Beyond the Consumer: Exploring If and Why Brand Activism Can Attract Talent

A Moderated Mediation Model of One Signal-Based Mechanism Testing If and Why Job Seekers are Attracted to Organizations Engaging in Brand Activism

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Abstract

Brand activism has today become ubiquitous. However, research has mainly focused on its effect on consumers. This paper extends the scope of stakeholders examined by investigating if brand activism can positively affect potential employees' attraction to an organization. Based on Signaling Theory, we propose that perceived innovation culture mediates this relationship. Across Study 1 (n = 400) and Study 2 (n = 566), the model is tested using two different sociopolitical topics. The results of both experiments confirm the signaling mechanism. The indirect effect is also stronger for individuals who are themselves innovative. However, unexpectedly, both studies revealed a negative direct effect between brand activism and employer attractiveness, offsetting the positive indirect effect via perceived innovation culture. We discuss several theoretical and managerial implications of these findings and call for more research on the topic.

Keywords: Brand Activism, Employer Attractiveness, Signaling Theory, Innovation Culture

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1. Introduction

In recent years, brands have started to express their opinions on divisive sociopolitical issues publicly, what has come to be known as brand activism (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). Global companies such as Ben & Jerry's (Fleming, 2019), P&G (Hobbs, 2015), and Airbnb (Airbnb, 2024) have all made headlines for taking public stances on social causes. There is little evidence suggesting that this trend will slow, as consumers increasingly expect brands to engage with societal issues (Moorman, 2020; Zhao et al., 2024). In fact, Sarkar and Kotler (2020) argue that brand activism is the future of marketing, stating that "companies no longer have a choice" (p. 21). Given the rising relevance and public nature of the topic it has frequently been mentioned as a research priority (e.g., Marketing Science Institute, 2022). This research paper contributes to the growing body of literature by shifting the focus from consumers to a different stakeholder group: potential employees.

Seeing that brand activism is typically communicated in consumer-facing channels (Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020), the majority of the research on the topic has focused on its effects on consumers (e.g., Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Haupt et al., 2023; Francioni et al., 2024; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Wannow et al., 2023). However, if brand activism is the future of marketing, it should be of interest to both researchers and practitioners to understand how it might affect other important stakeholder groups. Therefore, several reviews have recently called for research on brand activism to broaden the scope of stakeholders studied (Verlegh, 2023; Cammarota et al., 2023). This paper does so by arguing that brand activism has the potential to attract talent. To explain why this is the case, we draw on Signaling Theory (Connelly et al., 2011).

In a labor market that is often described as a "war for talent" (Brown et al., 2004; Michaels et al., 2001; Chambers et al., 2001), understanding how to win over employees has become pivotal to companies' success (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2009; Narayanan et al., 2019). Therefore, a growing stream of research papers has emerged identifying tools that companies can use to build an employer brand that wins over talent (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). Amongst them, some researchers have advanced the novel finding that communication aimed toward consumers also has the ability to attract job seekers by sending signals about organizational characteristics (e.g., Rosengren & Bondesson, 2014; Carpentier et al., 2019). The present paper adopts a similar line of reasoning. We argue that because brand activism

inherently involves significant risks (Clark et al., 2024), it should work as a credible signal of an organization's innovation culture, which informs job seekers' attraction. This indirect effect is hypothesized to be particularly strong for innovative job seekers.

The moderated mediation model is tested across two experiments using two different sociopolitical topics. The results are expected to contribute to the literature in many important ways. Foremost, we extend the brand activism literature by being one of the first articles that shift focus from consumers to potential employees. In doing so, this paper also adds to the specific field of employer branding literature showing how consumer-facing communication can send signals to potential employees about the organization (e.g., Rosengren & Bondesson, 2014; Carpentier et al., 2019; Schaefer et al., 2019). Additionally, our findings are expected to offer novel insights into the literature on innovation culture. While prior research has shown that perceptions of innovation culture matter to potential employees (Sommer et al., 2017), less is known about how organizations can signal such a culture to job seekers.

For practitioners, the study is also expected to offer important implications. In particular, given the importance of innovation to a company's success (Geroski & Machin, 1992), being able to attract innovative talent should be particularly valuable for organizations in the war for talent (Sommer et al., 2017). Thus, our paper is expected to provide valuable insights for managers by showing that brand activism can be used to not only attract more talent but also better talent.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to examine if and why brand activism affects employer attractiveness. In particular, drawing on Signaling Theory, we aim to test if brand activism can work as a credible signal of innovation culture which in turn should increase employer attractiveness. One moderator is also hypothesized: individual innovativeness. The hypotheses are tested in two online experiments using two different sociopolitical stances.

2. Theory and Hypothesis Development

2.1 Brand Activism and Employer Attractiveness

Sarkar and Kotler (2020, p. 24) define brand activism as "business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society". That is, companies engage in brand activism by publicly taking a stance on a divisive sociopolitical issue (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Hydock et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2024; Pimentel et al., 2023; Edelman, 2023; Zhao et al., 2024; Verlegh, 2023). Such activism often takes place in consumer-facing channels such as advertisements and social media (Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Among the most well-known brand activism campaigns are Nike's "For Once, Don't Do It" anti-racism campaign (Cohen, 2020) and Ben & Jerry's "I Dough, I Dough" pro-gay marriage campaign (Lukerson, 2015).

Sarkar and Kotler (2020) highlight how brand activism is a natural extension of CSR as consumers have started to demand more. Indeed, many consumers today expect brands to stand up for sociopolitical causes (Moorman et al., 2020; Sprout Social, 2019; Zhao et al., 2024), prompting brands to shift to a more society- and justice-driven focus (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). Recent research has shown that when brands succeed, brand activism can yield positive consumer outcomes such as higher brand attitudes, issue advocacy (Wannow et al., 2023), perceived corporate reputation (Sauter & Jungblut, 2023), and can even buffer against negative reactions to product failure (Francioni et al., 2024). A few studies have also begun exploring brand activism's impact on investors (Mkrtchyan et al., 2023; Bhagwat et al., 2020), indicating that financial stakeholders may also respond to these efforts. However, we propose that one potential benefit has yet to be explored in research: brand activism's ability to attract talent.

Employees look for cues about future potential employers from several different sources (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Wilden et al., 2010; Bangerter et al., 2011), even those that were originally purposed as consumer-facing (Rosengren & Bondesson, 2014; Carpentier et al., 2019). Accordingly, while brand activism is often not intended for job seekers, it may still affect them. In fact, several related fields have been shown to be antecedents of job seekers' attraction to organizations, including CSR (Jones et al., 2014; Klimkiewicz & Oltra, 2017), political organizational affiliation (Roth et al., 2022), and CEO-activism (Appels, 2022).

While no academic paper has investigated whether brand activism can have the same effect, commentary in popular media often strongly asserts that it does. For instance, Mahony (2022) claims that communicating an organization's stance on social causes is critical to attracting talent. Vitaud (2017) echoes this and states that “activism shapes your employer brand”. Building on these comments, this paper proposes that brand activism can indeed enhance how attractive an organization appears to potential employees.

H1. *Brand activism produces higher levels of employer attractiveness than no brand activism.*

To explain why brand activism can increase employer attractiveness, as hypothesized in H1, this paper turns to Signaling Theory (Connelly et al., 2011).

2.3 Signaling Theory

Signaling Theory is far from unfamiliar to the employer branding literature (e.g., Jones et al., 2014; Wilden et al., 2010; Cable et al., 2000) and describes the inherent information asymmetry that exists between employers and prospective employees (Spence, 1973; Connelly et al., 2011). Job seekers often want complete information about an organization, but many organizational qualities are hard to observe. This motivates potential employees to search for information that can be used to infer unknown organizational characteristics (Wilden et al., 2010). Taken together, the signaling system consists of a sender (the organization), a receiver (the potential employee), and a signal that correlates with an unobservable, relevant attribute (Connelly et al., 2011). In theory, virtually any information available to the job seeker can be used as a signal to infer perceived organizational characteristics (Ehrhart & Ziegert, 2005; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016) and the signal often evolves from activities originally used for other purposes (Bangerter et al., 2011). In line with the focus of this article, a wave of literature has emerged showing how marketing communication directed toward consumers also can send signals about organizational attributes to potential employees (e.g., Rosengren & Bondesson, 2014; Carpentier et al., 2019).

