

By: Amelia Nordling, Estefania Cardenal, Madeline Castillo, Mia Wolman, Supervised by: Ashley Johns
College of Communication and Information

Background

While activism has been around for decades (Ball, 2019; Moorman, 2020), conversations of brand activism are a relatively new concept being researched by industry and academia. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the death of George Floyd in April 2020, there has been intense spotlights on companies to stand up and speak out on socio-political issues (Schoeneck & White, 2020; Garg & Saluja, 2022). While companies have often spoken out on issues, there is also increased pressure from consumers for brands to put their actions where their mouth is (Mirzaei et al, 2022; Sibai et al., 2021; Garg & Saluja, 2022).

The gap in literature on the subject and the increase in consumer desire for brands to take a stand on these issues calls for a focus on researching the impact of brand activism on brand perceptions and purchase intentions. Topics that are often used interchangeably with brand activism are cause-related marketing and corporate social responsibility, however, these topics are distinctly different because brand activism is focused on considerably controversial stances commonly associated with particular political ideologies (Vrendenberg et al., 2020; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Mizaei et al, 2022; Moorman, 2020). A study like this is important to increase the literature focused on conceptualizing brand activism as its own unique strategy and to understand the way brand activism can impact types of brands and products differently.

Initial Questions

1. Are consumers more likely to be aware of a hedonic brand's activism than a utilitarian product brand's activism?
2. How does brand activism play a role in consumer purchase decisions of hedonic product brands compared to utilitarian product brands?
3. How does brand activism play a role in consumer attitudes toward hedonic product brands compared to utilitarian product brands?

Methodology

- This study will use a classic between groups experiment design.
- One group of participants will be asked via survey to identify a brand they purchased multiple times that brings them joy but they don't consider a necessity (hedonic), and the other will identify a brand they purchased as a necessity (utilitarian).
- Both groups will be presented with scales to measure the extent of their awareness of the brands activist efforts, their behavior toward the brand if the consumer is aware the brand participates in activism, their attitudes toward the brand if the consumer is aware that the brand participates in activism, and how these behaviors and attitudes would change if presented with new information that conflicts with the information on activist efforts.

Key Points

- **Brand activism** is defined as actions taken by company or brand which indicate a partisan stance on a particular socio-political topic that orients the stance with the company values or mission.
 - Rooted in consumers desire for corporate social responsibility
 - Early adoptions of brand activism included actions against the exploitation of overseas workers (Dauvergne, 2017).
 - When brands align activist messaging, purpose, and values with prosocial corporate practices, they employ authentic brand activism, which maximizes the potential for social change and leads to significant gains in brand equity (Assis et al., 2023).
- **Utilitarian brands** are brands that creates products of necessity whereas **hedonic brands** are those that create products meant to evoke joy or pleasure.
 - Most research into brand activism has been focused on hedonic brands.
 - Hedonic and utilitarian brands are in unison with their main goal: satisfying the needs of consumers. However, the way in which they do so is approached differently.

