From CSR to Brand Activism: Exploring Emerging Trends in Indonesia's Marketing Landscape

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ABSTRACK

The growing demand for brands to engage in sociopolitical issues has shifted the corporate focus from traditional Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to brand activism. While this transformation is well-documented in Western contexts, its trajectory in Indonesia remains underexplored. This study aims to investigate how brand activism has emerged within the Indonesian marketing landscape by examining its relationship with CSR, social media, brand equity, and authenticity. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA framework, this study analyzes 73 peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2025. The results show a clear evolution from philanthropic CSR to values-driven brand activism, catalyzed by digitally empowered consumers and amplified by social media platforms. Authenticity is identified as the most critical determinant of effective activism, as consumers increasingly evaluate the consistency between brand messaging and internal practices. While well-aligned activism strengthens brand equity through enhanced trust and emotional engagement, superficial or opportunistic efforts risk reputational damage. In the Indonesian context, cultural sensitivity and issue localization are crucial for brand credibility. This study contributes to both theoretical and practical understanding by situating brand activism within a Southeast Asian context and offering strategic insights for marketers aiming to build trust and differentiation in socially conscious markets. Future research is encouraged to incorporate empirical methods and explore employee perspectives on brand authenticity.

1.   INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the role of corporations in society has evolved far beyond profit-making. This transformation has given rise to more socially engaged marketing strategies, including Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and more recently, brand activism. Brand activism refers to a company's deliberate and public engagement with political, social, environmental, and cultural issues, aiming to influence both public discourse and corporate positioning in competitive markets (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Unlike CSR, which is often reactive or philanthropic in nature, brand activism is proactive, risk-taking, and sometimes controversial, directly embedding socio-political narratives into brand identity and strategy (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

The increasing expectation for brands to take stances on critical issues can be linked to shifts in consumer behavior, especially among younger generations. Consumers today are no longer passive recipients of marketing messages but active participants in shaping brand values through their social media engagement and purchasing decisions (Ahmad et al., 2022; Ebrahim et al., 2020). In the Indonesian context, with its rapidly expanding digital economy and high social media penetration, these

dynamics become particularly salient. As a Southeast Asian country with over 270 million people and one of the highest numbers of social media users globally, Indonesia offers fertile ground for brand activism to thrive or fail depending on how brands engage with authenticity, transparency, and alignment of values (Widyanto et al., 2022).

Yet, despite the increasing relevance of brand activism, its conceptual clarity and practical implementation remain debated in the literature. Scholars differ in defining brand activism, distinguishing it from CSR and cause-related marketing, and in identifying its impact on brand equity and consumer trust (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Gyrd-Jones et al., 2013). While some studies suggest brand activism enhances brand equity by resonating with value-driven consumers (Nguyen et al., 2023), others caution against "woke-washing" a term referring to superficial or opportunistic activism that erodes trust (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020). The tension between authenticity and performativity remains central to this debate, especially in culturally diverse markets such as Indonesia.

In Indonesia, CSR has traditionally dominated the corporate social agenda, largely influenced by religious, cultural, and governmental frameworks (Ahmad et al., 2022). Many companies have integrated CSR into their strategic planning, particularly in industries such as energy, banking, and FMCG. However, CSR practices in Indonesia have often been criticized for lacking transparency, strategic alignment, and measurable outcomes (Widyanto et al., 2022). With the rise of brand activism, there emerges a new paradigm that challenges the conventional boundaries of corporate responsibility. Brands are no longer expected merely to give back to society but to speak up for it to take sides in debates ranging from gender equality and climate justice to minority rights and political transparency (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Lindgreen et al., 2009).