However, for a signal to be effective, it must be observable (i.e., visible to the receiver) but also costly (i.e., come with a cost that only an actor truly possessing the characteristic would

bear) (Connelly et al., 2011). Possessing these features, the signal becomes a credible signal, also known as a "hard-to-fake" signal, because someone without the specific characteristic would not want to bear that cost (Bangerter et al., 2011; Connelly et al., 2011). This paper argues that brand activism attracts potential employees because they use it as a hard-to-fake signal of an innovation culture. In the following section, we apply the principle of a costly signal to develop this argument.

2.4 Brand Activism as a Signal of Innovation Culture

Innovation culture has been defined as an organizational culture that has "the intention to be innovative, the infrastructure to support innovation, operational level behaviors necessary to influence a market and value orientation, and the environment to implement innovation" (Dobni, 2008, p. 540). Having such a culture can lead to several beneficial performance and employee outcomes. For instance, innovation culture is positively associated with job satisfaction and performance (Chong et al., 2018; Wei et al., 2012; Michaelis et al., 2018). Employee perception of innovation culture also strengthens employees' belief that the company can keep up with changes in the environment, which can increase perceptions of firm performance, dynamism (Wei et al., 2012), and boost employees' confidence in the future of the firm (Zhou et al., 2005). Therefore, unsurprisingly, also potential employees have been shown to form their attitudes toward an employer based on whether or not the company is perceived to exhibit such a culture (Sommer et al., 2017; Styvén et al., 2021).

Central to this study is the fact that innovation and risk-taking are inherently intertwined. Employees are more prone to innovate when the company climate allows for risk-taking (García-Granero et al., 2014). Given that our actions are guided by the expected consequences (Vroom, 1964), it follows that to be innovative employees need to feel like they are allowed to take risks, try things, fail, and not get punished for such failure (O'Reilly, 1989). Naturally, an organization's willingness to take risks has therefore been conceptualized as a key part of current and potential employees' perception of innovation culture (Chang & Lin, 2007; Sommer et al., 2017).

With that being said, culture in general is something that is very hard to observe from the outside, which introduces a dilemma of information asymmetry. Hence, evidence points to the fact that job seekers are highly sensitive and susceptible to signals about organizational

culture. For instance, a female executive is used by job seekers to understand how just a company culture is (Iseke & Pull, 2017), advertised team bonuses help potential employees to infer a collectivist organizational culture (Kuhn, 2009), and corporate social performance sends a signal about how supportive the company culture is (Jones et al., 2014). The same should hold true for innovation culture. Prospective employees are assumed to have an interest in understanding more about the innovation culture of an organization but since such a cultural characteristic is hard to observe, they have to rely on credible signals. Brand activism is proposed to work as such a signal because it comes with risks which potential employees infer that only an organization with such a culture would be willing to take.

One of the main differences between CSR and brand activism is that brand activism concerns a divisive sociopolitical issue (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020; Hydock et al., 2020). Thus, scholars consistently note that while brand activism has benefits, it is also by nature risky (e.g., Clark et al., 2024; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Wannow et al., 2023; Hydock et al., 2020). Consumers want brands to stand with them and often lash back when a brand takes an opposing stance (Clark et al., 2024). A central point of the present report is that this backlash tends to be very public and visible to other people (Hoffman et al., 2020; Milfeld et al., 2025; Pöyry and Laaksonen, 2022). It can, for instance, come in the form of brand shaming (Kotler & Sarkar, 2020), boycotts (Hong & Li, 2020), and discrediting (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022). Many of us probably remember when Gillette faced costly backlash after its "The Best Men Can Be" campaign (Mainwaring, 2021) or when Bud Light saw boycotts following its endorsement of transgender influencer Dylan Mulvaney (Holpuch, 2023). For this reason, many brands do not dare to speak up about social issues. For example, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled to overturn Roe v. Wade in 2022, many brands chose to remain silent (Goldberg & Kelly, 2022).

Due to the public nature of this backlash, people, including potential employees, are assumed to be very aware of the risks that brands face when they decide to do brand activism. As not all brands are willing to bear this cost, it should have the ability to work as a credible, or hard-to-fake, signal. Empirically, evidence of this can be found. Lee et al. (2023) showed that consumers use brand activism as a signal of brand bravery because they understand the risk it entails. Similarly, Apples (2022) showed how CEO-brand activism sends signals to job seekers that the CEO is an authentic leader because only a leader with high authenticity would dare to speak up for their values despite the risk. By the same logic, since innovation

culture is defined in large part by openness to risk-taking, this paper proposes that potential employees use brand activism as a signal of innovation culture because a company with such a culture would be willing to take the risks of brand activism. In other words, organizations willing to take on the risks of brand activism are also inferred to foster an innovation culture.

H2. *Brand activism produces higher levels of perceived innovation culture than no brand activism.*

In the next step, following previous literature, we argue that such inferences should be positively associated with employer attractiveness. Employer attractiveness is defined by Berthon et al. (2005, p. 156) as "the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organization", and has been shown to be positively associated with job pursuit intentions (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Gomes & Neves, 2011).

The fact that innovativeness as an organizational trait can lead to such positive attitudes has for a long time been known (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Slaughter et al., 2004; Slaughter & Greguras; 2009; Sommer et al., 2017). Sommer et al. (2017) even found that innovation culture is a stronger predictor of employer attractiveness than for example product innovation. Given the many positive effects of innovation culture (Chong et al., 2018; Wei et al., 2012; Zhou et al., 2005) and the fact that people are driven to pursue positive outcomes (Vroom, 1964), this is not surprising. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H3. *Perceived innovation culture is positively associated with employer attractiveness.*

H2 and H3 together suggest a chain effect that helps us explain why brand activism may have the ability to attract job seekers. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H4. *Perceived innovation culture mediates the relationship between brand activism and employer attractiveness.*

2.5 Individual Innovativeness as a Moderator

As we propose that perceived innovation culture is the mechanism that causes brand activism to increase job seekers' attraction to an organization, we also assume that some job seekers

will be more affected than others. That is, while innovation culture is assumed to be an important trait in general, it is argued to be more important for some potential employees than others. In particular, potential employees who themselves identify as innovative.

Research has consistently shown that people are attracted to organizations to the extent that one identifies with it (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Chatman, 1989). In essence, we gravitate most toward organizations that have similar attributes to ourselves (Tom, 1971; Schreurs et al., 2009). Extended to our context, Sommer et al. (2017) found that potential employees who see themselves as innovative are also more attracted to organizations who are perceived as innovative. Following these findings, we hypothesize the following:

H5. *The impact of perceived innovation culture on employer attractiveness is stronger for individuals with a relatively high level of individual innovativeness.*

In the next step, this would imply that:

H6. *The positive indirect effect of brand activism on employer attractiveness via perceived innovation culture is stronger for individuals with a relatively high level of individual innovativeness.*

