

# Branding and Integrated Communication Centre

Facultad de Ciencias de la Información  
Universidad Complutense de Madrid



## The brand as a social phenomenon. Corporate Activism, Trust, and Cocreation

## Preface

This report is the result of the Santander-UCM research project with reference PR87/19-22686, assigned to the Faculty of Information Sciences of the Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

The research team involved in its preparation is as follows:

- **Main researcher:**
  - Villagra García, Nuria
- **Internal researchers (by alphabetical order):**
  - Carcelén García, Sonia
  - Clemente Mediavilla, Jorge
  - Díaz Soloaga, Paloma
  - López Vázquez, Belén
  - Monfort de Bedoya, Abel
  - Pintado Blanco, Teresa
  - Sánchez Herrera, Joaquín
  - Sebastián Morillas, Ana

# The brand as a social phenomenon. Corporate Activism, Trust, and Cocreation

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## Introduction

The study of brands and their impact on society has been one of the most active and central focuses of research in communication. However, it is only now that companies are discovering their potential to improve society, not only from an economic point of view, but also by creating values and attitudes that enhance social harmony among citizens.

From an economic point of view, the most important brands, whether they are for profit or not, such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), etc., can achieve three times the effect of organizations that lack this intangible asset. This positively affects job creation and the maintenance of the well-being of nations.

However, the ability of brands to influence society is not without risk, and questions regarding which kind of values they transmit and their impact on global society remain unanswered. Therefore, from the academic point of view, it is important to study this new and complex context to understand the changes that brands induce in society and promote good practices that benefit all citizens.

The current report therefore summarizes the results of a project entitled “The brand as a social phenomenon: corporate activism, trust, and perceptions” that analyzed the brand concept from three different perspectives

sharing a new way of understanding the process of construction, management, and evaluation of brands by questioning the traditional foundations of such research. The three aspects of brand management are as follows:

a) Traditionally, it has been argued that companies should maintain a neutral stance on social issues that may polarize public opinion. However, brands are increasingly adopting corporate activism strategies and acting as social agents that adopt controversial positions on political, religious, or social issues that were hitherto the dominion of other types of social institution. Companies must therefore understand the effects of such strategies on consumers and society in general, as well as the aspects that they must consider when undertaking such initiatives.

b) Despite current efforts to connect with their audiences, there is a crisis of trust in brands. Paradoxically, consumers sometimes seem to trust new and/or small brands more than traditional brands, some of which are more than 150 years old. This apparent contradiction (placing greater confidence in the unknown) is a question of enormous interest to all types of organization. An answer to this conundrum could improve brand management as well as understanding of individuals' expectations and preferences. It thus becomes necessary to understand which factors influence the generation of (mis)trust and analyze which aspects companies should consider to convey a clear purpose, engage in a real dialog with their audience, and partake in forms of communication that are interactive and participatory and have a positive impact on their activity as well as society.

c) The internet and social networks have facilitated a more direct, two-way relationship between brands and their consumers. In this new context in which the consumer wishes to play a more active role, brands must be able to establish mechanisms for listening and dialog and favor a tighter relationship with their audience. In this sense, another important challenge is the integration of consumers into strategic decision-making based on collaboration and cocreation processes that enable them to participate in brand marketing and communication strategies but without losing their identity or essence.

Each of these trends in brand management is analyzed below, and the main results obtained are summarized.

## Background on corporate activism and its effects on reputation and brand equity

Over recent decades, the social responsibility dimension of companies has been increasingly developed through corporate social responsibility (CSR), philanthropy, or social actions. This involved becoming involved in issues that enjoyed support or consensus among their stakeholders but not taking positions on controversial social and political issues or that may polarize public opinion, under the assumption that this could have negative effects. However, recent years have seen increasing examples of companies taking a position on controversial social and political issues that are not directly related to their business activity, such as LGBTQIA+ rights, racism, immigration, gun control, or climate change. Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020, p. 463) define corporate activism as “a company’s willingness to take a stand on social, political, economic, and environmental issues to create societal change by influencing the attitudes and behaviors of actors in its institutional environment.”

This trend represents a step forward in the role that companies adopt as corporate citizens, also addressing a demand from society. Consumers, and society in general, want companies to take sides on sociopolitical issues to drive social change beyond profit-making and transparently communicate their position on such issues. In addition, in their purchasing decisions, consumers choose brands with values and behaviors that they trust (Stanley, 2020). Therefore, corporate activism should improve a company’s results, e.g., having a positive impact on sales, consumer loyalty, brand value, or reputation, while also contributing to social change by

influencing the attitudes and behaviors of different social actors (governments, other companies, and NGOs)

Despite these positive effects, companies that adopt such strategies on controversial issues must also assume some risk. On the one hand, such a strategy may lead to public rejection and distrust if the position taken is not credible but rather perceived as opportunistic. This phenomenon is known as “woke washing,” i.e., when there is a misalignment between the cause and the purpose, values, and behaviors of the company (Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). For this reason, it is very important that the position adopted and its communication are reflected in corporate behavior and demonstrate a real commitment to social change beyond the short-term benefits to the company. On the other hand, it must be borne in mind when dealing with such issues that polarize public opinion that a fraction of consumers will not share these positions, which may result in their loss as consumers or negatively impact on their purchasing decisions.

At present, there is no consensus regarding whether companies have the legitimacy to adopt positions on controversial sociopolitical issues that polarize public opinion and were hitherto reserved for governments or other institutions such as NGOs. Our objective herein is to investigate the aspects that a company must consider before engaging in activism to ensure that it will be supported or valued by their consumers, as well as the resulting effects on corporate reputation and brand equity. We also analyze whether the political ideology of consumers can moderate these effects.

## Background to corporate activism

As mentioned above, corporate activism addresses a demand from society, so the general context is favorable to this type of action. However, companies should also consider some other important aspects before undertaking such strategies. The two main conditioning factors are authenticity and brand and institutional credibility.

