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How corporate sociopolitical activism in brand communication shapes brand engagement and consumer-based brand equity: the roles of moral intensity, business relatedness, and need for cognition

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ABSTRACT



While studies have examined corporate sociopolitical activism (CSA) from multiple perspectives, research has not yet examined how different CSA types shape consumer-level brand outcomes or when those effects strengthen or weaken. Addressing that gap, this research examines how CSA types expressed through brand communication influence consumer brand engagement (CBE) and consumer-based brand equity (CBBE), considering need for cognition (NFC) as a boundary condition. Building on three pretests, four quasi-experiments show that servant activism, which is high in moral intensity and low in business relatedness, generates the most favorable brand outcomes, whereas citizen activism also outperforms low-moral-intensity forms. Study 2 shows that CBE mediates the positive effect of servant activism on CBBE. Study 3 shows this indirect effect is stronger among high-NFC consumers. Across studies, moral intensity appears more influential than business relatedness under the conditions tested. These findings offer guidance for advertisers and marketers designing brand communication that builds engagement and equity without inviting skepticism.

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1. Introduction

Modern consumers increasingly expect businesses to address pressing sociopolitical issues as part of their corporate responsibility (Zhou, Lou, and Huang 2026), with more than half believing companies should do more on challenges such as climate change and economic inequality (Edelman 2023). This expectation creates opportunities for firms to leverage corporate sociopolitical activism (CSA), defined as public stances on contentious issues, to differentiate offerings and strengthen stakeholder relationships in competitive markets (McKean and King 2024; Minefee and Yue 2025; Pasirayi, Fennell, and Follmer 2023; Wowak and Busenbark 2024). These stances can be expressed through advertising, corporate video, press releases, and other brand communication, which makes CSA highly relevant to advertising scholarship even when a given execution is not a paid advertisement. The language of woke is often attached to these efforts (Caruelle 2025), a term with roots in Black political consciousness and later social justice movements (Prosser and King 2026), yet the same efforts may be criticized as woke-washing when perceived as inauthentic (Sobande, Kanai, and Zeng 2022). Notable examples such as Ben & Jerry's advocacy for marriage equality and Nike's support for Colin Kaepernick's protest against racial injustice illustrate how CSA can extend beyond core operations to address societal concerns (Cammarota et al. 2023).

Research on CSA spans ideological congruence (McKean and King 2024), home–host context (Minefee and Yue 2025), firm–investor dynamics (Sun et al. 2024), and mitigation of host-country animosity (Gong et al. 2025). Consumer-level outcomes have also been examined, including brand loyalty and related responses, showing that CSA can shape these outcomes in diverse ways (Jungblut and Johnen 2022; Klostermann, Hydock, and Decker 2022; Li, Kim, and Alharbi 2022; Schmidt et al. 2022). The next unresolved question is not whether CSA affects consumer-related brand outcomes in general, but which types of CSA affect which consumer outcomes and through what mechanisms. Understanding these differential effects is essential, given that consumers do not process all activism equivalently. Instead, responses vary with the activism stance at stake, perceived motives, communication source, and message strategy (Hou and Poliquin 2023; Kang and Kirmani 2024). Absent this differentiation, research risks obscuring distinct consumer reactions (support, backlash, or even unethical conduct) into an average effect that obscures how authenticity assessments and the nature of the activism shape behavior (Kang and Kirmani 2024; Klostermann, Hydock, and Decker 2022). A type-based approach, therefore, enables firms to select and tailor issues to amplify positive outcomes and contain negative spillovers, as well as advances theory by specifying the patterns that link activism type to behavioral responses (You and Jin 2024).

Two dimensions recur in activism research as especially important for stakeholder responses: moral intensity and business relatedness (Branicki et al. 2021; Olkkonen and Morsing 2023; Schmidt et al. 2022). Moral intensity refers to the perceived seriousness, urgency, and ethical weight of the issue (Bhagwat et al. 2020; Jones 1991). Business relatedness refers to the extent to which the chosen issue connects to a firm's core operations, industry, products, stakeholders, or market environment (Chatterji and Toffel 2019; Y. Lee and Tao 2021). Prior research suggests that these dimensions

shape how stakeholders infer authenticity, motive, and legitimacy from corporate activism (Appels 2023; Ginder, Kwon, and Byun 2021; Romani et al. 2015).

We operationalize CSA types using Branicki et al. (2021) activism typology, namely token activism, which is low in moral intensity and low in business relatedness, servant activism, which is high in moral intensity and low in business relatedness, strategic activism, which is low in moral intensity and high in business relatedness, and citizen activism, which is high on both dimensions. To illustrate, temporary rainbow-themed branding without corresponding internal policy change reflects token activism (Diwanji et al. 2026). FabIndia's controversial 'Jashn-e-Riwaaz' Diwali campaign, which signaled inclusivity and cultural pluralism without an obvious direct business gain, can be positioned as servant activism (Firstpost 2021). ITC's 'Well-being Out of Waste' initiative reflects strategic activism, given that the social message aligns closely with the firm's sustainability positioning and business interests (ITC 2026). Tata Steel's extension of same-sex partner benefits illustrates citizen activism, as moral commitment and organizational practice are aligned.

We draw on Branicki et al. (2021) typology for two reasons. First, the typology offers a source-centered account of activism, which is useful here since consumers often read branded CSA communication as signals of organizational character, commitment, and motive. Second, the typology organizes activism through moral intensity and business relatedness, two dimensions consumers can infer from communication content and supporting action. The present studies examine branded external communications, specifically press-release and video-based messages, which capture how firms communicate activism to consumers. Corporate sociopolitical advertising is one expression within this larger communication set, rather than a replacement label for CSA itself. When a firm publicizes a sociopolitical stance, consumers evaluate more than the words in the message. Consumers also infer whether the stance addresses a serious moral issue and whether commercial self-interest appears central to the stance. Those source inferences are central to brand evaluation, as they shape how consumers judge the brand and, in turn, influence brand outcomes (Appels 2023; Chatterji and Toffel 2019; Doty and Glick 1994; Verlegh 2024).

Accordingly, drawing on the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian and Russell 1974) and contingency theory (Fiedler 1964), we model CSA type as the stimulus, consumer brand engagement (CBE) as the organism, and consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) as the response. This framing explains why different configurations of moral intensity and business relatedness should generate different levels of engagement and equity. Such differences should also depend on how deeply consumers process the activist claim and, thus, we further examine need for cognition (NFC), defined as the tendency to enjoy effortful cognitive activity, as a moderator (Cacioppo and Petty 1982; Lins de Holanda Coelho, Hanel, and Wolf 2020). High-NFC consumers are more likely to scrutinize whether a firm's activist stance reflects moral conviction or commercial calculation, whereas low-NFC consumers are more likely to rely on simpler cues such as brand familiarity or broad social approval. NFC, therefore, helps to explain not only whether CSA works, but also which activism type is most persuasive for different consumers.

This research advances CSA scholarship and the literature on advertising and brand communication in three ways. First, the findings show that morally intense activism generates stronger brand outcomes than low-moral-intensity activism, with servant activism producing the most favorable pattern across studies and citizen activism also outperforming the low-moral-intensity forms. Second, the findings identify CBE as the mechanism through which servant activism strengthens CBBE. Third, the findings show that this indirect effect is stronger among high-NFC consumers while the low-moral-intensity forms draw relatively more favorable direct CBBE responses from low-NFC consumers.

For theory, these findings offer an *adequately incremental theoretical contribution*, in the form of a *theoretical extension* (Lim 2026), by showing that Branicki et al. (2021) typology, originally developed in a chief executive officer activism setting, remains theoretically useful when translated to branded external communication and linked to consumer brand outcomes. More specifically, this research *extends* prior work by specifying not only that activism type matters, but also why and when it matters, namely through CBE as the explanatory pathway and NFC as a boundary condition. The contribution is also *theoretically interesting* in two ways (Lim 2026). First, the findings are *counterintuitive* in showing that servant activism, which is high in moral intensity yet low in business relatedness, outperforms more strategically aligned forms in generating favorable brand outcomes, which challenges the common expectation that activism works best when moral claims and business fit are jointly high. Second, the findings are *noteworthy* in deepening current understanding of CSA by showing that moral intensity can carry greater weight than business relatedness in shaping consumer responses while also revealing that the persuasive advantage of different activism types depends on consumers' level of cognitive elaboration. Therefore, this research does not merely apply an existing typology to a new setting, rather, it extends, refines, and challenges current theorizing on CSA by clarifying the mechanism, boundary condition, and pattern through which distinct forms of activism influence CBE and CBBE.

For practitioners, these findings suggest that branded CSA communication works best when the message signals moral seriousness without appearing narrowly instrumental. Detailed, evidence-based storytelling is especially important for audiences likely to process such messages deeply, whereas simpler reputational cues may shape responses among less deliberative audiences. Therefore, message design, channel choice, and organizational follow-through should be aligned with the kind of activism a firm can credibly sustain.

2. Conceptual foundation

2.1. Corporate sociopolitical activism (CSA)

CSA has emerged as a significant area of inquiry as firms engage with contentious social and political issues beyond traditional corporate social responsibility (CSR). CSA encompasses public statements, resource commitments, and direct engagement with social movements, with distinct implications for stakeholder relationships and firm outcomes (Bhagwat et al. 2020). Scholarship has applied agency theory, institutional

theory, stakeholder theory, and social movement theory to explain antecedents and consequences, showing that activism can strengthen or sever ties depending on value alignment and perceived authenticity (Cammarota et al. 2023). Empirical work documents that CSA attracts attention from investors and consumers, yet effects on firm value and reputation are contingent on congruence with brand image, the intensity of the stance, and the sociopolitical context (Brownen-Trinh and Orujov 2023; Haq and Shin 2024). Organizational characteristics, including political ideology, also shape firm responses, with liberal-leaning firms more prone to concede to activist demands than conservative counterparts (A. Gupta and Briscoe 2020).

While this literature advances understanding of CSA's effects on firm-related outcomes (Table 1), a critical gap remains concerning the differential impact of CSA types on both firm and consumer outcomes. Many studies treat CSA as an undifferentiated concept and do not separate types by stance characteristics (Bhagwat et al. 2020), limiting insight into how differences in motivation, depth of engagement, and stakeholder involvement yield distinct effects on consumer perceptions, brand equity, and market performance. Recent reviews have accordingly called for finer-grained, process-oriented research that accounts for managerial reflexivity and the evolving alignment between activism type, stakeholder expectations, and organizational context (Wu and Liu 2024).

Our research addresses this gap by examining how CSA types shape CBE and CBBE through Branicki et al. (2021) typology, which distinguishes activism forms through moral intensity and business relatedness. The typology was developed for CEO activism, yet its underlying logic remains useful for corporate activism as long as the firm is treated as the signaling source. In brand communication contexts, including corporate sociopolitical advertising, consumers evaluate not only the message but also the organization behind the message, asking whether the firm is taking a serious moral position and whether commercial self-interest appears central to that position. Those source inferences make the typology relevant to firm-level CSA while keeping the original conceptual logic intact (Doty and Glick 1994).

These two consumer-inferable dimensions point to a specific process. Consumers first judge the seriousness of the activist stance and the extent to which the stance appears commercially entangled with the firm's interests. Those judgments shape brand engagement, which, in turn, accumulates into brand equity. Thus, CBBE is an appropriate outcome, since activism can alter perceived quality, associations, loyalty, and brand preference, whereas CBE is the appropriate mechanism, since engagement captures the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment through which activism-related judgments translate into enduring brand value.

2.2. Consumer-based brand equity (CBBE)

Brand equity represents the incremental value a brand adds to a firm and its products (Yoo, Donthu, and Lee 2000) and is widely regarded as a vital corporate asset (del Barrio-García and Prados-Peña 2019; Lang, Lim, and Guzmán 2022). Keller (1993, 2) defines brand equity as 'the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand', emphasizing its role in fostering consumer preference, product differentiation, and profitability (Buil, Martínez, and De Chernatony

Table 1. Overview of research on CSA.