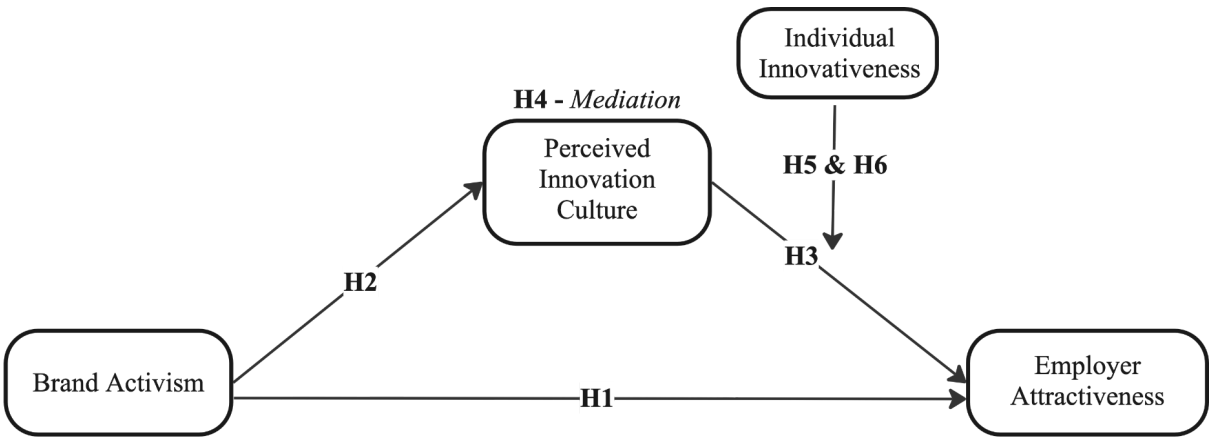


Fig. 1 Conceptual Framework

3. The Empirical Studies

3.1 Overview

Figure 2 shows an overview of the studies. Two online experiments were conducted to test the hypotheses. In Study 1, we test H1-H4. That is, the effect of brand activism on employer attractiveness and if perceived innovation culture mediates this relationship. In Study 2, we investigate if the results of Study 1 survive in another sociopolitical context, as well as introduce individual innovativeness as a moderator (H1-H6). Whereas Study 1 is based on a controversial stance supporting LGBTQ+ rights, Study 2 uses the contested topic of abortion rights.

3.2 Methodological Approach

Across both Study 1 and Study 2, we tested the hypothesis by conducting a one-factorial (brand activism vs. control) between-subjects online experiment. The overall methodological setup was chosen for three reasons. Firstly, randomized experiments are often described as the most appropriate method for establishing causality (Antonakis et al., 2010) and are widely used in brand activism literature, particularly online experiments (e.g., Zhao et al., 2024b; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Wannow et al., 2023; Haupt et al., 2023; Francioni et al., 2024; Caruelle, 2024). Secondly, compared to qualitative research approaches, quantitative research methods are better suited when the aim is to generalize the findings to a larger context (Eliasson, 2013). Thirdly, regarding experiment design, a between-subject design was adopted seeing that within-subject designs are highly susceptible to revealing cues about the experiment's purpose (Söderlund, 2018), which can trigger demand effects (Lonati et al., 2018). In both studies, a significance level of .05 was adopted following the general convention in research (Söderlund, 2018).

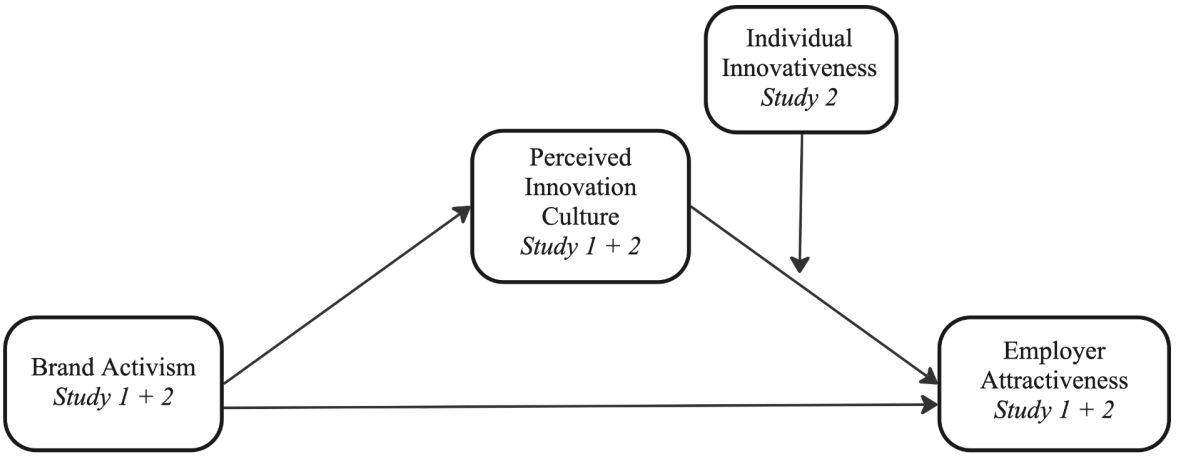


Fig. 2 Overview of Studies

4. Study 1

4.1 Stimuli Development

As noted by Söderlund (2018) a treatment must be developed such that everything is kept constant except the cause-variable of interest. Moreover, it should be made as realistic and unartificial as possible to allow for generalization (Colquitt, 2008), often referred to as external validity (Lonati et al., 2018). These considerations were used as points of departure when developing the stimuli.

The stimuli were developed as an Instagram post made by the fictional grocery retailer brand Fresh Groceries. Previous studies have shown how prior corporate attitudes (Xu et al., 2024) and identification (Haupt et al., 2023; Zhang & Zhou, 2023) can moderate the effects of brand activism on consumers' responses. Using fictional brands ruled out any such potential confounding effects. A grocery retailer was chosen since it can offer interesting career prospects for a wide array of people and has been used in previous studies on employer branding for similar reasons (Rosengren & Bondesson, 2014). Lastly, Instagram was used as this seems to be a natural platform for brand activism. A survey from Sprout Social (2019) showed that 58% of consumers are open to brand activism happening on social media. Also, Instagram has a history of being used for brand activism by well-known companies such as Nike (Nike, 2020) and Dove (Barnett, n.d.).

The Instagram posts were created with inspiration from Nike's Black Lives Matter campaign (Nike, 2020), featuring a simple background with a clear statement (See Appendix 1 for all treatments). As social media presence has been shown to be positively associated with employer attractiveness (Carpentier et al., 2017; Carpentier et al., 2019), both the control condition and the brand activism condition were exposed to an Instagram post. A correct control group should show a baseline level of the manipulated variable (Lonati et al., 2018). Accordingly, the non-sociopolitical message "We believe in people" was used. An identical approach was used by Caruelle (2024).

For the brand activism treatment, LGBTQ+ was chosen as an appropriate topic for Study 1. Several brands have previously taken a stance on this cause, such as Ben & Jerry's support of gay marriage (Luckerson, 2015), Disney standing up against the "Don't Say Gay" bill (Blair, 2022), Starbucks' pro-transgender #WhatsYourName campaign (Gonzalez, 2021), and

Tesco's continuous monetary support of the LGBTQ+ community (Gee, 2023). It was also deemed relevant as when this study was conducted the newly elected President Trump had just signed several executive orders to limit LGBTQ+ rights, sparking controversy around the world (Middleton, 2025; Bragg, 2025). While a grocery store might seem to have a limited connection to such topics, the subject of brand activism is usually not linked to the core offering of the company (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Cammarota et al., 2023). Therefore, the relevance of the issue was prioritized over the connection to the retailer.

Given that the study was conducted using a UK-based sample while the researchers were situated in Sweden, there was limited contextual familiarity with the sociopolitical issues currently contested amongst the sampled population. Hence, four different stances were developed and tested in a pre-study to ensure that the stance used in the study fulfilled the requirement of brand activism. That is, being considered sociopolitically divisive (e.g., Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Hydock et al., 2020). The four stances tested were: gay rights to donate blood, LGBTQ+ inclusive education, trans women's right to compete in the Olympic Games, and gender-affirming care.

4.2 Pre-Study

4.2.1 Purpose and Procedure

A pre-study was conducted with the primary aim of testing that the manipulation worked as intended and that no confounding variables were present. All of the versions of the brand activism treatment developed were tested to determine which one that served as the best manipulation of brand activism.

