

How the Timing of Brands' LGBT+ Activism Affects Consumer Responses: Better Early Than Late?

Abstract

Many brands delay expressing support for the LGBT+ community because of potential backlash. Across seven studies, including a 12-year real-world data analysis (based partly on the World Advertising Research Center database), a choice study, and experiments, we show that ad campaigns supporting LGBT+ causes when launched early (vs. late) lead to favorable consumer responses. The findings suggest that early LGBT+ activism timing has this effect because consumers perceive these brands' actions as more effortful. In addition, this effect is stronger for brands with greater financial resources. We provide guidelines for advertising practitioners aspiring to support the LGBT+ community.

Management Slant

- Timing of LGBT+-focused brand activism affects consumer responses.
- Consumers favor brands that support the LGBT+ community early rather than late.
- Brand effort explains activism timing's impact on consumer responses.
- Brands' available financial resources boost the effect of early activism.
- The pioneering advantage effect, not the bandwagon effect, underlies the process.

Keywords: Brand activism; allyship; pioneering advantage; financial resources; brand effort; LGBT+

INTRODUCTION

Approximately 7% of Americans identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and 1.6% identify as transgender or nonbinary (Brown, 2023). With an estimated \$1.1 trillion in spending power (Joseph, 2023), the LGBT+¹ community represents a significant consumer base. However, members of this community have historically faced marginalization in advertising, the marketplace, and broader society (Arsel et al., 2022; Bradley, 2021; Cheng et al., 2023; Nölke, 2018; Ruggs et al., 2018). Ongoing issues for the LGBT+ community include discrimination, marriage equality, adoption rights, pronouns, and gender-neutral bathrooms. A Center for American Progress study found that more than one in three LGBT+ adults faced discrimination in 2022 (Medina & Mahowald, 2023). A *Washington Post*/KFF poll also showed that 57% of Americans believe gender is fixed at birth and cannot be changed (Meckler & Clement, 2023).

Brands have been accused of misrepresenting and tokenizing the LGBT+ community in advertising (Schopper et al., 2024; World Advertising Research Center [WARC], 2023). In addition, LGBT+-related ads often come across as shallow and low-effort, failing public expectations (Coffee, 2022; Wareham, 2022). Therefore, carefully crafting their advertising to genuinely represent their support for the LGBT+ community is important for brands (Cowart & Wagner, 2021).

Brands often demonstrate allyship with the LGBT+ community by publicly supporting relevant issues (Jackson, 2023; Spielmann et al., 2023) and taking stances on sociopolitical matters affecting this marginalized group (Hydock et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Wang et

¹ LGBTQIA+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, agender, asexual, aromantic, and other identities. In recognition that labels are shortcuts that can never fully represent an individual (Bronski, 2019), we use the shorter “LGBT+” term to encompass all identities.

al., 2022). Thus, our research specifically explores brand activism centered on allyship with a marginalized group.

Our research focuses on the LGBT+ community for two main reasons. First, each marginalized group has distinct struggles (Oakenfull, 2013), and focusing on one group allows for a broader understanding of specific challenges and systemic barriers, enabling more effective advocacy (e.g., Nam et al., [2023] and Wang et al. [2022] focus exclusively on the Black Lives Matter [BLM] movement, and Wang & Wei, [2024] focus on people with disabilities). Second, many brands invest heavily in LGBT+-related marketing, especially during Pride month, to show allyship (Abad-Santos, 2018; Montecchi et al., 2024; Patel & Feng, 2021; Wareham, 2023), and LGBT+ equality is the top social issue supported by brands (CMO Survey, 2023a).

Despite increasing brand support, such activism can provoke backlash (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). In a preliminary study (N = 100; U.S. American participants from Prolific; for a full report, see Web Appendix A), we found that LGBT+ support was still one of the most polarizing issues. In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that supporting the LGBT+ community can be risky for firms. For example, Bud Light saw a 28.5% drop in sales after partnering with transgender influencer Dylan Mulvaney, and Target faced backlash over its Pride clothing line (Wareham, 2023). Shareholders may also view such activism as a diversion from profit generation (Bhagwat et al., 2020), making brand managers wary of publicly supporting LGBT+ issues. Indeed, 70.9% of marketing leaders report that they are unwilling for their brand to take a stance on politically charged issues (CMO Survey, 2023b). Finally, anecdotal evidence indicates that pioneer supporters of the LGBT+ community, such as Absolut Vodka and Levi's, have proudly and effectively promoted their commitment to this cause to their customers (Absolut, 2024; Levi Strauss & Co, 2019). Thus, brand managers often face a dilemma: Should

their brands support the LGBT+ community early on, or is it safer for them to wait and do so at a later stage?

The pioneering advantage effect literature highlights conditions under which brands may benefit from being first to market with products and services. For example, pioneering can lead to a larger customer base, resulting in higher market share and profits; strengthen brand associations, making the early brand the default option; and foster positive consumer beliefs about pioneer brands (e.g., Carpenter & Nakamoto, 1989; Kamins et al., 2000; Kardes & Kalyanaram, 1992). However, whether these advantages apply to risky and polarizing marketing activities, such as supporting the LGBT+ community, remains an open question. Thus, further research is necessary to determine whether early LGBT+ activist brands create stronger positive associations or leave more enduring memories in consumers' minds about their efforts to support the community (e.g., Kates, 2004; Montecchi et al., 2024). Similarly, the risks typically addressed in the pioneering advantage literature (e.g., uncertainty about product quality; Kamins et al., 2000) may not fully align with the social risks associated with LGBT+ brand activism. Given the social risks involved, whether being early or late to support the LGBT+ community pays off or backfires is unclear. On the one hand, brands may receive most of the negative attention from opponents of LGBT+-related causes if they decide to publicly declare their allyship early in the debate while sentiments are still unclear. On the other hand, brands may also receive credit for putting more effort into supporting the LGBT+ community if they take these risks early in the debate, which may then be rewarded by consumers.

Thus, the aim of this research is to examine consumer responses based on brand activism timing on issues related to the LGBT+ community. In other words, do consumers reward or punish brands for being early LGBT+ activists? We find evidence that early engagement in

activism pays off across an analysis of social media–based field data related to real-world ad campaigns, an actual brand choice lab experiment, and multiple scenario-based experiments.