Study	Objective(s)	Outcome(s)
Chatterji and Toffel (2019)	Explores how CEO activism, where corporate leaders speak out on social and environmental issues, influences public opinion and consumer attitudes.	CEO activism positively affects consumer perceptions of the company, suggesting that such activism can enhance the company's image and potentially its market position.
Bhagwat et al. (2020)	Explores CSA's impact on investor reaction.	CSA elicits negative reactions from investors, who perceive CSA as a diversion of resources from profit-oriented objectives to risky activities with uncertain outcomes.
A. Gupta and Briscoe (2020)	Explores whether organizations should be more open or closed to CSA based on members' political ideologies.	Liberal-leaning firms are more likely to accede to social activism demands, especially when members are closer to corporate headquarters or when the firm's ideology diverges from its local community or industry norms.
Bedendo and Siming (2021)	Explores the impact of CEO activism on shareholder value.	Shareholders react negatively to CEOs resigning from presidential advisory councils due to fears of losing political influence, indicating that CEO activism can pose risks to shareholder interests.
Villagra et al. (2021)	Explores how corporate activism impacts reputation and brand equity, particularly among consumers with liberal ideologies.	When companies engage in activism aligned with liberal values, they experience positive effects on their reputation and brand equity, suggesting that strategic activism can benefit brand positioning.
Appels (2023)	Explores how CEO sociopolitical activism can serve as a signal of authentic leadership.	CEO activism positively impacts job seekers' perceptions of employer attractiveness, thus aiding in talent acquisition.
Klostermann, Hydock, and Decker (2022)	Explores how corporate political advocacy (CPA) affects consumer brand perceptions.	CPA negatively affects consumer brand perceptions, especially among existing customers, with stronger negative effects when online protests intensify, although the effects have slightly weakened over time.
Pasirayi, Fennell, and Follmer (2023)	Explores how CSA communication influences firm value.	CSA efforts communicated <i>via</i> Twitter reduce firm value by an average of 0.22%, indicating that sociopolitical engagement can negatively impact stock prices unless stances closely align with the firm's core values.
Mkrtchyan, Sandvik, and Zhu (2024)	Explores the alignment of CEO activism with the ideologies of investors, employees, and customers.	CEO activism can lead to positive market reactions and increased shareholdings from investors with liberal leanings, enhancing firm value by aligning with key stakeholders' sociopolitical preferences.
Wowak and Busenbark (2024)	Explores the impact of CEO sociopolitical activism on employees.	CEO sociopolitical activism can increase organizational commitment and support for the CEO's stance when there is alignment between the CEO's and employees' ideologies.
Cycyota (2023)	Explores a typology of CEO activism.	Highlights the application of management theories to various aspects of CEO activism across four influences on CEO activities, using upper echelons theory, agency theory, organizational culture theory, and stakeholder theory.
Acharya et al. (2025)	Explores why some CEOs become sociopolitical activists while others remain on the sidelines.	CEOs with power, high status, and strong reputations are more likely to engage in sociopolitical activism, using their platform as a 'bully pulpit' to advocate for or against controversial issues.

2013; Sasmita and Suki 2015). Despite its significance, no consensus exists on its definition and measurement (Rojas-Lamorena, Del Barrio-García, and Alcántara-Pilar 2022). Literature classifies brand equity into financial and consumer-based perspectives

(Rojas-Lamorena, Del Barrio-García, and Alcántara-Pilar 2022), where the financial view quantifies a brand's monetary value (Nguyen, Dadzie, and Davari 2013) while CBBE focuses on consumer perceptions, knowledge, attitudes, associations, and loyalty (Buil, Martínez, and De Chernatony 2013). Research on CBBE spans domains such as CSR (Muniz et al. 2019), hospitality (Cano Guervos et al. 2020), social networking (Dwivedi et al. 2019), and telecommunications (Yang et al. 2019). Although conceptualizations vary (Table 2), Aaker (1991, 1996), Keller (1993, 2003), and Yoo, Donthu, and Lee (2000) offer the most widely used models (Rojas-Lamorena, Del Barrio-García, and Alcántara-Pilar 2022). Aaker (1991, 1996) identifies five dimensions: brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and proprietary brand assets, whereas Keller (1993, 2003) emphasizes brand awareness and brand image. More recently, work by Chatzipanagiotou, Veloutsou, and Christodoulides (2016, Chatzipanagiotou, Christodoulides, and Veloutsou 2019) highlights the sequential nature of CBBE (brand building, brand understanding, and brand relationships), demonstrating that equity develops through interconnected stages that vary across cultural contexts. Empirical evidence shows that CBBE enhances willingness to pay, cash flow, and future profitability (Oyedeki 2007; Yoo, Donthu, and Lee 2000) while also improving brand performance (Çifci et al. 2016), strengthening brand image (Pappu, Quester, and Cooksey 2005), reducing innovation risk (Liao and Cheng 2014), and creating entry barriers that drive competitive advantage (Chatzipanagiotou, Veloutsou, and Christodoulides 2016; Sasmita and Suki 2015).

Table 2. CBBE conceptualization (definition) and operationalization (measure).

Author(s)	CBBE definition	CBBE measure
Aaker (1991, 1996)	A set of brand-related assets and liabilities (e.g. name and symbol) that add or subtract value provided by a product or service.	Brand awareness, brand associations, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and proprietary brand assets.
Keller (1993, 2003)	Impact of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand.	Brand awareness and brand image.
Kamakura and Russell (1993)	Utility associated with product features and value attached to the brand name.	Brand dominance, intangible value, and perceived value.
Yoo, Donthu, and Lee (2000)	Differences in consumer response to identical marketing stimuli and product attributes with and without a brand name.	Brand awareness/associations, loyalty, and perceived quality.
Srinivasan, Park, and Chang (2005)	Incremental contribution obtained by the brand compared to the underlying product in the absence of any branding effort.	Brand awareness, attribute perception biases, and non-attribute preference.
Chen and Chen (2010)	A set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand (e.g. name and symbol) that add or subtract value provided by the product or service.	Overall brand equity.
Schivinski and Dabrowski (2015)	Conceptualization by Aaker (1991)	Operationalization by Yoo, Donthu, and Lee (2000).
Godey et al. (2016)	Conceptualization by Keller (1993)	Operationalization by Keller (1993, 2003).
Iglesias, Markovic, and Rialp (2019)	A relational market-based asset resulting from interactions between brands and their customers.	Operationalization by Yoo, Donthu, and Lee (2000).
Pina and Dias (2021)	Conceptualization by Yoo, Donthu, and Lee (2000).	Operationalization by Yoo, Donthu, and Lee (2000).
Arya, Paul, and Sethi (2022)	Conceptualization by Yoo, Donthu, and Lee (2000).	Operationalization by Yoo, Donthu, and Lee (2000).

Linking CBBE to activism, recent research suggests that brands engaging in authentic activism can enhance equity. Vredenburg et al. (2020) show that when brands align activist messaging with core values, authentic brand activism leads to significant equity gains by fostering trust and loyalty. However, woke-washing, where brands adopt activist stances superficially, damages equity and trust (Walter et al. 2024). Although several studies have linked brand activism with CBBE (e.g. Ahmad, Guzmán, and Al-Emran 2024; Z. Lee et al. 2024; Nguyen et al. 2023; Pimentel, Bassi-Suter, and Didonet 2024), a dearth of research connects CSA to CBBE—an issue this research seeks to address.

Having positioned CBBE as the outcome, the question becomes how CSA type reaches it. CBE provides that link. Engagement is a motivational state that arises from interactive, co-creative brand experiences (Cheung et al. 2020; Merrilees 2016), which converts stance-based perceptions into equity-relevant evaluations and behaviors. Hence, when consumers attend to a brand's activist stance, think about its implications, participate in brand-related activities, and form emotional bonds, the result is a more durable shift in the components of CBBE. The next section develops this mechanism in detail.

2.3. Consumer brand engagement (CBE)

Consumer engagement has gained significant attention across marketing (Harmeling et al. 2017), psychology (Achterberg et al. 2003), and sociology (Brodie et al. 2011), given its critical role in consumer decision-making (Calder, Malthouse, and Maslowska 2016) and firm performance (Oh et al. 2017). Explored under various labels, including customer engagement (Hollebeek et al. 2019), engagement behavior (Purohit et al. 2023), and CBE (Leckie, Nyadzayo, and Johnson 2016), CBE is most relevant here, since it captures consumer interactions with brands practicing CSA. CBE represents a motivational state arising from co-creative, interactive brand experiences and manifested through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (V. Kumar et al. 2019). Brodie et al. (2011) conceptualized CBE as multidimensional, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects, while Cian, Krishna, and Elder (2014) defined it in terms of cognitive involvement, absorption, and concentration toward a brand. Other scholars emphasize trust, commitment, and emotional bonding (Pansari and Kumar 2017) or view CBE as voluntary consumer contributions beyond financial transactions (Harmeling et al. 2017). Das, Saha, and Roy (2022) highlighted brand consumption experiences through cognition, emotion, and behavior, aligning with Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie's (2014) scale that categorizes engagement into cognitive (brand-related thoughts), affective (brand-related feelings), and behavioral (energy, effort, time interacting with the brand). Antecedents include consumer dispositions (Hanson, Jiang, and Dahl 2019), personality traits (A. Kumar et al. 2023), and motivations (López, Sicilia, and Verlegh 2022). Key outcomes comprise brand awareness (Abou-Shouk and Soliman 2021), brand preference (Goyal and Verma 2023), brand loyalty (Samarah et al. 2022), and brand salience (Rego et al. 2022), which signals CBE's importance in consumer-brand relationships.

Literature indicates a linkage between brand activism, CBE, and CBBE, highlighting the close connection among these concepts. Brand activism, in which brands take a stand on sociopolitical issues, significantly influences consumer perceptions and behaviors. For example, activism can enhance CBBE by aligning with consumer values and fostering deeper connections (Herzberg and Rudeloff 2023; Shukla, Rosendo-Rios, and Khalifa 2025). CBE mediates this effect by capturing consumers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement (Algharabat et al. 2020; Machado et al. 2019). Engaged consumers contribute to CBBE through participation in brand-related activities (Schivinski et al. 2021). Authenticity determines effectiveness, as genuine stances enhance trust and loyalty (Vredenburg et al. 2020). Thus, the close connection among brand activism, CBE, and CBBE highlights the need for strategic alignment and authenticity in brand communication, including advertising, to foster engagement and equity.

While prior work has linked brand activism, CBE, and CBBE, a gap remains in understanding how different CSA types uniquely drive or diminish CBBE *via* CBE. In this regard, investigating the CSA–CBE–CBBE triad is essential to advance theory and offer practical guidance for brand managers navigating sociopolitical activism. Such an investigation can also inform advertising and brand communication research and practice by demonstrating how CSA messages can be deployed across communication channels to enhance consumer engagement and brand equity. This research addresses these gaps, contributing to CSA, CBE, and CBBE scholarship with implications for branding and communication strategy.

3. Theoretical foundation

This research employs the S-O-R model (Mehrabian and Russell 1974) as an overarching lens, complemented by contingency theory (Wright and Ashill 1998), to explain relationships among CSA, CBE, and CBBE. Combining these theories clarifies both the effects of CSA types on CBE and CBBE and the moderating role of NFC, which offers insight into how CSA can be strategically leveraged through brand communication to achieve marketing communication objectives.

The selection of these theories is also consistent with the IMPACT criteria for theory selection proposed by Hollebeek et al. (2025). Most importantly, the combination offers strong theoretical *matching*, since the S-O-R model provides a clear process logic linking CSA communication to engagement and brand equity, whereas contingency theory explains why these effects should vary across different configurations of moral intensity, business relatedness, and consumer processing. The pairing is also *parsimonious*, as it explains the focal relationships without unnecessary theoretical layering, *applicable* to contemporary brand communication decisions, *conceptually rigorous* in linking activism type, engagement, and brand outcomes, and empirically *testable* through the hypotheses developed below.