Through Prolific, a UK sample of respondents was recruited and remunerated at an average fee of 9.73£/hour. To participate the respondents had to live in the UK and have English as their first language, to prevent any language barriers. After removing 6 for failing the instructional manipulation check, a final sample of 100 was left (M_{Age}= 42.64, SD_{Age}= 13.74, age range: 19 - 78 years, 58% women, 41% male, 1% self-described gender). Participants were first randomly assigned to one of the five treatments tested: control condition (n = 14), support for gender-affirming care (n = 23), support for trans women in the Olympic Games (n = 15), support for gay blood donation rights (n = 27), and support for LGBTQ+ inclusive education (n = 21). A Kruskal Wallis test revealed no significant difference in age between

the treatment groups (two-tailed test, H(4) = 2.946, p =.567), and a Pearson chi-square showed no significant difference in gender (two-tailed test, $\chi 2(8) = 7.866$, p = .447). This indicated that the randomization had cancelled out any demographic differences.

Subsequently, the respondents were asked to indicate to which extent the treatment was understood as brand activism, followed by a measure of advertising creativity as a confounding check. Prior research by Rosengren and Bondesson (2014) has shown that perceived advertising creativity can enhance employer attractiveness. Moreover, creativity is often conceptualized as a component of perceived innovation culture (Sommer et al., 2017). Thus, any differences in perceived creativity between treatments could offer an alternative explanation for the observed effects.

4.2.2 Measures

Turning to measures, all items were measured with a 7-point Likert scale. For the manipulation check, *brand activism* was measured with the respondents' agreement to the statement: "In the ad the company takes a stance on a divisive sociopolitical issue." (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree). This was developed based on the widely established definition of brand activism (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2024; Pimentel et al., 2023).

Turning to the confounding check, *creativity* was measured with the single question: "To what extent do you think the advertisement you just saw is creative?" (1 = Not at all, 7= Very).

Lastly, the *instructional manipulation check* (Söderlund, 2018) provided the following instruction: "The next question is an attention check. Please select "Strongly disagree" when rating the statement.". Subsequently, they were asked: "Based on the text you read above, how much do you agree with the statement?" (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree). The instructional manipulation check was designed to be compliant with Prolific's policy (see Prolific, n.d).

4.2.3 Results

Non-parametric tests can be used even for smaller sample sizes, when normal distribution cannot be assumed, to draw statistical inferences (Heiman, 2011). Therefore, these tests were adopted to analyze the results of this pre-study.

First, the brand activism manipulation was tested. The results showed that respondents overall correctly understood that the brand took a stance on a divisive sociopolitical issue in the brand activism conditions ($M_{Brand\ Activism} = 5.95$, $SD_{Brand\ Activism} = 1.63$; $M_{Control} = 2.36$, $SD_{Control} = 1.82$). A 2 Independent Mann-Whitney U test showed that the extent to which the treatment was understood as brand activism was significantly different between the brand activism and control conditions (two-tailed test, $U = 91.5$, $Z = -5.387$, $p < .001$). Moreover, a Kruskal Wallis test revealed no significant difference between the different brand activism treatments (two-tailed test, $H(3) = 4.623$, $p = .202$). Seemingly, all of the brand activism treatments seemed to do their job. To select one, we therefore relied on the mean scores and chose the one with the highest value. Out of the brand activism treatments, trans women's right to compete in the Olympic Games yielded the highest mean ($M = 6.47$), followed by gay blood donation rights ($M = 6.07$), then gender-affirming care ($M = 5.87$), and lastly LGBTQ+ inclusive education ($M = 5.52$). Based on this, the stance on trans women's right to compete in the Olympic Games was deemed most suitable for Study 1.

Next, the confounding check was conducted. In a 2 Independent Mann-Whitney U test no significant difference was found in perceived creativity between the brand activism condition on trans women's right to compete in the Olympic Games ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 1.58$) and the control condition ($M = 1.71$, $SD = 1.07$; two-tailed test, $U = 98.5$, $Z = -.311$, $p = .756$). Hence, creativity could be ruled out as a potential alternative explanation.

To conclude, after the pre-test, trans women's right to compete in the Olympic Games was chosen as the brand activism treatment for Study 1, which follows.

4.3 Research Design

For Study 1, UK-based respondents with English as their first language were recruited through Prolific and paid an average fee of 5.07£/hour. Participants in the pre-study were not eligible to participate in the study. Prolific has become a popular choice among online labor

platforms (examples of other papers using it include Appels, 2022; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Caruelle, 2024), and is particularly recommended due to its higher participant engagement (Albert & Smilek, 2023) and attentiveness (Peer et al., 2017) compared to alternatives such as Mechanical Turk.

After GDPR and consent information, the participants were introduced to the company Fresh Groceries through a short text specifying the industry, number of stores, number of employees, and career opportunities within the company. Subsequently, each participant was randomly assigned either the control condition or the brand activism condition and then asked to answer questions measuring the variables of interest. Guided by Söderlund (2018), the dependent variable was measured first, followed by the mediating variable, and last the manipulation check. Several papers advance the recommendation to measure the manipulation check last to prevent any demand effects (Lonati et al., 2018; Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017; Söderlund, 2018). However, this also involves a risk as the effect variables can impact the responses to the manipulation check. Following Söderlund (2018), a filler item was included to limit any such unwanted effects.

4.4 Sample Characteristics

We conducted an a priori power analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) to determine the required sample size for a mediation analysis. Assuming a small and equal effect size for all paths ($f^2 = .02$), an alpha level of .05, and a power of .80, a minimum sample size of 395 was calculated. In total, we recruited 411 participants. However, 11 of them were rejected due to failed instructional manipulation check, leaving a final sample of 400 ($M_{Age} = 43$, $SD_{Age} = 14.8$, age range: 19-85 years, 61.3 % women, 37.3% male, 1.3% on-binary, 0.3% self-described gender).

Of the respondents, 202 received the control condition ($M_{Age} = 42.75$, $SD_{Age} = 14.1$, age range: 19-80 years, 61.4% women, 38.6% male, 1% non-binary) and 198 received the brand activism condition ($M_{Age} = 44.07$, $SD_{Age} = 15.49$, age range: 20-85 years, 62.1% women, 35.9% male, 1.5% non-binary, 0.5% self-described gender). An Independent t-test revealed no difference in age between the groups (two-tailed test, $t(398) = -.887$, $p = .367$). Moreover, a Pearson chi-square test showed no difference in gender ($\chi2(3) = 1.493$, $p = .684$). It could

therefore be concluded that the random allocation had worked as intended and cancelled out any demographic differences.

4.5 Measures

All scales were measured on a 7-point Likert scale and Cronbach's alpha was used to check for reliability. First, *employer attractiveness* was measured with the four items: "For me, this place would be a good place to work.", "This company is attractive to me as a place for employment.", "I am interested in learning more about this company.", "A job at this company is very appealing to me.", "I am interested in learning more about this company." (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree; $\alpha = .942$). These items were adopted from the scale developed by Highhouse et al. (2003). The sixth, reverse-coded item was dropped since previous studies have found it to have low factor loading (see Iseke & Pull, 2019).

To examine the nomological validity (Söderlund, 2018), and given the established relation between employer attractiveness and job pursuit intention (Highhouse et al., 2003; Gomes & Neves, 2011; Bednarska, 2016; Chaudhary, 2019), five items were also included measuring *job pursuit intention* (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree): "I would accept a job offer from this company." "I would make this company one of my first choices as an employer.", "I would recommend this company to a friend looking for a job.", "I would exert a great deal of effort to work for this company.", and "If this company invited me for a job interview, I would go." (Highhouse et al., 2003; $\alpha = .940$). A zero-order correlation analysis between employer attractiveness and job pursuit intention showed a significant, positive relationship ($r = .895$, $p < .001$), allowing us to conclude that nomological validity was at hand.

