

Investigating Brand Activism toward Brand Purchase Intention among Chinese Consumers: A Mediator of Brand Image

Yuchen Guan, Yong See Chen

SEGi University, Malaysia

Abstract

Brand activism (BA) becomes important in marketing and advertising to attract consumers' purchase intentions (PI). This article aims to test the impact of BA on PI, via a mediator of brand image (BI) among Chinese consumers. Through the online survey, 122 Chinese consumers were researched, and with data analysis in SPSS & SmartPLS4.0, it was found that BA has a significant and negative impact on BI and no significant impact on PI. Then, BI has a full mediation impact between brand activism and purchase intention. This article provides insight of brand activism to Chinese consumers' purchase intention.

Keywords

Brand Activism (BA); Brand Image (BI); Purchase Intention (PI).

1. Introduction

In the market, brand image becomes an irreplaceable element to make consumers satisfied and increase their purchasing intentions [1]. Brand activism can impact the consumers' perceptions of brands or products [2, 3]. However, there is a problem with brand activism (increasingly speaking up on sociopolitical issues, and this may hurt a brand in marketing and consumers' purchase intention [4]. In particular, when there is a brand taking a stand on a socio-political issue, consumers will have different reactions and attitudes to this brand and the products. As in the case of H&M, consumers had different attitudes toward this brand, and H&M had 445 outlets in 2021, reduced to 360 in 2022 in Mainland China, due to negative influence from previous activity [5]. In this way, brand activism can hurt a brand in the market.

In the past research on brand activism, there were only a few researches examining the impacts of consumers' brand activism perceptions [6, 7]. Therefore, this article aims to test the BA & BI toward PI, and the mediation of brand image (BI) to the relationship between brand activism (BA) and purchase intention (PI).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R)

It is a psychological model used to explain and understand human behavior and reactions [8]. It represents Stimulus (S), Organism (O), and Response (R) which refer to the impulse that contains statement (S), an individual (O), and the effects or reactions (R). In this article, the brand activism is the stimulus, and the purchase intention is the response among consumers.

2.2. Variables

Purchase Intention (PI).

The definition of purchase intention is the degree of the perceptual conviction of consumers to buy goods and services, and this can reflect consumers' biased behavior toward the brand when consumers are satisfied with products and services [9]. In the purchase intention study, brand image can be a mediator between the predictors and purchase intention [10]. In the fast fashion

industry, purchase intention is widely studied with different brands, like H&M, and the consumers' perceptions are important to get a high purchase intention [11]. In this article, the purchase intention of H&M will be investigated with the independent variable brand activism and a mediator brand image.

Brand Activism (BA).

BA was defined as an act to take a stand on divisive social issues or divisive political issues publicly by the brand [12]. BA was used in marketing and advertising communication when the brand planned to take a stand on cultural, social, gender or environmental issues in the marketing and advertising communication to society [2]. Then, brand activism can impact consumers' attitudes, purchase intentions and behaviors in the market [13]. Brand activism is studied when the brand takes a stand on social, environmental, political, and cultural issues, and brand activism can help to gain consumers' attention and impact consumers to purchase in practice [14].

Brand Image (BI).

The definition of BI is a subjective mental picture of a brand that can be shared by the consumers [15]. Brand image is a perception of consumers' side [16]. BI can be a multi-dimensional perception in terms of value, quality, attitude, and brand associations [17]. Between brand image and purchase intention, when there is a strong and positive brand image, consumers will have high trust in this brand and this brand image will impact the consumer purchase decisions in the market [18]. Brand image can impact customer satisfaction and give a driver for consumers to have purchase intention to this brand [16].

2.3. Research Framework

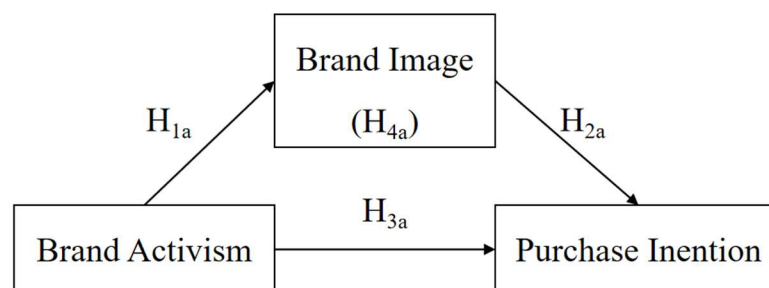


Figure 1. Research Framework

This model shows BA, BI, and PI. On consumers' purchase intention behavior, the (S-O-R) can be used to understand consumer behaviors.

H1a Brand activism has a significant impact on brand image.

H2a Brand image has a significant impact on purchase intention.

H3a Brand activism has a significant impact on purchase intention.

H4a Brand image has a mediation effect between brand activism and purchase intention.