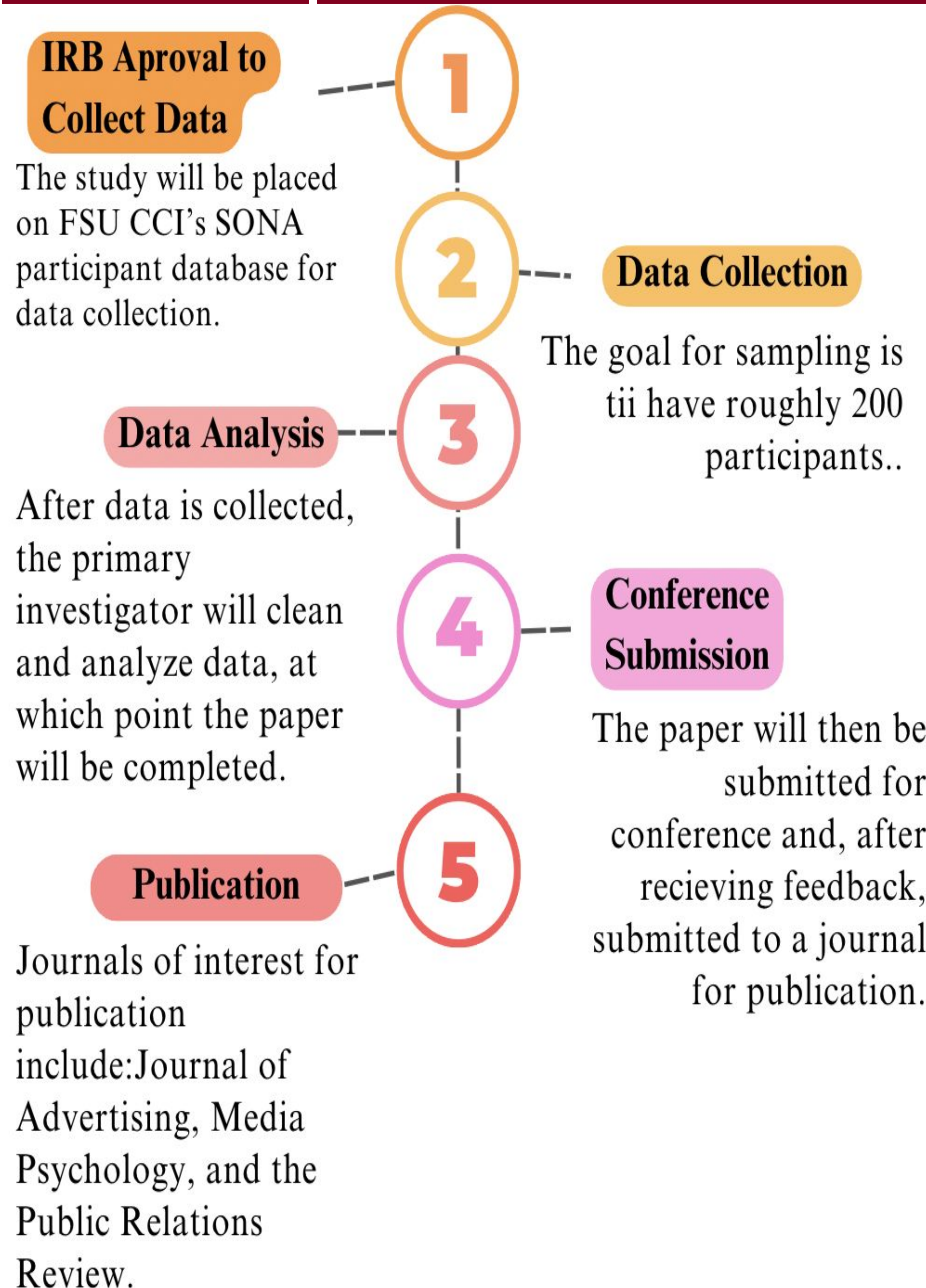
Literature Review

As identified earlier, previous literature has indicated that brand activism is separate from corporate social responsibility and cause-related marketing because it addresses politically controversial issues (Vrendenberg et al., 2020; Mirzaei et al, 2022). As such, brand activism can be defined as actions taken by company or brand which indicate a partisan stance on a particular socio-political topic that orients the stance with the company values or mission (Moorman, 2020; Vrendenberg et al., 2020; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Garg & Saluja, 2022; Mirzaei et al, 2022). There has been little to no research about if brand activism impacts hedonic brands and utilitarian brands differently. However, there has been deeper research into what characterizes brand activism and the role of authenticity in perception of activism. Vrendenberg et al. (2020) was able to identify 4 key characteristics important to identifying authentic brand activism: overall brand purpose, address a socio-political issue that is contended in the court of public opinion, the aligning political ideology, and contribution in messaging and action. Mizaei et al (2022) has identified a framework of how brands can achieve perception of authenticity in their activism efforts.



Empowering Change: Brands Taking a Stand for Social Justice
Image: Just Digital, 2023

Next Steps



References & Acknowledgements