We contribute to existing research in three key ways. First, we extend the pioneering advantage effect to ideologically polarizing activities such as LGBT+ support (Carpenter & Nakamoto, 1989; Kamins et al., 2000; Kardes & Kalyanaram, 1992). Previous studies indicate that reacting quickly to sociopolitical events or being among the few to support movements like BLM can be advantageous (Nam et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022). Our research shows that early LGBT+ activism is more positively received than late activism, with pioneering advantage (i.e., early vs. late) being a stronger predictor of positive responses than the bandwagon effect (i.e., few vs. many; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hydock et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Wang & Wei, 2024; Wang et al., 2022).

Second, we introduce brand effort as a novel driver of pioneering advantage in LGBT+ activism ad campaigns. We propose that consumers perceive early supporters as making more effort on controversial issues, influencing the effectiveness of activism (Kirmani, 1990; Morales, 2005). Thus, our research introduces a novel process leading to pioneering advantage to the activism literature, which goes beyond the traditional strategy literature.

Third, we show that the pioneering advantage is more pronounced for financially resourceful brands. Consumers interpret early LGBT+ activism campaigns by well-resourced brands as more effortful, while they regard late support from any brand as profit-driven (Erdem & Swait, 2004; Spry et al., 2011). Thus, brands showing late support do not benefit from the same perceived effort, regardless of financial resources.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Brand Activism and the LGBT+ Community

Brand activism, or a brand's stance on sociopolitical partisan issues, often focuses on marginalized groups such as the LGBT+ community (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Milfeld & Haley, 2024; Moorman, 2020). Issues such as BLM, immigration, and LGBT+ rights frequently headline news and public debates, prompting brands to engage in activism to meet consumer and stakeholder expectations (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Brands may support LGBT+ rights through ads, donations, or participation in Pride events. However, this activism risks alienating those with opposing views, leading to boycotts (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Kermani et al., 2023; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Moreover, brands may face criticism for "woke washing" if their actions do not align with their advocacy (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020), deterring some from vocally supporting contentious issues (CMO Survey, 2023b).

Literature on brand activism highlights two themes for when activism may be desirable. The first theme is brand-specific factors. Hydock et al. (2020) find that small-share brands benefit more from activism than large-share brands, and Moorman (2020) suggests that brands are viewed as cultural leaders with the power to drive societal change. The second theme focuses on consumer-related factors. Consumers favor activism that aligns with their beliefs and perceive it as authentic (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Loyalty also influences consumer support (Johnson et al., 2022). Building on these themes, we propose that the timing of activism influences consumer responses, with consumers viewing early stances on LGBT+ issues more favorably.

Pioneering Advantage, LGBT+ Activism Timing, and Consumer Response

A market pioneer, or first mover, is the first to initiate actions to differentiate itself from followers, such as launching a new product category (Golder & Tellis, 1993) or adopting a new

process (Kerin et al., 1992). Traditional literature on market entry suggests that both pioneers and followers have distinct advantages (Carpenter & Nakamoto, 1989; Kamins et al., 2000; Kardes & Kalyanaram, 1992). Pioneers benefit from a lead time to capture early adopters without competition, leaving a smaller customer base for followers (Kerin et al., 1992; von Hippel, 1984).

Behavioral perspectives indicate that pioneer brands enhance consumer learning through product trials and attribute formation (Carpenter & Nakamoto, 1989; Kamins et al., 2000; Kardes & Kalyanaram, 1992), facilitating greater attribute recall (Niedrich & Swain, 2003). Consequently, consumers view pioneer brands as category prototypes, establishing a benchmark against which they evaluate other brands. They perceive pioneer brands as distinct, high-quality, and status symbols (Alpert & Kamins, 1995; Niedrich & Swain, 2003), as well as novel, innovative, and risk-taking (Kamins et al., 2000). Pioneering advantages include (1) a larger customer base, leading to higher market share and profits; (2) enhanced brand associations through product trials; and (3) positive consumer beliefs about pioneer brands.

In brand activism, however, the pioneer advantage stems not from a large customer base or product trials but from the brand's desire to position itself as a risk-taking change leader. Such market signals may generate positive consumer beliefs, especially in the context of divisive, risky, and relevant issues (Moorman, 2020). Thus, in the LGBT+ context, the pioneer advantage derives from the perception of the brand as an initiator of necessary societal change.

While pioneer brands enjoy early advantages, follower brands can build on these benefits without facing the same technological uncertainties and consumer resistance (Kaličanin, 2008; Lieberman & Montgomery, 1988). Followers have the opportunity to refine strategies by enhancing or differentiating from pioneer attributes (Besharat et al., 2016; Carpenter &

Nakamoto, 1994). For example, innovative followers in categories such as personal computers and video games have outperformed pioneers (Shankar et al., 1998). However, in the context of LGBT+ activism, consumers may perceive followers as opportunistic or inauthentic if they support the community too late.

In traditional marketing literature, pioneering means being first to market with a new product or service (Besharat et al., 2016). In brand activism, pioneering involves early support for divisive causes such as LGBT+ rights. The goal is not profit maximization but genuine support for the community, reflecting a brand's role as a cultural leader with the power to drive change (Moorman, 2020). Pioneers of LGBT+ activism supported the LGBT+ community early, creating a lasting memory in the marketplace (Kates, 2004; Montecchi et al., 2024). This memory will also prevent consumers from seeing a brand as a pioneer if it has historically opposed the LGBT+ community, highlighting the importance of a brand's past actions in shaping its perceived authenticity as an advocate. Consumers expect authentic engagement rather than profit-driven actions, such as merely selling rainbow products. Thus, supporting the LGBT+ community early rather than late helps brands avoid skepticism and be deemed as true advocates for change, demonstrating genuine commitment through effort and determination.

Brand Effort

Starting a social initiative, such as supporting the LGBT+ community, demands significant time, money, planning, and organizational commitment. These actions reflect genuine effort, as in Ben & Jerry's ban on same-scoop servings in Australia in 2017 in response to the country's stance on same-sex marriage (Castrodale, 2017). In this study, we define brand effort in supporting the LGBT+ community as the perceived level of dedication, work, and commitment a brand demonstrates through its actions and policies that promote inclusivity and equality. The concept

of brand effort reflects consumers' perceptions of a brand's dedication and hard work in advocating for LGBT+ rights through its initiatives.