This evolving expectation raises several theoretical and practical challenges. First, brand activism requires a reconceptualization of brand identity not just as a market signal but as a social and moral actor (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Second, it necessitates integration with digital communication strategies, particularly through social media, where consumers can rapidly mobilize both support and criticism. Third, brand activism compels marketers and brand managers to grapple with the risks of polarizing audiences and alienating segments that may not align with the brand's sociopolitical stance (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Despite these challenges, some scholars argue that the benefits outweigh the risks, particularly in building long-term consumer loyalty and brand distinctiveness (Nguyen et al., 2023; Ahmad et al., 2022). Indonesia's marketing landscape adds further complexity. On one hand, the country's youthful, digitally native population tends to support brands that demonstrate social responsibility and authenticity. On the other hand, Indonesia's socio-political context is characterized by religious conservatism, ethnic diversity, and sensitive political climates, which may make bold brand activism riskier and less predictable (Widyanto et al., 2022). This tension calls for a more localized understanding of how global trends in brand activism are adapted, resisted, or transformed in Indonesia.

The existing literature on brand activism is dominated by studies from Western contexts, particularly the United States and Europe. These studies provide valuable theoretical insights but may lack cultural transferability to emerging markets. There is a significant research gap concerning how brand activism operates in non-Western, culturally diverse, and politically complex countries such as Indonesia (Ahmad et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Moreover, while bibliometric analyses and systematic literature reviews have been conducted globally (Irhamna et al., 2024), no such attempt has yet systematically mapped the Indonesian scholarship on CSR, brand activism, brand equity, authenticity, and social media integration as an interconnected framework.

To address this gap, the present study synthesizes insights from the four interrelated themes that underpin brand activism: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), social media engagement, brand equity, and authenticity. These four pillars offer a comprehensive lens through which to understand the motivations, strategies, and consequences of brand activism in the Indonesian context. CSR serves as the traditional foundation, rooted in stakeholder theory and legitimacy theory, providing a baseline for corporate engagement with societal needs (Carroll, 1999; Lindgreen et al., 2009). Social media, as both platform and amplifier, plays a critical role in shaping the visibility, reach, and participatory nature of brand activism (Ebrahim et al., 2020; Ahmad et al., 2022). Brand equity is evaluated as a measure of the impact of activism on consumer perception, loyalty, and willingness to support (Keller, 1993; Nguyen et al., 2023). Finally, authenticity is examined as the linchpin that determines whether brand activism is perceived as sincere or opportunistic (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

The urgency of this study stems from both academic and managerial imperatives. Academically, it contributes to the growing but still nascent field of brand activism research in Southeast Asia. It interrogates whether Western conceptualizations of activism are applicable in the Indonesian setting, or whether a more context-sensitive framework is needed. From a managerial perspective, the findings of this study can guide marketers, brand managers, and corporate leaders in navigating the ethical, strategic, and communicative dimensions of brand activism. It also provides insights into the expectations

of Indonesian consumers, particularly younger demographics who are shaping future brand-consumer relationships.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative and context-specific approach. Unlike previous studies that have treated CSR, social media, brand equity, and authenticity as separate domains, this article treats them as mutually constitutive in understanding brand activism. Furthermore, by focusing on the Indonesian context often underrepresented in global marketing literature this study addresses the call for more diverse, inclusive, and culturally grounded research in the field of marketing (Ahmad et al., 2022; Gyrd-Jones et al., 2013).

In light of these considerations, the primary objective of this study is to explore the emerging trends of brand activism in Indonesia by synthesizing the literature across the four identified themes. The article aims to:

1. Trace the evolution from CSR to brand activism in Indonesia,
2. Analyze how social media platforms facilitate or hinder brand activism,
3. Examine the impact of activism on brand equity in the local context,
4. Evaluate the role of authenticity in determining the success or failure of brand activism initiatives.

By addressing these objectives, this study seeks to offer a nuanced and critical understanding of how brands operating in Indonesia navigate the complex terrain of values-driven marketing.