## Credibility

The credibility of business organizations has been widely studied and is important in the field of marketing because business messages or communication from a company that is a source of credibility will have greater persuasive power on their consumers or recipients. However, the perceptions and attitudes of consumers regarding the actions of a company depend on whether they are fulfilling a role as corporate citizens and the degree of credibility that public institutions have for consumers. It thus becomes necessary to consider institutional as well as corporate credibility.

### a) Corporate credibility

This is understood as the degree to which consumers perceive that a company acts in good faith and possesses the capacity and experience necessary to carry out its business activities (Bigné, Currás, and Sánchez, 2009). Corporate credibility has been studied as a precedent of attitudes toward a brand or purchasing intentions, as well as perceptions of CSR. On the one hand, previous studies have confirmed a positive relationship between corporate credibility and CSR activities if they are consistent with the competences of the company and are aimed sincerely at its customers. On the other hand, this relationship will become negative if the

company is not credible or there is no business coherence. Given the scarcity of research considering credibility together with corporate activism, we analyze herein whether the trend described in such studies on CSR and credibility is indeed observed.

### b) Institutional credibility

Institutional credibility can be defined as the degree of confidence that citizens place in public institutions to do the right thing and act for the good of society (Kim and Lee, 2012). Low institutional credibility is probably one of the reasons why corporate activism is increasing so quickly. Indeed, more than half of consumers already consider that companies can solve social problems more effectively and quickly than governments (Edelman, 2019), so the origins of corporate activism may lie in the current difficulties faced by public institutions in addressing the most pressing problems in society. Previous research has demonstrated empirically that low trust in public institutions results in a positive attitude toward responsible business actions (Rim and Dong, 2018) because consumers consider that companies are more involved in issues that are important to citizens (Edelman, 2019). Therefore, the different roles that companies and governments play and citizens' perception of this will determine their relationship with corporate activism and whether they support companies that become involved in such initiatives.

## Authenticity

In addition to the credibility that consumers attribute to companies and institutions, another aspect that companies must consider before carrying out corporate activism actions is authenticity, understood as the set of values and beliefs that the organization defends and

that make it unique, based on its consistent behavior over time. Vredenburg et al. (2020) highlight the importance of authenticity for a corporate activism action to be effective. In their research, they found that brands engage in authentic activism by combining activist messages, purposes, and values with prosocial corporate practice, thus enhancing their brand value.

Authentic brand activism is opposite to the practice of woke washing (Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2018), which is understood as inauthentic brand activism. Authenticity is a preliminary aspect that companies must consider before engaging in corporate activism because it can help avoid the public skepticism that this type of action may otherwise produce. Authenticity makes the position adopted by a company credible and thus has a positive effect on corporate activism.

In short, if a company manages to build a solid foundation of corporate credibility and authenticity, it can then start to adopt positions on controversial issues. This being said, once a corporate activism action has been carried out, one must also study its effects on consumers and society in general.

## **Effects of corporate activism on reputation and brand equity, and the moderating role of political ideology**

### **Corporate reputation**

Corporate reputation is the mental representation of a company in the minds of its stakeholders, which grows over time depending on its ability to satisfy their expectations (Fombrun, 1996). For several decades, this concept has attracted interest from academics and professionals because of

the positive relationship that has been demonstrated between reputation and the attitudes and behaviors of stakeholders (clients, employees, investors, etc.) with regards to a company.

Unlike CSR, there are still no proven models to study the effect of corporate activism on reputation. A first approach enables us to deduce that corporate activism can have a positive impact on reputation as more consumers demand that companies express their values on and become involved in social and political issues. However, such a strategy can also have a negative effect on a fraction of the audience that does not share these beliefs or political positions, so companies must identify relevant issues that are related to the company's values.

The analysis above confirms the great importance of analyzing the impact on reputation when companies adopt political and social positions, and which aspects organizations should consider when choosing such topics and communicating their positions to achieve a positive effect.

### **Brand equity**

In addition to reputation, another effect that is widely studied in the marketing and communication literature is brand equity because of its value to both the company and the consumer. Brand value is "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers" (Aaker, 1991, p. 15). Recent studies have suggested that, given the increasing demand from consumers for companies to take sides on political and social issues, corporate activism can be valued by consumers and influence brand equity

(Corcoran, Newman, and Devasagayam, 2016; Korschun, Martin, and Vadakkepatt, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Meanwhile, consumers are also becoming increasingly skeptical and critical of brands and doubt the motives behind such campaigns, which can reduce their effect and even lead to rejection. To minimize this skepticism, and for activism action to be credible and effective, authenticity is essential. Therefore, demonstrating a real commitment to the cause or that the reasons behind such actions transcend the business itself are aspects that can minimize public skepticism and contribute to the creation of brand value.

### The influence of political ideology on consumer perceptions

As noted above, CSR and corporate activism are aspects that stakeholders consider when evaluating a company, thereby affecting both corporate reputation and brand equity. However, this effect can be moderated by various factors such as the values and political ideology of the consumer.

