

LONG TERM IMPLICATIONS OF A PANDEMIC ON STRATEGIC BRAND MARKETING AND CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY(CSR)

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ABSTRACT

This study is designed to explore strategic brand marketing efforts and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives resulting from the pandemic. A survey was administered to Generation Z and Millennials analyzing top brands from Interbrand's Best Global Brands 2022. The seven top brands selected for analysis were Apple, Amazon, Coca Cola, Disney, Nike, McDonalds, and Starbucks. Most of the participants were recruited through Cloud Research's Prime Panel during February of 2023 and linear regression models were employed for analyses. This study provided significant results into the critical importance of understanding the long-term effects of the pandemic on consumers' expectations of marketing and CSR efforts and the impact on consumer brand loyalty, brand trust and brand equity.

Keywords: COVID-19, Strategic Brand Marketing, Corporate Social Responsibility, Brand Equity, Brand Loyalty, Brand Trust, Generation Z and Millennials.

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic represents one of the most significant environmental changes in the modern marketing history, which has significantly impacted corporate social responsibility (CSR) and basic marketing and branding strategies (Balis, 2021). Marketers cannot ignore this pivotal global reality and most marketers agree that the marketing strategies developed and used during the COVID-19 pandemic will be important opportunities for their companies over the long term (Feldhaeuser, 2021; Moorman et al, 2021). The pandemic also truly challenged brand loyalty. As consumers increasingly demand greater personalization, companies will need to use more data and intelligence to sharpen their decision-making and drive greater relevance in their customer interactions to build stronger human connections to their brands (He and Harris, 2020; Balis, 2021).

Further, consumers, particularly Generation Z and Millennials, are demanding that businesses contribute to solving societal challenges and environmental problems while also being authentic and truthful in their strategic branding efforts (Kotler et al, 2021). This involves not only CSR initiatives, but also brand activism, where companies position themselves on social, political, and environmental issues that are not directly related to their business activity (Herzberg and Rudeloff, 2022). Therefore, to explore the long-term implications of strategic brand marketing and social responsibility efforts resulting from the pandemic, this study will implement a survey administered to Generation Z and Millennials analyzing top brands from Interbrand's Best Global Brands 2022.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Covid-19 and Strategic Brand Marketing Implications

As previously stated, The Covid-19 pandemic represents one of the most significant environmental changes in the modern marketing history, which has significantly impacted corporate social responsibility (CSR) and basic marketing and branding strategies (Balis, 2021). It was evident that 2020 was a year like no other and in 2021, companies had to redefine their strategies in terms of marketing and branding and businesses are still adapting and re-creating the new normal business strategy. Due to Covid-19, companies had to be reactive instead of proactive as marketers navigated this uncharted new business environment. It is clear the pandemic has redefined the efforts that marketers must implement to develop strategic advantages in the marketplace and to connect with consumers.

In today's dynamic business environment, corporations must recognize that their stakeholders, especially younger consumers who were greatly impacted by the pandemic, have higher expectations and are demanding more from businesses in terms of being ethical and socially responsible (e.g., Golob and Partnar, 2019). According to the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report, 48% of respondents stated that their brand choices have changed in the last few years because of how a brand responded to Covid-19. And 62% of Generation Z stated that they want to work with brands to address societal issues (Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report, 2022). On CNBC's Closing Bell, Nike's CEO John Donahoe said the brand is "really focused" on attracting young consumers right now because they want "the most innovative products and wants brands that are globally relevant" (Hartmans, 2023).

Millennials, also known as Generation Y, were born between 1981 and 1996, ages 27 to 42 in 2023, represent about 25% of the US population (eMarketer, 2023). Millennials tend to purchase from brands that are socially responsible, and they will continue to be loyal to a brand if it benefits a cause or supports those in need. However, Millennials will stop purchasing a brand if it behaves unethically (Shetty et al, 2019). Millennials spending power in 2022 was approximately \$65 billion (Wunderman Thompson, 2023). However, the younger generation, Generation Z, has spending power of almost \$360 billion according to Forbes (2023). Further Generation Z will soon become "the most pivotal generation of consumers" and many will have large spending power by 2026 (eMarketer, 2023).