According to signaling theory, when consumers receive a signal of a brand's support for an issue, they interpret the associated efforts and potential benefits (Connelly et al., 2011); that is, they perceive the sacrifices and difficulties involved in the initiative as reflecting an implicit responsibility of the brand (Kirmani, 1990; Mathur et al., 2012; Morales, 2005). Initiating support for LGBT+ causes is considered a brand's responsibility, and attribution theory suggests consumers reward brands that make genuine efforts while penalizing those that fall short (Morales, 2005; Weiner, 1995).

Consumers may view brands that support LGBT+ issues early as more committed because of the challenges and unknowns they face. For example, pioneering brands must research and address the preferences and challenges of the LGBT+ community to create effective solutions and policies. This effort contrasts with later entrants, which can mimic the actions of pioneers and thus be perceived as less involved. Early supporters also tend to be more dedicated and knowledgeable, as they demonstrate a deeper commitment to understanding and addressing the issues (Kerin et al., 1992). Consequently, consumers may view brands that engage in LGBT+ activism early as more effortful and genuinely dedicated than those that join later. Drawing on this discussion, we hypothesize the following:

H1: Early (late) support of the LGBT+ community through brand activism results in more (less) favorable consumer responses.

H2: The brand's effort in supporting the LGBT+ community mediates the effect of LGBT+ brand activism timing (early vs. late) on consumer responses.

Financial Resource Availability for LGBT+ Activism Initiatives

Resources encompass all assets available to a brand, including money, employees, and organizational knowledge (Barney, 1991). Strategic marketing suggests that leveraging these resources can provide a competitive advantage and enhance financial outcomes (Hunt & Morgan, 1996; Stahl et al., 2012). Significant resources are essential for effective advertising, research and development, and customer relationship management, which positively affect brand equity (Ailawadi et al., 2003; Rahman et al., 2018).

Drawing on signaling theory, we propose that allocating resources to support the LGBT+ community signals a brand's commitment and credibility (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Erdem & Swait, 2004; Spry et al., 2011). Specifically, financial resources play a crucial role in managing activism-related actions, including contract negotiations and potential consumer backlash (Kim & McAlister, 2011; Klein et al., 2004). Consumers expect brands to invest in substantial actions rather than just verbal support (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

We suggest that consumers perceive early supporters of LGBT+ causes, with ample financial resources, as more committed than later entrants. Late supporters face increased consumer skepticism, with financial investments regarded as profit-driven rather than genuine activism. Therefore, brands with significant financial resources stand to gain the most from early engagement in LGBT+ activism campaigns. Thus:

H3: When a brand supports the LGBT+ community early, greater financial resources lead to more positive consumer responses via perceived brand effort. For late support, financial resources do not affect perceived effort.

Pioneering Advantage vs. the Bandwagon Effect

Anecdotal evidence suggests that early activist brands are scarce, with extreme cases featuring only a singular brand initiating support for a marginalized group. Notably, this aligns with traditional literature on the pioneering advantage effect that focuses on scenarios involving a solitary pioneer brand (e.g., Kerin et al., 1992).

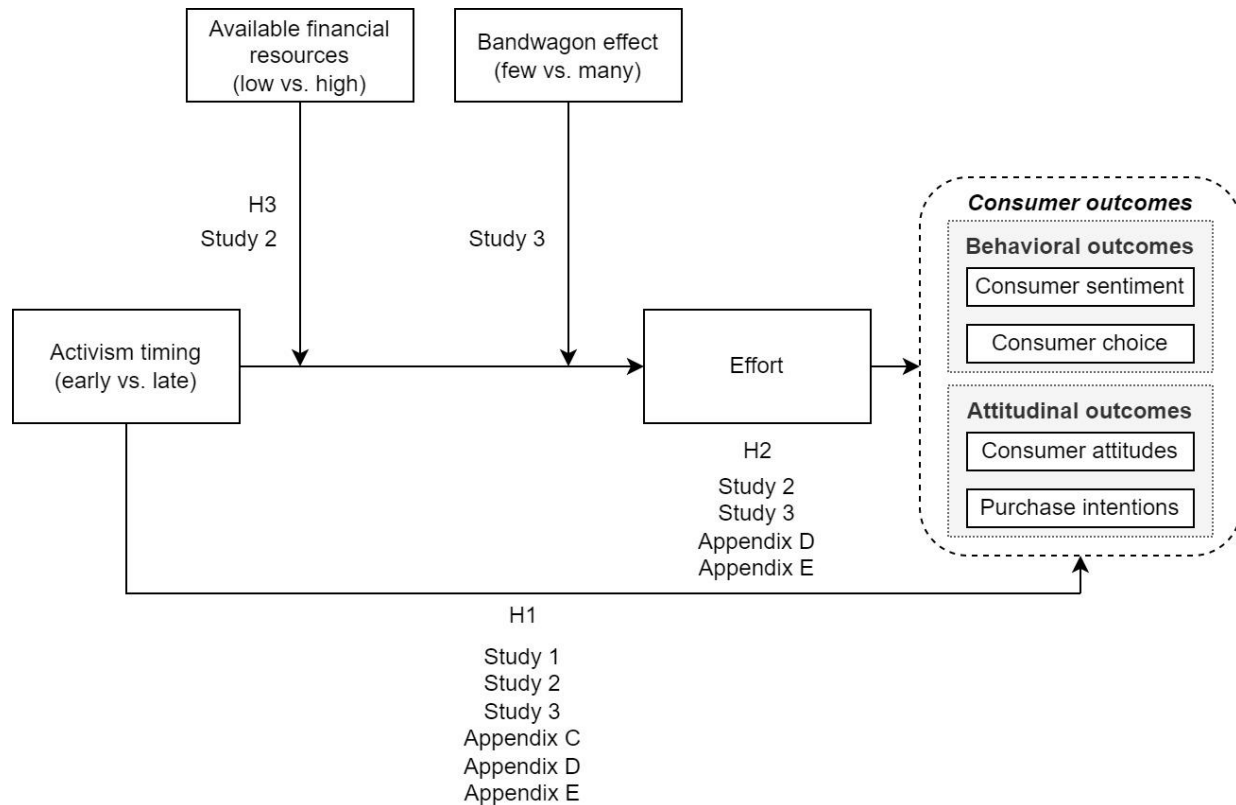
Consequently, the temporal aspect (i.e., LGBT+ activism timing of a brand) is closely connected with the quantity aspect of brand support (i.e., number of brands engaging in LGBT+-related activism). An increase in the number of brands supporting the LGBT+ community illustrates the bandwagon effect (e.g., Wang & Wei, 2024; Wang et al., 2022), a phenomenon deeply intertwined with the pioneering advantage effect. Originating from mass psychology, the bandwagon effect describes situations when individuals (or brands) emulate the behavior of others to align with a prevailing trend (Goldenberg et al., 2010). In the case of LGBT+ activism, this effect pertains to the number of brands allying with the community and essentially *jumping on the activist bandwagon*. Focusing on the BLM context, Wang et al. (2022) discover that consumers respond more favorably to activism when a brand is among the few (vs. many) adopting such a stance. Thus, in addition to testing the differential impacts of early (vs. late) LGBT+ activism on consumer reactions, we examine the relative significance of the pioneering advantage compared with the bandwagon effect in shaping positive responses to social movements, as suggested in previous studies (Hydock et al., 2020; Nam et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022).