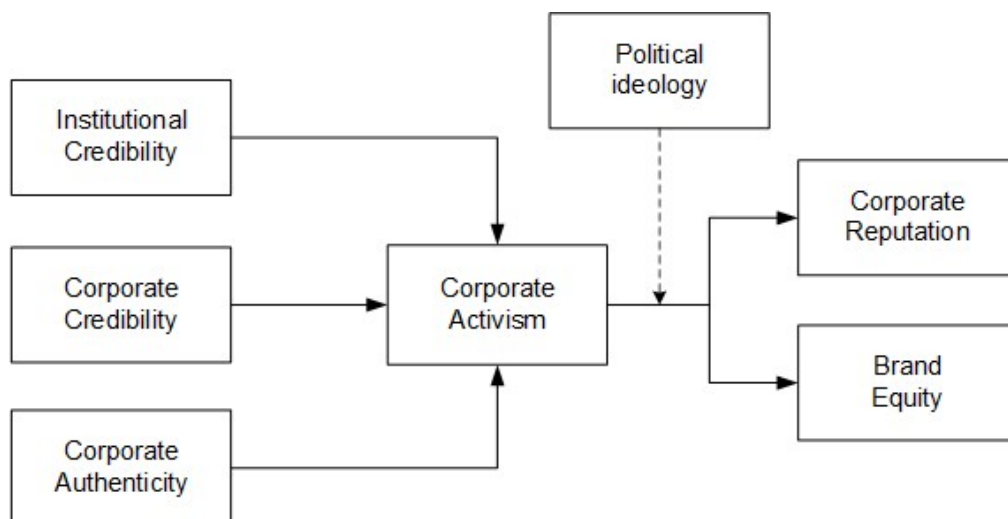
Political ideology is related to one’s values and beliefs and has a direct influence on people’s attitudes, opinions, and behaviors. The support for social, political, and environmental issues by companies in an

increasingly polarized society suggests that divergent reactions may affect consumer behaviors. In the specific case of corporate activism, it must be determined whether political ideology moderates the effect of corporate activism and how to take this into account when developing such actions.

The classification that is most applied to categorize consumer behavior in relation to political ideology is the distinction between liberals and conservatives.

Various investigations have indicated different behaviors and attitudes depending on ideology; For example, consumers with liberal ideology have a greater tendency toward “boycotting” and “buycotting.” Political ideology also influences the way in which consumers seek to differentiate themselves through brand choices, whereby conservatives seek vertical differentiation (choosing products that show them to be better than others) while liberals seek horizontal differentiation (choosing products that show them to be unique or different from others). Likewise, stakeholders with different ideologies usually adopt opposing positions on sociopolitical issues. Unlike conservatives, liberals focus more on protecting the environment or defending civil rights or issues such as social justice, diversity, or

social change. Therefore, a company adopting a corporate activism strategy should consider that political ideology will play an important role in moderating its effects on brand



equity or reputation as perceived by its consumers.

Taking all the above into account, we consider herein that corporate credibility and authenticity will have a positive impact and therefore translate into greater support or favorable attitudes from consumers toward corporate activism actions. In contrast, in the face of institutional credibility, consumers will show less support for companies to become involved in this type of initiative. In addition, companies should consider the role of political ideology in moderating the effects that activism actions can have on reputation and brand equity. Activism will have a positive impact on consumers with liberal ideology but be neutral (or not significant) for consumers with conservative ideology.

## Results

### Structural model estimation

The estimation of the structural equation model (SEM) provided good or very good fit indices of GFI = 0.80, AGFI = 0.77, CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.92, and RMSEA = 0.03. The hypothesis test showed that all the coefficients have the expected sign and are consistent with theory.

The results show that institutional credibility, corporate credibility, and authenticity are

antecedents of corporate activism and thus explain which circumstances contribute to the implementation of such initiatives. According to the parameter values obtained, when institutional credibility decreases, individuals perceive that corporations should become more directly involved in matters of a social and political nature, even when controversial or socially polarizing.

However, the relationship between corporate activism and reputation and brand equity changes when political ideology is incorporated as a moderating variable. In this sense, it is interesting to note that individuals with a more conservative ideology do not perceive possible positive effects on reputation or brand equity resulting from such corporate activism practices. One possible interpretation is that such people believe that corporations should focus on their central function (marketing, etc.) rather than on peripheral functions such as CSR, etc. In contrast, individuals with a more liberal ideological tendency do perceive that the involvement of companies in activist initiatives has a positive impact on their reputation and brand equity. For this group, the responsibility of organizations seems to extend beyond their corporate function to include involvement in social and political practices that transcend the traditional limits of their managerial or commercial functions

			Estimate (Std.)	Std. error	Critical ratio
Corporate credibility	→	Corp. activism	0.707	0.032	5.910 ***
Institutional credibility	→	Corp. activism	-0.062	0.005	-3.017 ***
Authenticity	→	Corp. activism	0.275	0.013	5.046 ***
<b>Liberals</b>					
Corp. activism	→	Corp. reputation	1.008	0.690	6.135 ***
Corp. activism	→	Brand equity	0.895	0.476	5.998 ***
<b>Conservatives</b>					
Corp. activism	→	Corp. reputation	0.988	4.075	1.653
Corp. activism	→	Brand equity	0.776	3.155	1.648

Note: \*p < 0.5; \*\*p < 0.01; \*\*\*p < 0.001

by adopting ideological positions on controversial or polarizing issues.

These results also have practical implications that could be very useful for companies and managers who wish to implement corporate activism actions. Thus, companies should consider corporate and institutional credibility as antecedents that can affect consumer perceptions of corporate activism, especially when institutional credibility may be lower, as this implies an improved perception of activist campaigns. Likewise, the effects of corporate activism on corporate reputation and brand equity should also be considered, especially when the political ideology of consumers might moderate these effects; In this sense, companies should make a greater effort to understand the ideology of their audiences before launching activism campaigns.

## Trust and distrust in brands

In recent decades, consumer confidence in brands has decreased drastically in many countries (Jackson, 2020), having a negative impact on consumers' purchasing intentions. In today's environment, consumers are more demanding with brands, which must thus transform and adapt to these new demands. It thus becomes important to study the factors that influence distrust and develop a strategy linked to the desired aim and generate an authentic and participatory dialog with consumers and society at large.