Generation Z consists of anyone born from 1997 to 2012 and makes up approximately 27% of the US population (Business Insider, 2023). Further businesses are trying to determine relevant marketing strategies to connect and engage with this younger generation. According to a 2017 Cone Gen Z CSR Study, 94% of Gen Z expect companies to address social and environmental issues and 63% of all respondents stated they would give socially responsible businesses the benefit of the doubt during a crisis. According to an interview with Generation Z consumers, "If a member of Gen Z does not agree with the morals of a company, many of them will boycott the products completely and get their friends to do so as well" (Fromm, 2022). This generation, which was critically impacted by the pandemic, is also socially and environmentally responsible, valuing diversity and equality, and aligning with brands that support those values and beliefs

(Fromm, 2022). If businesses want to sell to Generation Z, they must change first. This includes being authentic and socially responsible (Fromm, 2022).

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Brand Activism

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) as defined by Dahlsrud (2006), includes five dimensions, which are social, environmental, voluntariness, economic and stakeholders. The social and environmental dimension involves contributing to a better society and a cleaner environment; voluntariness is based upon actions focusing on ethics and values, beyond legal obligations; and economic refers to contributions to economic development. The stakeholder can be internal or external constituents, but for this study, the stakeholder focus is on the external stakeholder, the consumer, specifically Millennials and Generation Z.

Marketers recognize that corporate social responsibility (CSR) improves a company's image by focusing on high ethical standards and doing good things in the community, which fosters a level of trust in the company and creates meaningful bonds between the corporation and its stakeholders (SPI Group 25, 2021). Companies engaging in CSR-related branding activities must take an integrative approach and act on CSR expectations and issues and concentrate on relational brand elements and outcomes (Golob and Partnar, 2019). Further, to connect with consumers on a deeper level and focus on what is important to them, companies must not only engage in corporate social responsibility initiatives, but also consider going further by investing in the emerging marketing strategy of brand activism (e.g., Sarkar and Kotler, 2020).

Brand activism, according to Sarkar and Kotler (2020), “consists of business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society” (p. 554). Brand activism goes beyond the concept of CSR, which is more values-driven and a long-term corporate strategy (Sarkar and Kotler, 2020, Vrendenburg et al, 2020). Further, brand activism is an emerging strategic marketing initiative that is more of a reactive strategy where corporations position themselves on social, political, and environmental issues that are not directly related to the core business activities (Moorman 2020; Sarkar and Kotler 2018, Sarkar and Kotler, 2020). The critical characteristics of authentic brand activism that set brands apart from competitors are being purpose oriented and values-driven, focusing on controversial and progressive issues, and embodying message and practice (Vrendenburg et al, 2020).

For example, iconic American brands, such as Coke, Disney, Starbucks, Nike, and Delta Airlines have taken positions on controversial issues from gun control, immigration, abortion, LGBTQ and voting laws. Further when corporations take these positions, the activism can become an integral and inseparable part of their brand (Poynton, 2021).

Disney, in response to pressure from stakeholders, both employees and consumers, publicly took a stand against The Parental Rights in Education *Act* (HB 1557), commonly referred to as the "*Don't Say Gay*" *Bill*. In a Facebook post in 2022, Disney wrote that the company opposes “any legislation that infringes on basic human rights” and stands “in solidarity” with LGBTQ+ employees “who make their voices heard today and every day” (CBS, 2022). Disney's former

CEO, Chapek also stated Disney would discontinue political donations in Florida and provide support for advocacy groups fighting similar legislation in other states (The Guardian, 2022).

In 2020, Coca Cola exhibited brand activism when the company displayed a message on the Times Square digital billboard in New York City saying “Together We Must take action to start change, demand justice, admit we can do more, stand as one, right wrongs, listen and create a better future and end racism. The sentiment was shared in social media as well, and “Together We Must” has become our pledge and our push for our company and our brands” (The Coca Cola Company, 2023). Further Ben & Jerry’s campaigns on issues related to food ethics including non-GMO and animal wellbeing, which aligns with their brand purpose of values-based sourcing (The Marketing Society, 2023).

According to the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report, 62% of Generation Z and 61% of Millennials believe that brands should make it easier for them to see what their values and positions on important issues are when they are about to make a purchase. This leads to our first exploratory research question:

RQ1: What is the impact of CSR/ brand activism on consumer purchase intention?