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

We test our predictions in three main studies (see Web Appendix B for an overview of all the studies). Figure 1 depicts our conceptual model. Study 1 is an exploratory pilot study that provides initial behavioral evidence from social media on the impact of activism timing (early

vs. late) on consumer responses to actual LGBT+ activism ad campaigns. Study 2 attempts to replicate these findings under controlled conditions and demonstrates that early (vs. late) LGBT+ activism timing generates more favorable responses from consumers. Additionally, Study 2 tests the mediating effect of brand effort and the moderating effect of the brand's available financial resources. In Study 3 tests the robustness of the pioneering advantage effect while accounting for the bandwagon effect as an alternative explanation.

In addition, we report four studies in the Web Appendices (see Web Appendix B for an overview of all the studies). Web Appendix A is a preliminary study (N = 100; U.S. American participants from Prolific; 53% female, 47% male; $M_{\text{age}} = 35.96$ years) that measured the divisiveness of brands' support of various marginalized groups. We found that LGBT+ support is one of the most polarizing issues, second only to support of illegal immigrants. Web Appendix C (N = 170; British members of a university subject pool; 44.8% female, 55.2% male; $M_{\text{age}} = 26.39$ years) examines behavioral outcomes of activism timing in terms of actual brand choice in a laboratory experiment with real brands. We found that consumers are more likely to choose brands that supported the LGBT+ community early (vs. late). Web Appendix D (N = 309; U.S. American participants from Prolific; 43.2% female, 55.8% male, 1% nonbinary; $M_{\text{age}} = 40.11$ years) tests our proposed mediation mechanism with the use of fictitious brands. We found that effort mediates the relationship of activism timing and consumer reactions to LGBT+ activism. Finally, using real brands Web Appendix E (N = 620; U.S. American participants from Prolific; 52.0% female, 48% male; $M_{\text{age}} = 36.70$ years) reveals the mediation effect of effort in the relationship between activism timing and consumer reactions. All studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by an independent Institutional Review Board (ethics committee).

Figure 1 Conceptual Model.**STUDY 1: EXPLORATORY EVIDENCE FROM FIELD DATA**

This exploratory pilot study aims to explore the impact of activism timing on consumer responses to LGBT+ brand activism ad campaigns. Specifically, we analyze consumer responses to brand activism campaigns launched over a 12-year period on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter).

Data

In the first step, we generated a database of brand activism campaigns supporting the LGBT+ community. Given the nature of our independent variable (i.e., activism timing), we focused only

on brands that have engaged in brand activism. Despite the difficulty in collecting data from every single brand activism campaign, we made every effort to follow a systematic and rigorous approach to identify as many campaigns as possible for this study. Specifically, we collected news articles, case studies, and press releases published over a 12-year period (i.e., from August 17, 2010, to July 11, 2022) using two well-established databases: WARC and LexisNexis (e.g., Bhagwat et al., 2020; Borah & Tellis, 2014). In WARC, we used the keyword “activism” in combination with either “LGBT,” “queer,” “gay,” “trans,” or “transgender” to find content related to LGBT+ brand activism campaigns. In LexisNexis, we used the keyword combination of “LGBT,” “brand,” “campaign,” and “hashtag” to identify content related to LGBT+ activism campaigns. Moreover, we restricted the search on LexisNexis to the publication language “English” and the publication location “North America.”

Research assistants confirmed whether the articles found on WARC and LexisNexis indeed described brand activism campaigns that matched our criteria (see Table F1 in Web Appendix F). They then added the criteria-matching campaigns together with the official hashtags of the campaigns and the campaigns’ launch dates (i.e., month and year) to a database. In this pilot study, we operationalize activism timing as the time when a brand began its first brand activism campaign supporting the LGBT+ community. In line with this, we removed any subsequent activism campaigns of a brand from the analysis.

In the second step, we used the hashtags identified in the first step to scrape tweets related to the brands’ activism campaigns (Boegershausen et al., 2022). We used a social listening company to scrape all historical tweets that included both the hashtags and the corresponding brand names. We did not scrape retweets or tweets that were not written in the English language (Valesia et al., 2020). In addition to the campaigns’ hashtags, the data set included the month

and year in which the campaigns launched. If a campaign and its related hashtags came from both the WARC and LexisNexis databases, we removed the duplicate tweets that resulted from this overlap ($N = 7,138$). All the campaigns identified were launched by brands that were active throughout the observation period. Thus, we assume that our data do not suffer from survivorship bias. In total, this process produced a set of 27,203 tweets posted by 18,530 unique X/Twitter accounts related to 15 different campaigns (see Table F2a & F2b in Web Appendix F for details on the campaigns included).

Dependent Variable (Consumer Sentiment)

We used IBM's Watson Tone Analyzer, a well-trained tool for analyzing short texts (Agrawal & An, 2012; Davvetas et al., 2024; Dessì et al., 2019; Gundecha, 2016; IBM, 2024; Li et al., 2009; Wang & Pal, 2015), to compute the sentiment conveyed in tweets to measure consumers' responses to the campaigns. The generated sentiment scores ranged from -1 (indicating negative sentiment in the tweet) to $+1$ (indicating positive sentiment in the tweet; $M = 0.51$ $SD = 0.39$). Prior research has also used tweets' sentiment as a proxy for consumer responses to brands (e.g., Berger et al., 2020; Humphreys & Wang, 2018; Kübler et al., 2020).

