

ACTIVISM AS A MARKETING STRATEGY: IMPACTS AND CHALLENGES FOR FASHION BRANDS IN LGBTQ+ CONTEXT

ANA SOFIA MARCELO

POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE OF CASTELO BRANCO / CIPEC /
TECHN & ART, PORTUGAL, ANA.MARCELO@IPCB.PT

ANA MAFALDA MATIAS

POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE OF VISEU / CI&DEI, PORTUGAL,
ANAMAFALDA@ESEV.IPV.PT

Abstract

In recent years, fashion has played a central role in social activism, especially in defending the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. Fashion brands adopt inclusion and diversity strategies, reflecting a social commitment that resonates with consumers. This paper investigates fashion brands' LGBTQ+ initiatives, exploring the underlying motivations and differentiating between genuine activism and opportunistic pinkwashing practices. The research reveals that activism can strengthen reputation and consumer loyalty, providing significant benefits when genuine. However, brands that embrace LGBTQ+ causes superficially risk losing credibility.

The paper also discusses corporate social responsibility (CSR) in fashion, highlighting the importance of consistent internal policies and sustainable practices to ensure the authenticity of campaigns. In addition, it explores the challenges brands face in conservative markets, where supporting LGBTQ+ causes can generate boycotts, and presents recommendations for effective and ethical strategies.

The study is based on a literature review and analysis of fashion campaigns. It presents a critical view of the impact of activism and suggests areas for future research. It concludes that the integration of values of inclusion and social justice is essential for brands to stand out in a positive and lasting way.

Keywords: Activism, LGBTQ+, Fashion, Brand, Social Marketing

Introduction

In recent years, the relationship between fashion and social responsibility has intensified, with several brands taking a stand on social issues, such as supporting the LGBTQ+ community. This historically marginalized community has found a platform for visibility and expression in fashion, and collaborations between brands and the LGBTQ+ community range from inclusive advertising campaigns to direct support for social causes.

Fashion has been fundamental in the construction of identity and individual expression, often linked to the fight for rights: from the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s to the emergence of LGBTQ+ designers, the sector has become a space for celebrating queer identities. However, while some brands demonstrate genuine support, others have been accused of "pinkwashing" — superficial support for LGBTQ+ causes for purely commercial purposes without a real commitment to social change.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the fashion sector encompasses environmental issues, inclusion, and diversity. Brands that partner with LGBTQ+ causes demonstrate a commitment to social justice, a value increasingly appreciated by young consumers, who tend to reject brands that engage in pinkwashing (Boyd et al., 2020; Cavusoglu & Dakhli, 2016). This brand activism goes beyond advertising campaigns, involving internal changes such as inclusive hiring policies, the development of gender-neutral products, and supporting LGBTQ+ organizations through donations and partnerships.

However, the commodification of LGBTQ+ struggles can weaken the impact of activism, turning legitimate causes into fads. The authenticity of these initiatives is often questioned, and support for these causes can even lead to boycotts in conservative markets, requiring brands to balance their

social commitment with the realities of a global marketplace (Naeem & Ozuem, 2021; Brennan & Gudelunas, 2017).

This article aims to explore the LGBTQ+ activism strategies adopted by fashion brands and investigate the underlying motivations. The methodology is based on a literature review and analysis of fashion campaigns, assessing the representation, authenticity, and involvement of the LGBTQ+ community. It also recommends avoiding pinkwashing and promoting ethical and effective inclusion (Garnelo-Gomez, 2022).

1. Activism and social marketing in the fashion context

The concept of activism is particularly complex, given that it can have different definitions depending on the context and its various dimensions of analysis: social, legal, economic, political, and environmental.

Currently, consumers are demanding that brands take a stand on various situations, "...Consequently, there is a call for the corporate world to take a stand on significant societal issues. Yet, brand activism can be precarious ground" (Schembri, 2022:1). Therefore, although fashion brand activism can serve as a tool for corporate social responsibility, its success depends on the authenticity and consistency not only of the content they publish in a variety of media, with particular emphasis on social media but also of the actions they develop.