The S-O-R model outlines associations among stimulus (S), organism (O), and response (R) (Mehrabian and Russell 1974). A stimulus triggers cognitive and emotional processes (O), which, in turn, produce behavioral responses (R). Within this

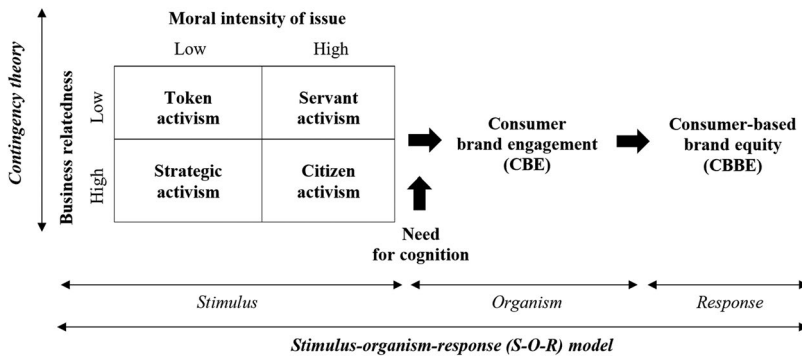


Figure 1. Research framework. *Notes:* Theoretical framework in italics and conceptual framework in non-italics.

framework, different CSA types (token, servant, strategic, and citizen activism) serve as stimuli (S), expected to evoke varied levels of CBE (O)—the cognitive and affective state of engagement—and subsequently influence CBBE (R). Applying the S-O-R model thus elucidates how CSA stimuli elicit different CBE states and ensuing CBBE outcomes.

Contingency theory informs the evaluation of these stimuli by focusing on perceived fit between a firm's action and the context in which that action occurs (Morton and Hu 2008; Wright and Ashill 1998). In activism settings, however, fit is not uniformly positive. Moral intensity can legitimize a stance, whereas strong business relatedness can either reassure consumers that the firm can act effectively or arouse suspicion that the stance mainly serves commercial interests. Hence, consumer responses should depend on the configuration of these two dimensions rather than on either dimension in isolation. Under the conditions studied here, moral intensity should carry greater weight than business relatedness, since consumers evaluating contentious sociopolitical communication often ask first whether the firm seems morally serious and only then whether the issue aligns with the business (Figure 1).

4. Hypotheses development

4.1. Direct effect of CSA on CBBE

Drawing on contingency theory within the S-O-R framework, we argue that consumers judge branded CSA communication through the joint configuration of moral intensity and business relatedness. Low moral intensity should weaken brand outcomes regardless of business fit, since symbolic or thin commitments provide little basis for trust and can invite skepticism (Sobande 2020). In this regard, both token activism and strategic activism should underperform the morally intense forms.

Moral intensity should exert the stronger effect. Prior research shows that consumers respond more favorably when firms address issues that appear ethically serious, urgent, and socially consequential, whereas low-moral-intensity stances are less likely to generate admiration, identification, or support (Bravo and Chapa 2024; Romani et al. 2015).

Moral intensity should be especially important in CSA, where consumers evaluate not only issue choice but also the sincerity of the firm behind the stance.

Business relatedness plays a more conditional role. When a morally serious stance is tightly tied to the firm's commercial interests, consumers may still reward the effort, yet they may also infer instrumental motive and discount sincerity (Ferguson, Brown, and Boyd 2019; Schlaile, Klein, and Böck 2018). In this regard, servant activism should generate the most favorable CBBE, citizen activism should also perform well, and both low-moral-intensity forms should lag behind. Among those weaker forms, strategic activism may fare worst, since strong business fit without corresponding moral seriousness can make commercial self-interest especially salient. Accordingly:

H₁, Servant activism will generate the highest CBBE, followed by citizen activism, which will generate higher CBBE than token activism and strategic activism.

4.2. Mediation effect of CBE between CSA and CBBE

CBE captures the extent to which consumers cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally invest in a brand (Ndhlovu and Maree 2022). Activist communication should strengthen engagement when consumers read the stance as personally meaningful, morally serious, and worthy of sustained attention, especially when the stance invites identification with the brand rather than suspicion about the brand's motives.

Servant activism, characterized by high moral intensity and low business relatedness, aligns with these findings since CSA issues selected by firms in this category are high in moral intensity but low in business relatedness (Branicki et al. 2021). Such actions are intended to bring positive social change, even if they divert resources from profit-oriented objectives (Bhagwat et al. 2020). Thus, CSA of this type is likely to foster a deeper motivational state arising from co-creative, interactive brand experiences, manifesting through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (V. Kumar et al. 2019). Conversely, token activism may lack the depth to engage consumers meaningfully; strategic activism may be perceived as too self-serving; and citizen activism—while strong in moral grounding—may blur lines between ethical commitment and business objectives, leading to mixed reactions. Such heightened engagement (CBE) for servant activism is therefore expected to significantly enrich consumers' attitudes, knowledge, and loyalty toward the brand, yielding the highest CBBE.

Servant activism should produce this pattern most clearly. A morally intense stance that is not tightly tied to commercial gain suggests that the firm intends to advance positive social change, even if the firm diverts resources from profit-oriented objectives (Bhagwat et al. 2020). Such a stance should encourage consumers to attend to, think about, and identify with the brand (V. Kumar et al. 2019), which, in turn, should lift CBBE. Citizen activism may still raise CBBE, yet the simultaneous presence of strong business relatedness can dilute the engagement mechanism by making instrumental motives more salient. Conversely, token activism may lack the depth needed to engage consumers meaningfully, whereas strategic activism may be perceived as too self-serving. Hence:

H₂. Servant activism will generate greater CBE resulting in higher CBBE compared to citizen activism, token activism, and strategic activism.

4.3. Moderation effect of need for cognition (NFC) on CSA, CBE, and CBBE

Cacioppo and Petty (1982, 116) defined NFC as the ‘tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive activities’. Individuals high in NFC analyze stimuli more elaborately to extract meaning, whereas those low in NFC rely on heuristics and others’ opinions to interpret stimuli (Das et al. 2024). Consequently, complex, challenging stimuli that require deeper thought appeal particularly to high-NFC individuals (McKay-Nesbitt et al. 2011). Notably, research across psychology (Bagby, Taylor, and Ryan 1986), sociology (Mensmann and Frese 2019), and marketing (Winter, Scholl, and Sassenberg 2021) supports that NFC relates to individual differences and behavioral outcomes (Das et al. 2024; Lins de Holanda Coelho, Hanel, and Wolf 2020).

Including NFC as a moderator in the CSA-CBE-CBBE pathway aligns with the S-O-R model (Mehrabian and Russell 1974) and contingency theory (Fiedler 1964). Under the S-O-R model, external stimuli (CSA types) shape internal cognitive and emotional states (CBE), which, in turn, drive behavioral responses (CBBE). NFC moderates this pathway by determining the depth of consumers’ processing of moral intensity and business relatedness. High-NFC consumers apply systematic, critical thinking to assess these dimensions before engaging with the brand, resulting in stronger CBE when moral intensity is high. However, high business relatedness may trigger suspicion, viewed as self-serving, despite moral intensity, due to detailed scrutiny. In contrast, low-NFC consumers rely on heuristics and surface cues (e.g. brand reputation, emotional appeal), making their engagement more reactive and less contingent on CSA’s substantive alignment. From a contingency perspective, CSA’s effectiveness in driving CBE and CBBE depends on fit with individual cognitive tendencies (Lim and Young 2021). High-NFC consumers require fact-based, coherent, authentic activism to engage, whereas low-NFC consumers respond more to simplified, emotionally resonant messaging. Therefore:

H₃. The relationship between CSA types and CBBE mediated by CBE varies by NFC such that, among high-NFC individuals, CBBE mediated by CBE will be higher for servant activism than for citizen, token, and strategic activism, compared to low-NFC individuals.

5. Methodology

The sequence of research is presented in Figure 2. To test how CSA types affect CBBE, four studies (Studies 1a, 1b, 2, and 3) were conducted. Studies 1a and 1b examined the direct effect of token, servant, strategic, and citizen activism on CBBE across two different scenarios to confirm generalizability. Study 2 examined CBE’s mediating role in the CSA and CBBE relationship, while Study 3 examined NFC’s moderating role in that mediation.

Participants for the three pre-tests (Pre-tests 1, 2a, and 2b) and four main studies (Studies 1a, 1b, 2, and 3) were recruited in India. Indian consumers exhibit diverse

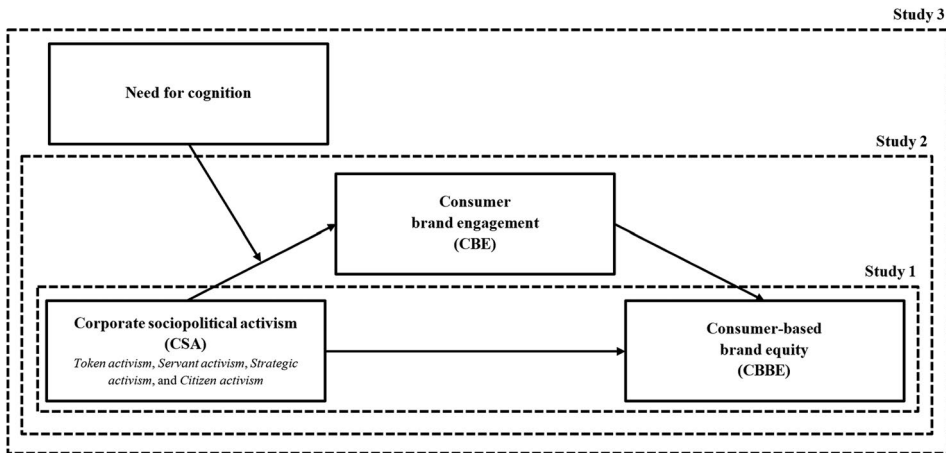


Figure 2. Design of multi-study research.

demographics, growing political engagement, and vibrant digital activism. In a highly competitive market under constant scrutiny, CSA significantly shapes perceptions, loyalty, and trust (Atanga, Xue, and Mattila 2022). Rising sentiments for purpose-driven consumption in India also make it an ideal setting to assess CSA's effect on CBBE (Khan and Kasliwal 2017). Real-world cases, including Tanishq's advertisement backlash and Amul's sociopolitical campaigns, further illustrate CSA's reputational impact in India.

Three pretests finalized the stimuli for the quasi-experiments. Pretest 1 identified suitable CSA issues and focal firms. Pretests 2a and 2b validated whether the scenarios varied as intended on moral intensity and business relatedness. Pretest 2a used direct single-item assessments for the two dimensions, whereas Pretest 2b used established multi-item scales. Using both approaches strengthened confidence in the manipulations before the main quasi-experiments.

Studies 1a and 2 were administered through LinkedIn messaging, whereas Study 1b was administered at a large Indian university.

Studies 1a and 2 relied on convenience-based recruitment through a network of Indian LinkedIn contacts rather than probability sampling and, accordingly, are treated as quasi-experiments rather than true experiments. LinkedIn's professional user base aligns with educated demographics relevant to CSA issues. Indeed, literature indicates that CSA stances gain traction on networking sites, go viral (positive or negative), and then enter mass-market discourse (Nalick et al. 2016; Pasirayi, Fennell, and Follmer 2023). Three members of the research team circulated separate questionnaire links for the four scenarios across outreach batches until the target number of usable responses was reached. Each respondent completed one scenario within a study and participation across Studies 1a and 2 was restricted to one study only. For Study 1a, 856 contacts were approached and 416 usable responses were obtained. For Study 2, 1,218 contacts were approached and 412 usable responses were obtained.