Independent Variable (Activism Timing)

We operationalized activism timing by chronologically ordering the campaigns. We then computed an ordinal variable to reflect the order in which the brands launched their campaigns. Specifically, we coded the first LGBT+ campaign on the timeline as 1 and the campaigns that followed as 2–15. The higher the number, the more the brand is considered a late brand rather than an early brand.

Control Variables

First, in line with previous research (Borah et al., 2020), we included brand reputation as a control variable in our analysis, coded as 1 if the brand was on the Interbrand 100 list in the year of the campaign and 0 otherwise. Second, we use the value of 1 if the data source for a campaign is WARC and 2 if the data source is LexisNexis. Third, we included number of likes ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 72.11$) and number of retweets ($M = 0.05$, $SD = 0.69$) that each post received as control variables in the analysis. Fourth, we included the number of followers ($M = 30,017.16$, $SD = 252,187.5$) and the number of friends ($M = 3,428.98$, $SD = 21,410.47$) of the X/Twitter user who posted the content as control variables. Fifth, we accounted for the acceptability of LGBT+ relationships in the United States for each year (Brenan, 2024). Finally, we included a variable that takes the value 1 if the campaign also includes the transgender community and the value 0 if it mainly focuses on same-sex couples, to capture possible effects of different types of sexuality in advertising (Daskalopoulou et al., 2024). Web Appendix F lists all the campaigns coded as 1 and 0.

Empirical Testing and Results

We used a linear regression with robust error estimation to investigate the predicted relationships among the variables using STATA version 18, given the count nature of our dependent variable (consumer sentiment as a proxy for consumer responses). As our data fall across several years, we used a time-series format in STATA, with date and clock as the time unit. To test our prediction about the relationship between activism timing and consumer sentiment (i.e., early brands generate more positive consumer sentiment than late brands), we regressed consumer sentiment to our variable for activism timing, which takes higher values the later the brand launched a LGBT+-related brand activism campaign. The results show a negative relationship between the extent to which a brand is late and consumer sentiment ($b = -0.026$, $SE = 0.001$, $p <$

.001), confirming H1 that consumers respond more favorably to a brand that supports the LGBT+ community earlier (see Model 1 in Table F3 in Web Appendix F). These results persist when we include the control variables: whether the brand is listed on the Interbrand 100, the data source, acceptability of LGBT+ relationships in the United States in that year (Brenan, 2024), transgender community inclusion, the number of likes, the number of retweets, the number of followers, and the number of friends (see Model 2 in Table F3 and Figure F1 in Web Appendix F). The results also replicate when we include separate year dummies for the period 2010–2022, with 2010 as the baseline year.

Brands that showed their support for the LGBT+ community early in the timeline received more positive consumer responses than brands that showed their support later. These results hold when we control for general sentiment toward the LGBT+ community, the number of likes and retweets, and the number of followers and friends of the user posting the content, as well as across the WARC and LexisNexis data.

Discussion

Overall, the results provide initial support for H1 using real-world field data and real online consumer responses to actual LGBT+ brand activism campaigns. We acknowledge the exploratory nature of this study, based on the correlational technique and the statistical impossibility of drawing any causal inference between activism timing (early vs. late) and consumer responses. Moreover, as we noted previously, some campaigns may be missing from our list. However, we employed a rigorous search process involving two major databases for news and campaigns. Thus, we are confident that the campaigns included in the dataset were relevant, received media attention, and were influential on consumers. In the next studies, we focus on addressing the limitations of this study (i.e., lack of causal inference and selection bias)

by testing the effects in experimental settings. For example, we replicate this main effect in a consumer choice study (reported in Web Appendix C), in which consumers significantly favored the brand when it acted early (vs. late) ($b = 1.059$, $SE = 0.32$, $p < .001$). While inclusion of the transgender community in a campaign has a significant effect on the dependent variable ($b = -0.026$, $SE = 0.001$, $p < .001$), it does not affect the main relationship between activism timing and consumer sentiment. However, for completeness, in Web Appendix F, we provide additional analyses that focus on the transgender community (vs. not) in the campaigns and how this inclusion affects our main results.

STUDY 2: MODERATING EFFECT OF THE BRAND'S AVAILABLE RESOURCES

In Study 2, we test an important boundary condition—namely, whether a brand's available financial resources to sustain LGBT+ activism influences consumers' perceptions of brand effort and, in turn, brand attitudes.

Method

We recruited 443 U.S. American participants from Prolific (42.7% female, 55.5% male, 1.1% nonbinary; $M_{age} = 36.65$ years) who took part in the study in exchange for \$1.00. We randomly assigned participants to one condition in a 2 (activism timing: early vs. late) \times 2 (available financial resources: less vs. more) between-subjects design. Participants read about the (fictitious) brand Reclaus, which recently received coverage for its activism of LGBT+ issues. The manipulation of activism timing (early vs. late) included portraying the brand either as a pioneer or a follower in its support of the LGBT+ community. As a manipulation of the available financial resources, participants read that “The company generated a significant amount [only a modest amount] of profits during the last financial year” and that the CEO of Reclaus stated, “We have a large amount of resources, so we take on this challenge based on the resources we

can devote. [We don't have many resources, but we take on this challenge based on the resources we can devote].” We provide the full stimuli in Web Appendix G.

Next, participants responded on a two-item 7-point Likert scale related to brand effort ($\alpha = .96$; e.g., “Reclus has put a lot of effort into providing LGBTQ+ community support”; adapted from Mathur et al., 2012) and a three-item 7-point bipolar brand attitude scale ($\alpha = .92$; e.g., dislike/like very much). Participants also completed two manipulation checks on 7-point bipolar scales: activism timing (“In terms of its stance on LGBTQ+ issues, Reclus is a...”; 1 = follower, 7 = pioneer) and the available financial resources of the brand (“Reclus is...”; 1 = low in resources, 7 = high in resources).