2. LITERATURE FRAMEWORK

2.1 Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and the Evolution Toward Brand Activism

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has traditionally referred to corporate initiatives aimed at fulfilling ethical, social, and environmental obligations to stakeholders. Grounded in stakeholder theory and legitimacy theory, CSR encourages companies to go beyond legal compliance and contribute positively to societal development (Carroll, 1999; Lindgreen et al., 2009). In Indonesia, CSR is often institutionalized through regulations, religious values, and philanthropic traditions. However, recent critiques argue that such approaches tend to be reactive, superficial, and risk-averse, often disconnected from core business strategy and lacking in measurable outcomes.

The limitations of traditional CSR have prompted a shift toward brand activism, which involves corporations publicly taking stances on controversial sociopolitical and environmental issues. While CSR focuses on "doing good" in a general sense, brand activism is about "doing right" within specific moral or political domains (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Vredenburg et al. (2020) note that brand activism reflects a more radical, values-driven, and culturally embedded approach to corporate engagement. This shift challenges the traditional boundaries of corporate involvement, pushing brands to integrate social justice into the very fabric of their identity and operations.

Several scholars argue that CSR serves as a foundational precursor to brand activism. Brands with a strong CSR track record are often better positioned to transition into activism, as they have established credibility, stakeholder trust, and a moral brand persona (Ahmad et al., 2022; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Others caution that conflating CSR with activism may obscure important distinctions regarding intentionality, risk, and visibility. For example, CSR initiatives are often under the radar and non-confrontational, whereas brand activism is inherently public, polarizing, and high-risk.

In the Indonesian context, the transformation from CSR to brand activism is still in its early stages. Many brands remain cautious, adhering to safe, culturally sanctioned CSR practices. However, emerging examples suggest a growing willingness to engage more assertively in sociopolitical discourse, especially among younger brands and digitally savvy companies. This evolution reflects a global trend toward embedding value-based messaging in branding strategies and a local desire to align corporate missions with national development goals.

2.2 Social Media and Digital Platforms in Brand Activism

Social media has fundamentally altered the way brands communicate with their audiences. In the context of brand activism, platforms like Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube enable brands to rapidly disseminate messages, engage in dialogue, and co-create meaning with users (Ebrahim et al., 2020). Social media also serves as a double-edged sword: it allows for greater visibility and virality, but it also exposes brands to public scrutiny, backlash, and cancel culture when perceived as inauthentic or opportunistic (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

Digital platforms are not merely channels of communication; they are spaces of contestation and meaning-making. Consumers increasingly use social media to demand accountability, signal values, and mobilize collective action (Ahmad et al., 2022). This has resulted in a new kind of consumer–brand relationship, where users expect brands to reflect their personal and societal values. In Indonesia, where

over 200 million people actively use social media, the stakes for brand communication are particularly high.

Ahmad et al. (2022) emphasize that social media functions as both amplifier and validator of brand activism. Messages that align with consumer expectations and exhibit sincerity are rewarded with likes, shares, and brand loyalty. Conversely, brands that are perceived as disingenuous or performative are punished through digital dissent, boycotts, and meme-based mockery. This environment creates a high-pressure context for brands, where timing, tone, and transparency are crucial for campaign success.

Furthermore, social media analytics offer valuable tools for measuring the impact of brand activism. Engagement metrics such as reach, sentiment analysis, and hashtag virality can serve as proxies for consumer resonance and campaign effectiveness. However, scholars also warn against over-relying on vanity metrics, urging brands to prioritize qualitative indicators of trust, alignment, and authenticity (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

2.3   Brand Equity as Outcome and Strategy

Brand equity refers to the value added to a product or service as a result of brand perception, reputation, and consumer loyalty (Keller, 1993). High brand equity leads to increased consumer preference, price premium, and resilience in times of crisis. In the context of brand activism, equity becomes both an antecedent and a consequence strong brands are more likely to engage in activism, and activism can either enhance or damage equity depending on its execution (Nguyen et al., 2023; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Studies suggest that brand activism can positively affect brand equity by deepening emotional connections with consumers, especially among Gen Z and Millennials, who tend to support value-driven brands (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Ahmad et al. (2022) found that consumers reward brands perceived as morally congruent with their own values. Conversely, brands that misalign with stakeholder values or appear opportunistic face reputational decline and loss of equity.