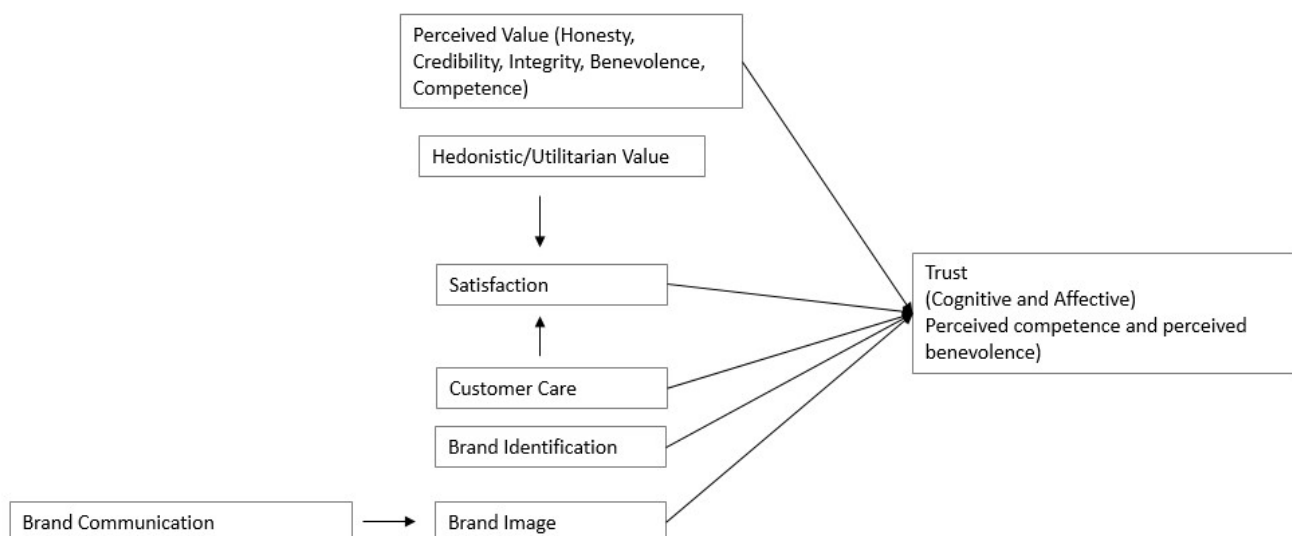
A review of academic research carried out to date reveals the consideration of trust variables, whereas only a few factors related to brand distrust have been studied. Existing theoretical models have thus been compared to identify the factors that characterize trust while revealing the specific variables that define distrust.

Two theoretical models have been proposed to determine which variables are most relevant to building trust and distrust in a brand, in both online and offline environments. The development of these models has revealed that some of the brand

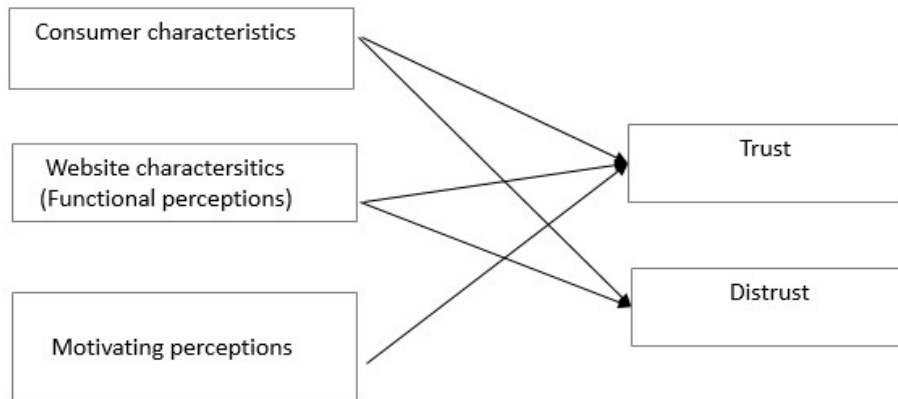
trust variables that influence offline environments are perceived value, hedonistic/utilitarian value, satisfaction, brand identity, etc. Meanwhile, brand trust variables identified in online environments indicate that consumer and website characteristics can reduce brand distrust. This background enables the consideration of the new digital reality and its possible impact on the relational behavior of the individuals engaged with it.

Based on this analysis of the connection between variables and consumer perceptions, we propose the following different trust/distrust models for the offline and online environment:

Literature refers to a loss of confidence that impacts on public satisfaction. A review of seminal scientific publications confirms this, with most authors reporting a progressive loss of trust in all areas of society, highlighting that trust is a fundamental factor regarding public satisfaction. The analysis reveals a direct relationship between trust and some variables that affect consumer behavior, including perceived value, customer service, brand identity, etc.



The generation of trust in brands has been studied in multiple disciplines, each offering different but complementary perspectives on this phenomenon. However, this study uncovered scant academic literature on distrust. Some authors define distrust as a different theoretical construct from trust.



This study found that numerous authors have studied brand trust, whereas few have analyzed brand distrust. However, variables related to distrust are relevant to understanding many consumer behaviors and perceptions. It thus becomes necessary to determine the factors that characterize trust as a whole, as well as the specific factors that define distrust.

One contribution of this work is thus to reinforce the conclusions of previous work on brand trust/distrust and to provide two theoretical models, one of them novel, on the variables that can influence brand distrust in online environments, thus laying the foundation for future research.

In general, the specific objectives of this part of the study are as follows:

- To review existing literature on models of brand trust and distrust
- To study brand trust and distrust variables and confirm how they affect

consumer behavior during the buying process

- To compare existing models of brand trust and distrust and propose new theoretical models
- To evaluate the proposed models through statistical analysis

The methodology applied to achieve this includes a review of relevant publications on factors related to brand trust and distrust. Subsequently, a quantitative methodology is

applied to evaluate the data from a representative sample to enable a verification of the proposed models.

## Brand trust

In relation to brand trust, various studies have demonstrated the relationship between trust and some variables that affect consumer behavior, such as perceived value, customer service, brand identity, brand communication and image, hedonistic/utilitarian value, brand satisfaction, cognitive and affective factors, perceived competence, and perceived benevolence.