Consumer Perceived Ethically (CPE), Brand Loyalty, Brand Trust/Esteem and Brand Equity

The concept of consumer perceived ethically (CPE) was first developed in the research literature by Brunk (2010a), which posits that if a company has respect for morals and values, is socially responsible, avoids causing harm, and carefully evaluates the positive and negative impact of its behavior before acting, then consumers tend to perceive a brand as ethical. Brunk (2010a) also concluded that the most influential dimension of consumers’ ethical perceptions of the company and its brands is the company’s stance on corporate social responsibility (CSR). More recent studies have concluded that brand activism also influences consumers’ ethical perceptions of the brand (e.g., Sarkar and Kotler, 2020).

While there are a considerable number of studies on CSR, the research on specific CSR effects related to branding is not as extensive (e.g., Golob and Partnar, 2019). Further, studies on brand activism are limited and more research analysis into this evolving concept is required. In addition, Eyada (2020) recommended future research studies focusing on societal issues and concerns specially related to certain brands.

Keller (2003) defines brand loyalty under the concept of “brand resonance” which refers to the nature of customer-brand relationship and the extent to which customers feel that they can relate to the brand. Customers, with true brand resonance, have a high degree of loyalty and want to interact with the brand and share their experiences with others and recommend the brand to others (e.g., Aaker, 2004; Keller, 2003). Research has proven that CSR initiatives have a positive impact on brand loyalty while also serving as a critical tool in building and maintaining customer loyalty (e.g., Lu et al, 2020; Fandos-Roig et al., 2021). Further studies concluded that CSR positively enhances customer brand loyalty (Lin and Chung, 2019; Lee, 2019). This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: Perceptions that a brand is CSR/Brand Activist has a positive influence on brand loyalty

According to Fandos-Roig et al (2021), CSR is critical to brand trust. Ahn and Kwon (2020) concluded that CSR initiatives increase the consumer's level of brand trust. Further, Dzapina et al. (2019) discovered that CSR activities develop a bond between customers and brands by increasing brand credibility. In the 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer Report, 62% reported that businesses are the only institutions that are only trusted. And business is now the sole institution that respondents perceive as both ethical and competent. Further, 63% indicated they buy or advocate for brands based on their beliefs and values, which includes both CSR and brand activism. This leads to our second hypothesis:

H2: Perceptions that a brand is CSR/Brand Activist has a positive influence on brand trust/esteem.

Brand equity as defined by Keller (1993) is “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand” (p. 8). Research has shown that corporate social responsibility has a positive effect on brand equity (e.g., Hur et al, 2014). In our current dynamic business environment, consumers, especially the younger generations, are also demanding that brands take a stand on sociopolitical issues. Further when brands align their activist messaging, purpose, and values with prosocial corporate initiatives and strategies, they engage in authentic brand activism, which leads to the greatest potential for social change and the largest gains in brand equity (Vrendenburg et al, 2020). This leads to the exploration of our final hypothesis:

H3: Perceptions that a brand is CSR/Brand Activist has a positive influence on brand equity.

METHODOLOGY

Procedure and Sample

To test the proposed hypotheses (See Figure 1) and the research question, an online Qualtrics survey using Likert scales was administered during a one-week period in February 2023. A research company, Cloud Research, was employed to recruit most of the participants (250 total) through its Prime Panels, which provides access to quality participants with demographic targeting. The remainder of the participants were recruited through advertising courses at UNF. Stratified sampling by age group was employed in the sampling process to include only participants that were Millennials or Generation Z. After cleaning up the data by excluding surveys that were incomplete, a final sample of 280 valid responses were utilized in the data analysis.

Figure 1: The Hypothesized Model



Questionnaire and Measures

A 5-point Likert scale of importance was utilized to analyze the first research question exploring the impact of CSR/brand activism on purchase intention (See Table 1). The survey questions analyzing the three hypotheses were designed using scale items from the existing literature (See Table 2). The responses were recorded using a 7-point Likert scale of agreement from strongly disagree to strongly agree. There were seven brands selected for analysis from Interbrand’s Best Global Brands, all representing a variety of industries: (1) Apple: Technology; (3) Amazon: E-commerce; (7) Coca Cola: Beverage; (9) Disney: Entertainment; (10) Nike: Sports Apparel; (11) McDonalds: Fast Food, and (51) Starbucks: Coffee Retailer. The corresponding number represents the position on Interbrand’s list and the companies were selected based upon the following criteria: (1) commitment to CSR and/or brand activism initiatives; (2) the consumers’ familiarity with these brands and (3) the representation of various industries.