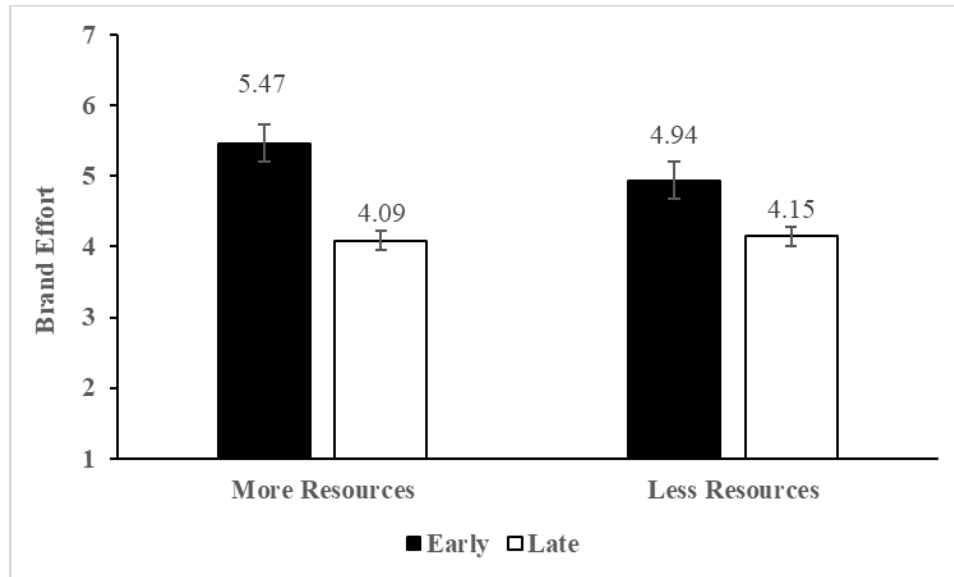
Results

The manipulation check confirmed that participants in the early activism timing condition significantly viewed the brand as supporting the LGBT+ community earlier than participants in the late activism timing condition ($M_{\text{early}} = 5.95$, $SD = 1.40$ vs. $M_{\text{late}} = 2.39$, $SD = 1.71$; $F(1, 442) = 571.62$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.27$). Similarly, participants in the more available resources condition reported that the brand had a higher amount of resources than participants in the less available resources condition ($M_{\text{more_res}} = 5.95$, $SD = 1.34$ vs. $M_{\text{less_res}} = 2.45$, $SD = 1.35$; $F(1, 422) = 746.66$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.60$). Thus, the manipulations worked as intended.

Brand Effort. A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) on brand effort revealed a significant main effect of LGBT+ activism timing ($M_{\text{early}} = 5.21$, $SD = 1.33$ vs. $M_{\text{late}} = 4.12$, $SD = 1.60$; $F(1, 442) = 61.04$, $p < .001$, $d = .74$), a marginal main effect of the available resources ($M_{\text{more_res}} = 5.95$, $SD = 1.34$ vs. $M_{\text{less_res}} = 2.45$, $SD = 1.35$; $F(1, 422) = 2.89$, $p = .09$, $d = .16$), and a significant interaction ($M_{\text{early_more_res}} = 5.47$, $SD = 1.21$, $M_{\text{late_more_res}} = 4.09$, $SD = 1.63$ vs. $M_{\text{early_less_res}} = 4.94$, $SD = 1.41$, $M_{\text{late_less_res}} = 4.15$, $SD = 1.58$; $F(1, 442) = 4.53$, $p = .034$, $\eta^2 =$

.01; see Figure 2). A planned contrast revealed that, compared with participants in the late-with-more-resources condition, participants in the early-with-more-resources condition reported higher levels of brand effort ($M_{\text{early_more_res}} = 5.47$, $SD = 1.21$ vs. $M_{\text{late_less_res}} = 4.09$, $SD = 1.63$; $t(439) = 7.05$, $p < .001$, $d = .67$), in support of H3.

Figure 2 Results of Activism Timing and Financial Resources on Brand Effort in Study 2



Brand Attitudes. A two-way ANOVA on brand attitudes revealed a significant main effect only of activism timing ($M_{\text{early}} = 5.07$, $SD = 1.21$ vs. $M_{\text{late}} = 4.45$, $SD = 1.26$; $F(1, 442) = 27.34$, $p < .001$, $d = .50$). Neither the available resources ($F(1, 442) = .951$, $p = .330$) nor the interaction effect ($F(1, 442) = .000$, $p = .992$) was significant.

Moderated Mediation Analysis. A moderated mediation (PROCESS Model 7) shows a significant indirect effect ($ab = .11$, $SE = .05$; 95% CI = [.01, .22]). Consumers perceived early brands as more effortful than late brands, which in turn led to higher brand attitudes. Furthermore, the effect was significantly stronger for brands with a large number of resources ($b = .25$, $SE = .05$; 95% CI = [.16, .36]) than for brands with a small number of resources ($b = .15$, $SE = .04$; 95% CI = [.07, .24]). Overall, the results of Study 2 lend support to H2, as effort

mediates the effect of activism timing and brand attitudes. Furthermore, the findings of Study 2 support also H3, as consumers perceive brands that support the LGBT+ community early as more effortful when they have a higher amount of available financial resources.

STUDY 3: ROBUSTNESS OF THE PIONEERING ADVANTAGE VERSUS BANDWAGON EFFECT

In line with our predictions, a brand's early support of the LGBT+ community is met with consumer appreciation. Our findings confirm that the pioneering advantage effect extends to scenarios in which early support involves social risks due to the divisive nature of the cause. To enhance the ecological validity of our findings, Study 2 operationalized early brands with attributes such as being the "first" in a specific context (e.g., in a local area) to support the LGBT+ community. While this increased the realism of the scenarios and followed the approaches in traditional pioneering advantage literature, we conducted Study 3 to rule out any potential confounding factors. Here, we disentangle the effects of the pioneering advantage (early vs. late brand) and the bandwagon effect (few vs. many brands), to scrutinize the robustness of our main effect of activism timing while considering the bandwagon effect as a potential alternative explanation for our observed outcomes.

Method

We recruited 441 U.S. American participants from Prolific (39.2% female, 59.2% male, 1.1% nonbinary, 0.5% prefer not to say, $M_{\text{age}} = 42.74$ years) who took part in the study in exchange for \$1.00. We randomly assigned participants to one condition in a 2 (activism timing: early vs. late) \times 2 (number of brands joining the LGBT+ support: few vs. many) between-subjects experiment.