The results of this study show that all these variables are important, but that three of them can explain customer satisfaction with their favorite brands and lead them to trust them more: perceived value, customer service, and satisfaction.

Regarding perceived value, some authors argue that, despite the importance of trust as a fundamental characteristic, there is no scale to measure trust in a brand environment when purchasing a product or service, especially for consumer brands (Delgado-Ballester, 2004). Various other aspects, such as honest and credible communication, shared values, brand reputation, and altruistic brand behavior, can also increase brand trust (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Germany, 2001).

Other studies argue that a precedent for trust is customer service (Amegbe and Osakwe, 2018). In addition, customer service must occur on a regular basis in interactions between brands and consumers. In addition to customer service, one must also consider satisfaction and trust.

Recent research has shown that brand satisfaction emerges from the relationship between customer service, customer satisfaction, and brand trust. In general, some authors explain that high levels of customer service are positively correlated with relational results such as trust, while high levels of customer service are positively correlated with trust in different sectors (Zarei et al., 2015).

Finally, the relationship with a brand can act as a mediator by forming part of a mechanism through which trust, satisfaction, and brand evaluation influence brand loyalty. This brand relationship acts as a mediating variable between trust, satisfaction, and loyalty, where trust and satisfaction appear to be indirect antecedents of loyalty (Veloutsou, 2015).

## **Brand distrust**

The academic literature on distrust is sparse compared with that on brand trust. Some scholars have defined distrust as a different construct from trust. However, both terms are used together, whereas only a few studies have included trust and distrust as different concepts (Cho, 2006; Ou and Sia, 2010). However, research uses both terms in the online context. The authors of a recent study argued that online trust and distrust generate asymmetric effects when considering some variables such as consumer and website characteristics, causing generate different effects of trust and distrust on consumer behaviors (Chang and Fang, 2013).

Those authors argue that an Internet-savvy consumer is likely to exhibit less distrust. On the other hand, consumers in the online context trust electronic marketers associated with websites that provide detailed information (Park et al., 2005). In addition, consumers consider security to be an important aspect of internet shopping (Bart et al., 2005). Based on those results, brands can achieve an advantage by understanding consumers' attitudes regarding trust and distrust. In summary, when a consumer feels less distrust, they will be more willing to buy from a website (Chang and Fang, 2013).

Finally, some scholars claim that motivational insights lead to confidence in online environments. Some aspects, such as ease of use, clear design, and fast, useful, accurate, and relevant information, can generate trust in brands in the digital environment. This occurs because consumers save time and effort when a brand is well valued. Likewise, various elements are positively valued, including search tools to help find information, easy contact by email with purchasing assistants, simple order and

payment mechanisms, return policies or other security and accountability measures, and personalization of the purchase (Ou and Sia, 2010).

Ultimately, the strength of a brand guarantees that the product will be of high quality and that orders will arrive on time and in good condition (Bart et al., 2005). All this generates brand trust and makes consumers perceive and enjoy it, making website visits exciting, enjoyable, and fun.

## Results

The results obtained from this literature review highlight three aspects:

### a) Updating of studies on trust and distrust

- Regarding brand trust, studies have shown that a number of variables should be considered when evaluating trust, including the perceived value of the brand, comprising attributes related to the honesty, benevolence, credibility, integrity, and competence associated with the brand, satisfaction, customer service, identification with the brand, and brand image.
- In relation to brand distrust in digital environments, the literature review reveals that the factors that can generate distrust are associated with consumer knowledge of the online medium, and that this can be modeled using the information provided by the brand and the security offered in this environment, in other words, by designing website characteristics and functionalities that can increase consumer motivation. This includes specifically a clear design, high speed, and the utility, accuracy, and

relevance of the information provided by the brand.

### b) Determination of the variables that enhance confidence and satisfaction according to the proposed model.

The proposed models were then validated through empirical research. This updated model proposed herein analyzes the following aspects:

- The results collected show that the perceived value, satisfaction, customer service, and image of favorite brands have a positive and significant effect on the trust placed in them. Likewise, the brand's customer service shows a positive and significant relationship with customer satisfaction, while the brand's communication strategy is positively and significantly related to its image.
- Based on the second model proposed to explain satisfaction, an explanatory investigation is suggested on customer satisfaction with favorite brands. Satisfaction is broadly related to trust, so knowing how it arises is crucial. For this reason, we studied the relationship between three variables: customer service, brand satisfaction, and perceived value.

Relationship	Path coefficients	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	5%	95%
Perceived value → Trust	0.309	11.611	0.000	0.266	0.353
Satisfaction → Trust	0.295	11.269	0.000	0.251	0.337
Customer care → Satisfaction	0.506	22.196	0.000	0.469	0.543
Customer care → Trust	0.153	6.852	0.000	0.116	0.189
Brand communication → brand image	0.625	32.683	0.000	0.594	0.657
Brand image → Trust	0.226	8.272	0.000	0.182	0.273

Relationship	Path coefficients	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	5%	95%
Customer care → Satisfaction	0.305	12.167	0.000	0.263	0.345
Customer care → Perceived value	0.407	15.330	0.000	0.363	0.450
Perceived value → Satisfaction	0.494	21.343	0.000	0.455	0.532

The results show that perceived value acts as a complementary mediating variable between customer service and satisfaction. In addition, high levels of customer service were found, indicating its significant relationship with increasing satisfaction, in addition to increasing the perceived value, which in turn leads to satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.061$ ).

## Cocreation as a tool to generate engagement and brand value

The internet and social networks have enabled users to establish conversations with their brands quickly and easily. This new digital context has given rise to a new type of consumer (called a prosumer) who is much more proactive and wishes to interact with and participate in cocreation processes with brands, either simply by leaving recommendations or suggestions, or by becoming involved in a deeper way in the marketing and communication strategies of companies.