Table 1: CSR/ Brand Activism and Purchase Intension

Likert Scale Components
How important is it to you that companies you purchase goods or services from do each of the following?
Show concern for societal issues
Show concern for environmental issues
Place emphasis on being trustworthy
Stand for something beyond profit
Have values similar to yours
Help you feel connected to others and your community
Take public stands on social issues
Take public stands on polical issues

Table 2: Brand Scale

Construct Variables
CSR/Brand Activism
This brand is a socially responsible brand (Brunk, 2012).
This brand seems to be environmentally responsible (Walsh and Beatty, 2007).
This brand appears to support good causes (Walsh and Beatty, 2007).
This brand contributes to society (Walsh and Beatty, 2007).
Brand Trust/Esteem:
I trust this brand (Chaudhuri and Holbrook’s, 2001; Lau and Lee, 1999).
This brand is reliable (Villarejo-Ramos and Sanchez-Franco, 2005, Onurlubas and Ozturk (2020).
I respect this brand (Villarejo-Ramos and Sanchez-Franco, 2005).
Brand Loyalty:
I would recommend the product or service to others (Aaker, 2004).
Brand Equity:
Relevance: I can identify with this brand (Swaminathan et al, 2007, Keller, 2011, Kotler et al, 2021).
If I have to choose among different brands offering the same type of service, I would definitely choose this brand (Yasin et al, 2012, Yoo et al, 2000).

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Construct Reliability

Construct reliability for the combined scale items of brand trust and brand equity were assessed through Cronbach’s alpha coefficients and mean values were also calculated (See Table 3). All the Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were higher than the acceptable value of .7, with most of the Cronbach’s alpha coefficients in the .8 and .9 range of good to excellent. High values for Cronbach’s alpha indicate good internal consistency of the items in the scale (George and Mallery, 2003).

Table 3: Construct Reliability and Mean Values

Construct	Items	Mean	Cronbach Alphas
Apple Trust/Esteem	Apple Trust	5.09	.923
	Apple Respect	5.12	
	Apple Reliable	5.28	
Apple Equity	Apple Identify	4.91	.852
	Apple Choose	4.93	

Amazon Trust/Esteem	Amazon Trust	5.55	.916
	Amazon Respect	5.66	
	Amazon Reliable	5.43	
Amazon Equity	Amazon Identify	5.31	.793
	Amazon Choose	5.36	
Coca Cola Trust/Esteem	Coca Cola Trust	5.23	.908
	Coca Cola Respect	5.23	
	Coca Cola Reliable	5.24	
Coca Cola Equity	Coca Cola Identify	5.02	.893
	Coca Cola Choose	5.04	
Disney Trust/Esteem	Disney Trust	5.04	.928
	Disney Respect	5.07	
	Disney Reliable	5.09	
McDonalds Trust/Esteem	McDonalds Trust	4.87	.945
	McDonalds Respect	4.88	
	McDonalds Reliable	4.85	
McDonald's Equity	McDonald's Identify	4.73	.892
	McDonald's Choose	4.68	
Nike Trust/Esteem	Nike Trust	5.15	.917
	Nike Respect	5.16	
	Nike Reliable	5.32	
Nike Equity	Nike Identify	5.06	.892

	Nike Choose	5.01	
Starbucks Trust/ Esteem	Starbucks Trust	5.03	.899
	Starbucks Respect	5.09	
	Starbucks Reliable	5.25	
Starbucks Equity	Starbucks Identify	4.96	.863
	Starbucks Choose	4.95	

Demographics

In terms of the age generation for the sample, 85% were in the age range of 27 to 42, classified as Millennials and 15% were in the age range of 18 to 26, classified as Generation Z. In terms of ethnicity, the sample consisted of 70% White Caucasians; 20% Black/African Americans; 5.7% Hispanic/Latino; 3.2% Asian/Pacific Islander, and .7% Native American. And lastly regarding gender, 62% of the respondents were females and 36% were males.