Brands adopting an activist position implies efforts to be actual agents of change, positioning activism as an instrument in strategic management aimed at consumers (Miguel & Miranda, 2023) and society in general. This form of activism often incorporates elements such as communicating the brand's identity, defending values such as inclusion, fighting discrimination, promoting citizenship, human rights, and

gender equality, reflecting a more profound commitment by brands beyond promoting notoriety.

Fashion brand activism has gained prominence in recent years, with brands and designers developing actions in defense of a wide range of causes:

- Social activism: movements such as Black Lives Matter and Me Too have influenced contemporary fashion, with brands associating themselves with causes and social movements to support these causes.
- Political activism: fashion has always been a form of political expression. From Coco Chanel's collections, which challenged gender identity norms, to Vivienne Westwood's creations, with their political messages.
- Environmental activism: The fashion industry is one of the most polluting industries and is responsible for a high percentage of global CO2 emissions. Movements such as Extinction Rebellion have exerted pressure to reduce fashion's environmental impact.

2. Benefits and challenges of activism as a communication strategy

Activism has emerged as a relevant communication strategy for brands, especially in the fashion industry, where aligning with social causes can influence public perception. This section will analyze the benefits and challenges of this approach, focusing on the impact on brand reputation and image, consumer loyalty and engagement, the risks related to perceived authenticity, the phenomenon of pinkwashing, and the coherence of corporate practices.

2.1. Impact on brand reputation and image

When done well, activism can significantly improve a brand's reputation. By taking a stand on social issues, a company demonstrates a commitment to values that resonate with consumers, who associate these brands with social

responsibility and integrity (Vredenburg et al., 2020). In the fashion industry, brands that support the LGBTQ+ community are seen as promoters of diversity and inclusion, characteristics that are increasingly valued by consumers (Alexander, 2009). This strategy can also help to create a unique identity that sets the brand apart in the marketplace.

However, the effectiveness of this approach depends on authenticity and consistency. Brands that fail to align their values with practice can be seen as exploitative, negatively impacting their reputation (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021). Therefore, activism initiatives must be communicated clearly and consistently to maximize positive impact.

2.2. Consumer loyalty and engagement

Brand activism also strengthens the emotional bond with consumers, who tend to be more loyal to brands that share their values (Holt & Cameron, 2012). In the fashion industry, campaigns promoting inclusion and diversity increase the engagement of consumers who feel represented, encouraging the sharing of content on social media and word-of-mouth recommendations.

In addition, creating communities around the supported causes, such as awareness-raising events or partnerships with NGOs, deepens the relationship with consumers. Involvement in social causes generates more active and loyal support for the brand, resulting in more excellent repeat purchases and loyalty.

2.3. Sustainability and coherence in corporate practices

Sustainability and coherence are key to successful activism. Sustainability refers to maintaining a commitment to a cause over time, while coherence implies that all aspects of the company reflect the values promoted. For activism to be effective and authentic, corporate practices must be aligned

with campaigns, such as inclusive internal policies and concrete actions to support the cause (Eilert & Cherup, 2020).

A lack of coherence, such as a brand that promotes LGBTQ+ causes but maintains discriminatory practices, can generate criticism and questions about the authenticity of its activism. Integrating activism values into all areas of the company strengthens the image and promotes a positive and lasting impact on society (Ciszek & Lim, 2021).

2.4. Risks of perception and authenticity: the practice of pinkwashing

Pinkwashing is one of the biggest challenges for brands that adopt activism. The term refers to the superficial use of support for LGBTQ+ causes as a marketing strategy without a real commitment to the cause (Miller, 2021). This practice can result in a negative perception, with consumers feeling that the brand exploits the cause for commercial purposes.

The risks of pinkwashing include loss of credibility and erosion of consumer trust. In an era where transparency and responsibility are valued, consumers quickly detect inconsistencies in activism campaigns, which can lead to boycotts (Gois & Ferraz, 2021). Therefore, brands must take a genuine approach, clearly and transparently communicating their honest efforts to support the LGBTQ+ community and integrating these values into their daily practices.

