal and collective identities.

In our study, we observed that brand activism did not pose an identity threat to participants. Rather, when the company's brand activism aligned with the personal beliefs of the respondents, it reinforced and strengthened their existing identities. This dynamic suggests that brand activism can act as an echo chamber, intensifying existing beliefs and potentially contributing to ideological entrenchment. This effect can contribute to a more polarized public where individuals seek out and support brands that echo their political or social views, further segregating the marketplace into ideologically homogeneous segments.

Societal Implications

Political polarization in the United States has increasingly become a significant issue, with societal divides deepening over political ideologies and beliefs. As polarization escalates, the potential for constructive dialogue and bipartisan cooperation diminishes, leading to a more fragmented society. In this context, the role of businesses, particularly through their practices of brand activism, becomes particularly noteworthy.

Brand activism involves companies taking stands on social, environmental, and political issues. While such activism can bolster a company's reputation among consumers who share similar values, it can also alienate those with differing views. It can also lead to improved stock returns for shareholders if executed favorably (Bhagwat et al., 2020). This suggests that taking a stand on contentious issues doesn't just align with moral or ethical imperatives, but can also serve strategic business interests. However, there is a complex dual role that firms play in relation to political polarization. Firms can benefit from polarization by creating distinct consumer groups with strong brand loyalties, allowing companies to target their marketing more effectively and to build passionate brand communities. This might enhance customer retention and advocacy for the brand among consumers who feel represented. Alternatively, by taking sides on divisive issues, companies can deepen societal divisions by aligning with specific political or ideological groups, potentially worsening tensions.

While companies might engage in activism as part of their corporate social responsibility initiatives or strategic positioning, their actions can inadvertently deepen societal divides. Consequently, businesses face the challenge of navigating their role as social actors who can either mitigate or contribute to polarization. As they weigh these choices, companies must consider not only the potential business benefits but also the broader societal impacts of their actions. This delicate balance involves assessing short-term gains against long-term societal consequences, a decision-making process that is increasingly important in today's politically charged environment.

The potential impact of firms' brand activism on political polarization could carry significant implications for policymaking, particularly regarding how businesses engage with political discourse. If ongoing or future research demonstrates that brand activism significantly heightens political polarization among consumers, this could prompt lawmakers to consider regulatory measures. Moreover, such a development in policy could provoke a broader debate about the role of corporate entities in democratic societies. It raises questions about the balance between a company's right to express its values and the broader impacts of such expressions on public discourse and unity. Thus, any legislative action would need to carefully weigh the benefits of free speech and corporate influence against the risks of increased societal polarization.

Limitations and Further Research

Our study encountered several limitations that may have impacted the findings. Firstly, the sample demographics were not fully representative of the U.S. population, with a disproportionate number of respondents falling within the 18-25 age range, potentially skewing the results due to how developed their political identities may be. Additionally, there was an imbalance in gender representation, with more female participants than male. Moreover, the sample contained a higher proportion of conservatives compared to liberals, which could have influenced the statistical significance of conservative respondents' results.

Our study may contribute to several new areas of research. First, our study found that brand activism that aligns with one's own beliefs strengthens their identity and that the effect is stronger among conservatives. Future studies could investigate the reasoning for this phenomenon to be heightened for conservatives. Since our study did have significantly more conservatives respond, it is imperative to know if that is what contributed to their increased effect. Since the majority of brand activism is liberal, this might not be something our society should be worried about if liberals don't experience this effect.

Furthermore, it would be beneficial for subsequent studies to utilize real companies instead of hypothetical ones to better reflect real-world scenarios. Participants' preconceived notions about companies could significantly influence their reactions to strategic decisions like brand activism. Moreover, exploring factors such as perceived company power as potential moderators could provide additional insights into the dynamics at play.

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