RQ1

In analyzing the overall research question addressing the impact of CSR/ brand activism on consumer purchase intention, the level of importance was explored for each of the CSR/brand activism components. Analysis of the mean values on the 5-point Likert scale of not very important to extremely important indicated that all factors fall into the moderately important to very important range (See Table 4). Results indicated that trustworthiness is the most important with a mean value of 3.90, followed by beyond profit with a mean value of 3.80 and similar values of 3.62.

Table 4: Results from RQ1

	Mean	SD	SEM
Society	3.29	1.241	.074
Environment	3.50	1.164	.070
Trustworthy	3.95	1.011	.060
Beyond Profit	3.82	1.113	.067
Similar Values	3.60	1.087	.065
Connection	3.43	1.180	.071
Social Issues	3.24	1.323	.079
Political Issues	3.05	1.332	.080

Note. n=280

In analyzing each factor, analysis of the importance of showing concern for societal issues, 44.6% of Millennials and Generation Z indicated it was very important to extremely important, followed by 30.4 % who felt it was only moderately important. Analysis of showing concern for environmental issues, 53.5% indicated it was very important to extremely important, followed by 28% who stated it was moderately important. Regarding emphasis on trustworthiness, 71.4% indicated it was very important to extremely important, and 21% indicated it was moderately important. Sixty five percent of Millennials and Generation Z indicated that it was very important to extremely important that a company stand for something beyond profit, followed by 21% that stated it was moderately important. Regarding similar values, 57.8 % indicated it was very important to extremely important, while 28% stated it was moderately important. Almost 50% of Millennials and Generation Z stated that companies that help you feel connected to others and your community were very important to extremely important, compared to 31% that felt it was moderately important. Further 44.7% stated it was very important to extremely important for companies to take a stand on social issues, while almost 30% said it was only moderately important. And lastly, almost 40% felt that it was very important to extremely important to take a stand on political issues, while 28% felt it was only moderately important.

Regression Analysis

To test the proposed model and the three hypotheses, linear regression analysis was utilized. The scale items for brand trust/esteem and brand equity were combined. The independent variables were the four scale items from the literature representing CSR and brand activism which included evaluation of the brand in terms of being socially responsible (Social), contributing to society (Society), being environmentally responsible (Environment), and supporting good causes (Good Causes). For H1, the dependent variable was brand loyalty.

Results indicated support for H1: Perceptions that a brand is CSR/Brand Activist has a positive influence on brand loyalty. Specifically, findings for Disney, Nike, and Starbucks indicated that all four variables, being socially responsible, contributing to society, being environmentally responsible and supporting good causes all positively influenced brand loyalty with significance levels of $p < .05$. Results for Apple, Amazon and Coca-Cola indicated that being socially responsible and contributing to society positively influenced brand loyalty with significance levels of $p < .05$. And lastly, results for McDonald's indicated that being socially responsible, contributing to society, and being environmentally responsible positively influenced brand loyalty with significance levels of $p < .05$. Analyzing H1 in terms of the beta coefficient, the larger the standardized beta coefficient, the more relative importance it assumes in predicting the dependent variable (Burns et al, 2017). The largest coefficient was Apple Society: $\beta=.475$, followed by McDonalds Society: $\beta=.395$ (See Table 5).

Table 5: H1: Brand Loyalty Supported Variables by Company

	Social	Society	Environment	Good Causes
Apple	$\beta = .243$ $t=3.299$ $p=.001$	$\beta=.475$ $t=7.782$ $p=.000$		
Amazon	$\beta=.475,$ $t=7.782$ $p=.000$	$\beta =.360$ $t=6.450$ $p=.000$		
Coke	$\beta =.349$ $t=4.542$ $p=.000$	$\beta =.292$ $t=3.608$ $p=.000$		
Disney	$\beta =.256$ $t=3.466$ $p=.001$	$\beta =.211$ $t=2.600$ $p=.010$	$\beta =.180$ $t=2.366$ $p=.019$	$\beta =.194$ $t=1.985$ $p=.048$
McDonalds	$\beta=.193,$ $t=2.847$ $p=.005$	$\beta=.395$ $t=5.879$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.167$ $t=2.322$ $p=.021$	
Nike	$\beta=.153$ $t=2.199$ $p=.029$	$\beta=.223$ $t=3.160$ $p=.002$	$\beta=.282$ $t=3.582$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.195$ $t=2.381$ $p=.002$
Starbucks	$\beta=.174$ $t=2.198$ $p=.029$	$\beta=.268$ $t=3.767$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.150$ $t=2.187$ $p=.030$	$\beta=.214$ $t=2.719$ $p=.007$

Note. Blank cells indicate no significance as $p > .05$.