Following previous literature (Schmidt et al., 2023; Uzkurt et al., 2013), the mediating variable *perceived innovation culture* was measured with Chang and Lin's (2007) scale, developed based on prior studies (e.g., Cameron & Freeman, 1991; Quinn & Spreitzer, 1991). However, these items were developed for employees currently working in the organization. We therefore had to adjust them to take into account the fact that respondents could not assess innovation culture based on experience. The final six items were: "I think that the managers at Fresh Groceries are committed to innovation and risk-taking.", "I think that the managers at Fresh Groceries are actively leading employees towards growth and innovation.", "I think that the managers at Fresh Groceries have vision and insight to create new business

opportunities.", "If I were an employee at Fresh Groceries I believe that I would always be able to face challenges in order to learn and grow from them.", "I believe Fresh Groceries pays attention to the uniqueness of their employees and encourages innovation from employees.", and "I believe Fresh Groceries is willing to take risks, and it is indeed an ambitious and energetic organization." (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree; $\alpha = .944$).

To test the manipulation of *brand activism,* the same item from the pre-study was used. That is: "In the ad the company takes a stance on a divisive sociopolitical issue." (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree). Alongside, the filler item "The ad's visual design was appealing." was included. This was done to make the properties of the treatment less obvious (Söderlund, 2018).

An *instructional manipulation check* (Söderlund, 2018), similar to the one in the pre-study, was also used, but now with revised answer alternatives ("Strongly disagree," "Somewhat disagree," "Somewhat agree," "Strongly agree"). The change was made since some respondents in the pre-study expressed difficulties in understanding what to answer when the scale was presented as a 7-point Likert scale.

It should be noted that more variables were measured in the study that later were excluded from the paper. To keep the report concise we chose to not present these other variables here.

4.6 Results

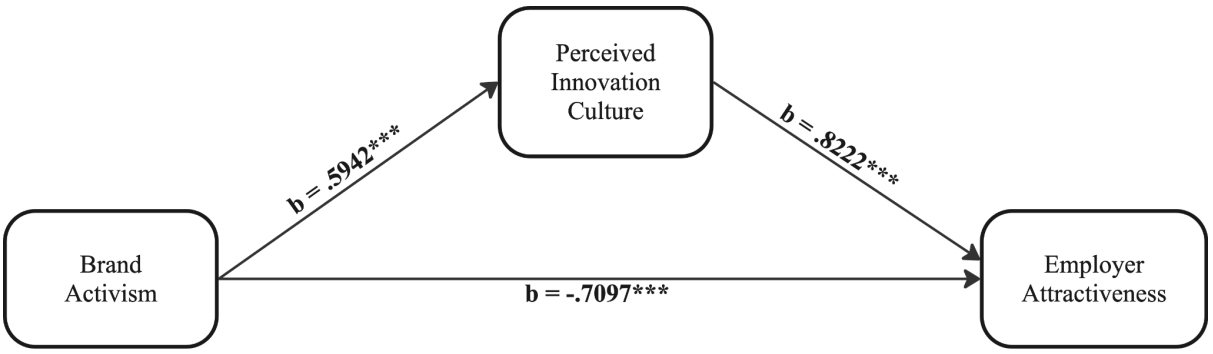
The manipulation check showed that the extent to which the brand was perceived as taking a stance on a divisive sociopolitical issue was higher in the brand activism condition ($M = 5.91$, $SD = 1.24$) than in the control condition ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.42$). This difference was significant (two-tailed test, $t(398) = 25.042$, $p < .001$). Moreover, a One-sample t-test revealed that the mean in the brand activism condition was significantly higher than the midpoint of the scale (3.5) (two-tailed test, $t(197) = 27.453$, $p < .001$), while the mean in the control condition was significantly lower than the midpoint (two-tailed test, $t(202) = -9.265$, $p < .001$). All in all, the results indicated that the manipulation of brand activism had worked as intended.

Moving on to hypothesis testing, we started to test H1. Contrary to our hypothesis, an Independent t-test did not show a significant difference between the mean score of employer attractiveness in the brand activism condition (M = 4.08, SD = 1.69) and the control condition (M = 4.3, SD = 1.27; two-tailed test, t(398) = -1.482, p = .139). Accordingly, brand activism did not produce higher levels of employer attractiveness and H1 was not supported.

Moving on to H2, it was expected that brand activism would produce higher levels of perceived innovation culture. As hypothesized, the mean was higher in the brand activism condition (M = 4.84, SD = 1.25) than in the control condition (M = 4.25, SD = 1.26). This difference was significant (two-tailed test, t(398) = 4.617, p < .001). H2 was therefore supported. That is, brand activism produced higher levels of perceived innovation culture. Further, investigating H3, a zero-order correlation analysis revealed a positive and significant relation between perceived innovation culture and employer attractiveness (two-tailed test, r = .672, p < .001). H3, then, was also supported.

As for the mediation (i.e., H4), it was tested using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4; 5000 bootstrap sample) (Hayes, 2022). Previous research has highlighted that this method has methodological advantages over traditional multiple regression techniques (Zhao et al., 2010). A 95% confidence interval (CI) not containing 0 determined a significant mediating effect. The experimental condition was used as the independent variable (0 = control, 1 = brand activism), perceived innovation culture was the mediator, and employer attractiveness was the dependent variable. The analysis revealed that there indeed was a significant, positive indirect effect of brand activism via perceived innovation culture (b = .4885, CI_{95}[.2771, .707]). Conclusively, H4 was supported. Notably, a negative direct effect was identified (b = -.7097, p < .001). Accordingly, we had what Zhao et al. (2010) describe as a competitive mediation at hand. The full model is displayed in Figure 4.

Conclusively, the results for Study 1 found support for H2, H3, and H4, while no support was found for H1.



*** p < .001

Fig. 3 Results from Study 1

4.7 Discussion

Study 1 showed that brand activism functioned as a credible signal of innovation culture, which in turn positively influenced potential employees' attraction to the organization. However, despite this positive indirect effect the net result was not higher employer attractiveness. Contrary to our theoretical framework, brand activism also had some adverse effects on potential employees' attraction. As a result, there was no significant difference in overall employer attractiveness.

Study 2 was now designed with three goals. First, we set out to replicate the findings using another sociopolitical stance (abortion rights). The importance of replication has been stressed for a long time (Fisher, 1926; Turkey, 1969), and after the replication crisis scholars have been urged to adopt multi-study approaches to show that the results are reliable and not a product of chance (e.g., Lynn, 2017). Also, as the conceptual reasoning behind brand activism as a signal of innovation culture is anchored in the idea that brand activism as a concept is risky (e.g., Clark et al., 2024), and that potential employees are assumed to recognize this, it should be possible to replicate this signaling effect with all types of brand activism. Second, in Study 2 we also introduced individual innovativeness as a moderator. It was expected that high individual innovativeness would make the effect of perceived innovation culture on employer attractiveness stronger (H5) and, in turn, the indirect effect of brand activism on employer attractiveness (H6). Third, seeing the unexpected results of Study 1, it was of interest to see whether the results of Study 2 would be consistent with the original theoretical framework or the results of Study 1.

5. Study 2

5.1 Stimuli Development and Pre-Study

For Study 2, the control treatment from Study 1 was used. For the brand activism treatment, everything was kept constant except the sociopolitical issue. Instead of trans women's right to compete in the Olympic Games the grocery retailer took a stance on abortion rights (See Appendix 2). Not only has this been a topic of brand activism from big brands such as Patagonia (Levin, 2022) and Levi-Strauss (Bondarenko, 2022), but it is also consistently used as stimuli in brand activism research (e.g., Wannow et al., 2023; Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020; Zhao et al., 2024b).

To make sure that the manipulation worked as intended a pre-study was conducted using the same design and measures as in Study 1. Respondents from the UK with English as their first language were recruited through Prolific and paid an average fee of 4.29 £/hour. Respondents who participated in previous studies were not eligible. After removing 6 respondents for failing the instructional manipulation check, the final sample consisted of 70 respondents (M_{Age}= 44.87, SD_{Age}= 14.47, age range: 20 - 78 years, 55.7% women, 42.9% male, 1.4% non-binary, $n_{Brand\ Activism}$ = 35, $n_{Control}$ = 35). An Independent t-test revealed no significant difference in age between the brand activism group (M = 42.63, SD = 13.58) and the control group (M = 47.11, SD = 15.16; two-tailed test, t(68) = 1.304, p =.197), and a Pearson chi-square showed no significant difference in gender (two-tailed test, $\chi 2(2) = 1.026$, p = .599). Accordingly, the random allocation had worked as intended.