3. Fashion brands and the LGBTQ+ community

Some fashion brands have made a clear commitment to social activism, defending the rights of the LGBTQ+ community through their collections and communication campaigns, which deserve particular attention.

LEVI'S

The Levi's brand, in defense of equality and inclusion, once again joins the month dedicated to LGBTQ+ pride with the launch of the Pride Collection 2024. The colors of the new collection are inspired by the "Rainbow Rodeos" culture of the queer community, which originated in Nevada in the 1970s.

In defense of its commitment to the LGBTQ+ cause, LEVI'S states: "*In support of this collection, Levi's makes an annual \$100,000 USD donation to Outright International, a global organization working to advance human rights for LGBTQIA+ people all over the world*" (www.levi.pt).



Fig. 1 Levi's Pride 2024 Collection (Levi's website - www.levi.pt)



Fig. 2 CONVERSE Proud to be 2024 Campaign (Converse website - www.converse.com)

CONVERSE

"The Converse Pride 2024 collection is dedicated to the resilience of queer trailblazers standing in the power of being themselves unapologetically. We celebrate our LGBTQIA+ community, past and present, for creating the future, and we invite the world to follow where queer culture leads – in any space and every place." (www.converse.com).

DIESEL

"Since the '90s, Diesel's advertisement campaigns have set a unique tone of voice, serving as an antidote to the status quo, normalizing taboos, flipping the script on stories of social injustices, minorities, absurd in society." (www.tomoffinland.org).

DIESEL takes a stance towards the PRIDE cause. It defines itself as a platform to publicize real testimonies, aware of the brand's social responsibility, fostering a close relationship with the values defended by its strategic audiences, and also aiming to achieve broader, in a brand vision that seeks to make a difference in the world we live in. In this sense, the DIESEL brand has recently launched several capsule collections to celebrate the PRIDE movement. In 2022, curated by

the Tom of Finland Foundation and the Community, he organized an art exhibition that was shown in Italy (Venice) and France (Paris) called "All Together." Tom of Finland is a recognized Finnish artist, openly homosexual, and known for his homoerotic work.

To give even more visibility to this legacy, the brand's designer, Glenn Martens, created a unique PRIDE capsule collection in 2022, with works by some artists in the exhibition curated by the Tom of Finland Foundation.



Fig. 3 Diesel Pride capsule collection 2024 (Revista FY! - <https://fuckingyoung.es>)

4. Activism and Portuguese fashion brands

Portuguese fashion brands have developed a timid path towards incorporating social and environmental values (...) in the construction of brand identity. Portuguese fashion brands' assumption of social responsibility is visible in some communication actions following the global trend of competing brands. This path takes place through small steps, as it is necessary to carefully measure this position's impact among its strategic audiences, which can constitute an advantage in a market as competitive as fashion.

In Portugal, LGBTQ+ activism has achieved visibility and importance, and several Portuguese fashion brands have been involved in various actions to promote inclusion and support this community in our country. The defense of the values of the LGBTQ+ community can be observed through advertising campaigns, partnerships, and other actions, which count on the collaboration of brands and aim not only at symbolic support but also at making changes in society toward the defense and recognition of Human Rights.

NUNO GAMA

Nuno Gama, fashion designer Nuno Gama, has expressed his support for this community in multiple ways over his 30 years of professional activity. He creates garments characterized by androgyny and gender deconstruction, promoting fashion without a defined gender, challenging traditional fashion conventions, and consequently actively contributing to the defense of the causes of the LGBTQ+ community.

In his participation in the 47th edition of ModaLisboa, the designer presented his collection at the Spring/Summer 2017 fashion show, in which the mannequins, in addition to phrases appealing for non-discrimination, carried plates with discriminatory adjectives at the end of the show, which left, in a reaction apparent against prejudice. Fashion events: Portugal



Fig. 4 Spring/Summer 2017 Collection (Blog Brankopopovic - <https://brankopopovic.blogspot.com>)

Fashion and Moda Lisboa Lisbon Fashion Week have shown increasing diversity in their fashion shows, including LGBTQ+ mannequins and the presentation of collections from designers that challenge traditional gender norms.