For H2, the dependent variable was brand trust/esteem. Results indicated support for H2: Perceptions that a brand is CSR/Brand Activist has a positive influence on brand trust/esteem. Specifically, findings for Apple, Disney, McDonald's, and Nike indicated that all four variables, being socially responsible, contributing to society, being environmentally responsible and supporting good causes all positively influenced brand trust/esteem with significance levels of $p < .05$. Results for Amazon, and Coca-Cola indicated that three variables, being socially responsible, contributing to society, and supporting good causes all positively influenced brand loyalty with significance levels of $p < .05$. And lastly, results for Starbucks indicated that three variables, being socially responsible, contributing to society, and being environmentally responsible all positively influenced brand loyalty with significance levels of $p < .05$. Analyzing H2 in terms of the beta coefficient, the largest coefficient was Starbucks Society: $\beta=.443$, followed by McDonalds Society: $\beta=.410$ (See Table 6).

Table 6: H2: Brand Trust/ Esteem Supported Variables by Company

	Social	Society	Environment	Good Causes
Apple	$\beta=.250$, $t=4.215$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.391$ $t=7.950$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.155$ $t=2.580$ $p=.010$	$\beta=.153$ $t=2.381$ $p=.018$
Amazon	$\beta=.259$ $t=3.544$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.357$ $t=7.036$ $p=.000$		$\beta=.198$ $t=2.769$ $p=.006$
Coke	$\beta=.271$ $t=4.477$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.360$ $t=5.561$ $p=.000$		$\beta=.216$ $t=3.664$ $p=.000$
Disney	$\beta=.211$ $t=3.591$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.312$ $t=4.820$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.145$ $t=2.399$ $p=.017$	$\beta=.145$ $t=2.399$ $p=.017$
McDonalds	$\beta=.203$ $t=3.657$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.410$ $t=7.441$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.144$ $t=2.435$ $p=.016$	$\beta=.203$ $t=3.415$ $p=.001$
Nike	$\beta=.262$ $t=5.010$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.307$ $t=5.801$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.264$ $t=4.471$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.131$ $t=2.137$ $p=.033$
Starbucks	$\beta=.186$ $t=3.046$ $p=.003$	$\beta=.443$ $t=8.094$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.223$ $t=4.237$ $p=.000$	

Note. Blank cells indicate no significance as $p > .05$.

For H3, the dependent variable was brand equity. Results indicated support for H2: Perceptions that a brand is CSR/Brand Activist has a positive influence on brand trust/esteem. Specifically, findings for McDonald's indicated that all four variables, being socially responsible, contributing to society, being environmentally responsible and supporting good causes all positively influenced brand equity with significance levels of $p < .05$. Results for Amazon, Nike and Starbucks indicated that three variables, being socially responsible, contributing to society, and being environmentally responsible all positively influenced brand equity with significance levels of $p < .05$.

Results for Apple indicated that three variables, being socially responsible, contributing to society, and supporting good causes all positively influenced brand equity with significance levels of $p < .05$. Results for Disney indicated that three variables, being socially responsible, being environmentally responsible and supporting good causes positively influenced brand

equity with significance levels of $p < .05$. And lastly, results for Coca-Cola indicated that only two variables, being socially responsible, and contributing to society positively influenced brand equity with significance levels of $p < .05$. Analyzing H3 in terms of the beta coefficient, the highest coefficients were Starbucks Society: $\beta=.443$; Disney Good Causes: $\beta=.424$, and Amazon Society: $\beta=.404$ (See Table 7).