3. Methodology

This article is conducted in a quantitative research method, and the samples are the consumers in China with a convenience sampling technique. Then, the online survey has been used to collect the data, after this survey is designed by adapting items statements from past research, such as 11 items on BA adapted from Hermann [14], 4 items on BI adapted from Mabkhot et al. [19], and 4 items on PI adapted from Wang & Li [20]. The data analysis is done in SPSS and SmartPLS4.0. The brand is about the H&M in Mainland China.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Demographic Profile

Table 1. Demographic Profile

(N= 122)		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	60	49.2
	Female	62	50.8
Past Purchase experiences	Yes	87	71.3
	No	35	28.7
Future Purchase in Next three months	Yes	15	12.3
	No	107	87.7

Among the respondents who are consumers in China, Table 1 indicates the gender, past and future experiences. For instance, there are more females studied, most (71.3%) respondents had past purchase experiences on the brand H&M, but most (87.7%) respondents will have no future purchase intention in the following three months.

4.2. Levels of Variables

Table 2. Level of Brand Activism, Brand Image, and Purchase Intention

(N=122)	Levels	Frequency	Percent
Brand Activism	Low	5	4.1
	Medium	42	34.4
	High	75	61.5
Brand Image	Low	72	59.0
	Medium	42	34.4
	High	8	6.6
Purchase Intention	Low	82	67.1
	Medium	32	26.3
	High	8	6.6

Based on the table of levels of each variable, brand activism is rated at a high level, with 4.1% of respondents believing it at a low level, 34.4% of respondents believing it at a medium level, and 61.5% of respondents believing it at a high level. Similarly, brand image is rated at a low level and purchase intention is rated at a low level among most respondents, with 59% and 67.1% respectively. Hence, among Chinese consumers, their perceptions of brand activism, brand image, and brand purchase intention are at a high level, low level, and low levels respectively for H&M brand in China.

4.3. Measure Model in Smart-PLS

In the data analysis on each item loading, the item of brand activism “BA5: I am passionate about a cultural issue” with outer loading of 0.383, lower than 0.5, so this item cannot be used in the model testing [21]. Table 3 indicates good construct reliability and convergent validity, according to the values of loading, Cronbach’s alpha (over 0.7), composite reliability (over 0.7) and AVE (over 0.5)[21].

Table 3. Reliability and Convergent Validity

	Loading	α	CR (ρ -A)	CR (ρ -c)	AVE
BA		0.951	0.959	0.958	0.694
BA1	0.749				
BA2	0.825				
BA3	0.854				
BA4	0.780				
BA5	0.383*				
BA6	0.849				
BA7	0.812				
BA8	0.926				
BA9	0.777				
BA10	0.885				
BA11	0.856				
BI		0.916	0.928	0.941	0.800
BI1	0.923				
BI2	0.891				
BI3	0.828				
BI4	0.933				
PI		0.966	0.985	0.975	0.908
PI1	0.925				
PI2	0.967				
PI3	0.976				
PI4	0.943				
*BA5 is removed, due to low loading					

Table 4 indicates good discriminant validity with HTMT less than 0.85 [21].

Table 4. HTMT

	Brand Activism	Brand Image	Purchase Intention
Brand Activism			
Brand Image	0.775		
Purchase Intention	0.196	0.506	

4.4. Structure Model

In the structural model, VIF is less than 3.3, so there is no multi-collinearity issue [22], f square indicates a small, medium, and large effect size (0.02, 0.15, & 0.35 respectively) [23].

Table 5. Hypothesis Testing

	Relationship	Beta	STDEV	t	p	VIF	f ²	LL	UL	Result
H _{1a}	BA→BI	-0.738	0.105	7.025	0.000	1.000	1.199	-0.844	-0.485	Yes
H _{2a}	BI→PI	0.765	0.181	4.235	0.000	2.199	0.384	0.462	1.170	Yes
H _{3a}	BA→PI	0.366	0.223	1.643	0.100	2.199	0.088	-0.100	0.794	No
H _{4a}	BA→BI→PI	-0.565	0.183	3.090	0.002	-	-	-0.989	-0.275	Yes

On the hypothesis testing, BA activism has a significant and negative direct effect on BI ($\beta = -0.738$, $p = 0.000$), BI has a significant and positive direct effect on PI ($\beta = 0.765$, $p = 0.000$), and BA has no direct effect on PI ($p = 0.100$, > 0.05). In mediation, BI has a significant mediation on

the relationship between BA and PI, and this mediation is as a full mediation (indirect mediation only) [21].

