

Activism in the public sector: an experiment with citizens and public employees

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Abstract

Brand activism is a branding initiative towards which even public organisations are opening. The aim of this research is to verify the effectiveness of brand activism initiatives in the public sector for increasing brand credibility, transparency and brand perception. Through a one-factorial subject design administered to employees (n. 124) and citizens (n. 78) of an Italian Municipality, we demonstrate that public brand activism (PBA) initiatives change the perception of public brands in terms of transparency and credibility. Furthermore, our findings suggest that PBA mitigates the importance of transparency in public brand perception, highlighting the potential of PBA for improving public brand reputation.

Keywords: public brand; brand activism; brand perception; credibility; transparency

1. Introduction

Public organisations (e.g., public administrations, universities, healthcare companies) can be defined as organisations that are financed, owned and established to serve the public interest (Wamsley & Zald, 1973). According to Hourie et al. (2015), the public sector, with its public goods (e.g., education, recreation, cleaning services), improves the quality of life and well-being of citizens, thus creating social value. The creation of social value makes it possible to build high levels of legitimacy and trust in the organisation to ensure its survival (Hoggett, 2006). However, constant external pressures and conflicting interests make it difficult for public organisations to gain the support of different stakeholders (Gromark & Melin, 2013). Public trust and credibility in public organisations have been steadily decreasing over time (Dubnick, 1996; Jamal & Bakar, 2021). The difficulty for public organisations to gain the support of different stakeholders (Gromark & Melin, 2013) has pushed public managers towards branding initiatives (Whelan et al., 2010). The literature on public branding is not extensive, but some studies reveal that creating a public brand can increase public awareness, develop a positive reputation, improve effectiveness and generate revenue (Leijerholt, 2017). Brand activism, understood as “corporate efforts to promote, prevent or direct social, political, economic and/or environmental reform with the desire to improve society” (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018, p. 468), is a branding initiative towards which public organisations are also opening up. Local governments have recently promoted gender equality, or boycott initiatives have taken a stand on socio-political issues (e.g., UK local governments in the pro-Palestinian movement for divestment and boycotting of Israel). These social events have enormous social impact and can increase

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public awareness among public stakeholders, creating a strong public brand. Even if public activism is a new paramount component of public government, few studies have investigated the effects of these initiatives on public brand perception. Until now, brand activism has focused mainly on the private sector, and the literature has also gone in this direction. In the public sector, brand activism can reinforce their activism in taking a stand on socio-political issues to improve society and create social value. The aim of this research is to verify the effectiveness of brand activism initiatives in the public sector for increasing brand credibility, brand transparency and brand perception for both citizens and employees.

2. Background

Brand activism, understood as the effort on the part of a company to promote social, political, economic and/or environmental reform with the desire to improve society (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018), has mostly been studied in the private sector (Ahmad et al., 2024; Pimentel et al., 2024). However, activism also occurs in public organisations (e.g., Cooper & Herman, 2019; Cammarota et al., 2024). The public sector is showing an interest in branding-related initiatives, such as brand activism, with the aim of increasing public awareness and involving stakeholders more closely. There are few studies investigating activism in the public sector. Most studies focus on activism in education (Cammarota et al., 2024). In particular, universities are increasingly taking specific actions to address social problems (e.g., LGBTQ+ inequalities and civil rights). The literature speaks here of ‘university activism’ (Cammarota et al., 2024), through which universities act in support of or in opposition to social causes by involving internal and external stakeholders. The literature also speaks of ‘state or municipal activism’, which involves local governments and can have different purposes, such as the promotion of economic justice, gender equality, peace, and ecological sustainability (Cooper & Herman, 2019). For example, Cooper and Herman (2019), speaking of municipal activism, study the participation of UK local governments in the pro-Palestinian movement. Prado et al. (2021) discussed how Brazilian subnational governments carried out strong activism in defense of the environmental agenda as opposed to the conduct adopted by the federal government. They also speak of ‘governmental activism’ when governmental actors join forces with nongovernmental actors in controversial actions against policies they want to prevent or correct (Verhoeven & Duyvendak, 2017). Benavidez Vega (2021) speaks of the ‘judicial activism’ of constitutional courts when they go beyond the mere control of laws and play an active role in their interpretation and application.

To the best of our knowledge, few studies address activism in the public sector. Therefore, while various definitions of brand activism exist, a single definition of public sector activism is lacking. On the basis of the literature on brand activism and the empirical studies conducted thus far, we can define public brand activism as the taking of positions on social, political, economic or environmental issues by public organisations with the aim of influencing public opinion and improving society. Considering the steadily decreasing trust of citizens and employees in the public sector (Dubnick, 1996; Houston & Harding, 2013), public brand activism (PBA) could improve the reputation and image of public organisations, which support social causes and thus support society. The literature on

brand activism has demonstrated a positive effect on brand perception (Rudeloff et al., 2023). Brand perception is also influenced by brand credibility (Buil et al., 2012). The increased credibility through brand activism may therefore lead the consumer to perceive the activist brand better. Greater brand perception and increased credibility can positively influence consumers' behavioural intentions (Montecchi et al., 2024; Li et al., 2011; Foroudi et al., 2018, Xie et al., 2024). Although there is still no evidence in the literature, we can say that brand activism can also influence brand transparency, understood as the deliberate attempt to make all legally disclosable information available in an accurate, timely, balanced and unambiguous manner (Montecchi et al., 2024). This happens because they believe that they contribute to a better outcome and generate a positive impact (Zhou et al., 2023). On the basis of the literature, we advance the following hypotheses:

H1: Citizens' and employees' brand credibility, brand transparency and brand perception are greater when the public institution activates public brand activism (vs. when the public organisation does not activate any brand activism).