Table 7: H3: Brand Equity Supported Variables by Company

	Social	Society	Environment	Good Causes
Apple	$\beta=.250$ $t=3.400$ $p=.001$	$\beta=.353$ $t=5.779$ $p=.000$		$\beta=.190$ $t=2.383$ $p=.018$
Amazon	$\beta=.254$ $t=3.680$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.404$ $t=8.409$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.232$ $t=3.171$ $p=.002$	
Coke	$\beta=.279$ $t=3.975$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.363$ $t=4.837$ $p=.000$		
Disney	$\beta=.220$ $t=3.347$ $p=.001$		$\beta=.158$ $t=2.335$ $p=.020$	$\beta=.424$ $t=4.869$ $p=.000$
McDonalds	$\beta=.245$ $t=3.966$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.245$ $t=4.000$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.258$ $t=3.933$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.181$ $t=2.734$ $p=.007$
Nike	$\beta=.309$ $t=5.066$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.165$ $t=2.669$ $p=.008$	$\beta=.305$ $t=4.430$ $p=.000$	
Starbucks	$\beta=.186$ $t=3.046$ $p=.003$	$\beta=.443$ $t=8.094$ $p=.000$	$\beta=.2223$ $t=4.237$ $p=.000$	

Note. Blank cells indicate no significance as $p > .05$.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

For RQ1, results indicated that all the CSR and brand activism factors were important to Millennials and Generation Z as all the mean values were moderately important to very important. Further, trustworthiness was the most important with 71% indicating that it was very to extremely important to them, closely followed by 65% stating the need for businesses to stand

for something beyond profit and almost 58% stating that businesses must align with their values. This supports the findings in the Edelman Trust Report (2023) that businesses are the only trusted institution that has responded to the social and economic consequences of COVID-19. Also, according to Home Depot's SVP/CMO, it is important to look to the long term and really understand the impact of our brand. This includes understanding the brand purpose and creating an emotional connection with the next generation of homeowners. Further she believes that "Consumers will continue to support brands that share their values" (Molly Battin, SVP, CMO, Home Depot, 2023). Brands that aspire to true leadership must not only deliver exceptional experiences for their customers, but are increasingly expected to act with integrity, doing the right thing by people and planet (Interbrand, 2023).

For H1 and brand loyalty, results indicated significance in either three or four variables. Specifically for three of the brands, Disney, Nike, and Starbucks, all four CSR/brand activism variables, being socially responsible, contributing to society, being environmentally responsible and supporting good causes positively influenced brand loyalty. This finding is not surprising as Disney, Nike and Starbucks have all exhibited brand activism (Poynton, 2021). In terms of the highest absolute beta coefficient, Apple Society was the highest ($\beta=.475$), followed by McDonalds Society ($\beta=.395$). This indicates that consumer perceptions that Apple is a socially responsible brand is the most important CSR/brand activism variable in terms of influence on brand loyalty.

Results also support the findings that consumers, particularly Gen Z and millennials, are demanding that businesses contribute to solving societal challenges and environmental problems while also being authentic and truthful in their strategic branding efforts (Kotler et al, 2021). This finding is also in line with previous research CSR initiatives and the positive impact on customer brand loyalty (e.g., Fandos-Roig et al., 2021; Lee, 2019; Lin and Chung, 2019; Lu et al, 2020).

For H2 and brand trust/esteem, results for Apple, Disney, McDonald's, and Nike indicated that all four variables, being socially responsible, contributing to society, being environmentally responsible and supporting good causes all positively influenced brand trust/esteem. In terms of the highest absolute beta coefficient, Starbucks Society was the highest ($\beta=.443$), followed by McDonalds Society ($\beta=.410$). This indicates that consumer perceptions that Starbucks is a socially responsible brand is the most important CSR/brand activism variable in terms of influence on brand trust/esteem.

These findings are consistent with researchers' conclusions that CSR initiatives and brand activism are essential in building consumer brand trust (e.g., Ahn and Kwon, 2020; Fandos-Roig et al, 2021). Further, it supports Sarkar and Kotler (2020) conclusion that brands are increasingly positioning themselves boldly on societal issues. In addition, according to Kotler et al (2021), "Leading companies and their CEOs are expected not only to navigate business topics but also to address social, economic, and political issues. Company brand plays a special role because it can serve as a trust anchor, as a point of orientation" (p.1).