Study 1b data were collected in response to the review process. A total of 655 questionnaires were distributed across the four conditions, yielding 414 returned questionnaires, of which 400 usable responses were retained after excluding

questionnaires that failed the attention check and randomly removing a small number of valid questionnaires to achieve equal sample sizes across conditions, leaving 100 responses per condition.

Study 3 was administered offline at three large Indian universities. Using working professionals in Studies 1a and 2 and student samples in Studies 1b and 3 follows Viglia, Zaefarian, and Ulqinaku (2021) recommendation to vary experimental samples and helps assess whether the pattern generalizes across age profiles.

Respondents younger than 18 were excluded. Age, gender, brand attitude, and brand attachment were included as controls where relevant. Across studies, we followed Viglia, Zaefarian, and Ulqinaku (2021) experimental design guidelines by selecting consequential issues, pretesting manipulations, using separate samples across studies, reporting full statistical results, and presenting the sequence of tests transparently.

5.1. Pretest 1

5.1.1. Goal

The first pretest aimed to identify suitable CSA events and corporate brand names to design realistic and relatable scenarios for the main studies. This pretest was essential to ensure that the chosen CSA events and firms would resonate with the target population, which strengthens the validity of the research design.

5.1.2. Procedure

A total of 81 participants were recruited from four large Indian universities (Bangalore, Delhi, Kolkata, and Mumbai). The sample comprised 54.3% male participants and 45.7% were aged 30 to 45 years. Participants answered two open-ended questions: (i) 'Which two areas of CSA should a firm prioritize in India?' and (ii) 'Which two firms in India are best suited to engage in CSA?' Respondents were briefed on CSA's meaning, with examples, before responding.

5.1.3. Findings

Responses were analyzed for frequency to identify the most cited areas of CSA and firm names. Tata emerged as the most credible firm for CSA engagement, given its strong reputation and national presence. Voter awareness was the most frequently mentioned CSA topic, reflecting current societal interests. These findings, summarized in Table 3, justify selecting Tata and voter awareness for scenario design.

Tata's strong brand equity, history of social responsibility, and diverse industry presence make it an ideal candidate. As one of India's most trusted brands, Tata has

Table 3. Pretest 1 results.

Rank	Brand name	Mention	CSA area	Mention
1	Tata	65	Voter awareness	71
2	Reliance	37	Gender equality	29
3	Patanjali	22	Farm loan waiver	23
4	Hindustan Unilever	21	Other backward class (OBC) reservation	21
5	Maruti Suzuki	12	LGBTQ rights	16

engaged in CSA through initiatives such as Tanishq's interfaith advertisement, Tata Steel's LGBTQ+ inclusion policies, and Tata Motors' women's empowerment campaigns, each eliciting varied consumer reactions. Hence, Tata's cross-sector operations, nationalistic appeal, consumer trust, and prior CSA experiences provide an effective real-world testing ground for CSA's impact on CBBE.

Voter awareness as a CSA event is appropriate as it reflects citizen engagement, political consciousness, and brand perception in India's dynamic democracy. With over 900 million eligible voters (Election Commission of India 2023), political awareness, especially among younger demographics, means consumers increasingly expect brands to take a stand. Politically engaged consumers reward or penalize brands based on sociopolitical stances, making voter awareness a critical variable in assessing CSA's effect on CBBE (Atanga, Xue, and Mattila 2022). Examples such as Tata Tea's 'Jaago Re' campaign and backlash against perceived political affiliations illustrate how CSA intersects with voter engagement and consumer trust.

Therefore, Pre-test 1 helped establish a solid foundation for the main studies by ensuring that the CSA scenarios were grounded in realistic and credible contexts. This approach seeks to enhance the ecological validity of the research and ensure that the findings would be applicable to real-world settings.

5.2. Pretest 2a

5.2.1. Goal

This pretest aimed to validate the selected CSA scenarios regarding their alignment with moral intensity and business relatedness. This step was crucial to ensure that each scenario accurately reflected the intended types of activism (token, servant, strategic, and citizen) and was perceived appropriately by the target population.

5.2.2. Procedure

A total of 124 respondents were recruited from the same four universities as in Pretest 1, with 53.2% female participants and 39.5% aged 18 to 30 years. Each participant evaluated one of the four CSA scenarios and completed two manipulation checks, namely rating moral intensity and rating business relatedness. Responses used seven-point formats, with 1 indicating highly irrelevant and 7 indicating highly relevant. The scenarios appear in [Appendices 1–4](#).

5.2.3. Findings

Two one-way ANOVAs (one for moral intensity and one for business relatedness) were performed to assess whether the designed scenarios were perceived as intended.

For moral intensity, the ANOVA indicated a significant mean difference across the activism scenarios ($F(3, 120) = 19.76, p < 0.001$). As the Levene's test failed to assume equal variances ($p < 0.05$), we used the Games-Howell test as the post-hoc analysis. Servant activism had the highest mean score for moral

intensity ($M=5.52$, $SD=1.36$), followed by citizen ($M=5.35$, $SD=1.08$), strategic ($M=4.03$, $SD=1.08$), and token ($M=3.90$, $SD=0.60$) activism. Significant mean differences were observed between servant and citizen activism versus token and strategic activism (Servant vs. Token: $M_{\text{difference}}=1.61$, $p<0.001$; Servant vs. Strategic: $M_{\text{difference}}=1.48$, $p<0.001$; Citizen vs. Token: $M_{\text{difference}}=1.45$, $p<0.001$; Citizen vs. Strategic: $M_{\text{difference}}=1.32$, $p<0.001$). However, no significant difference was found between servant and citizen activism on moral intensity ($M_{\text{difference}}=0.16$, $p=0.95>0.05$).

For business relatedness, the ANOVA indicated a significant mean difference across the activism scenarios ($F(3, 120)=25.95$, $p<0.001$). As the Levene's test supported the assumption of equal variances ($p=0.38$), we used the Tukey test as the post-hoc analysis. Strategic activism had the highest mean score for business relatedness ($M=5.84$, $SD=1.00$), followed by citizen ($M=5.58$, $SD=0.85$), token ($M=4.29$, $SD=0.97$), and servant ($M=4.26$, $SD=0.82$) activism. Significant mean differences were observed between strategic and citizen activism versus token and servant activism (Strategic vs. Token: $M_{\text{difference}}=1.55$, $p<0.001$; Strategic vs. Servant: $M_{\text{difference}}=1.58$, $p<0.001$; Citizen vs. Token: $M_{\text{difference}}=1.29$, $p<0.001$; Citizen vs. Servant: $M_{\text{difference}}=1.32$, $p<0.001$). No significant difference was found between strategic and citizen activism on business relatedness ($M_{\text{difference}}=0.26$, $p=0.69>0.05$).

These pretest results confirmed that the scenarios were perceived as intended, with clear distinctions in moral intensity and business relatedness among the four types of CSA.

5.3. Pretest 2b

5.3.1. Goal

Pretest 2b also aimed to validate the alignment of the designed scenarios with moral intensity and business relatedness to confirm scenario manipulation but using established scales with a different brand.

5.3.2. Procedure

Moral intensity was measured with items adapted from Jones (1991) capturing core dimensions (e.g. 'The possible consequences of this message are very significant'; 'Most people would agree that this message is ethically right'; 'There is a high probability that this message will actually cause benefit'; 'The positive consequences of this message will occur very soon'; 'Those affected by this message are close to me (socially, culturally, etc.)'; 'The consequences of this message will be concentrated on a few people'). Business relatedness was measured with the Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, and Hill (2006) fit scale adapted to the activism context (e.g. 'The activism message fits with Reliance's businesses'; 'The activism message is related to Reliance's core business'; 'The activism message is consistent with Reliance's industry characteristics').

Participants evaluated one of the four scenarios ($n=200$, with 50 respondents per cell; 46% female, 54% male, 0% non-binary, and 0% prefer not to say; and age ranging from 22 to 40 years), which can be found in [Appendices 5–8](#). Responses used seven-point formats, with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 7 indicating strongly

agree. Internal consistency by cell was satisfactory and ranged from 0.72 to 0.95 for moral intensity ($\alpha_{\text{token}} = 0.720$, $\alpha_{\text{servant}} = 0.949$, $\alpha_{\text{strategic}} = 0.938$, and $\alpha_{\text{citizen}} = 0.892$) and from 0.63 to 0.91 for business relatedness ($\alpha_{\text{token}} = 0.628$, $\alpha_{\text{servant}} = 0.740$, $\alpha_{\text{strategic}} = 0.876$, and $\alpha_{\text{citizen}} = 0.907$). Given the pretest context, values ≥ 0.60 were deemed acceptable for screening purposes (Lim 2025).

5.3.3. Findings

We employed two one-way ANOVAs (one for moral intensity and one for business relatedness) to evaluate whether the designed scenarios were perceived as intended.

For moral intensity, the ANOVA indicated a significant mean difference across the activism scenarios ($F(3, 196) = 34.55$, $p < 0.001$). As the Levene's test failed to assume equal variances ($p < 0.05$), we used the Games-Howell test as the post-hoc analysis. Servant activism had the highest mean score for moral intensity ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.55$), followed by citizen ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.19$), strategic ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.13$), and token ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.98$) activism. Significant mean differences were observed between servant and citizen activism versus token and strategic activism (Servant vs. Token: $M_{\text{difference}} = 2.12$, $p < 0.001$; Servant vs. Strategic: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.63$, $p < 0.001$; Citizen vs. Token: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.82$, $p < 0.001$; Citizen vs. Strategic: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.33$, $p < 0.001$). However, no significant difference was found between servant and citizen activism on moral intensity ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.30$, $p = 0.70 > 0.05$).

For business relatedness, the ANOVA indicated a significant mean difference across the activism scenarios ($F(3, 196) = 30.14$, $p < 0.001$). As the Levene's test supported the assumption of equal variances ($p = 0.27$), we used the Tukey test as the post-hoc analysis. Strategic activism had the highest mean score for business relatedness ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.13$), followed by citizen ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 1.10$), token ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.91$), and servant ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.18$) activism. Significant mean differences were observed between strategic and citizen activism versus token and servant activism (Strategic vs. Token: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.15$, $p < 0.001$; Strategic vs. Servant: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.83$, $p < 0.001$, Citizen vs. Token: $M_{\text{difference}} = 0.90$, $p < 0.001$; Citizen vs. Servant: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.59$, $p < 0.001$). However, no significant difference was found between strategic and citizen activism on business relatedness ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.25$, $p = 0.67 > 0.05$).

Consistent with Pretest 2a, Pretest 2b confirms that the four scenarios are perceived with clear, intended differences on moral intensity and business relatedness when assessed with established scales, which validates the manipulation.

6. Study 1: The CSA and CBBE relationship

6.1. Study 1a

6.1.1. Goal

This study aimed to test how token, servant, strategic, and citizen activism affect CBBE. More specifically, Study 1a tested H_1 , which predicts that servant activism will produce the most favorable CBBE, followed by citizen activism, which will outperform the low-moral-intensity forms.

6.1.2. Method

A between-subjects scenario-based quasi-experimental design was employed. A total of 416 valid responses were obtained ($M_{\text{age}} = 30$ years, female = 45%, male = 55%, non-binary = 0%, prefer not to say = 0%), which met the G*Power sample-size requirement (α error = 0.05, power = 0.95, groups = 4, and covariates = 4). To strengthen instrument validity, the questionnaire and scenarios were face-validated by three internationally recognized professors (Lim 2024; Lim et al. 2026), complementing Pretest 2a—the scenarios appear in Appendices 1 to 4. Respondents were distributed equally across the four CSA scenarios and were instructed to read the assigned scenario carefully before answering the questionnaire.

The questionnaire comprises three sections. Section 1 presented the scenario followed by manipulation check and scenario realism questions obtained from Jebarajakirthy et al. (2023). Section 2 included items measuring CBBE (Baalbaki and Guzmán 2016; $\alpha=0.87$), brand attitude (Spears and Singh 2004; $\alpha=0.89$) and brand attachment (Shimul, Phau, and Lwin 2019; $\alpha=0.77$) (Appendix 9). Section 3 collected demographic information (age, gender) of the respondents. All construct items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree).