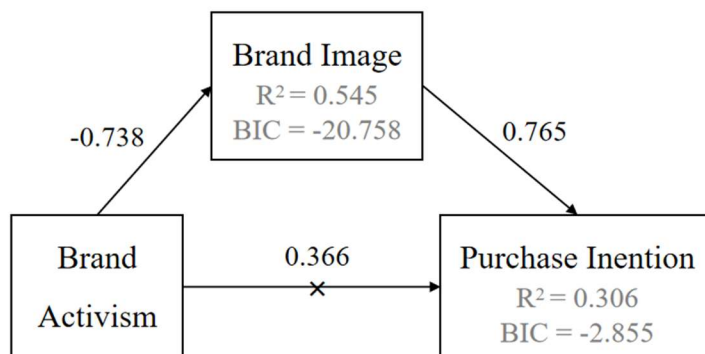


Figure 2. Results of BA to PI with a mediator role of BI

To sum up, the brand activism of H&M can damage their brand image among consumers in Chinese market, and brand image can still impact Chinese consumers’ purchasing intention positively. Brand activism has no direct impact on purchase intention, but brand image has a full mediation between brand activism and purchase intention to H&M in this research.

Table 6. PLS Predict

Indicators	Q ² predict	PLS-SEM_RMSE	LM_RMSE
BI1	0.447	1.332	1.591
BI2	0.303	1.585	2.130
BI3	0.352	1.527	1.873
BI4	0.477	1.225	1.670
PI1	0.084	1.708	1.893
PI2	0.001	1.891	2.333
PI3	0.025	1.879	2.134
PI4	0.025	1.816	2.215

Q²predict > 0 for all indicators, and PLS_RMSE < LM_RMSE
Hence, there is a high predictive power in this model [21, 24].

Table 6 indicates a high predictive power in this model built in this research (As shown in Figure 1), and the low BIC value also indicates a good model fit in this research [21].

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

To start with the levels of these variables, most consumers believe that brand activism is at a high level, brand image is at a low level, and purchase intention is at a low level in China. This can indicate that there is a high level of consumers’ perceptions of brand activism, but a low brand image and low purchase intention among consumers in China. In other words, most consumers do not refuse the brand activism of a brand in the market, but most consumers believe a low level of brand image and a low level of purchase intention to H&M in the market. In this research, brand activism damaged the brand image when they took a stand on social issues, and this is why the consumers have lower purchase intention for this brand [25].

In conclusion, brand activism is important for a brand in marketing and advertising communication. In the market, brand activism can impact consumers' attitudes and intentions toward a brand. When a brand behaves in negative brand activism, it will damage this brand image and make consumers have lower purchase intention for this brand. Hence, it is strongly recommended that brand activism can be taken with full respect to consumers' politics, society, culture and environment in the market. Besides, it is also recommended that brand activism can be studied with different dimensions, such as political, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions, or studied in other countries.

References

- [1] Shi, J., & Jiang, Z. Chinese cultural element in brand logo and purchase intention. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, Vol. 41(2023) No. 2, 171-185. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MIP-04-2022-0175>.
- [2] Shetty, A. S., Venkataramaiah, N. B., & Anand, K. Brand activism and millennials: an empirical investigation into the perception of millennials towards brand activism. *Problems and perspectives in Management*, Vol. 17 (2019) No. 4, 163-175. [http://dx.doi.org/10.21511/ppm.17\(4\).2019.14](http://dx.doi.org/10.21511/ppm.17(4).2019.14).
- [3] Tressoldi, C., Espartel, L.B. and Rohden, S.F. Authentic brand positioning or woke washing? LGBTQI+consumer perceptions of brand activism. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*. (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-05-2022-0126>.
- [4] Zhou, X., Lou, C., & Huang, X. Transcendent Brand Activism Advertising: Explicating the Roles of Color and Message Framing in Advertising Effectiveness. *Journal of Advertising*, (2023) 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2023.2217866>.
- [5] Li R.Y. H&M Shuts Down, cannot go back to the era. (2023). https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_23395762.
- [6] Nguyen, D.T., Le, D.H.A., Truong, L.G., Truong, N.G. and Vu, V.V. The effect of Generation Z's perceptions of brand activism on brand loyalty: evidence from Vietnam. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*. Vol. 35 (2023) No. 6, 1494-1512. <https://doi.org/10.1108/APJML-02-2022-0165>.
- [7] Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A., & Kemper, J. A. Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing? *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, Vol. 39 (2020) No. 4, 444-460. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743915620947359>.
- [8] Gao, L., & Bai, X. Online consumer behaviour and its relationship to website atmospheric induced flow: Insights into online travel agencies in China. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, Vol. 21 (2014) No. 4, 653-665. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2014.01.001>.
- [9] Rajaobelina, L., & Bergeron, J. Antecedents and consequences of buyer-seller relationship quality in the financial services industry. *International Journal of Bank Marketing*. Vol. 27 (2009) No. 5. pp 359-380. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02652320910979889>.
- [10] Al-Dmour, H., Aloqaily, A., Al-Qaimari, R., & Al-Hassan, M. The effect of the electronic word of mouth on purchase intention via the brand image as a mediating factor: an empirical study. *International Journal of Networking and Virtual Organisations*, Vol. 24 (2021) No. 2, 182-199. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJNVO.2021.114732>.
- [11] Neumann, H. L., Martinez, L. M., & Martinez, L. F. Sustainability efforts in the fast fashion industry: consumer perception, trust and purchase intention. *Sustainability Accounting, Management and Policy Journal*. Vol. 12 (2020) No. 3. 571-590. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SAMPJ-11-2019-0405>.
- [12] Kotler, P., & Sarkar, C. Finally, brand activism. *The Marketing Journal*, 9. (2017). <https://www.marketingjournal.org/finally-brandactivism-philip-kotler-and-christian-sa>.
- [13] Kam, C. D., & Deichert, M. Boycotting, buycotting, and the psychology of political consumerism. *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 82 (2020) No. 1, 72-88. <https://doi.org/10.1086/705922>.