For H3 and brand equity, McDonald's was the only brand with all four variables, being socially responsible, contributing to society, being environmentally responsible and supporting good

causes, positively influencing brand equity. Amazon, Nike, and Starbucks indicated that three variables, being socially responsible, contributing to society, and being environmentally responsible all positively influenced brand equity. In terms of the highest absolute beta coefficient, Starbucks Society was the highest ($\beta=.443$), followed by Disney Good Causes ($\beta=.424$) and Amazon Society ($\beta=.404$). This indicates that consumer perceptions that Starbucks is a socially responsible brand is the most important CSR/brand activism variable in terms of influence on brand equity.

According to Herzberg and Rudeloff's (2022) study, brand activism can increase brand equity with certain risk implications; however, if corporations want to avoid risks, findings also indicate that CSR can increase brand equity similarly. But Vrendenburg et al (2020) concluded that brand activism can lead to the highest increase in brand equity. Further, Herzberg and Rudeloff (2022) conclude that the importance of brand activism is going to increase as more consumers, especially the younger generation, expect companies to take a stand on societal issues and not remain silent.

This study provides practical, long-term implications for marketers in today's dynamic and polarized businesses environment. Consumers' expectations of marketing and strategic branding have evolved and changed due to the pandemic, especially in the younger generations. The younger consumers who were greatly impacted by the pandemic, have higher expectations and are demanding more from businesses in terms of being ethical and socially responsible (e.g., Golob and Partnar, 2019). Marketers had to redefine branding strategies during the pandemic and the findings in the study indicated that CSR activities and brand activism initiatives are important in influencing a brand's loyalty, trust/esteem, and equity within the younger generations. Marketers must realize that brands need to show up differently in 2023 and beyond with the growing importance of authentic, value-driven brands (Rae Wang, Dairy Queen Florida). Further, the findings are consistent with a study conducted by Pew Internet (2020), that concluded like Millennials, Generation Z has also demonstrated a higher commitment to ethical and environmental issues than the older generations. According to Kotler et al (2021), Generation Z, more than previous generations, considers brand activism activities crucial and, they perceive companies as a collaboration partner to bring about change. Therefore, it is critical that marketers understand how to develop relevant branding strategies to effectively connect and engage with this significant younger generation. Finding out how to appeal to Gen Z will take new perspectives.

Secondly, brands will need to be authentic in their CSR and brand activism strategies and stay true to their brand purpose. Purpose has become one of the most influential terms in business in recent years, and its popularity has substantially increased during the global COVID-19 pandemic (Trapp, 2021). Purpose is an organization's denominator that inspires stakeholders to work together to achieve a common goal that provides social good and goes beyond making a profit (Business Roundtable, 2019). This is also in line with stakeholder theory and the view that a company's actions during a crisis are critical as a stakeholders' perceptions, of a quality relationship relies heavily on how an organization behaves during times of crisis (Chang & Shen, 2020). Further according to Qin et al (2022), "In the uncommon occurrence of all companies experiencing the same crisis, such as the global COVID-19 pandemic, organizations'

actions may especially impact stakeholders’ perceptions of purpose-driven organizations” (p.429).

This year and beyond are going to be really challenging for marketers according to Lindsay Morgan, CMO, Pizza Hut, Yum Brands. The issue is how brands are going to be there for their customers and how brands are going to be consistent and provide comfort and ease that is in line with what your brand does (Lindsay Morgan, CMO, Pizza Hut, Yum Brands). Brand activism can necessitate engaging in controversial issues and taking a stand, which can be risky for corporations. Therefore, it is critical that corporations have a strong and clear brand purpose before adopting brand activism strategies as brand credibility can suddenly erode when inconsistencies become apparent (Herzberg and Rudeloff, 2022).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. First, the study only examined seven corporations from the Interbrand 2023 Best Global Brands List. Future research could expand and examine more brands. Secondly, the study was limited in the industry representation and only included technology, e-commerce, beverage, entertainment, sports apparel, fast food, and coffee retailer. Future studies could expand the breadth and include a more industry categories for better representation. And lastly, this study included approximately 300 participants, Millennials and Generation Z over a one- week period. Future research could include more participants and could also compare older and younger generations.

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