6.1.3. Results

6.1.3.1. Scenario realism. Four one-sample *t*-tests confirmed scenario realism for the four types of CSA. Respondents perceived all the scenarios as real (Token: $M=5.81$, $SD = 1.15$, $t(103) = 16.09$, $p < 0.001$; Servant: $M=6.40$, $SD = 0.49$, $t(103) = 49.72$, $p < 0.001$; Strategic: $M=5.45$, $SD = 0.78$, $t(103) = 19.04$, $p < 0.001$; Citizen: $M=5.12$, $SD = 0.99$, $t(103) = 11.58$, $p < 0.001$).

6.1.3.2. Manipulation checks for moral intensity and business relatedness. Two ANOVAs, one for moral intensity and one for business relatedness, confirmed scenario manipulation. The ANOVA results indicated significant differences across the scenario types for moral intensity ($F(3, 412) = 110.92$, $p < 0.001$) and business relatedness ($F(3, 412) = 47.83$, $p < 0.001$).

For moral intensity, servant activism had the highest mean score ($M=5.25$, $SD = 1.24$), followed by citizen ($M=5.01$, $SD = 0.84$), strategic ($M=3.86$, $SD = 0.70$), and token ($M=3.43$, $SD = 0.42$) activism. Significant mean differences were observed between servant and citizen activism versus token and strategic activism (Servant vs. Token: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.82$, $p < 0.001$; Servant vs. Strategic: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.39$, $p < 0.001$; Citizen vs. Token: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.58$, $p < 0.001$; Citizen vs. Strategic: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.15$, $p < 0.001$). No significant difference was found between servant and citizen activism ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.24$, $p = 0.38 > 0.05$).

For business relatedness, strategic activism had the highest mean score ($M=5.36$, $SD = 1.23$), followed by citizen ($M=5.18$, $SD = 1.05$), token ($M=4.01$, $SD = 1.02$), and servant ($M=3.92$, $SD = 1.17$) activism. Significant mean differences were observed between strategic and citizen activism versus token and servant activism (Strategic vs. Token: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.35$, $p < 0.001$; Strategic vs. Servant: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.44$, $p < 0.001$; Citizen vs. Token: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.17$, $p < 0.001$; Citizen vs. Servant: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.26$,

$p < 0.001$). No significant difference was found between strategic and citizen activism ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.18, p = 0.67 > 0.05$).

Overall, the results of moral intensity and business relatedness variations based on CSA type confirmed appropriate scenario manipulation.

6.1.3.3. Main effects. An ANCOVA with CBBE as the dependent variable, CSA type as the fixed factor (coded as 1=token, 2=servant, 3=strategic, and 4 = citizen), and brand attitude, brand attachment, age (coded as 1 = 18–30, 2 = 31–45, and 3 = 46 and above), and gender (coded as 1 = male, 2 = female) as covariates revealed a significant effect of CSA type on CBBE ($F(3, 408) = 148.75, p < 0.001$). CBBE was highest for servant activism ($M = 5.46, SD = 0.89$), followed by citizen ($M = 4.92, SD = 0.82$), token ($M = 4.03, SD = 0.63$), and strategic ($M = 3.78, SD = 0.84$) activism.

Multi-group comparisons showed that servant activism exceeded token activism ($M_{\text{difference}} = 1.43, SE = 0.11, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [1.22, 1.64]$), strategic activism ($M_{\text{difference}} = 1.68, SE = 0.12, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [1.44, 1.91]$), and citizen activism ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.54, SE = 0.12, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.31, 0.78]$). The observed pattern was consistent with H_1 , since servant activism produced the highest CBBE and citizen activism exceeded the two low-moral-intensity forms in the rank ordering.

6.1.4. Discussion

The findings show that different CSA types produce meaningfully different levels of CBBE. Servant activism yielded the highest CBBE, followed by citizen activism, token activism, and strategic activism. Therefore, Study 1a offers initial support for H_1 and suggests that moral intensity matters more than business relatedness in shaping brand equity.

6.2. Study 1b

6.2.1. Goal

Like Study 1a, Study 1b examined how token, servant, strategic, and citizen activism affect CBBE, here using a different issue (gender equality) and a different firm (Reliance), and tested H_1 .

6.2.2. Method

A between-subjects scenario-based quasi-experimental design was utilized. To strengthen instrument validity, three internationally recognized professors reviewed and face-validated the questionnaire and scenarios (Lim 2024; Lim et al. 2026), complementing Pretest 2b—the scenarios appear in [Appendices 5 to 8](#) and the questionnaire in [Appendix 9](#). A total of 655 questionnaires were distributed across four conditions, yielding 414 returned responses (100 for Scenario 1, 103 for Scenario 2, 105 for Scenario 3, and 106 for Scenario 4). To ensure data quality, we included an attention-check item. Specifically, respondents were presented with the statement ‘the enumerator drives a black City’ alongside the measurement items, whereby

respondents who failed this check were excluded from the analysis (Oppenheimer, Meyvis, and Davidenko 2009). To maintain equal cell sizes across conditions, a small number of additional valid questionnaires were randomly removed from the overrepresented conditions. In total, 14 questionnaires were removed from Scenarios 2, 3, and 4, leaving 400 valid responses, with 100 in each condition. The final sample had an average age of 23.5 years and included 46% female respondents and 54% male respondents. The sample met the G*Power requirement (α error = 0.05, power = 0.95, groups = 4, and covariates = 2).

6.2.3. Results

6.2.3.1. Scenario realism. One-sample *t*-tests indicated that perceived realism was significantly above the scale midpoint in all four scenarios (Token: $M=5.00$, $SD = 0.98$, $t(99) = 10.18$, $p < 0.001$; Servant: $M=5.42$, $SD = 1.71$, $t(99) = 8.34$, $p < 0.001$; Strategic: $M=4.41$, $SD = 1.26$, $t(99) = 3.26$, $p < 0.01$; Citizen: $M=5.71$, $SD = 0.45$, $t(99) = 37.05$, $p < 0.001$), signaling that the scenarios were perceived as realistic.

6.2.3.2. Manipulation checks for moral intensity and business relatedness. As in Pre-test 2b, the manipulation checks in this study used Jones (1991) to assess moral intensity and Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, and Hill (2006) to assess business relatedness. Two ANOVAs (one for moral intensity and one for business relatedness) confirmed scenario manipulation. The ANOVA results indicated a significant mean difference in the scenario types based on moral intensity ($F(3, 396) = 58.27$, $p < 0.001$) and business relatedness ($F(3, 396) = 49.70$, $p < 0.001$).

For moral intensity, servant activism had the highest mean score ($M=4.82$, $SD = 1.21$), followed by citizen ($M=4.32$, $SD = 1.66$), strategic ($M=3.36$, $SD = 1.39$), and token ($M=2.68$, $SD = 0.39$) activism. Significant mean differences were observed between servant and citizen activism versus token and strategic activism (Servant vs. Token: $M_{\text{difference}} = 2.14$, $p < 0.001$; Servant vs. Strategic: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.47$, $p < 0.001$; Citizen vs. Token: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.64$, $p < 0.001$; Citizen vs. Strategic: $M_{\text{difference}} = 0.97$, $p < 0.001$).

For business relatedness, strategic activism had the highest mean score ($M=4.92$, $SD = 1.05$), followed by citizen ($M=4.35$, $SD = 1.01$), token ($M=3.70$, $SD = 1.11$), and servant ($M=3.23$, $SD = 1.02$) activism. Significant mean differences were observed for strategic and citizen activism with token and servant activism (Strategic vs. Token: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.22$, $p < 0.001$; Strategic vs. Servant: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.69$, $p < 0.001$; Citizen vs. Token: $M_{\text{difference}} = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$; Citizen vs. Servant: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.12$, $p < 0.001$).

6.2.3.3. Main effects. An ANCOVA with CBBE as the dependent variable, CSA type (coded as 1 = token, 2 = servant, 3 = strategic, and 4 = citizen) as the fixed factor, and age and gender as covariates revealed a significant effect of CSA type on CBBE ($F(3, 394) = 34.19$, $p < 0.001$). Brand attitude and brand attachment were excluded as covariates in this study because both differed significantly across conditions ($F(3, 396) = 59.79$ and $F(3, 396) = 57.10$, respectively, $p < 0.001$), violating the covariate-independence assumption of ANCOVA. CBBE was highest for servant activism ($M=4.39$, $SD = 0.71$), followed by citizen ($M=3.97$, $SD = 0.80$), token ($M=3.69$, $SD = 0.38$), and strategic ($M=3.62$, $SD = 0.39$) activism.

Multi-group comparisons showed that servant activism exceeded token activism ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.70$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.54, 0.85]), strategic activism ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.77$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.61, 0.93]), and citizen activism ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.42$, $SE = 0.11$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.21, 0.63]). None of the covariates was significant in this model (all $p > 0.05$). Therefore, Study 1b replicated the pattern predicted in H_1 .

6.2.4. Discussion

Study 1b replicates and extends Study 1a by showing that servant activism yields the highest CBBE in a different issue–firm context, while citizen activism again ranks above the low-moral-intensity forms. Along with Pretest 2b, these results indicate that the scenarios capture the theorized axes and that moral intensity is more influential than business relatedness in this design.

7. Study 2: The mediating role of CBE

7.1. Goal

Study 2 aimed to test whether CBE mediates the effect of CSA on CBBE (H_2). Hence, building on the findings from Study 1, this study endeavored to examine whether higher levels of CBE, driven by different CSA types, translate into enhanced CBBE.

7.2. Method

The quasi-experimental design and data collection for Study 2 mirrored Study 1a, with one key addition, namely the measurement of CBE. Items used to measure CBE were obtained from Vivek et al. (2014) and contextualized, for example, 'I would closely follow the Tata community' ($\alpha = 0.85$). A total of 464 responses were returned. Following the removal of questionnaires that failed the attention check and a small number of randomly selected valid questionnaires from overrepresented conditions to obtain equal cell sizes, 412 usable responses were retained. The final sample had an average age of 34.8 years and included 44.2% female respondents and 55.8% male respondents. The sample met the G*Power requirement (α error = 0.05, power = 0.95, groups = 4, and covariates = 2).

7.3. Results

7.3.1. Scenario realism

Four one-sample t -tests confirmed scenario realism for the four activism types (Token: $M = 5.34$, $SD = 0.80$, $t(102) = 17.16$, $p < 0.001$; Servant: $M = 5.28$, $SD = 0.86$, $t(102) = 15.18$, $p < 0.001$; Strategic: $M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.09$, $t(102) = 10.97$, $p < 0.001$; Citizen = 5.11, $SD = 1.01$, $t(102) = 11.16$, $p < 0.001$).

7.3.2. Manipulation checks for moral intensity and business relatedness

Two ANOVAs (one for business relatedness and one for moral intensity) confirmed manipulation. A significant mean difference of the scenario types based on moral

intensity ($F(3, 408) = 43.86, p < 0.001$) and business relatedness ($F(3, 408) = 140.48, p < 0.001$) was observed.

For moral intensity, servant activism noted the highest mean score ($M = 5.31, SD = 0.84$) followed by citizen ($M = 5.01, SD = 0.70$), strategic ($M = 4.18, SD = 1.13$), and token ($M = 4.06, SD = 1.03$) activism. Both servant (Servant vs. Token: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.25, p < 0.001$; Servant vs. Strategic: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.13, p < 0.001$) and citizen (Citizen vs. Token: $M_{\text{difference}} = 0.95, p < 0.01$; Citizen vs. Strategic: $M_{\text{difference}} = 0.83, p < 0.01$) activism witnessed significant mean differences with token and strategic activism. Though significant, the mean difference between servant and citizen activism was small ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.30, p < 0.05$).