The manipulation check showed that the extent to which the brand was perceived as taking a stance on a divisive sociopolitical issue was higher in the brand activism condition (M = 6, SD = 1.48) than in the control condition (M = 2.57, SD = 1.07). This difference was significant (two-tailed test, t(68) = 9.003, p < .001). As for the confounding check, there was no significant difference in perceived creativity between the conditions ($M_{Brand\ Activism}$ = 2.91, $SD_{Brand\ Activism}$ = 1.597; $M_{Control}$ = 2.43, $SD_{Control}$ = 1.501; two-tailed-test, t(68) = 1.311, p = .194). It was therefore concluded that the stimuli worked as intended.

5.2 Research Design

Study 2 was designed in a similar manner as Study 1. UK-based respondents with English as their first language were recruited through Prolific and paid an average fee of 6.36£/hour.

Participants from Study 1 or the previous pre-studies were not eligible to participate in the study.

As in Study 1, after GDPR and consent information, the participants were introduced to the company Fresh Groceries through a short text. Subsequently, each participant was randomly assigned either the control condition or the brand activism condition, now displaying a stance on pro-choice instead of trans women's right to compete in the Olympic Games. In accordance with recommendations from the literature (Söderlund, 2018; Lonati et al., 2018; Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017), the dependent variable was measured first followed by the mediator and the moderator. The manipulation check was put last to limit any demand effects.

5.3 Sample Characteristics

As in Study 1, we conducted an a priori power analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) to determine the required sample size, this time for a moderated mediation analysis. Assuming a small and equal effect size for all paths ($f^2 = .02$), an alpha level of .05, and a power of .80, a minimum sample size of 395 was calculated. In total, 603 respondents were recruited. Of them, 37 were removed for failing the instructional manipulation check leaving a final sample of 566 ($M_{Age} = 42.77$, $SD_{Age} = 13.89$, age range: 18-82 years, 59.4% women, 39.6% male, 0.5% on-binary, 0.5% preferred not to specify gender).

Of the respondents, 289 received the control condition ($M_{Age} = 42.1$, $SD_{Age} = 13.55$, age range: 18-82 years, 63.7% women, 35.3% male, 0.3% non-binary, 0.7% preferred not to specify gender) and 198 received the brand activism condition ($M_{Age} = 43.48$, $SD_{Age} = 14.22$, age range: 19-79 years, 54.9% women, 44% male, 0.7% non-binary, 0.4% preferred not to specify gender). An Independent t-test revealed no difference in age between the groups (two-tailed test, $t(564) = -1.18$, $p = .238$). Moreover, a Pearson chi-square test showed no difference in gender ($\chi2(3) = 5.248$, $p = .155$). It could therefore be concluded that the random allocation had cancelled out any demographic differences and worked as intended.

5.4 Measures

The same scales as in Study 1 were used to measure *employer attractiveness* ($\alpha = .951$) and *perceived innovation culture* ($\alpha = .943$). As for the moderating variable, *individual innovativeness,* we adopted the ten-item scale developed by Pallister and Foxal (1998): “I am

generally cautious about accepting new ideas.", "I rarely trust new ideas until I can see whether the vast majority of people around me accept them." , "I am suspicious of new inventions and new ways of thinking.", "I am aware that I am usually one of the last people in my group to accept something new.", "I am reluctant about adopting new ways of doing things until I see them working for people around me.", "I find it stimulating to be original in my thinking and behavior.", "I tend to feel that the old way of living and doing things is the best way.", "I am challenged by ambiguities and unsolved problems.", "I must see other people using new innovations before I will consider them.", and "I often find myself skeptical of new ideas." (1 = Strongly disagree and 7 = Strongly agree). After re-coding the reversed items, such that a higher score indicated higher individual innovativeness, Cronbach's alpha was .882.

Finally, the same manipulation check and instructional manipulation check were used as in Study 1. Additional variables were also measured but not included in the final report.

5.5 Results

The manipulation check showed that the extent to which the brand was perceived as taking a stance on a divisive sociopolitical issue was higher in the brand activism condition ($M = 6.37$, $SD = 1.14$) than in the control condition ($M = 2.63$; $SD = 1.55$). This difference was significant (two-tailed test, $t(564) = 32.788$, $p < .001$). A One-sample t-test also showed that the mean score was significantly higher than the midpoint of the scale (3.5) in the brand activism condition (two-tailed test, $t(276) = 41.773$, $p < .001$) and significantly lower in the control group (two-tailed test, $t(288) = -9.584$, $p < .001$). The results indicated that the manipulation of brand activism had worked as intended.

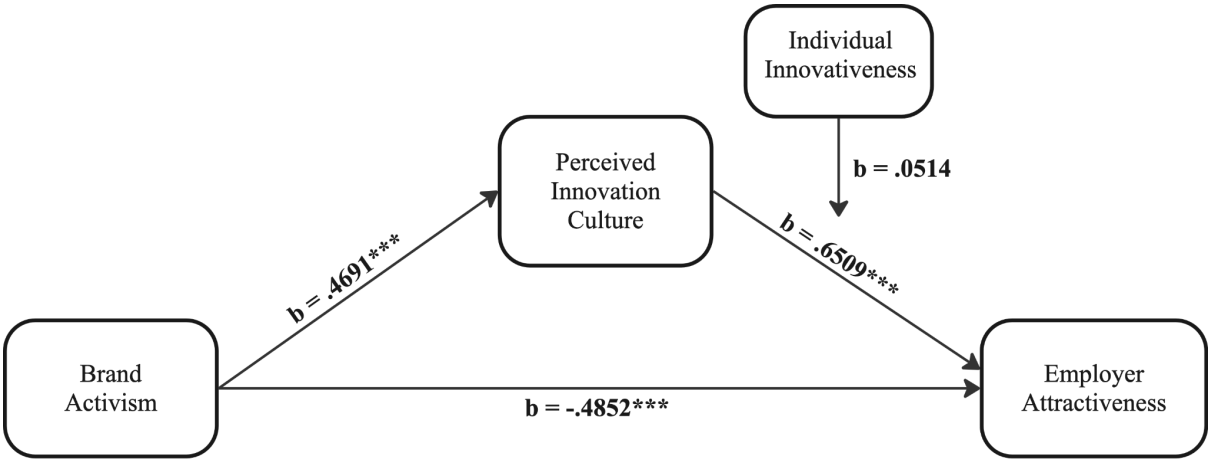
To start with, H1 was assessed by comparing the mean levels of employer attractiveness in an Independent t-test. It was hypothesized that brand activism would produce higher levels of employer attractiveness than no brand activism. However, as in Study 1, there was no significant difference between the mean in the brand activism condition ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.66$) and the control condition ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 1.39$; two-tailed test, $t(564) = -.417$, $p = .677$). Once again, H1 was not supported.

Moving on to perceived innovation culture (i.e., H2), the mean level was higher in the brand activism condition (M = 4.58, SD = 1.37) than in the control condition (M = 4.11, SD = 1.29). This difference was significant (two-tailed test, t(564) = 4.2, p < .001). Accordingly, brand activism did produce higher levels of a perceived innovation culture and H2 was supported. Further, supporting H3, a zero-order correlation revealed a positive and significant correlation between perceived innovation culture and employer attractiveness (r = .757, p < .001).

A mediation test for H4 was conducted using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4; 5000 bootstrap sample) (Hayes, 2022). A 95% confidence interval (CI) not containing 0 determined a significant mediating effect. The experimental condition was used as the independent variable (0 = control, 1 = brand activism), perceived innovation culture was the mediator, and employer attractiveness was the dependent variable. The results revealed that there was a significant positive indirect effect of brand activism on employer attractiveness mediated by perceived innovation culture (b = .4167, CI_{95}[.2143, .6181]). Thus, we could also in Study 2 support H4 and lend support for our signaling framework. Mirroring Study 1, there was also a significant, negative direct effect (b = -.4702, p < .001), indicating a competitive mediation (Zhao et al., 2010).