Therefore, the rules of the game in the creation of brand value have changed substantially, giving way to a new way of building brands through cocreation processes generated between consumers and companies in the digital environment.

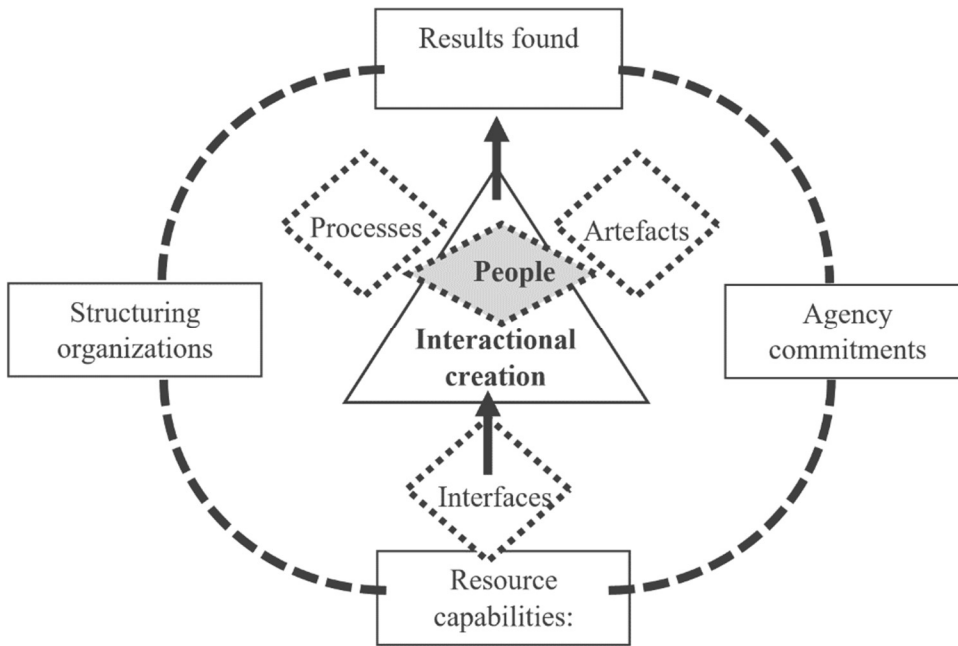
### The cocreation process concept

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Prahalad and Ramaswamy defined the concept of cocreation as collaboration between the client and supplier in the process of creating an idea or design or the development of new products or services. Rather than an effort by the company to satisfy the customer, this therefore describes a joint effort through which both parties obtain a benefit. In 2004, the same authors designed the DART model for the construction of brand value through cocreation, based on four pillars: dialog, access, risks–benefits, and transparency. This model is well recognized and accepted by the research community.

Subsequently, Hatch and Schultz (2010) proposed a simplified version of the DART model with two axes: the commitment between the company and its stakeholders (dialog + access) and the information provided by the company (risks–benefits + transparency), concluding that there is growing interest from companies in offering multiple channels to create a greater commitment between the company and its stakeholders.

Almost 15 years after the conceptualization of the term “cocreation,” Ramaswamy and Ozca (2018) offered a new definition for it that can be summarized as a process of creative interaction through environments based on interactive systems (facilitated by interactive platforms) that involve commitments regarding the agenda and structure of organizations. With the help of digital technologies, interactive platforms offer a multiplicity of interactive environments that connect creations with the results that arise from their relational activity.

For Carcelén and Díaz-Soloaga (2022), this way of understanding the cocreation process could be nuanced by prioritizing the relevance of people ahead of artifacts, processes, and interfaces (Graphic 1). From this point of view, cocreation can be defined as an interaction process that establishes an open and permanent dialog with consumers, being able to generate improvements and changes in business activity through interactive exchange dynamics.



Source: Adapted from Ramaswamy and Ozca (2018)

### Word of mouth in the digital environment (eWOM) and its relation with the cocreation process

eWOM can be defined as any informal communication directed to consumers through the internet and related to the use or characteristics of certain goods or services or their distributors (Poturak and Softic, 2019). Such informal communication by users through comments or recommendations in the digital environment is part of the cocreation process discussed above, in which the client interacts with a brand by voluntarily providing information to other users based on their own purchasing experience.

Some studies positively relate eWOM to purchasing intentions, having an even greater effect than advertising, and revealing that a large fraction of consumers depend on eWOM recommendations to make their own

purchasing decisions (Tseng et al., 2013; Tajvidi et al., 2018).

Such is the influence of recommendations that some studies have investigated the effect of positive and negative comments from consumers on a brand's social network accounts on users in the

community itself (Relling et al., 2016). For this, two types of customers were differentiated: (1) the brand's fan customers, who follow it emotionally and like to share their passion for the brand with other people (social goal community), and (2) rational customers of the brand, who follow it for functional reasons and seek information and knowledge about the characteristics of the product and brand (functional goal community). The results of that work indicated that both negative and positive comments can have different effects depending on the type of community. Negative comments affect a brand's fan community less than rational consumers, whereas negative comments are more valued by the rational community, as they provide more information, credibility, and trust toward the brand. Meanwhile, positive comments provoke a greater response and participation among the fan community.

## Perceived value and its relationship with the cocreation process

As mentioned above, the relationship between perceived brand value and cocreation by consumers is an aspect that should be considered in depth, because users are no longer passive agents in the process of purchasing products and services, rather playing a leading role in building brand value (Boksberger and Melsen, 2011; Sarkar and Banerjee, 2019; Tajvidi et al., 2021; Tran and Vu, 2021). Since cocreation also involves consumer behavior rather than their internal perceptions, there are growing indications of a direct relationship between such activity and perceived brand value.

Sánchez-Fernández and Iniesta-Bonillo (2007) carried out a meta-analysis of the concept of “perceived value,” concluding that this phenomenon involves a relationship between a subject (consumer–user) and object (product–brand).