For business relatedness, strategic activism noted the highest mean score ($M = 5.62, SD = 0.66$) followed by citizen ($M = 5.56, SD = 0.59$), token ($M = 4.12, SD = 1.05$), and servant ($M = 3.65, SD = 1.02$) activism. Both strategic (Strategic vs. Token: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.50, p < 0.001$; Strategic vs. Servant: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.97, p < 0.001$) and citizen (Citizen vs. Token: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.44, p < 0.001$; Citizen vs. Servant: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.91, p < 0.001$) activism witnessed significant mean differences with token and servant activism. No significant mean difference was observed between strategic and citizen activism ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.06, p = 0.73 > 0.05$).

These results confirmed the scenario manipulation based on moral intensity and business relatedness.

7.3.3. Main effects

An ANCOVA with CBBE as the dependent variable, CSA type as the fixed factor, and age and gender as covariates revealed a significant effect of CSA type on CBBE ($F(3, 406) = 197.49, p < 0.001$). Brand attitude and brand attachment were excluded as covariates in this study because both differed significantly across conditions ($F(3, 408) = 72.15$ and $F(3, 408) = 46.42$, respectively, $p < 0.001$), violating the covariate-independence assumption of ANCOVA. CBBE was highest for servant activism ($M = 4.81, SD = 0.69$), followed by citizen ($M = 4.71, SD = 0.69$), token ($M = 3.37, SD = 0.64$), and strategic ($M = 3.11, SD = 0.51$) activism.

Multi-group comparisons showed that servant activism exceeded strategic activism ($M_{\text{difference}} = 1.70, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [1.54, 1.87]$) and token activism ($M_{\text{difference}} = 1.44, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [1.26, 1.63]$). No significant difference emerged between servant and citizen activism ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.10, p = 0.29 > 0.05, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.09, 0.29]$). Neither covariate was significant ($p > 0.05$). The mean pattern again aligned with H_1 .

7.3.4. Mediation effects

To examine the mediating effect of CBE between different types of CSA and CBBE, we conducted another ANCOVA with CBE as the dependent variable followed by a mediation analysis using PROCESS MACRO (Model 4) (Hayes 2013).

The ANCOVA results for CBE indicated a significant main effect of CSA ($F(3, 406) = 70.10, p < 0.001$). CBE was highest for servant activism ($M = 4.76, SD = 0.55$), followed by citizen ($M = 3.79, SD = 0.77$), token ($M = 3.70, SD = 0.74$), and strategic activism ($M = 3.56, SD = 0.42$). Pairwise comparisons showed that servant activism exceeded strategic activism ($M_{\text{difference}} = 1.20, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [1.05, 1.35]$) and token activism ($M_{\text{difference}} = 1.06, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.88, 1.24]$). Servant activism also exceeded citizen

activism ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.97, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.79, 1.15]$). Neither covariate was significant ($p > 0.05$).

Next, we employed PROCESS MACRO (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrapping re-samples (Hayes 2013) to test the mediation effect of CBE between CSA types and CBBE, considering CBBE as the dependent variable, CBE as the mediator, and CSA types as multi-categorical fixed factors (1=token, 2=servant, 3 = strategic, 4 = citizen) with age and gender as covariates. For the mediation analysis, indicator coding was used for CSA types, with token activism as the base category.

The mediation results showed that the bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect of CBE did not include zero for servant activism (direct effect = 1.17, SE = 0.10, $t = 11.81, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.97, 1.36]$, indirect effect = 0.27, SE = 0.06, 95% CI [0.17, 0.39]). For citizen activism, the direct effect remained significant (direct effect = 1.32, SE = 0.09, $t = 15.33, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [1.15, 1.49]$), whereas the confidence interval for the indirect effect included zero (indirect effect = 0.02, SE = 0.03, 95% CI [-0.03, 0.08]). For strategic activism, the direct effect was negative and significant (direct effect = -0.22, SE = 0.09, $t = -2.57, p < 0.05, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.39, -0.05]$), whereas the confidence interval for the indirect effect included zero (indirect effect = -0.04, SE = 0.03, 95% CI [-0.09, 0.01]). Thus, CBE mediated the positive effect of servant activism on CBBE, providing partial support for H_2 , whereas the indirect effects for citizen and strategic activism were not significant (Figure 3).

7.4. Discussion

Study 2 extends the direct effect evidence by showing that CBE is the mechanism through which servant activism strengthens CBBE. Citizen activism again produced relatively favorable direct CBBE, yet that advantage did not operate through CBE. Strategic activism likewise showed no indirect effect through CBE, although its direct effect was negative and significant. Therefore, servant activism appears distinctive in its ability to stimulate engagement that accumulates into equity.

8. Study 3: The moderating role of NFC

8.1. Goal

Study 3 aimed to investigate whether NFC strengthens the indirect effect of CSA on CBBE through CBE (H_3). Therefore, the study introduced NFC as a moderating variable, categorizing participants into high- and low-NFC groups through a median split (median = 4.00; respondents at the median were allocated to achieve equal group sizes) and exposing them to the same CSA scenarios used in the previous studies.

8.2. Method

Similar to Study 1b, data collection for this study took place offline, where three members of the research team collected data from student samples at their respective universities. The questionnaire, however, largely mirrored those used in Studies 1a and 2, with the following changes: a 4 (CSA type: token vs. servant vs. strategic vs.

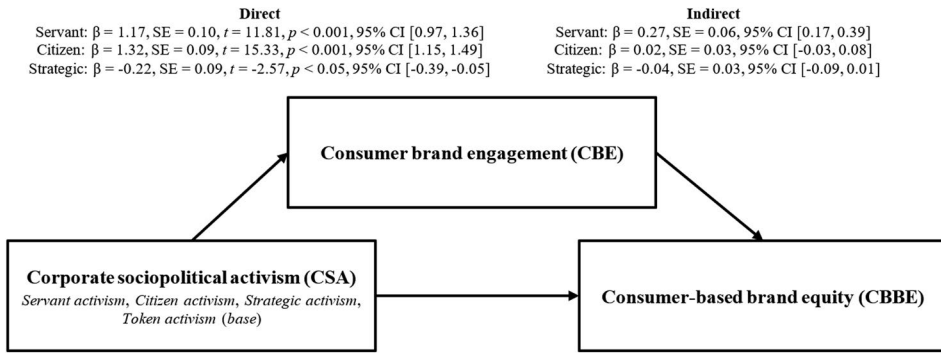


Figure 3. Mediation of CBE on CSA and CBBE.

citizen) \times 2 (need for cognition: low vs. high) between-subjects design and the inclusion of items to measure NFC (Lins de Holanda Coelho, Hanel, and Wolf 2020; $\alpha = 0.82$). A total of 680 usable responses were obtained for this study (Mage = 20.4 years, Male = 57.9%, Female = 42.1%, Non-binary = 0%, Prefer not to say = 0%). Two ANOVAs, one for CBBE and one for CBE, and PROCESS MACROs (Models 4 and 7) were used for data analysis (Hayes 2013).

8.3. Results

8.3.1. Manipulation checks

Similar to Studies 1a, 1b, and 2, the scenario manipulation and realism checks were successful. The scenarios were perceived as realistic and the manipulations of moral intensity and business relatedness functioned as intended.

8.3.2. Main effects on CBBE

An ANOVA with CBBE as the dependent variable and CSA type and NFC as fixed factors indicated significant main effects for both CSA type and NFC, as well as a significant interaction. CSA type was significant ($F(3, 672) = 93.09, p < 0.001$), NFC was significant ($F(1, 672) = 10.71, p < 0.001$), and the CSA type \times NFC interaction was significant ($F(3, 672) = 17.28, p < 0.001$). CBBE was highest for servant activism ($M = 5.38, SD = 1.04$), followed by citizen ($M = 4.73, SD = 1.63$), token ($M = 4.05, SD = 1.30$), and strategic activism ($M = 3.18, SD = 1.24$). Multi-group comparisons showed that servant activism exceeded strategic activism ($M_{\text{difference}} = 2.20, p < 0.001, 95\% CI [1.96, 2.45]$), token activism ($M_{\text{difference}} = 1.33, p < 0.001, 95\% CI [1.08, 1.58]$), and citizen ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.66, p < 0.001, 95\% CI [0.36, 0.95]$) activism.

An additional ANOVA with CBE as the dependent variable confirmed significant main effects for both CSA type and NFC. CSA type ($F(3, 672) = 26.96, p < 0.001$) and NFC ($F(1, 672) = 15.00, p < 0.001$) were significant. CBE was highest for servant activism ($M = 5.01, SD = 1.52$), followed by citizen ($M = 3.90, SD = 1.35$), token ($M = 3.78, SD = 1.91$), and strategic activism ($M = 3.49, SD = 1.92$). Multi-group comparisons showed that servant activism exceeded strategic ($M_{\text{difference}} = 1.53, p < 0.001, 95\% CI [1.16, 1.89]$), token ($M_{\text{difference}} = 1.23, p < 0.001, 95\% CI [0.87, 1.60]$), and citizen ($M_{\text{difference}} = 1.11, p < 0.001, 95\% CI [0.81, 1.42]$) activism.

8.3.3. Mediation effects

PROCESS Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap resamples (Hayes 2013) was used to test whether CBE mediated the effect of CSA type on CBBE. The indirect effect was significant for servant activism (direct effect = 0.77, SE = 0.12, $t=6.42$, $p<0.001$, 95% CI [0.53, 1.01], indirect effect = 0.56, SE = 0.09, 95% CI [0.38, 0.75]). For citizen activism, the direct effect was significant (direct effect = 0.62, SE = 0.12, $t=5.36$, $p<0.001$, 95% CI [0.40, 0.85]), whereas the confidence interval for the indirect effect included zero (indirect effect = 0.06, SE = 0.08, 95% CI [-0.10, 0.22]). For strategic activism, the direct effect was significant (direct effect = -0.74, SE = 0.12, $t=-6.34$, $p<0.001$, 95% CI [-0.97, -0.51]), whereas the indirect effect included zero (indirect effect = -0.13, SE = 0.10, 95% CI [-0.33, 0.06]).

8.3.4. Moderation effects

The interaction pattern showed that the high-NFC premium was specific to servant activism, which generated higher CBBE among high-NFC consumers than among low-NFC consumers ($M=5.81$ versus 4.94). The remaining three forms moved in the opposite direction, with low-NFC consumers reporting higher CBBE for citizen ($M=5.20$ versus 4.26), token ($M=4.31$ versus 3.76), and strategic ($M=3.52$ versus 2.86) activism. These contrasts suggest that high-NFC consumers reserve their reward for the most morally intense and least self-interested form of activism, whereas low-NFC consumers respond more favorably to the remaining forms, relying on simplified or reputational cues rather than scrutinizing the alignment between message and motive.

8.3.5. Moderated mediation effects

Given that only servant activism showed a significant indirect effect through CBE in the preceding mediation analysis, the present moderated mediation analysis focused on whether this theoretically relevant indirect path varied across levels of NFC. We did not extend the moderated mediation analysis to the other CSA types, as the prior results provided no evidence that their effects operated through CBE on average. PROCESS Model 7 was used to test whether NFC moderates the CBE-mediated effect of servant activism on CBBE (Hayes 2013). The index of moderated mediation (IMM) was significant (IMM = 0.69, SE = 0.16, 95% CI [0.37, 1.02]), whereby, as indicated in Figure 4, CBE significantly mediated the effect of servant activism on CBBE (indirect effect = 0.90, SE = 0.13, 95% CI [0.67, 1.16]) for high-NFC consumers, whereas the confidence interval for the indirect effect included zero (indirect effect = 0.21, SE = 0.11, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.44]) for low-NFC consumers. Collectively, these findings support H_3 , whereby the positive indirect effect of servant activism on CBBE through CBE was stronger among high-NFC consumers than among low-NFC consumers, which underscores the importance of cognitive processing depth in consumer responses to CSA.