H5 and H6 were tested in the same analysis using Hayes' PROCESS macro Model 14 (5000 bootstrap sample) (Hayes, 2022). The experimental condition was used as the independent variable (0 = control, 1 = brand activism), perceived innovation culture was the mediator, individual innovativeness was the moderator, and employer attractiveness was the dependent variable. The results revealed only a marginally significant interaction effect between perceived innovation culture and individual innovativeness (b = .0514, p = .0558). H5 was therefore not supported. The analysis did however show that the indirect effect of brand activism on employer attractiveness via perceived innovation culture was significantly moderated by individual innovativeness (index = .0241, CI_{95}[.0002, .0540]), giving support for H6. Importantly, the indirect and direct effects identified in the previous mediation analysis remained significant even after including the moderator. The full model, based on this analysis, is shown in Figure 3.

In conclusion, Study 2 found support for H2, H3, H4, and H6. H1 and H5 were not supported.



*** p < .001

Fig. 4 Results from Study 2

5.6 Discussion

Study 2 replicated the findings of Study 1 (see Table 1 for an overview). It showed that brand activism worked as a credible signal of innovation culture which positively affected employer attractiveness. Moreover, in Study 2 we also tested if individual innovativeness moderated this relationship. The results revealed a significant moderating effect on the indirect effect of brand activism on employer attractiveness via perceived innovation culture. Overall, Study 2 added further support to our explanatory model based on Signaling Theory by showing that the results of Study 1 could be replicated both using a different sociopolitical stance and with the inclusion of a moderator.

However, Study 2, like Study 1, also unexpectedly revealed that brand activism caused a negative reaction from potential employees, adversely affecting their attraction. The result was therefore no significant change in employer attractiveness. What this might be will be touched on in the general discussion.

Summary Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis		Study 1	Study 2
H1	Brand activism produces higher levels of employer attractiveness than no brand activism.	Not Supported (p = .139)*	Not Supported (p = .667)*
H2	Brand activism produces higher levels of perceived innovation culture than no brand activism.	Supported (p < .001)	Supported (p < .001)
H3	Perceived innovation culture is positively associated with employer attractiveness.	Supported (p < .001)	Supported (p < .001)
H4	Perceived innovation culture mediates the relationship between brand activism and employer attractiveness.	Supported (p < .05)	Supported (p < .05)
H5	The impact of perceived innovation culture on employer attractiveness is stronger for individuals with a relatively high level of individual innovativeness.		Not Supported (p = .0558)
H6	The positive indirect effect of brand activism on employer attractiveness via perceived innovation culture is stronger for individuals with a relatively high level of individual innovativeness.		Supported (p < .05)

*It should be noted that the means trended in the opposite direction to that hypothesized

Table 1

6. General Discussion

This paper set out to examine if brand activism can attract talent by signaling an innovation culture. The results of our empirical studies show that the answer to this is not as clear-cut as initially anticipated. Employing Signaling Theory (Connelly et al., 2011), we argued that potential employees are interested in learning more about a company's innovation culture, but because this is difficult to observe, they use brand activism as a signal. This signal was argued to be credible because it involves costs (i.e., high risk) that an organization with an innovation culture would be willing to take on. Next, following previous literature (Sommer et al., 2017; Styvén et al., 2021), this was expected to increase potential employees' attraction to the organization. Over the course of two online experiments, using two different sociopolitical stances, this was confirmed. It was also shown that this indirect effect was stronger for job seekers who consider themselves innovative. However, while brand activism had a positive effect on employer attractiveness via perceived innovation culture, it was also found to trigger something outside our theoretical framework causing a negative, offsetting reaction. Conclusively, brand activism can signal an innovation culture, but it was not found to attract more talent.

Before moving on to the contributions of these results, we want to touch upon what this unexpected, adverse effect may be. As this is the first study to examine brand activism's effect on potential employees, the underlying cause of this reaction is far from clear. However, we will present two possible explanations. First, it could be that the activism in the experiments was perceived as inauthentic, causing potential employees to interpret it as woke-washing (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Woke-washing is in the literature on consumers referred to as instances where companies publicly promote sociopolitical issues, yet fail to align those messages with consistent corporate practices, leading audiences to perceive the activism as opportunistic (Ahmad et al., 2024; Vredenburg et al., 2020). While our studies did not give any information about the company that would indicate any such inauthenticity, research has demonstrated how consumers today are so sensitive to organizations´ manipulation tactics that brand activism in and of itself can trigger perceptions of woke-washing (Caruelle, 2024). Woke-washing decreases brand credibility (Walter et al., 2024), brand trust, brand attitude (Caruelle, 2024), and brand authenticity (Ahmad et al., 2024). Seeing that authenticity in leadership also is a highly regarded trait among employees (Banks et al., 2016; Gardner et al., 2011), it is reasonable to believe that it can also negatively affect employer attractiveness.

Second, it could be that brand activism causes respondents to identify less with the organization. As established in our hypothesis development, individuals are attracted to organizations which they identify with (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Following this, brand activism may inform job seekers that the company holds other values and opinions than themselves. Controversial topics are also often closer to one's self-identity than other kinds of topics (Brewer, 1991), meaning that such disagreement may be especially harmful to one's identification with the organization. Moreover, even amongst those who agree, brand activism may make job seekers infer that the organization is very political, which might go against their perception of themselves and therefore decrease their identification with the organization. We will discuss the aspect of disagreement further in the section on limitations and future research.

6.1 Theoretical Contribution

The results of this research paper contribute to several fields of research. Foremost, it is a response to the scholars who have called for brand activism research to extend its effect to other stakeholders than consumers (Verlegh, 2023; Cammarota et al., 2023). While the related concepts of CSR (Jones et al., 2014), organizational political affiliation (Roth et al., 2022), and CEO-activism (Apples, 2022) all have been studied as antecedents of employer attractiveness, little attention has been put on if and why brand activism can affect potential employees. Our study reveals that brand activism does affect job seekers' perception of organizational characteristics which influences their attraction, but that there is much left to learn about the mechanisms behind its overall effect on employer attractiveness. Accordingly, we hope that this study is the first of many within this area.

Second, this paper contributes to the research on innovation culture. To date, the concept has been mostly researched within organizations (e.g., Chong et al., 2018; Li & Liu, 2022; Wei et al., 2012), leaving the literature on its role among job seekers incomplete. Across both our studies we replicate the findings of Sommer et al. (2017) and Styvén et al. (2021) by showing that perceived innovation culture is positively correlated with employer attractiveness. Moreover, to the authors' best knowledge, there is no paper before us discussing what may cause a prospective employee to assess such a characteristic of an organization in the first place. This paper makes a first contribution to this by showing that brand activism plays a significant role in forming potential employees' perceptions of an organization's innovation culture. The reason for this is that brand activism involves risks that only an organization fostering an innovation culture would be willing to bear. Future researchers may be able to use the same logic to build on the repertoire of tools that organizations can use to convey such a culture.

Third, the findings of this article add to the specific field of employer branding literature demonstrating how consumer-facing communication also can affect job seekers' perception of organizations. For instance, Rosengren and Bondesson (2014) showed how creativity in consumer advertising works as a signal of favorable employee development opportunities, and Carpentier et al. (2019) investigated how social media presence can signal organizational competence and warmth to job seekers. Brand activism now joins these as another signal of a specific organizational trait.

Finally, our research contributes to the longstanding body of literature on Signaling Theory within the field of employer branding. First, in line with an array of previous literature (e.g., Jones et al., 2014; Cable et al., 2000; Wilden et al., 2010), this study finds support for the notion that job seekers use information from organizations as signals of relevant information which they cannot observe. Second, the use of signaling within employer branding literature has over the years received criticism, particularly due to overuse and lack of application of the core principle of credible, or costly, signals (Bangerter et al., 2011; Highhouse et al., 2007). For this reason, this report has strived to systematically apply the principle of a credible signal throughout the theoretical reasoning and, thus, hope to contribute by working as a step in the right direction to change this reputation.