Tajvidi et al. (2021) established the mediating role of interactivity in creating brand value, differentiating two relational perspectives: (1) that of the consumer in relation to other consumers, and (2) that of the consumer in relation to the seller. Each of these capitalizes on a specific angle of interactive activity in the digital environment, in both cases implying increased brand value as perceived by consumers when they interact with them in a bidirectional way through social networks and other digital communication channels.

Therefore, the main objective of this study is to delve into the brand-building process through eWOM including recommendations, comments, and customer participation on the internet, and determine the possible relationship between the cocreation process and brand value.

## Results

### Attitudes toward the cocreation process among Spanish consumers

In general, we find a favorable attitude toward cocreation processes when they are linked to eWOM, with 66% of respondents being willing to recommend a worthwhile brand and 52% to recommend and share their purchasing experience. Recommendations through eWOM are widely accepted by a large part of the population. However, it is interesting to note that, when the level of cocreation requires greater involvement by the individual, the opposite effect occurs, with an increasing percentage of people not being willing to make this creative effort. Indeed, only 17.9% of those surveyed stated that they participated in the process of creating a new product for a company and 24.9% in the process of creating specific content for a brand.

In addition, consumers (who identify themselves as prosumers) wish to interact with companies, since about 60% of those surveyed want to be considered by, listened to, and receive a response from their brands when required.

Finally, when studying the link between eWOM and the purchasing decision process for a brand, 40% of those surveyed indicated that they make their purchasing decision based on the opinions of other consumers. This percentage increases to 50% when the opinion is found on the social networks of friends and acquaintances. In addition, the interactions of other users with some brands can make consumers aware of new products. Indeed, almost 50% of those surveyed became aware of the existence of new brands due to comments from other users. It remains to say that the interaction with and response of

brands to customers' comments generate positive attitudes toward their possible purchases, with one-third of those surveyed being inclined toward buying a product when their comments or suggestions are taken into account.

### The demographic profile of cocreators

It has been studied whether there is a statistical association (based on cross tabulation analysis with the chi-squared test) between stated attitudes toward cocreation and certain sociodemographic and economic characteristics of the individual including gender, age, and income or educational level.

Regarding age, it has generally been observed that the most favorable attitudes toward cocreation are significantly associated with people in the middle and young age ranges. Among all the attitudes studied, a less favorable predisposition toward cocreation and eWOM is significantly more associated with being older than 65 years.

On the other hand, in general terms, the cocreation process is significantly more associated with women, who statistically have the most favorable predisposition toward the cocreation process in general, and specifically the idea of leaving recommendations and participating more actively in cocreation processes with brands, greater interaction with companies, and taking eWOM more into account when making purchasing decisions.

Regarding the income level variable, significant differences were observed between the different cocreation attitudes suggested to users. It can be said that a favorable predisposition toward eWOM and the interaction between the company and customer is significantly associated with the segment with the highest income levels. At the same time, cocreation and eWOM that

involve greater effort, when participation decreases, is more associated with a user profile with a high income level.

Finally, the education variable shows significant differences in only three of the attitudes toward cocreation. In all cases, the higher the educational level of the individual, the more favorable their attitude toward recommending a product, and comments on the internet have a greater influence on the probability of their buying a certain brand.

Finally, several explanatory models related to the probability of participation in a cocreation process through eWOM have been identified (through binary logistic regression analysis). To construct these models, the sociodemographic (sex, age, and educational level) and economic (income level) characteristics of the individuals were considered as possible explanatory variables.

In the first model proposed, the probability of greater participation and involvement in a cocreation process (creating specific content for a brand) increases (in order of importance) with lower age, higher income level, and female gender.

In addition, the probability of being predisposed to leaving a recommendation or positive review of a product/brand through eWOM increases for female gender, higher education level, and higher income.

Finally, the probability that a comment shared on the internet will influence an individual's purchasing decisions increases with (in order of importance) lower age, higher education level, and higher income level.

## The cocreation process and perceived brand value: defining a typology of consumers

Multivariate statistical techniques (multiple correspondence analysis and cluster analysis) were applied to identify a typology of clients. Three consumer segments were identified on the basis of their attitudes toward cocreation and perceived brand value along with their individual sociodemographic and economic characteristics.

Each of the identified segments is described below:

Cluster 1, “anti-cocreators”: This segment has a higher proportion of individuals with the most unfavorable attitude toward the cocreation process in general. Members of this cluster indicate that they disagree most with the studied process, having a negative predisposition toward participation in cocreation processes with brands (from the most basic level involving recommendations to the most complex leading to collaboration in the creation of specific content), interaction with them through dialog with companies, and a low influence of e-WOM in the purchasing process. In addition, this group also states that they are more in disagreement with respect to attitudes related to the perceived value of the brand, since they do not consider that favorite brands are the most sincere, honest, and the best purchasing option, so their level of satisfaction is not ideal. Regarding the sociodemographic variables of members of this segment, the profile of the respondents is more associated with men and being 65 years of age or older.

Cluster 2, “indifferent/passive toward cocreation”: Members of this group show, on the one hand, an indifferent attitude toward the cocreation process itself (for 50–60% of

individuals), indicating that it is a passive segment whose members may know how to interact with brands but do not feel interested in doing so, preferring to remain on the sidelines and let other consumers participate. On the other hand, this segment also manifests mostly indifference in their perception of brand value and also does not have definite beliefs about whether their preferred brands meet the characteristics of honesty and sincerity or respond to their needs. The sociodemographic profile of the respondents in this segment is mainly associated with being young (18–24 years old) and having a low or basic level of education.