8.4. Discussion

The results of Study 3 show that NFC meaningfully conditions how consumers respond to CSA. Servant activism again produced the highest CBE and CBBE, whereby the

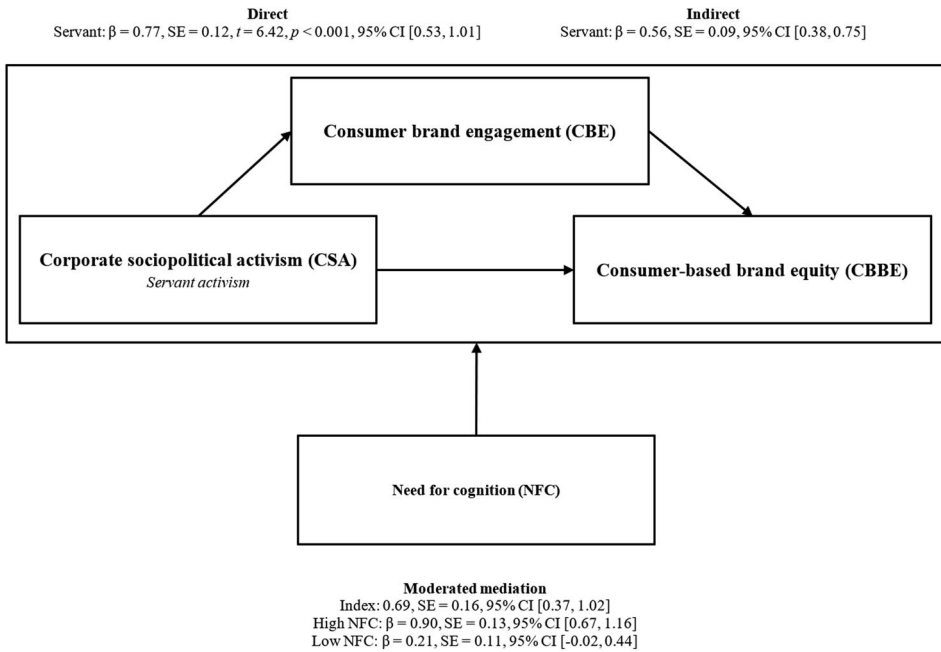


Figure 4. Moderated mediation effect of NFC.

engagement pathway for servant activism became substantially stronger among high-NFC consumers. The remaining activism forms showed a different descriptive pattern, with low-NFC consumers reporting relatively higher direct CBBE. Therefore, Study 3 extends the earlier findings by showing that the mechanism supporting servant activism depends on how deeply consumers process the activist message.

9. Conclusion

9.1. General discussion

While prior work has examined CSA from macro vantage points such as ideological alignment, home-host context, firm-stakeholder dynamics, and host-country animosity (Gong et al. 2025; McKean and King 2024; Minefee and Yue 2025; Sun et al. 2024), direct linkage from a corporate stance to consumer-level brand outcomes remains limited. The present research addresses that gap by tracing how CSA type influences CBBE through CBE and by showing when that process strengthens. Across studies, servant activism generated the strongest brand outcomes, citizen activism also outperformed the low-moral-intensity forms, and high NFC amplified the indirect effect of servant activism through CBE. These findings are important for advertising and brand communication scholarship, as well as for branding and marketing more broadly, since they clarify which forms of activism are most likely to build brand value rather than skepticism. That is to say, the findings are relevant to *advertising* and *brand communication* scholarship since they specify how externally communicated sociopolitical stances shape consumer interpretation of the brand, which is central to message

design, persuasion, and communication effectiveness. The findings are also relevant to *branding* since they show that activism does not influence brand value uniformly, but instead depends on the type of activism communicated and the engagement it generates. More broadly, the findings are relevant to *marketing* since they explain when sociopolitical positioning functions as a value-creating market action rather than a source of consumer skepticism, which bears implications for segmentation, targeting, positioning, and resource allocation.

Several findings align with prior research showing that activism can enhance brand equity when consumers read the stance as authentic, value-consistent, and socially meaningful (Ahmad, Guzmán, and Kidwell 2022; Z. Lee et al. 2024; Li, Kim, and Alharbi 2022). Servant activism led to the highest CBE and CBBE, which supports the view that consumers reward morally serious activism when commercial self-interest is less salient (Chu, Kim, and Kim 2023; Lude and Prügl 2018; Selvanathan, Uluğ, and Burrows 2023). Citizen activism also generated comparatively favorable direct CBBE, which suggests that consumers can respond positively when moral commitment and business relevance coexist, as long as the moral claim remains credible.

At the same time, the results challenge the common assumption that business relatedness is inherently beneficial. Strategic activism consistently underperformed, even though business relatedness was high, which suggests that strong commercial fit can backfire when moral intensity is weak. Token activism also performed poorly, yet strategic activism often fared worst, which implies that consumers may react especially negatively when a firm appears to align activism tightly with business interests without matching moral seriousness. This pattern is consistent with work on performative or insincere activism (Ganesan and Mallapragada 2025; Kwon et al. 2024; Walter et al. 2024).

NFC further refines this account. High-NFC consumers responded especially strongly to servant activism, which is consistent with the elaboration likelihood model (Cacioppo and Petty 1982) and related work on effortful processing (Knowlton and Castel 2022). Recognition of servant activism's value requires consumers to appreciate why a morally serious stance that is not tightly tied to commercial self-interest can appear more authentic. Low-NFC consumers, in contrast, reported relatively higher direct CBBE for the remaining activism forms, which suggests greater reliance on simpler cues such as familiarity, broad approval, or surface positivity.

Another key takeaway concerns the relative weight of the two evaluative dimensions. Under the conditions tested herein, moral intensity was more influential than business relatedness in driving engagement and equity. When activism was perceived as morally serious and less commercially entangled, consumers inferred stronger authenticity and rewarded the brand through higher CBE and CBBE. When activism appeared commercially aligned without comparable moral seriousness, skepticism increased and brand outcomes weakened. This interpretation fits attribution-based accounts of corporate activism, which suggest that consumers judge not only what a firm supports but also why the firm appears to support it (Carnes et al. 2022; Ginder, Kwon, and Byun 2021; Romani et al. 2015).

These findings are especially relevant in the Indian context, where ethical and sociopolitical concerns increasingly shape brand judgments (Geetha et al. 2024). India's diverse social environment and growing consumer activism make authenticity

especially consequential (Dhanesh and Sriramesh 2018; Sengupta et al. 2022). The strong performance of servant activism suggests that Indian consumers reward firms that appear morally serious without seeming commercially opportunistic, whereas the relatively weaker performance of strategic activism suggests caution when activism looks instrumentally motivated. The NFC results add a further layer by showing that consumer cognition affects how such signals are interpreted.

This research also clarifies how Branicki et al.'s (2021) typology can be extended from CEO activism to firm-level CSA. The typology was not treated here as a speaker-neutral message classification. Instead, the firm was treated as the signaling source and consumers were assumed to infer seriousness and motive from corporate communication and associated action. That shift preserves the original logic of the typology while adapting the source from the CEO to the organization. Therefore, the present evidence supports the typology's use as a structured way to analyze corporate activism without claiming that the original source logic disappears.

At the firm level, token activism captures symbolic alignment without substantive investment, servant activism captures morally serious engagement with limited commercial linkage, strategic activism captures issue engagement tied closely to business interests, and citizen activism captures activism in which moral commitment and organizational practice are jointly strong. The present findings from voter-awareness and gender-equality scenarios show how consumers respond differently to those forms. More broadly, the results suggest that the typology is useful for organizing consumer judgments of seriousness, motive, and fit when firms enter contested sociopolitical debates.

9.2. Theoretical contributions

This research makes significant contributions to the growing field of *activism* research by elucidating how different types of CSA impact consumer engagement and brand equity, with the moderating influence of NFC.

To begin, this research contributes to CSA theory by integrating the S-O-R model (Mehrabian and Russell 1974) with contingency theory (Fiedler 1964) to explain how different activism configurations shape CBBE through CBE. Within this theoretical framework, CSA type serves as the stimulus, CBE serves as the organism, and CBBE serves as the response, with contingency theory further indicating that consumers evaluate activism through the joint configuration of moral intensity and business relatedness rather than through either dimension alone. The present findings refine that logic further by showing that, in branded sociopolitical communication, consumers appear to prioritize whether the firm's stance reflects moral seriousness over whether the stance aligns closely with the firm's business interests, which, in turn, suggests that the persuasive advantage of activism may depend more on perceived moral seriousness than on close alignment with business interests.

Second, this research contributes by extending Branicki et al. (2021) typology to firm-level CSA in a conceptually disciplined way. Prior work often treats corporate activism as a unitary concept (Saracevic and Schlegelmilch 2026), which limits understanding of how distinct forms of activism generate different consumer outcomes.

The present research shows that the typology remains useful when the firm is treated as the signaling source and when consumers infer seriousness and motive from campaign content and associated organizational action. This contribution reflects an adequately incremental theoretical extension (Lim 2026), as it does more than demonstrate theoretical generalizability. More specifically, it repositions the typology from a CEO-centered classification to a firm-level interpretive framework that explains how consumers read branded activism through judgments of moral seriousness and commercial intent.

Third, this research contributes to activism scholarship and to research on advertising and brand communication by challenging the view that business relatedness is generally beneficial. Across studies, servant activism generated the strongest brand outcomes, whereas strategic activism often generated the weakest. In this regard, moral intensity appears more influential than business relatedness in explaining when CSA strengthens brand engagement and equity. Since the evidence comes from scenario-based quasi-experiments in India, this conclusion should be read as conditional rather than universal.

Fourth, the moderation analysis extends activism research by showing that NFC changes how the engagement mechanism operates. High-NFC consumers were especially responsive to servant activism and the indirect effect of servant activism through CBE was significant only for that group. The remaining activism forms produced relatively more favorable direct CBBE among low-NFC consumers, which suggests that cognitive style shapes how consumers interpret activism even when the same message is shown.

Collectively, these contributions advance *advertising* and *brand communication* scholarship by clarifying how activism claims should be framed across communication formats, advance *branding* by showing how engagement carries activist meaning into equity, and advance *marketing* by identifying the conditions under which activism strengthens or weakens consumer response. Therefore, this research's central contribution lies not only in showing that CSA is consequential, but in showing which form of CSA works best, through which mechanism, and for whom.

9.3. Managerial implications

The findings provide practical guidance for managers seeking to use CSA to strengthen CBE and CBBE. As consumers increasingly expect firms to address sociopolitical issues, managers cannot assume that any activist message will build brand value. The results instead suggest that the design, framing, and depth of organizational commitment are all consequential.

To begin, managers should recognize that servant activism produced the strongest pattern of consumer response. Morally serious activism that is not tightly tied to commercial self-interest appears more likely to generate trust, engagement, and equity. Hence, firms should prioritize issues they can support credibly through visible commitments, clear resource allocation, and communication that emphasizes purpose rather than brand self-promotion. In advertising and brand communication terms, detailed storytelling, evidence of follow-through, and concrete beneficiary outcomes

should be more effective than broad symbolic claims when firms pursue this route (DiRusso et al. 2022; Shoenberger et al. 2025).

Second, managers should be cautious with strategic activism. The present findings suggest that activism closely aligned with business interests can invite skepticism when the moral claim appears weak. In this regard, managers should resist treating contentious issues as short-term positioning opportunities. Where business relatedness is unavoidably high, firms should communicate the societal significance of the issue clearly and support the message with visible action, otherwise consumers may discount the stance as opportunistic. The backlash faced by FabIndia's 'Jashn-e-Riwaaz' campaign illustrates how quickly skepticism can emerge when audiences question sincerity (Firstpost 2021).