6.2 Managerial Implications

For managers, understanding what attracts and what does not attract talent is today pivotal. Van Hoye and Lievens (2009) highlight that with changing demographics and a low supply of highly talented employees, employer branding is essential to a company's success. Ultimately, organizations have no choice but to participate in the so-called "war for talent" (Chambers et al., 2001). While we in the introduction set out to demonstrate that brand activism can be an effective way for organizations to attract innovative talent, our findings did not support an overall increase in employer attractiveness. Yet, our study still advances several learnings for managers that can aid them in understanding how to survive in this war.

Firstly, while the results of the present study showed that brand activism did not enhance employer attractiveness, it also did not hurt it. This provides an opportunity: companies can take public stances on social issues central to their purpose and values, potentially enjoying rewards of increased investor valuation (Mkrtchyan et al., 2023) and brand outcomes (Wannow et al., 2023; Francioni et al., 2024), without fearing a loss of potential job applicants. Ultimately, organizations that want to express values or support causes can do so without jeopardizing their recruitment position.

Further, the war for talent is not only about attracting employees but also retaining them (Mitchell et al., 2001). The results of this study may help organizations to do so by showcasing that when organizations engage in brand activism, potential employees form

higher expectations of the organization's innovation culture. This matters because when individuals join an organization under inaccurate or unmet expectations, dissatisfaction and early turnover are likely (Wanous & Colella, 1989; Cable & Judge, 1996; Cable et al., 2000). In other words, the results of this study underscore an important consideration for organizations that are considering engaging in brand activism: such practices create expectations of an innovative culture among future employees and to survive in the war of talent you are wise to be able to deliver on that.

Lastly, seeing that innovation is crucial for the success of a company (Geroski & Machin, 1992) and that such a capability is highly dependent on the knowledge of employees (Khandekar & Sharma, 2005), attracting innovative employees has been argued to be particularly important in the war for talent (Sommer et al., 2017). Our results show that actions that lead potential employees to infer an innovation culture can be particularly effective in attracting such innovative talent. We showed that brand activism can lead employees to infer such a culture because of the recognized risks involved. Therefore, organizations may be able to engage in other bold moves, such as risky marketing or product development, to similarly signal innovation culture and appeal to innovative talent.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

Like any other, this study also has its limitations. As has been made clear, one limitation pertains to the fact that our theoretical framework could not fully explain the relationship between brand activism and employer attractiveness. However, what we hope that our research has shown is that this is indeed a compelling avenue of research where more literature is needed. In particular, identifying what may be the cause of the negative reaction should be high up on the research agenda. If we can understand the mechanism responsible, we might also be able to figure out how to mitigate or eliminate it. For example, if it is caused by the perception of woke-washing, simply showcasing proof of aligned corporate practices may remove this negative effect (Caruelle, 2024; Vredenburg, 2020). This would allow managers to reap the positive benefits of brand activism as a signal of an innovation culture to attract innovative talent. In other words, we encourage future research to identify alternative mediators with a negative sign and investigate how these can be eliminated.

Second, it should be noted that both of our studies tested brand activism stances that can be considered “progressive”. While these arguably are the type of stances that you see most often from brands, it is not the only type of brand activism. Sarkar and Kotler (2020) elucidate how brand activism can be progressive or regressive. An example of the latter would be Chick-fil-A who publicly financially supported organizations fighting same-sex marriage (Severson, 2012). Since such a stance also involves risks of backlash, our theoretical reasoning suggests that such a stance should be able to signal innovation culture. However, since this was not tested in this report we urge future researchers to ascertain if our findings hold also in that context.

Third, the relationships tested may be subject to more moderators than the one presented in this study. Most notably, because brand activism involves taking a stance on a divisive issue (e.g., Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Hydock et al., 2020), there will naturally be people who agree and people who disagree. This has frequently been used in consumer research on brand activism as a moderator (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Wannow et al., 2023; Sauter & Jungblut, 2023). In fact, our signaling framework builds on the fact that some people will disagree and retaliate, which makes brand activism risky. However, we did not examine whether job seekers who disagree have similar negative reactions. This is a critical direction for future research. For instance, in previous sections we discussed how disagreement may partly be what caused the negative direct effect identified. Moreover, disagreement may also alter the signaling effect. As Connelly (2011, p. 54) explains, “signaling effectiveness is determined in part by the characteristics of the receiver”. Accordingly, it might be that people who agree and disagree interpret the signal differently. Evidence of this was found by Apples (2022) who showed how CEO-activism signals authentic leadership, but only for those who agree with the stance. It could even be so that disagreement not only attunes the signal but also changes it. For instance, the risk taken when doing brand activism can potentially be interpreted as a signal of recklessness or incompetence rather than an innovation culture.

Fourth, in both of our studies, a fictional company was used. While this was done to improve internal validity, it limits the external validity. In real-life settings, job seekers are arguably unlikely to be completely unfamiliar with an employer, which might alter the effectiveness of brand activism as a signal. Indeed, the strength of a signal depends on the extent to which the job seeker already possesses information about the employer (Celani & Singh, 2010). Thus,

job seekers who already have information about the innovation culture of the firm (e.g., through word-of-mouth) might not be as susceptible to brand activism as a signal. Accordingly, future research is encouraged to investigate how our signaling framework holds up also in the context of real companies.

Lastly, literature on brand activism, including ours, often discusses and replicates findings using different sociopolitical issues. However, little attention has been put on different levels of controversy. While brand activism naturally involves a debated topic, there are different levels to how controversial that topic can be (Zhao et al., 2024b). Seeing that humans have a natural tendency to connect controversy to risk (Chen & Berger, 2013), arguably due to our natural fear of social rejection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), it could be argued that the more controversial the stance is, the more risky it is perceived by potential employees. In the context of our findings, this prompts two interesting questions: First, does a more controversial stance work as a stronger signal of an innovation culture? Second, how controversial does the stance have to be to effectively signal an innovation culture? These are interesting questions for future researchers to investigate.

7. References

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8. Appendix

Appendix 1 - Treatment Study 1

Control



Brand Activism (LGBTQ+)









Appendix 2 - Treatment Study 2

Control



Brand Activism (Abortion Rights)



Appendix 3 - Use of AI

In the creation of this paper, the following AI-powered tools have been used: ChatGPT, DeepL, Grammarly, and Scribbr Citation Generator. ChatGPT was employed during the ideation and research phases to discuss the methodology and theoretical framework. It was also used to critique and provide feedback on the clarity and grammar of the writing. DeepL was used to translate individual words or sentences. Grammarly was used to check spelling and grammar in the end-phase of writing. Lastly, Scribbr Citation Generator was used to create in-text citations as well as compile the reference list.

The use of AI has overall improved the quality of the thesis by aiding in the creation of a pedagogical report. Just as you would ask a friend if a paragraph makes sense to them, AI was often used to see if our thoughts came across as intended. It was common to ask questions such as “Please summarize how you interpret and understand this reasoning.” to see if we had written a clear enough text. Moreover, Scribbr Citation Generator also helped by saving time on referencing accurately and consistently.

With that being said, we also noted many risks of using AI in thesis-writing which we urge future students to be aware of. Firstly, AI is to date not very good at handling sources. Whenever it tries to reference articles they are either made up or inaccurate information about the content of the article is given. Hence, we urge everyone to take the time and read the articles yourself. Second, we often found that AI is not very good at thinking in an academic way. It often mixed up moderation and mediation, and gave inaccurate interpretation of findings. Thus, a student that relies solely on this will end up with a thesis of low quality. Thirdly, AI language is very generic. ChatGPT, for some reason, has a tendency to want to rewrite the texts that you give it in accordance with their preferences. However, in our opinion these rewritten texts often lack personality and creativity. Sure, the sentences get shorter, more concise, and its vocabulary extends beyond ours, but it is extremely boring to read. Thus, we preferred writing the text ourselves.