Cluster 3, “active cocreators”: This segment is more representative of those who are more in agreement with the cocreation process. In addition, it includes 75–95% of the individuals who show a very favorable predisposition toward cocreation in terms of participation, interaction, and influence in the purchasing process. The members of this segment participate more actively in brand recommendation processes, contributing their own (positive or negative) experience to other consumers and promoting and valuing in a very positive way the resulting dialog in the online environment. In addition, these individuals state that they are more in agreement with the influence of e-WOM when making purchasing decisions. Also, this group is especially aware of the cocreation process, being those that cocreate the most, participating in content creation for brand marketing and communication campaigns. Regarding perceived brand value, this segment includes 70–75% of those indicating that they agree more with the idea that their favorite brands are sincere, respond to their needs, and are the best purchasing option, and their level of satisfaction with them is high. Finally, this segment is associated with

being a woman and having a high income profile, high level of education, and intermediate age range (35–44 years).

The results obtained in this study reveal the interest in active participation among consumers. It could be said that there is an explicit desire among many users to interact and become involved in creation processes that, in addition to generating value for the brands that launch them, positively influence the customer experience and purchasing intentions. On the other hand, the study identified other consumer segments comprising those who identify themselves as “anti-cocreators” or are “indifferent” toward this process, where users are not attracted by this marketing and communication strategy that brands sometimes offer to consumers, so their level of participation and interaction is very low, as is their possible influence when making a purchasing decision.

From this perspective, identifying the profiles of the most active users and those who tend to interact through content cocreation should become a primary objective of company marketing managers since it allows, in addition to generating engagement and influencing purchasing decision processes, increasing the value of brands that involve consumers in this process.

## Methodology

### Sampling and data collection

The data analysis considered a sample of 1,521 individuals who were selected by means of random stratified sampling of the entire Spanish population aged over 18 years. The sampling error is therefore 2.51% for  $p = q = 0.5$  and a 95% confidence interval. This sample was drawn from an online panel managed by a specialized research company, made up of individuals selected to match the sociodemographic characteristics of the Spanish population.

The strata were selected based on geographic (province), age, and gender criteria, and participants received a reward in the form of points redeemable for gifts. Data collection was carried out through a structured questionnaire including the scales necessary to confirm the theoretical model proposed herein. All items were evaluated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “totally disagree” to “totally agree,” coded inversely when necessary.

### Measurement scales

The “credibility of institutions” and “credibility of corporations” constructs were built from the scale of McCroskey and Teven (1999), “corporate authenticity” was designed using the scale of Moulard et al. (2016), “corporate reputation” was built from that of Ponzi et al. (2011), while for “brand value” we decided to use the scale of Pappu et al. (2005), which in turn comprises those of Aaker (1991, 1996), Yoo et al. (2000), and Yoo and Donthu (2001).

To the best of the authors’ knowledge, there is still no validated scale to measure corporate

activism, thus a battery of 20 items was designed using some related scales (Austin, et al. 2019; Borden, 2019) and from Edelman’s (2019) annual report on trust in businesses. From this initial battery of items, and applying confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), a scale was extracted with three differentiated constructs: “social activism,” “declarative political activism,” and “reactionary political activism.”

“Social activism” refers to the involvement of a company in activist initiatives that promote social causes. “Declarative political activism” implies the adoption of clear and public positions on political ideology by large corporations, whereas the construct “reactionary political activism” is defined as the set of initiatives that a company can adopt to counteract the lack of competence shown by governments and public institutions.

Meanwhile, the “trust” construct was based on the proposals of Gurviez and Korchia (2003). “Satisfaction” was based on the study by Kuikka and Laukkanen (2012). “Customer service” was formed from the contributions of Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and Ruiz et al. (2014,2016). To elaborate the “brand image” construct, the items proposed by Salinas and Pérez (2009) were used.

Meanwhile, for “advertising and promotion,” the study by Zehir et al. (2011) was followed. Finally, “perceived value” was elaborated based on the proposal of Johnson, Herrmann, and Huber (2006).

In this section, no validated scales were identified in seminal academic publications. The items of the questionnaire were thus elaborated from a review of articles on the subject.

## Branding and Integrated Communication Centre at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid

The Branding and Integrated Communication Centre at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid

(<https://www.ucm.es/gestiondemarcas/>), directed by Jorge Clemente and Nuria Villagra, is active in the field of research and dissemination of trends in brand management and communication. We understand the brand as a strategic and transformative element in organizations and analyze its economic and social impact by using an applied and multidisciplinary approach.

Our main lines of research are:

- Brand management: identity and purpose; management of corporate and commercial brands; communication strategies; effectiveness measurement.
- Economic and social impact of brands: economic impact of brands and communication; effects on the public; globalization, values, and social transformation.
- Content production: new media and digital platforms; branded content; corporate, brand, and film storytelling.
- Responsible brands: corporate social responsibility; sustainability; corporate activism; brand/society cocreation and collaboration.

Our team of researchers comes from various universities (Universidad Complutense de Madrid, ESIC University, Universidad de Valladolid, Universidad Pontificia de

Salamanca) with specialists in all disciplines related to brand research.

In addition, we have worked with all types of companies and institutions, carrying out research in the following areas:

- Brand perception studies
- Advice on the design of brand strategies
- Measurement of consumer loyalty to brands
- Brand awareness studies
- Measurement of brand equity
- Identification of indicators that allow the measurement of the management and communication of the brand with its audience (scorecards)
- Analysis of the effectiveness of advertising campaigns (ROMI)
- Evaluation reports of the internal brand of organizations
- Advice on the definition of the purpose, values, and territory of the brand
- Analysis of the corporate reputation of all types of organization
- Design of corporate social responsibility strategies
- Brands with values and corporate activism
- Support with strategic brand communication decisions
- Brand health measurement on social media
- Generation of audiovisual content aimed at building brands

This report summarizes the main results of the project “The brand as a social phenomenon: corporate activism, trust, and perceptions.” with reference PR87/19-22686, carried out thanks to funding provided by Banco Santander and the Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

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