SALSA JEANS

The Portuguese jeans brand has already developed collections and advertising campaigns focused on diversity and inclusion. In some of these campaigns, LGBTQ+ models were included, in addition to messages that promote acceptance and respect for different sexual orientations and gender identities.

The brand launched a capsule collection called "Walk with Pride," with profits going to the "We Love Project" of the Spanish NGO "Apoyo Positivo," which aims to help young people gain access to information and specialized support (website Salsa Jeans).

WONTHER

Also, in fashion accessories, Portuguese brands have a strong presence that practices activism. An example is the Portuguese brand WONTHER, a jewelry brand characterized as ethical and celebrates inclusion. It develops numerous campaigns in which it donates a percentage of sales to support the LGBTQ+ community and to promote equality and protection of the rights of people in the LGBTQ+ community.

Olga Kassian, founder of WONTHER, states: "We have a social responsibility to carry out actions that not only draw attention to social problems but also contribute financially. At a time when gender inequalities are increasingly exposed, I am very proud to join Plano I to carry out this action and, thus, we can invest in a more empathetic and humane society" (www.nit.pt). WONTHER was featured in an editorial in the North American magazine "Teen Vogue," which focused on the fight to make the fashion industry more ethical and sustainable. The British newspaper "The Guardian" cited WONTHER, on a



Fig. 5 WONTHER 2021 Campaign (Revista NIT - <https://www.nit.pt/compras/esta-marca-portuguesa-doa-10-das-vendas-para-apoiar-comunidade-lgbtqia>)

list at the time, as one of the ten most sustainable brands in the industry (Salgueiro, NIT, Novembro 2020).

Portuguese fashion brands' involvement in LGBTQ+ activism is not restricted to creating collections or advertising campaigns but reflects a broader commitment to social change. These actions help to normalize topics such as sexual orientation and gender identity and promote greater acceptance in society. In short, LGBTQ+ activism, in the context of fashion in Portugal, reflects a broader change in the social fabric, where brands are increasingly aware of the importance of embracing diversity and contributing to the construction of a more inclusive society.

5. Conclusions

Activism in fashion marketing has become a growing demand from society, which expects brands to sell products and position themselves on relevant social and cultural issues. This analysis explores the benefits and challenges associated with brand activism, focusing on its impact on reputation, consumer loyalty, and the risk of perceived authenticity, particularly in the context of pinkwashing. From the analysis, it is concluded that, when implemented authentically, activism can bring significant benefits. Alignment with social and political causes reinforces the brand's reputation and image, associating it with values of social responsibility and ethics (Scott, 2021). Brands that genuinely commit to inclusion and diversity, especially about the LGBTQ+ community, stand out in a competitive market and gain the loyalty of consumers who value these commitments.

In addition to improving reputation, activism can increase consumer engagement and strengthen customer loyalty. Brands involved in social causes often see greater customer loyalty and increased willingness to support the brand, resulting in a more engaged consumer base. However, activism must be perceived as genuine. Pinkwashing – superficial

activism for commercial purposes – can damage brand credibility and alienate consumers.

Another important aspect is the coherence between public activism and the company's internal practices. For activism to be effective, campaign social values must be aligned with corporate policies. Failures in this alignment can result in criticism and the loss of effectiveness of activism campaigns.

The future of activism in fashion marketing is promising, but it requires a balance between authenticity and commercial strategy. As social awareness and demand for ethical practices increase, more brands will embrace activism in their communications strategies. However, success will depend on brands' ability to implement initiatives that meet consumer expectations and reflect a genuine commitment to the supported causes.

Future trends may include a greater emphasis on integrating activist values into everyday corporate practices and a more critical approach to the social impact of campaigns. With the growth of digital platforms and social media, brands can monitor and respond to consumer feedback in real-time, enabling adjustments to strategies to align with evolving expectations.

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