Participants read a scenario (see Web Appendix H for the stimuli) about Food Market, a fictitious grocery store brand. To manipulate the activism timing, in the article, participants read how Food Market was one of the brands that declared support for the LGBT+ community early (vs. late) in the societal debate (similar manipulation to those used in the previous studies). To manipulate the number of brands joining the support of the LGBT+ community, participants also read that at the moment of declaring its support, Food Market was among the few (vs. many) brands that joined the cause.

After reading the scenario, participants filled out the same two-item measure of brand effort ($\alpha = .96$) as in Study 2. Participants also filled out the same three-item scale as in Study 2 for attitudes ($\alpha = .95$) and one purchase intention item (“How likely are you to buy the product or services of the Food Market brand?” 7-point scale; 1 = extremely unlikely, 7 = extremely likely). Finally, participants completed the manipulation checks, each on a 7-point scale: “In terms of its stance on LGBTQ+ issues, Food Market is getting involved in the debate: 1 = Early – 7 = Late” and “Food Market is joining the LGBTQ+ debate together with: 1 = A few other brands – 7 = Many other brands.”

Results

The results of a two-way ANOVA for the manipulation check confirmed that participants in the early activism timing condition viewed the brand as acting earlier than participants in the late activism timing condition ($M_{\text{early}} = 2.41$, $SD = 1.67$ vs. $M_{\text{late}} = 5.37$, $SD = 1.60$; $F(1, 441) = 360.87$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.81$). We found no significant effect for the number of brands engaging in LGBT+ activism or for the interaction effect. Similarly, participants in the condition in which Food Market engaged in LGBT+ activism with many brands reported so on the manipulation check measure significantly more than those who read that Food Market engaged in activism

with only a few other brands ($M_{\text{few}} = 3.16$, $SD = 2.04$ vs. $M_{\text{many}} = 5.32$, $SD = 1.72$; $F(1, 441) = 146.66$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.15$). We found a similarly significant main effect of activism timing ($M_{\text{few}} = 3.95$, $SD = 2.20$ vs. $M_{\text{many}} = 4.52$, $SD = 2.11$; $F(1, 441) = 10.26$, $p < .001$, $d = .30$) but no significant interaction effect ($F < 1$, $p > .9$).

Brand Effort. The two-way ANOVA showed only a significant main effect of activism timing on perceived effort. Participants in the early activism timing condition perceived the brand as having put more effort into the campaign than the brand in the late timing condition ($M_{\text{early}} = 5.35$, $SD = 1.33$ vs. $M_{\text{late}} = 4.46$, $SD = 1.66$; $F(1, 441) = 38.75$, $p < .001$, $d = .59$). We found no significant effect for the number of brands supporting the LGBT+ community ($F < 1$, $p > .5$) or a significant interaction effect ($F < 1$, $p > .3$).

Brand Attitudes. Participants had also higher attitudes toward the brand acting early than toward the brand acting late ($M_{\text{early}} = 5.02$, $SD = 1.59$ vs. $M_{\text{late}} = 4.66$, $SD = 1.58$; $F(1, 441) = 5.63$, $p = .018$, $d = .23$). Again, we found no significant effect of the number of brands joining the campaign ($F < 1$, $p > .4$) or a significant interaction effect ($F < 1$, $p > .3$).

Purchase Intention. Finally, participants declared a higher purchase intention for the brand acting early than for the brand acting late ($M_{\text{early}} = 5.04$, $SD = 1.85$ vs. $M_{\text{late}} = 4.60$, $SD = 1.87$; $F(1, 441) = 6.06$, $p = .014$, $d = .23$). Again, we found no significant effect of the number of brands joining the campaign ($F < 1$, $p > .5$) or a significant interaction effect ($F < 1$, $p > .4$).

Mediation Analysis. We next performed a mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 4, 95% CIs, 10,000 bootstrap resamples) to test our hypothesis. In line with H2, the results show a significant mediation effect. Being early (vs. late) in supporting the LGBT+ community affects the brand effort, which in turn influences consumers' brand attitudes (indirect effect: $ab = .42$, $SE = .08$; 95% CI = [.58, .288]). The results for purchase intention mirror those for attitude

(indirect effect: $ab = .45$, $SE = .09$; 95% CI = [.64, .29]). We provide more detailed results in Web Appendix I.

Discussion

Taken together, the results of this study provide support for our hypothesized relationship (H2). Supporting the LGBT+ community early, rather than late, enhances consumer perceptions of a brand's effort toward LGBT+ activism. Thus, this early support positively influences effort perceptions, subsequently improving consumer attitudes toward the brand and increasing purchase intention. Notably, the effect remains robust regardless of whether the brand acts together with few or many other brands, ruling out the bandwagon effect as an alternative explanation.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Despite more brands declaring allyship with the LGBT+ community (Montecchi et al., 2024; Ruggs et al., 2018), many still hesitate to publicly announce their stance because of the issue's polarizing nature (Bhagwat et al., 2020; CMO Survey, 2023b; Hydock et al., 2020). Our research examines whether a pioneering advantage (e.g., Carpenter & Nakamoto, 1989) exists for early LGBT+ activism (Montecchi et al., 2024; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Across our set of studies, we find that early brand campaigns receive more favorable consumer responses. The relationship between activism timing and consumer response is mediated by perceived brand effort and influenced by financial resources. In addition, the effect is driven by pioneering advantage (early vs. late) rather than the bandwagon effect (few vs. many).

Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the traditional literature on the pioneering advantage (Lieberman & Montgomery, 1988; Mueller, 1997), LGBT+-related marketing (Montecchi et al., 2024;

Oakenfull, 2013; Patel & Feng, 2021), inclusion and allyship-focused brand activism (Ruggs et al., 2018; Spielmann et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022), and available resources (Hunt & Morgan, 1996). First, in the context of products and services, traditional pioneering advantage research demonstrates that early market entry benefits brands through favorable consumer attitudes, perceived technological leadership, asset preemption, consumer switching costs, and market share (Carpenter & Nakamoto, 1989; Kamins et al., 2000; Kardes & Kalyanaram, 1992; Lieberman & Montgomery, 1988; Mueller, 1997). Extending this work to modern advertising, we show that pioneering advantages exist in the realm of brand activism campaigns.

