

**Fake activism and Moral Conflict in social media:  
Consumer resistance to brand decoupling**

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**Extended Abstract**

The morality of companies is under increasing public scrutiny in contemporary society, particularly in the current age of widespread brand activism. Scholarship on contemporary brand activism has largely examined how consumers react to moral misconduct by brands (Romani et al. 2015; Wannow et al., 2024), engaging in consciousness-raising online conversations and anti-brand movements (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Batista et al., 2022; Gambetti and Biraghi, 2023; Kang and Kirmani, 2024) that hold companies accountable for their actions and values. Despite that, research has thus far neglected how brands and consumers navigate or circumvent moral conflicts. This especially in the context of social media platforms that have emerged as pivotal battlegrounds where this moral confrontation unfolds, serving as arenas for both brand praise and protest.

To gain a deep and nuanced understanding of this shifting moral terrain, we position our study in the exemplar context of tobacco branding. In the nicotine industry, moralizing discourse of praise and protest is magnified, constantly putting tobacco brands into the spotlight. In this context, we build on the notion of “brand decoupling”, which refers to the formal attempt to disconnect a brand from actions that contradict external moral expectations. Brand decoupling occurs with the aim of circumventing moral conflict, eliciting consumers’ identification and emotional affiliation, and eluding public scrutiny.

This study employs a multi-sited netnography through which we captured and interpreted the posts and conversations on Mission Winnow’s platform and website hub, as well as the branded content and the free flows of consumers’ conversations generated around the brand on social media. Mission Winnow by Philip Morris is a novel example of a brand creating an entirely separate brand entity to provide sponsorship, and to associate itself with new brand values (Gambetti et al. 2024).

Findings reveal a broad interchange of moral controversy, acceptance, and opposition discourses on social media. When consumers’ acceptance narratives gain traction, consumers extend their support towards the new brand entity, employing strategies that echo moral rationalization and decoupling. However, when resistance narratives dominate, consumers consciously draw connections between the decoupled brand and the parent brand’s immoral behavior.

Our study reveals how tobacco marketers use evocative and aspirational brand imagery and culturally-resonant brand discourse. Social responses oscillate between devoted brand emotional affiliation and support, on the one hand, and harsh moral critique and

collective backlash on the other. These tensions are nurtured and amplified in social media platforms. This makes tobacco branding a prototypical context through which we may theorize the dynamic interrelationship of brand activism with the back-and-forth of decoupling and recoupling enacted by both brands and consumers as they interactionally navigate moral conflict on social media.

This study expands upon prior research into brand activism and consumers' moral reasoning toward controversial brands, linking the notion of brand decoupling to brand activism discourse and introducing key underexplored aspects like the power of imagery, linguistic creativity, and nostalgia. Moreover, it presents significant implications for a more nuanced understanding of the important interrelationship of brand decoupling and recoupling on social media.

**Keywords:** brand activism, brand decoupling, moral decoupling, moral recoupling, social media, netnography

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