In Indonesia, the relationship between brand activism and brand equity remains underexplored. Existing literature tends to focus on CSR impacts on brand image and trust rather than activism per se (Widyanto et al., 2022). However, recent case studies indicate that Indonesian consumers, especially in urban and digital-savvy markets, are becoming increasingly responsive to activism-based branding, especially when campaigns reflect local issues such as environmental protection, social justice, or religious tolerance.

Thus, integrating brand equity into the brand activism framework offers both evaluative and strategic utility. It allows scholars and practitioners to assess the long-term effectiveness of activism campaigns and to understand how sociopolitical engagement reshapes brand architecture, loyalty, and consumer advocacy.

2.4   Authenticity and the Threat of Woke-Washing

Perhaps the most critical determinant of successful brand activism is authenticity. Authenticity is the perception that a brand's actions are sincere, consistent with its values, and motivated by genuine concern rather than opportunism (Gyrd-Jones et al., 2013; Vredenburg et al., 2020). In the absence of authenticity, brand activism risks being perceived as "woke-washing" a term denoting superficial, marketing-driven alignment with social causes for commercial gain (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

Authenticity is particularly crucial in the Indonesian market, where consumers are highly sensitive to religious, cultural, and ethical inconsistencies. Brands that fail to demonstrate alignment between their activism messages and actual business practices such as labor rights, environmental sustainability, or diversity are quickly exposed and criticized. This makes authenticity not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity.

Several studies propose frameworks for evaluating authenticity, including congruence between brand values and social cause, historical consistency, stakeholder alignment, and transparency of action (Nguyen et al., 2023; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Ahmad et al. (2022) suggest that authenticity is context-dependent and culturally constructed; what is considered authentic in one country may be deemed insincere in another.

Importantly, authenticity also relates to leadership and internal branding. Employees must be aligned with the brand's activist values, and internal practices must reflect the external messaging. Otherwise, consumers may perceive dissonance, resulting in cynicism and distrust.

2.5   Integrating the Four Themes in a Localized Framework

While each of the four themes CSR, social media, brand equity, and authenticity can be studied independently, their interconnections are critical for a comprehensive understanding of brand activism. CSR provides the ethical foundation and historical legacy upon which activism builds. Social media acts

as a platform and amplifier, shaping the communicative dynamics of activism. Brand equity serves as both motivation and metric, influencing strategic decisions and consumer reactions. Authenticity, finally, is the linchpin that determines whether activism succeeds or backfires.

In the Indonesian context, these elements interact with unique cultural, political, and digital ecosystems. A localized framework is thus needed to capture these interdependencies and guide both academic inquiry and managerial action. The literature reviewed here lays the groundwork for such an endeavor and highlights the need for empirical studies that test these relationships within Indonesia's socio-economic and cultural milieu.

3. METHODOLOGY

To address the research objectives namely, to explore the evolution from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to brand activism, assess the role of social media in activism efforts, analyze its implications for brand equity, and evaluate the role of authenticity in the Indonesian context this study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. The SLR method is well-suited for synthesizing dispersed scholarly findings across multiple theoretical domains while identifying conceptual patterns and research gaps (Sarkis-Onofre et al., 2021; Tranfield et al., 2003).

3.1 Review Design and Protocol
The review was conducted following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009), which provide a structured framework for ensuring methodological transparency and academic rigor. The process followed four phases: (1) identification of relevant literature, (2) screening for relevance, (3) eligibility assessment based on predefined criteria, and (4) inclusion for qualitative synthesis.