Second, while recent research has examined consumer reactions to brands' activism response times in the BLM context (Nam et al., 2023), our study focuses on the timing of activism campaigns supporting the LGBT+ community. Unlike the emerging literature (e.g., Nam et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022), we explore pioneering advantages from a broader scope, without focusing on brands' reaction to specific events. Furthermore, we contribute to prior work (Wang et al., 2022) by demonstrating that pioneering advantages persist regardless of the number of supporting brands, indicating that these advantages can manifest in polarizing contexts such as LGBT+ activism, beyond potential bandwagon effects.

Third, our study contributes to the LGBT+ marketing (Montecchi et al., 2024; Oakenfull, 2013; Patel & Feng, 2021) and allyship-related brand activism (Spielmann et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022) literature. We focus on brands' public support of the LGBT+ community, a particularly important topic amid growing backlash against such campaigns. This is exemplified by the Bud Light incident involving a transgender model and comes as LGBT+ rights groups urge brands not to abandon the cause (Wareham, 2023). We show that brands gain a pioneering advantage by supporting the LGBT+ community early, as consumers perceive greater effort in championing

this marginalized group. Thus, our research introduces brand effort as a novel mediator to the activism literature (e.g., Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2020; Nam et al., 2023) explaining the relationship between activism timing and consumer responses.

Finally, we explore brand-related factors affecting consumer responses to activism (Hydock et al., 2020), identifying financial resources dedicated to LGBT+ causes as a boundary condition for activism timing effects. The pioneering advantage is enhanced for brands with substantial financial resources. However, this condition does not affect late brands, which consumers may perceive as exploiting the LGBT+ community for commercial gain, diminishing the impact of financial resources (Vredenburg et al., 2020). In summary, our findings provide insights for brands navigating the complexities of LGBT+ activism, highlighting the benefits of early support and the critical role of perceived brand effort and financial resources.

Practical Implications for Brand Managers & Advertisers

Brands invest millions of dollars in campaigns to demonstrate their support for the LGBT+ community through various outlets, including television ads, social media ads, and press releases. However, many of these campaigns fail to exert a positive impact on consumers because of misrepresentation, underrepresentation, and stereotyping of the target population (Northey et al., 2020) or perceptions of insincerity and low effort (Shepherd et al., 2021). In addition, many brands are conservative in showing support for these groups out of fear of boycotts and backlash. Together, these issues present a challenge for brands on how to create an effective communication strategy.

Our findings offer actionable guidance for brand managers on enhancing activism strategies and consumer attitudes. First, we suggest that pioneering brands should pay close attention to the timing of their activism—explicitly stating their support for the LGBT+

community early on. Doing so would signal the brand's effort in supporting activism causes. Consumers' perceptions of effort are crucial in how they respond to brand activism, especially LGBT+ causes. Consumers can distinguish between brands that make a genuine effort and those engaging in surface-level actions. Brands that invest time and resources, particularly early on, signal a strong commitment, building authentic relationships. Promoting these early efforts through transparent communication can amplify the brand's message and demonstrate long-term support.

Second, to further amplify the pioneering advantage, early brands should also communicate the financial resources they plan to invest in the campaign. Managers of companies with late activism timing or fewer resources should find other ways to demonstrate their efforts to help the LGBT+ community. Highlighting these efforts in advertising campaigns portrays the brand as genuinely committed to the cause, fostering a sense of belonging among marginalized consumers (Harmeling et al., 2021).

Third, for brands entering the LGBT+ activism space later need to emphasize and communicate their efforts through meaningful actions rather than just symbolic gestures. This could involve funding LGBT+ organizations or supporting policies that directly benefit the community. Demonstrating genuine involvement and investment helps avoid perceptions of "rainbow washing" and fosters consumer trust. To test this, we conducted a post hoc study and report the results in Web Appendix J (N = 604; U.S. American participants from Prolific; 42.2% female, 44.5% male; $M_{\text{age}} = 37.59$ years). In summary, while early brands have an advantage in showing proactive support, all brands must ensure their audiences view their activism as sincere and effortful, regardless of timing.

Limitations and Future Research

We provide both theoretical and empirical evidence for the impact of activism timing (early vs. late) on consumer responses, demonstrating that early support for the LGBT+ community results in more favorable consumer reactions. While Study 1 primarily offers correlational evidence, subsequent studies address this limitation through an experimental approach. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that the relationship between activism timing and consumer responses may vary depending on consumer, brand, and campaign characteristics.

While Study 1 controlled for LGBT+ activism campaigns focusing on specific subgroups within the LGBT+ spectrum (see Web Appendix F for details), our experimental studies do not differentiate between these groups (e.g., the transgender community). Research has shown that consumers' responses can vary when they are exposed to different subgroups of the LGBT+ community (Montecchi et al., 2024; Northey et al., 2020). Although we demonstrate (Study 1; see Web Appendix F for details) that the pioneering effect of activism timing persists regardless of the campaign's subgroup focus (same-sex couples vs. the transgender community), our initial findings suggest that this effect can be amplified or diminished depending on the subgroup targeted. Further research is necessary to clarify these nuances. We encourage future studies to explore these differences in greater depth.

In addition, our studies primarily conveyed brand actions through text, such as press releases or newspaper articles. Future research could examine the influence of different communication mediums, such as text versus visual formats (Northey et al., 2020), in representing various groups within the LGBT+ community.

Although our research focuses on the LGBT+ community, future studies could examine whether our findings apply to other marginalized groups and causes (e.g., BLM, #MeToo, Planned Parenthood) or in countries other than the United States and United Kingdom. Our

research advances the exploration of consumers' responses to LGBT+ activism timing and may encourage further research on the drivers of brand activism and factors that enhance consumer responses to brands championing social causes.

Our work contributes to the traditional literature on pioneering advantage and brand activism by highlighting the impact of activism timing on consumer responses through the novel mediator of brand effort. Future research could explore other mediators, such as brand authenticity, that are well-established in influencing consumer behavior and attitudes (Biraglia et al., 2023; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Nunes et al., 2021). Including these mediators could provide deeper insights into the relationship between activism timing and consumer responses.

Finally, while our study focuses on contemporary consumer responses, it also opens an interesting avenue for future research on longitudinal shifts in cause perception and pioneering advantages. For example, while a brand's historical pioneering might diminish in relevance for newer consumers, its ongoing, visible effort may shape these consumers' perceptions of the brand.

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