H2: Brand credibility and brand transparency affect brand perception in citizens and employees after they gain knowledge of public brand activism initiatives.

3. Methodology

The researchers used an experimental method to compare the changes in consumer and employee public brand perceptions, brand transparency and brand credibility before and after they saw a public brand activism initiative. Specifically, a pretest-postdesign survey questionnaire was utilised. It was divided into five (5) parts: the profile of the respondents (check if the respondents were or were not a public employee), the pre-test part, the picture of the PBA initiative, and the post-test part. Before a full-scale administration was deployed, the questionnaire was also face validated by another researcher with experience in public sector marketing. Two hundred (202) participants from a municipality in Italy were interviewed upon meeting the developed criteria. They ensured that the participation of the respondents in the study was voluntary and was based on informed consent. Furthermore, the survey questionnaire was distributed through Google Forms. The online survey was administered to citizens and employees working in the municipality engaged in this experiment. The quantitative data collected in this study are statistically analysed via paired t-test to compare the pre-test and post-test results of the gathered data in both the citizen and employee samples. Independent sample t tests are used to determine whether the means of two paired measurements, such as the pre-test and post-test scores, are significantly different. A p value that yields a score of less than 0.05 means that the observed difference is statistically significant. This research conducted an experimental study online. The experiment consisted of a one-factorial subject design that was administered to employees and citizens of the same municipality. The respondents were presented with a visual stimulus, which included a real public brand activism initiative. The initiative promoted a complete service for the Ukraine population (educational assistance, sanitarian assistance, etc.) in an Italian Municipality. Cronbach's alpha was used to test the reliability scales. It yielded a score of 0.904213, which means that the internal consistency of the questionnaire is high, making it reliable.

4. Results

The study employed a sample of 202 participants (124 employees and 78 citizens) from an Italian Municipality. The sample comprised 53.5% (n = 107) females, 44.5% (n = 89) males, and 2% (n=4) who preferred not to respond, with an average age equal to 25–55 years. The results revealed that there was a significant difference before and after the stimuli in the perception of brand transparency, brand credibility and brand perception. As shown in Table 1, the results change significantly in both groups (employees and citizens) exposed to the visual stimuli except for the intention of prosocial service use. The t-value of all the variables is negative. This means that there is an increase in the importance of the constructs after the intervention of the PBA stimulus on the respondents. H1 is supported.

Table 1: Independent sample test between groups before and after stimuli

Constructs	Group	t	Sig.	μ before (SD)	μ after (SD)
Brand credibility (Cosenza et al., 2015)	citizen	-4.240	.000**	3.55 (1.61)	4.76 (1.67)
	employee	-2.546	.012**	3.98 (1.37)	4.46 (1.58)
Prosocial service intention (Cagampan et al., 2022)	citizen	-1.064	.289	4.35 (1.85)	4.67 (1.97)
	employee	-.388	.699	4.46 (1.54)	4.54 (1.56)
Brand transparency (Yang & Battocchio, 2021)	citizen	-4.156	.000**	3.55 (1.61)	4.67 (1.67)
	employee	-4.41	.000**	3.61 (1.50)	4.47 (1.58)
Brand perception (Cagampan et al., 2022)	citizen	-3.569	.000**	3.65 (1.73)	4.67 (1.97)
	employee	-2.623	.009**	3.94 (1.60)	4.49 (1.68)

Source: our elaboration

The results of regression models on citizens and employees demonstrate a significant influence of brand credibility before ($\beta_{\text{before}}=.806$, $p=.000***$ and $\beta_{\text{before}}=.631$, $p=.000***$, respectively) and after the stimuli ($\beta_{\text{after}}=.779$, $p=.000***$ and $\beta_{\text{after}}=.699$, $p=.000***$, respectively). Brand transparency affects brand perception only for employees before the stimuli ($\beta=.365$, $p=.000***$) but does not impact brand perception after the stimuli both for citizens and employees ($\beta=.123$, $p=.165$; $\beta=.190$, $p=.057$, respectively), demonstrating that public brand activism mitigates the brand perception operating on the transparency of the public brand. For these latter, H2 is not supported at all.

5. Conclusions

The present study intends to fill a gap in the literature concerning the role of public brand activism in public brand perception from citizens' and employees' points of view. The study reveals the importance of PBA for changing the perception of public brands in terms of transparency and credibility. Overall, this study highlights the effects of public brand

activism on the evaluation of brand transparency, brand credibility and brand perception (Xie et al., 2024). This result confirms the recent results of the literature on the topic (Rudeloff et al., 2023). The regression model for citizens also highlights the importance of credibility independent of the public brand activism initiative. The results also revealed that PBA mitigates the effect of brand transparency on brand perception among public employees, suggesting that public policy makers could use PBA to improve the authenticity perceived by employees and their job motivation. From a theoretical perspective, this work contributes to the literature on brand activism in two ways. First, to the best of our knowledge, this research is the first to study the role of PBA in improving public brand reputation. Second, in light of what has been said thus far, this study enriches the still limited research by investigating the importance of using PBA to engage internal (e.g., employees) and external stakeholders (e.g., citizens). Although this study has taken one step forward in understanding PBA for enhancing brand reputation, it has various limitations. First, the customer's point of view limits its generalizability: the analysis was conducted on a very limited sample of citizens and employees. This research refers to one Italian Municipality; for this reason, further research could investigate the potential PBA in other municipalities and in other countries. The study limits the evaluation of two stakeholders (citizens and employees) while excluding other stakeholders, such as private and non-profit organisations, that could be interested in the PBA of public institutions.

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