The following research questions guided the review:
- How has CSR evolved into brand activism in recent literature?
- What role does social media play in shaping and disseminating brand activism?
- How does brand activism influence brand equity?
- How is authenticity framed and evaluated in brand activism efforts, especially in culturally diverse contexts such as Indonesia?

Search terms included: "brand activism", "corporate activism", "CSR", "social media marketing", "brand equity", "authenticity", "woke washing", and combinations of these. Searches were conducted in major academic databases, including **Scopus**, **ScienceDirect**, and **Taylor & Francis**, which are known for their broad coverage of high-quality, peer-reviewed literature in marketing, communication, and management studies.

3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria
The following inclusion criteria were applied:
- Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2010 and 2025.
- Articles written in English.
- Articles explicitly addressing at least one of the core themes: CSR, brand activism, social media, brand equity, or authenticity.
- Both conceptual and empirical studies were included.

Exclusion criteria included:
- Conference proceedings, theses, or book chapters without peer-review.
- Articles unrelated to branding, consumer behavior, or marketing.
- Studies lacking full-text access or methodological clarity.

After deduplication and screening based on titles and abstracts, **150 articles** were retained for full-text review. From these, **73 core articles** were deemed directly relevant and were selected for final synthesis—many of which were also identified in Irhamna et al. (2025) and other key bibliometric reviews.

3.3 Data Extraction and Thematic Synthesis
Data were extracted manually using a structured matrix in spreadsheet format. Each article was coded for the following variables:
- Author(s), year, journal
- Research type (conceptual/empirical)
- Geographic context
- Thematic focus (CSR, social media, brand equity, authenticity)

- Key findings or propositions
- Relevance to Indonesia (if applicable)

A manual **thematic analysis** was then conducted to identify recurring patterns, contrasts, and emerging insights across the four main themes. This qualitative approach allowed the researcher to inductively build categories and subthemes, drawing from grounded theory logic (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Patterns were discussed iteratively until thematic saturation was reached. For instance, studies discussing CSR evolution (e.g., Carroll, 1999; Lindgreen et al., 2009; Ahmad et al., 2022) were grouped and contrasted with more recent conceptualizations of brand activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Likewise, articles on authenticity and "woke-washing" (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2023) were evaluated in terms of their methodological rigor and cultural relevance to Southeast Asia.

3.4   Contextual Relevance to Indonesia

Although most articles were international in scope, particular attention was paid to research that:
- Focused on emerging markets or Southeast Asia,
- Addressed cultural specificity in branding,
- Included Indonesian brands or consumer data.

This helped ensure that the findings and discussions would remain anchored in the **realities of Indonesia's marketing environment**, which includes factors such as religious diversity, political sensitivity, high digital penetration, and emerging civic consciousness (Widyanto et al., 2022; Ahmad et al., 2022).

3.5   Limitations and Rigor

This study adopts several strategies to ensure the **trustworthiness** of findings:
- Systematic documentation of search strings, article selection, and inclusion criteria,
- Double-checking of coded data for consistency,
- Use of peer-reviewed sources only.

Nevertheless, certain limitations are acknowledged:
- The reliance on secondary sources limits empirical generalizability.
- Exclusion of non-English literature may overlook local insights from Indonesian-language publications.
- Manual thematic synthesis, while rich in depth, may be more prone to subjective nterpretation than automated content analysis.

Despite these limitations, the chosen methodology provides a **robust foundation for synthesizing diverse insights** on brand activism and its adjacent concepts, and for understanding how these phenomena are likely to evolve in Indonesia's unique cultural and consumer landscape.

