

Track 2: Validating the Social Issue Flywheel

This submission originates from **a team of scholars who met at TCR 2023 in Track 1 “#14. The Rise of Brand Activism Track,” fell in like, and created a theoretical model together.** Our team is composed of diverse researchers from different backgrounds, cultures, and career stages (from doctoral students to later-stage scholars). Below is a brief overview of the theoretical model, our plans for an empirical project, and the anticipated impact of that work.

The Theoretical Model

Through our exploration of brand activism, we identified that the literature has largely ignored contextual and environmental factors. Prior literature has a) focused predominantly on consumer-level responses, b) framed managerial strategy as simply reactive to the demands of activist organizations or consumers, and/or c) treated the evolution of social issues or causes as uni-directional. In response, **we created the Social Issue Flywheel model, which accounts for and explains the factors influencing the climate surrounding a socio-political issue and how it changes dynamically over time based on these factors.** The use of a flywheel metaphor demonstrates the interaction of factors that can influence the evolution of the discourse around a social issue, including aspects of the issue itself, overarching societal characteristics and norms, differences in stakeholder perspectives, responses to the actions of other entities, as well as the actions of ‘exogenous’ entities (such as corporations, NGOs, and government). These factors intersect to determine the types of forces driving the flywheel, their relative strength, the momentum of the discourse around an issue, and their downstream consequences. Scholars, activists and managers can use this tool for environmental scanning and sense-making. This manuscript is nearing journal submission.

We now seek to **empirically validate the assumptions of our model using a multi-method approach.** Notably, a member of our group has built a novel **analytical framework based on large-language modeling (LLM) with the ability to gather social media and Reddit data to examine discourse.** This will allow us to test research questions, including:

- At what point in a social movement do brands typically enter, and are there better strategies for engaging in a contested social space? Our theory suggests that early phases of social movements are highly unpredictable and that companies likely lack the information, expertise, and/or activist collaborators to form coherent strategies.
- How does brand activism influence consumer discourse and how is brand activism affected by consumer discourse? Our model suggests that highly polarized climates amplify information about the brand, inciting more discordant discourse on both sides of an issue.

We will first test these possibilities using the LLM-enhanced analytical framework to examine specific discourse cases and explore initial findings. **Subsequent experiments will cross-validate the results and test for underlying mechanisms** that drive the relationships.

We anticipate the results from this project to provide significant contributions to the understanding of how social movements grow and evolve and how brands create change and are changed themselves. **We aim to clarify the pathways through which positive social change can occur and to uncover the ways in which companies influence the development and evolution of social movements.**

TIMELINE

Time Frame	Tasks
Summer 2024	Development of LLM-enhanced framework to examine brand activism discourse on social media. Identify and obtain a commitment from research team members.
Fall 2024	Analysis of Reddit and potentially other social media data Development of experiments to assess causation and determine mediators potentially underlying the effect identified by LLM-enhanced framework data. Process by moderation may also be tested, as well as novel moderators identified as theoretically valuable. The initial writing of the manuscript begins.
Spring 2025	Finalize experiments. Experimental data collection. Manuscript writing continues.
TCR: June 12-15, 2025	Experimental data analysis. Revisions to the manuscript.
Post-TCR 2025	Official methods and findings are added to the manuscript. The general discussion is completed and final revisions to the manuscript. Present findings at a marketing conference. Submit the manuscript to a top-tier peer-reviewed journal.