Third, citizen activism remains viable when firms can show that moral commitment and organizational practice are jointly strong. The evidence indicates that citizen activism performs better than the low-moral-intensity forms, although not as strongly as servant activism on the engagement pathway. Therefore, managers should treat citizen activism as a demanding option that requires consistent policy, operational follow-through, and restrained communication while keeping in mind that heavy self-congratulatory promotion can be counterproductive, especially for consumers who scrutinize motive closely (Jungblut and Johnen 2022).

Fourth, token activism should be avoided. Symbolic gestures without substantive commitment did not build strong engagement or equity and they risk inviting cynicism. Accordingly, managers should avoid temporary, low-cost displays of solidarity that are unsupported by policy change, resource commitment, or sustained communication. In practice, a firm is better served by doing less public activism than by engaging in activism that consumers can readily dismiss as performative.

Finally, the NFC findings call for a cautious rather than overstated segmentation claim. Most firms cannot identify NFC directly at scale, especially outside very data-rich digital contexts. A more realistic implication is to vary message depth across channels and formats. Detailed long-form content, transparent reasoning, and evidence of impact should be more persuasive for audiences likely to process activism carefully, whereas shorter messages and simpler reputational cues may carry greater weight for audiences processing the message less deeply. Message testing across platforms can help firms approximate these differences without requiring fine-grained psychological profiling.

9.4. Limitations and future directions

Despite the significant contributions of this research to the domain of CSA, there are several limitations that provide avenues for future investigation.

Several limitations also define the study's boundary conditions. First, the research relied on scenario-based quasi-experiments, which support causal inference better than descriptive survey designs but still simplify real market conditions (Dolnicar, Viglia, and Kurtaliqi 2026). For instance, field settings could generate stronger or weaker effects once competing messages, media clutter, and prior brand histories are fully present. Therefore, future research should examine whether the same patterns

hold in field experiments or naturalistic campaign settings and should also test adjacent mechanisms such as perceived authenticity or motive attribution.

Second, the evidence comes from India and the samples combined working professionals and university students. That design improves sample variation across studies, yet generalizability to other national and political contexts remains uncertain. As such, future research should test the framework in other cultural settings, compare collectivist and individualist markets, and examine whether the same hierarchy of activism types holds when the focal issue, brand history, or political polarization differs.

Third, NFC was operationalized through a median split to test moderation in a clear experimental format. A continuous moderation approach and additional audience variables, such as political ideology, perceived brand globalness, or prior activism expectations, could offer a more fine-grained account. Thus, future work should also examine whether alignment between corporate political activity and CSR changes how consumers interpret activist messages over time.

Disclosure statement

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Data availability statement

Data can be made available upon reasonable request.

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Appendix 1: Token activism (Pretest 2a, Study 1a, Study 2, Study 3)

Scenario

The CEO of Tata, a leading Indian multinational, issued a press release prior to the election in one Indian state. In this release, the CEO appealed to the voters of the state to cast their votes for qualified candidates. The message read:

Please remember while casting your vote that these candidates will decide your future for the coming five years. Vote wisely.

Manipulation check (1 = Highly irrelevant, 7 = Highly relevant)

- Rate the moral intensity of the scenario.
- Rate the business relatedness of the scenario.

Scenario realism (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree) (Jebarajakirthy et al. 2023)

- The scenario seems to be real.
- What is described in this scenario happens in real purchase situations

Appendix 2: Servant activism (Pretest 2a, Study 1a, Study 2, Study 3)

Scenario

The CEO of Tata, a leading Indian multinational, issued a press release prior to the election in one Indian state. In this release, the CEO appealed to the voters of the state to cast their votes for qualified candidates. The message read:

Please remember while casting your vote that these candidates will decide your future for the coming five years. We are highlighting a list of candidates with serious criminal records as disclosed in their election affidavits. Vote wisely.

Manipulation check (1 = Highly irrelevant, 7 = Highly relevant)

- Rate the moral intensity of the scenario.
- Rate the business relatedness of the scenario.

Scenario realism (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree) (Jebarajakirthy et al. 2023)

- The scenario seems to be real.
- What is described in this scenario happens in real purchase situations.

Appendix 3: Strategic activism (Pretest 2a, Study 1a, Study 2, Study 3)

Scenario

The CEO of Tata, a leading Indian multinational, issued a press release prior to the election in one Indian state. In this release, the CEO appealed to the voters of the state to cast their votes for qualified candidates. The message read:

Please remember while casting your vote that these candidates will decide your future for the coming five years. We are highlighting a list of candidates who we believe can significantly improve the business prospects of your state. Vote wisely.

Manipulation check (1=Highly irrelevant, 7=Highly relevant)

- Rate the moral intensity of the scenario.
- Rate the business relatedness of the scenario.

Scenario realism (1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree) (Jebarajakirthy et al. 2023)

- The scenario seems to be real.
- What is described in this scenario happens in real purchase situations.

Appendix 4: Citizen activism (Pretest 2a, Study 1a, Study 2, Study 3)

Scenario

The CEO of Tata, a leading Indian multinational, issued a press release prior to the election in one Indian state. In this release, the CEO appealed to the voters of the state to cast their votes for qualified candidates. The message read:

Please remember while casting your vote that these candidates will decide your future for the coming five years. We are highlighting a list of candidates who we believe can significantly improve the business prospects of your state. We are also highlighting a list of candidates with serious criminal records as disclosed in their election affidavits. Vote wisely.

Manipulation check (1=Highly irrelevant, 7=Highly relevant)

- Rate the moral intensity of the scenario.
- Rate the business relatedness of the scenario.

Scenario realism (1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree) (Jebarajakirthy et al. 2023)

- The scenario seems to be real.
- What is described in this scenario happens in real purchase situations.

Appendix 5: Token activism (Pretest 2b, Study 1b)

On the occasion of International Women's Day, the CEO of Reliance released a three-minute video featuring the success stories of prominent women in India, positioning the message as a celebratory expression of support for women's empowerment.

Scenario realism (1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree)

- The scenario seems to be real.
- What is described in this scenario happens in real purchase situations.

Manipulation check (1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree)

Moral intensity (Jones 1991)

- The possible consequences of this message are very significant.
- Most people would agree that this message is ethically right.
- There is a high probability that this message will actually cause benefit.
- The positive consequences of this message will occur very soon.
- Those affected by this message are close to me (socially, culturally, etc.).
- The consequences of this message will be concentrated on a few people. (R)

Business relatedness (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, and Hill 2006)

- The activism message fits with Reliance's businesses.
- The activism message is related to Reliance's core business.
- The activism message is consistent with Reliance's industry characteristics.

Appendix 6: Servant activism (Pretest 2b, Study 1b)

On the occasion of International Women's Day, the CEO of Reliance released a three-minute video featuring the success stories of women working across industries in which Reliance operates, positioning the message as a celebratory expression of support for women's empowerment.

Scenario realism (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree)

- The scenario seems to be real.
- What is described in this scenario happens in real purchase situations.

Manipulation check (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree)

Moral intensity (Jones 1991)

- The possible consequences of this message are very significant.
- Most people would agree that this message is ethically right.
- There is a high probability that this message will actually cause benefit.
- The positive consequences of this message will occur very soon.
- Those affected by this message are close to me (socially, culturally, etc.).
- The consequences of this message will be concentrated on a few people. (R)

Business relatedness (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, and Hill 2006)

- The activism message fits with Reliance's businesses.
- The activism message is related to Reliance's core business.
- The activism message is consistent with Reliance's industry characteristics.

Appendix 7: Strategic activism (Pretest 2b, Study 1b)

On the occasion of International Women's Day, the CEO of Reliance released a three-minute video featuring the success stories of women employed by Reliance across industries, positioning the message as a celebratory expression of support for women's empowerment.

Scenario realism (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree)

- The scenario seems to be real.

- What is described in this scenario happens in real purchase situations.

Manipulation check (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree)

Moral intensity (Jones 1991)

- The possible consequences of this message are very significant.
- Most people would agree that this message is ethically right.
- There is a high probability that this message will actually cause benefit.
- The positive consequences of this message will occur very soon.
- Those affected by this message are close to me (socially, culturally, etc.).
- The consequences of this message will be concentrated on a few people. (R)

Business relatedness (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, and Hill 2006)

- The activism message fits with Reliance's businesses.
- The activism message is related to Reliance's core business.
- The activism message is consistent with Reliance's industry characteristics.

Appendix 8: Citizen activism (Pretest 2b, Study 1b)

On the occasion of International Women's Day, the CEO of Reliance released a three-minute video featuring Reliance's contributions to the success stories of women employed by Reliance across industries, positioning the message as a celebratory expression of support for women's empowerment.

Scenario realism (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree)

- The scenario seems to be real.
- What is described in this scenario happens in real purchase situations.

Manipulation check (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree)

Moral intensity (Jones 1991)

- The possible consequences of this message are very significant.
- Most people would agree that this message is ethically right.
- There is a high probability that this message will actually cause benefit.
- The positive consequences of this message will occur very soon.
- Those affected by this message are close to me (socially, culturally, etc.).
- The consequences of this message will be concentrated on a few people. (R)

Business relatedness (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, and Hill 2006)

- The activism message fits with Reliance's businesses.
- The activism message is related to Reliance's core business.
- The activism message is consistent with Reliance's industry characteristics.

Appendix 9: Measurement items (Studies 1a, 1b, 2, and 3)

Consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) (1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree) (Baalbaki & Guzmán, 2016)

- The reliability of Tata/Reliance as a brand is very high.
- Brand Tata/Reliance seems to be consistent in the quality of products it offers.
- The performance of Tata/Reliance as a brand is very high.
- The functionality of Tata/Reliance as a brand is very high.
- Tata/Reliance offers consistent quality.
- Tata/Reliance brands perform consistently.
- Tata/Reliance offers an acceptable standard of quality.
- Tata's/Reliance's products are well made.
- Brand Tata/Reliance is my first choice.
- I am loyal to Tata/Reliance.
- If Tata/Reliance is available, I will not buy other brands.
- I am committed to buying Tata's/Reliance's products.
- Tata's/Reliance's products are environmentally safe.
- Tata/Reliance is an environmentally responsible brand.
- Tata/Reliance is a sustainable brand.
- Tata/Reliance is a healthy brand.
- Tata's/Reliance's products improve the way I am perceived by others.
- Using Tata's/Reliance's products makes a good impression on other people.
- Tata's/Reliance's products offer social approval to their users.
- Tata's/Reliance's products help me feel accepted.

Consumer brand engagement (CBE) (1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree) (Vivek et al. 2014)

- Publications related to Tata would grab my attention.
- I would like to learn more about Tata.
- I believe I would pay a lot of attention to publications related to Tata.
- I think I would spend a lot of my discretionary time interacting with the Tata brand.
- I would closely follow the Tata community.
- I would be passionate about publications on the Tata community.
- I would like to actively interact with the Tata community.
- It would be more fun to interact with the Tata community.

Brand attitude (1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree) (Spears and Singh 2004)

- Overall, Tata/Reliance brands are appealing.
- Overall, Tata/Reliance brands are good.
- Overall, Tata/Reliance brands are pleasant.
- Overall, Tata/Reliance brands are favorable.
- Overall, Tata/Reliance brands are likable.

Brand attachment (1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree) (Shimul, Phau, and Lwin 2019)

- I am deeply passionate about Tata/Reliance products.
- I am deeply in love with Tata/Reliance products.

- When I think of Tata/Reliance products, I feel a sense of joy.
- I have a deep emotional connection with Tata/Reliance.
- I would feel a sense of loss if Tata/Reliance products were no longer available.

Need for cognition (1=Strong disagree, 7=Strongly agree) (Lins de Holanda Coelho, Hanel, and Wolf 2020)

- I would prefer complex to simple problems.
- I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking.
- Thinking is not my idea of fun. (R)
- I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities. (R)
- I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems.
- I would prefer a task that is intellectual, difficult, and important to one that is somewhat important but does not require much thought.