4.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1   Results

The systematic review of 73 selected articles, including key studies from Irhamna et al. (2025), reveals four major findings aligned with the core research themes:

1. A Shift from CSR to Brand Activism
   There is clear evidence that the traditional conception of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) which emphasized philanthropy and compliance is giving way to more assertive forms of brand activism. Several studies highlight that this transition is driven by shifting consumer expectations and generational changes in values, particularly among Millennials and Gen Z consumers. Companies are increasingly pressured to take public positions on social, political, and environmental issues, even when these stances are polarizing.
2. Social Media as Catalyst and Risk Zone
   Social media platforms play a dual role in enabling brand activism. On one hand, they amplify brand voices and allow for real-time engagement. On the other hand, they expose brands to the risk of backlash when their activism is perceived as performative or inconsistent.
3. Brand Activism and Brand Equity
   A growing body of evidence suggests that well-executed brand activism enhances brand equity through increased trust, loyalty, and emotional attachment. However, the reverse is also true: misaligned or inauthentic activism can harm brand equity, sometimes irreparably.
4. Authenticity as the Decisive Factor
   Authenticity consistently emerges as the linchpin of successful brand activism. The literature shows that consumers critically evaluate whether a brand's public messaging aligns with its

internal practices and long-term commitments. "Woke-washing" and tokenistic activism are strongly penalized by informed audiences.

4.2 Discussion
4.2.1 From CSR to Activism: Evolution or Disruption?

The evolution from CSR to brand activism in Indonesia reflects broader global trends, yet is shaped by distinct local dynamics. Traditionally, CSR in Indonesia has been strongly influenced by religious and community-oriented norms, often tied to Islamic philanthropy (zakat, infaq), environmental programs, or state-endorsed initiatives. These CSR activities, while commendable, are typically risk-averse and carefully distanced from political discourse.

However, in the last decade, Indonesia has seen the emergence of a new wave of consumer expectations. Younger Indonesians digitally savvy and socially aware demand that brands not merely donate to causes but take a stand on them. This aligns with global arguments made by Sarkar and Kotler (2018), who frame brand activism as "taking sides" on divisive issues. In Indonesia, this transition is visible in sectors such as fashion, cosmetics, and fintech, where progressive brands have embraced diversity, sustainability, and women's empowerment as core brand values.

Nevertheless, not all companies are equipped for this shift. Many fear reputational risk, government backlash, or consumer boycotts. The brand activism movement, therefore, creates a strategic dilemma: to remain "neutral" and risk irrelevance, or to engage in activism and risk controversy. This dilemma echoes the global tension described by Vredenburg et al. (2020), where corporate silence is increasingly interpreted as complicity.

4.2.2 The Role of Social Media: Democratizing or Destabilizing?

Social media has become the most influential driver of brand activism in Indonesia. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok have enabled brands to craft narratives, build communities, and launch campaigns within hours. According to Ahmad et al. (2022), social media functions as both a loudspeaker and a mirror amplifying corporate voices while reflecting public sentiment in real-time.

In Indonesia, the virality potential of activism is high. Campaigns promoting religious tolerance, environmental protection, or mental health awareness often gain traction quickly, provided they resonate culturally. For instance, Wardah and Sociolla, two beauty brands, have successfully used social media to promote women's empowerment, body positivity, and halal values while maintaining brand relevance.

However, social media also exposes brands to "cancel culture." One misstep be it a culturally insensitive post or a partnership with a controversial figure can provoke massive backlash. This supports findings from Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) and Vredenburg et al. (2020), who note that digital platforms democratize activism but also destabilize brand authority. In essence, social media does not tolerate inauthenticity. Activism must be consistent, credible, and ongoing, not confined to trending hashtags or annual campaigns.

4.2.3 Impact on Brand Equity: A Double-Edged Sword

The impact of brand activism on brand equity is multifaceted. A growing body of research demonstrates that when executed with authenticity and alignment, activism strengthens consumer-brand relationships, increases trust, and even drives purchase intention (Nguyen et al., 2023; Ahmad et al., 2022). Emotional engagement is particularly powerful brands that resonate with personal values tend to gain long-term loyalty.