- [14] Hermann, A. Ensuring Brand Activism in Integrated Marketing Communications Campaigns Resonates with Millennial Consumers. Honors Theses. (2020). https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_thesis/1571.
- [15] Zhang, Y. The impact of brand image on consumer behavior: A literature review. *Open journal of business and management*, Vol. 3 (2015) No. 01, 58–62. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/ojbm.2015.31006>.
- [16] Dash, G., Kiefer, K., & Paul, J. Marketing-to-Millennials: Marketing 4.0, customer satisfaction and purchase intention. *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 122 (2021). 608-620. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.10.016>.
- [17] Paul, J. Masstige model and measure for brand management. *European Management Journal*, Vol. 37 (2019) No. 3, 299-312. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2018.07.003>.
- [18] Kumar, A., Paul, J., & Unnithan, A. B. 'Masstige' marketing: A review, synthesis and research agenda. *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 113 (2020), 384-398. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.09.030>.
- [19] Mabkhot, H. A., Shaari, H., & Salleh, S. M. The influence of brand image and brand personality on brand loyalty, mediating by brand trust: An empirical study. *Jurnal Pengurusan (UKM Journal of Management)*, Vol. 50 (2017). 71-82. https://www.ukm.my/jurnalpengurusan/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/jp_50-7.pdf.
- [20] Wang, W. T., & Li, H. M. Factors influencing mobile services adoption: a brand-equity perspective. *Internet Research*, Vol. 22 (2012) No. 2, 142-179. <https://doi.org/10.1108/10662241211214548>.
- [21] Hair Jr, J., Hair Jr, J. F., Hult, G. T. M., Ringle, C. M., & Sarstedt, M. A primer on partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). 2nd edition. Sage publications. (2022).
- [22] Kock, F., Berbekova, A., & Assaf, A. G. Understanding and managing the threat of common method bias: Detection, prevention and control. *Tourism Management*, Vol. 86 (2021), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2021.104330>.
- [23] Cohen, J. A power primer. *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 112 (1992). 155–159. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.112.1.155>.
- [24] Shmueli, G., Sarstedt, M., Hair, J. F., Cheah, J. H., Ting, H., Vaithilingam, S., & Ringle, C. M. Predictive Model Assessment in PLS-SEM: Guidelines for Using PLSpredict. *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 53 (2019) No. 11, 2322-2347. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-02-2019-0189>.
- [25] Mukherjee, S., & Althuizen, N. Brand activism: Does courting controversy help or hurt a brand?. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, Vol. 37 (2020) No. 4, 772-788. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2020.02.008>.

Appendix: Measurement

Brand Activism (BA)

BA1: I am passionate about a social issue.

BA2: I believe brands should publicly take a stance on a social issue.

BA3: I am passionate about a political issue.

BA4: I believe brands should publicly take a stance on a political issue.

BA5 I am passionate about a cultural issue.

BA6: I believe brands should publicly take a stance on a cultural issue.

BA7: It is important to me that a brand I purchase products or services from has values I agree with.

BA8: When a brand supports an issue I support, I am likely to think favourably of the brand.

BA9: When a brand supports an issue I do not support, I am likely to think unfavourably of the brand.

BA10: I consider the issues a brand publicly supports when I make a buying decision.

BA11: I am loyal to companies or brands that take a stand on an issue.

Brand Image (BI)

BI1: I think that this brand is friendly.

BI2: I think that this brand is useful.

BI3: I think that this brand is popular.

BI4: I think that this brand is gentle.

Purchase Intention (PI)

PI1: I plan to buy this brand's products right away

PI2: I am willing to purchase this brand product again.

PI3: I will recommend this brand's products to some who seek my advice.

PI4: I will say positive things about this brand's products.