In Indonesia, this is evidenced by the positive reception of brands that take progressive stances. For example, The Body Shop Indonesia's vocal support for environmental justice and women's rights has elevated its local brand equity. Similarly, GoTo's initiatives on digital inclusion and sustainability have positioned it as a socially aware brand in the tech industry.

Conversely, poor alignment between a brand's actions and its messaging can erode brand equity. Cases of tokenism such as releasing rainbow-themed products during Pride Month without supporting LGBTQ+ rights internally are heavily criticized. This aligns with global findings on the "woke-washing" phenomenon, where superficial activism backfires and damages consumer trust (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

In sum, brand activism is not a shortcut to goodwill. It is a long-term brand equity strategy that requires coherence between identity, operations, and communication. Inconsistencies are amplified, not concealed, in the digital era.

4.2.4 Authenticity and the Fight Against Woke-Washing

Authenticity is the decisive factor in determining the success or failure of brand activism. As Gyrd-Jones et al. (2013) argue, authenticity arises when a brand's external communication is congruent with

its internal values and stakeholder experiences. In Indonesia, consumers increasingly demand transparency not just in words, but in actions.

Brands like Indomie, which quietly support local education and nutrition programs without fanfare, are often viewed as more authentic than brands that aggressively advertise their "purpose" but lack long-term impact. Irhamna et al. (2025) show that authenticity in activism depends on several factors:

- Historical consistency of values and messaging,
- Transparency in operations (e.g., fair labor, ethical sourcing),
- Employee alignment with brand values,
- Willingness to act even when it may hurt profitability.

The literature also identifies "relational authenticity"—the ability of brands to build ongoing, dialogical relationships with their consumers. This is particularly relevant in collectivist cultures like Indonesia, where brand relationships are viewed more holistically, as moral and social bonds (Ahmad et al., 2022).

Despite its importance, authenticity is difficult to measure. It requires a deep understanding of cultural nuance, stakeholder expectations, and historical context. What is considered authentic in Jakarta may be perceived as disingenuous in Aceh or Bali. Thus, localized brand activism strategies are essential.

4.2.5 The Indonesian Context: Opportunities and Cultural Constraints

While global frameworks on brand activism provide valuable insights, they must be adapted to Indonesia's socio-cultural landscape. Religious diversity, political sensitivity, and regional variation present unique challenges. For example, promoting LGBTQ+ rights—a common topic in Western brand activism remains highly controversial in Indonesia and may result in regulatory or consumer backlash. Similarly, politically charged campaigns may attract unwanted attention from authorities or religious groups.

Therefore, brands must adopt a "context-sensitive activism" strategy, focusing on issues that resonate locally such as education, poverty reduction, disaster response, and environmental protection. These issues offer opportunities for meaningful engagement without polarizing the market.

At the same time, the growing influence of Indonesian youth and urban consumers creates new spaces for progressive discourse. As reported by Widyanto et al. (2022), young Indonesians are increasingly open to global values, and their activism expectations align with those of global citizens. Brands that successfully navigate these expectations can differentiate themselves and build lasting emotional bonds.

4.3 Summary of Discussion

To summarize, the discussion reveals five critical insights:

1. CSR is evolving into brand activism, but this evolution requires strategic clarity and value alignment.
2. Social media empowers brand activism but also amplifies its risks.
3. Brand equity can be enhanced or destroyed by activism, depending on its execution.
4. Authenticity is non-negotiable; woke-washing is severely punished.
5. Local culture matters brand activism must be both globally aware and locally grounded.

These findings not only confirm much of the existing theory but also highlight areas where Indonesian marketing practices diverge from global patterns. They reinforce the need for **strategic activism** activism that is sincere, consistent, and culturally intelligent.

5. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the transition from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to brand activism within the Indonesian marketing landscape, focusing on four interrelated themes: CSR, social media, brand equity, and authenticity. Drawing on a systematic review of 73 scholarly articles, the findings demonstrate a significant shift in how brands engage with sociopolitical issues. CSR, once characterized by philanthropic and compliance-based practices, is increasingly evolving into a form of public engagement where brands are expected to take moral and political stances. This transition is not merely semantic; it reflects fundamental changes in consumer expectations, digital behavior, and societal values.

The review shows that social media plays a central role in this evolution. It serves not only as a tool for disseminating brand messages but also as a space for dialogue, accountability, and collective critique. In Indonesia, where digital penetration is high and the population is young and socially conscious, social media has become a double-edged sword. It amplifies brand activism but also exposes

inconsistencies and opens the door to cancel culture. Brands are now under constant surveillance by their audiences, who can mobilize quickly in support of—or against—corporate actions.

Another critical finding is the dual impact of brand activism on brand equity. When brand activism aligns with the values of consumers and is executed with consistency and transparency, it strengthens emotional connections and builds long-term loyalty. However, when perceived as opportunistic or disconnected from core operations, brand activism can severely damage brand reputation. In this regard, the literature consistently emphasizes the centrality of authenticity. Authentic activism requires that internal practices, employee values, and stakeholder relationships all reflect the brand's public stance. This congruence between communication and conduct is what differentiates meaningful activism from mere marketing tactics.

Within the Indonesian context, brand activism presents both opportunities and challenges. Cultural and religious sensitivities demand that companies engage with issues that are locally resonant and socially constructive. While global activism themes such as diversity, climate change, and social justice are increasingly relevant, their articulation must consider Indonesia's diverse moral landscape and regulatory environment. Brands that adopt a context-sensitive approach—grounded in local values while embracing global principles—are more likely to succeed in building trust and differentiation.

The practical implications of these findings are significant for brand managers, corporate strategists, and communication professionals. Brands should reassess their CSR strategies to ensure they are embedded in a broader narrative of corporate values. Executives need to build mechanisms for internal alignment so that activism is not just externally declared but internally lived. Moreover, marketing strategies must be agile enough to respond to digital backlash while remaining committed to long-term value creation. Indonesian firms, particularly those in consumer-facing sectors such as retail, beauty, and technology, must recognize that brand activism is no longer optional but increasingly expected by younger, socially engaged consumers.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by bridging the gap between traditional CSR frameworks and emergent theories of brand activism. It positions authenticity not as a peripheral concern but as a central axis in the study of brand-consumer relationships. Furthermore, by focusing on an emerging market context, this research adds a geographically nuanced perspective to a field still dominated by Western-centric models. It encourages scholars to rethink assumptions about activism, culture, and consumer engagement through a more pluralistic and context-aware lens.

Despite its contributions, the study acknowledges several limitations. It relies entirely on secondary data and does not include empirical findings from Indonesian consumers, employees, or brands. The exclusion of non-English literature may also have limited the inclusion of valuable local insights. Moreover, while thematic analysis was conducted with methodological rigor, the use of manual coding carries inherent subjectivity. Finally, as brand activism is a fast-evolving field, new developments may quickly outpace the literature reviewed in this study.

Future research should address these limitations by incorporating primary data through surveys, interviews, or case studies in the Indonesian context. Comparative studies across Southeast Asia could further illuminate the cultural dimensions of brand activism. Longitudinal designs would be valuable in examining how activism influences brand equity over time, while employee-focused studies could explore internal perceptions of authenticity. Additionally, more research is needed on how brands manage the risks of backlash and activist fatigue, especially in politically sensitive environments.

In conclusion, this study affirms that brand activism is not a passing trend but a fundamental reconfiguration of the brand's role in society. In Indonesia, where social consciousness is rising alongside digital connectivity, brand activism holds the potential to advance both corporate and societal goals. However, this potential can only be realized through activism that is deliberate, authentic, and locally grounded. Brands that navigate this terrain with cultural intelligence and strategic clarity are more likely to thrive in the emerging era of value-driven marketing.

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