

Socioeconomic Identity, Class Consciousness, Brand Activism, and Purchase Intention: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract: Brands' activism has emerged as a key strategic practice as companies have become more involved in controversial social, political, and economic debates, including racial justice and gender equality, labour rights and income inequality. Certain campaigns strengthen loyalty and advocacy, and other ones generate doubt and boycotts, indicating that consumer reactions are driven by more complex sociological and psychological dynamics. Social class, socioeconomic identification, and class consciousness are important factors in many activist agendas, but are insufficiently developed in models connecting brand activism with consumer behaviour and purchase intention. This rigorous thematic systematic literature review integrates seminal theories and recent research of brand activism, social class in consumer behaviour, socioeconomic identity, Social Identity Theory (SIT), and Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). It is in this spirit that the thesis organises the literature in four key (focal) categories, as follows: (1) the development and ambivalence of brand activism, (2) the persisting relevance of social class and class consciousness in consumption, (3) socioeconomic identity as a mediator between stratification and consumer responses, and (4) identity-based models of purchase intention based on SIT and CCT. The literature highlights priority debates and contradictions, such as the tensions between the instrumental and transformative perspectives on activism, the underdevelopment of class in marketing and uncertainty over the limits of identity-based impacts. The review ends with a proposed research agenda for future work advocating: (a) the more robust incorporation of class-relevant concepts into the brand activism literature; (b) utilisation of multilevel perspectives to connect macro inequalities to micro identity work; and (c) a broader range of methodological tools, including cross-cultural and longitudinal approaches. At a conceptual level, it proposes socioeconomic identity as a primary pathway that explains why class consciousness influences consumers' reactions to activist brands, providing a scaffold for future empirical tests.

Keywords: Brand activism; social class; socioeconomic identity; class consciousness; purchase intention; Social Identity Theory; Consumer Culture Theory; literature review

I. INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, firms engage in brand activism, with recent years particularly seeing an upsurge around issues such as racial justice, gender equality, environmental sustainability and wealth inequality. As contrasted with traditional corporate social responsibility (CSR), which tends to be steeped in non-controversial philanthropy or compliance, brand activism signifies an explicit association with contentious sociopolitical issues and a desire to shape the societal outcome. This development is also in line with broader changes in consumer expectations (a change that is more prevalent among younger and more politically active demographic groups), who are now more likely to judge brands on their social purpose or stance in the social sphere.



But both empirical and practitioner experiences suggest that the results of brand activism can be very different. Some campaigns strengthen loyalty, encourage higher willingness to pay and generate positive word-of-mouth, while others seem to erode brand equity or trigger orchestrated boycotts. These contrasting results clearly suggest that the consequences of activism on consumers are not homogeneous, but vary on how consumers process activist messages and how they fit them into their identities and life contexts.

Class, socio-economic identity and class consciousness are important but under-theorised axes through which to examine these dynamics. Social class is a pervasive axis of stratification shaping lifestyles, tastes and consumption (Holt 1998; Lamont & Lareau 1988). Socioeconomic identity relates to how people view themselves within class structure, and class consciousness is awareness of shared interests as a group and of structural inequalities. Activist campaigns that speak of wages and working conditions, votes to influence politics, access to resources or redistribution centre on these class-related experiences, but the brand activism literature has seldom highlighted class. This article provides a critical thematic systematic review which brings together the work on brand activism, social class in consumer behaviour, socioeconomic identity, Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Consumer Culture Theory (CCT).

Rather than testing hypotheses, it synthesises existing research to answer three broad questions:

How has brand activism been conceptualised, and what do current studies reveal about its effects on consumer behaviour?

In what ways do social class, socioeconomic identity, and class consciousness shape consumption and responses to marketing?

How can SIT and CCT be used to conceptualise socioeconomic identity as a mechanism linking brand activism to purchase intention?

The review proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the approach to conducting a critical thematic systematic review. Subsequent sections present thematic syntheses of the literature on brand activism, social class and consumer behaviour, socioeconomic identity, and identity-based explanations of purchase intention grounded in SIT and CCT. The review then discusses key debates and contradictions, identifies research gaps, and proposes a conceptual insight that positions socioeconomic identity at the heart of class-sensitive understandings of brand activism. It concludes with a future research agenda for scholars at the intersection of sociology and marketing.

Review Approach: Critical Thematic Systematic Framing

This review combines systematic and critical approaches. It is systematic in the sense that it draws on established streams of scholarship in brand activism, social class and consumer behaviour, identity-based consumer research, SIT, and CCT, relying on peer-reviewed articles and authoritative overviews as core sources. It is thematic in that it organises the literature into recurring conceptual clusters rather than chronologically or by method alone. It is critical in that it does not merely summarise findings but interrogates assumptions, highlights contradictions, and identifies underexplored perspectives.

The body of literature reviewed here spans multiple disciplines, including marketing, consumer research, sociology, and social psychology. Key works on social class and consumer behaviour stress the continuing relevance of class despite evolving lifestyle patterns, while foundational texts on SIT and CCT provide the theoretical backbone for understanding identity and culture in consumption. Recent work on brand activism and purpose-driven branding offers empirical insights and practitioner-oriented frameworks that inform the discussion.

Given the interdisciplinary nature of the topic, the review prioritises conceptual depth and cross-field integration over exhaustive enumeration of all studies. It aims to build a coherent narrative that connects macro-structures of inequality, meso-level brand strategies, and micro-level identity work.



Concise Thematic Summary

From CSR to brand activism:

From CSR to brand activism: Brand activism goes further than traditional CSR by situating brands at the heart of sociopolitical debates and committing them to specific causes, thanks to visibility via social media, increased attention to systemic problems (e.g. climate change, racial injustice, inequality), and the need to differentiate in overcrowded markets

Ambivalent outcomes and authenticity:

When activism is considered authentic and aligned with a brand's heritage and internal practices (e.g., labour, supply chain), it boosts attitudes, loyalty and advocacy, yet "woke washing" – borrowing social justice rhetoric without meaningful action – triggers scepticism and backlash.

Centrality of social class in consumption:

Social class as central to consumption: Social class, defined by income, education, and occupation, remains a determinant of taste, preference and consumption habits, guiding the acquisition of economic and cultural capital and resulting in class-distinct shopping, leisure, and media consumption patterns

Class consciousness and marketplace evaluations:

Class conscience and marketplace judgments: Class consciousness, or the recognition of stratification and common class interests, influences how consumers assess companies and campaigns that appeal to themes of justice, such that "the more consumers identify with class consciousness, the more critical they are of the exploitative brand and the more favourable they are towards the brand that speaks to their class concerns."

Socioeconomic identity as a bridge:

Socioeconomic identity refers to whether people see themselves as "us" versus "them" in class terms, and this has proved useful in capturing diversity within objective class locations; consumers rely on brands to articulate, defend and negotiate class positioning and to make sense of which brands feel "for us," "for them" or 'with us' as an aspirational or dissonant brand.

Socioeconomic identity and brand activism:

Campaigns that promote fair wages, labour rights, or social support rooted directly in class issues; when they connect with and reinforce socio-economic identities, they generate trust and support, but if they conjure up incongruities with lived class realities, they become fodder for ridicule and alienation.

Identity-based purchase intention:

Research on purchase intention has indicated that identity-related constructs (e.g., self-identity, social identity) often mediate the influence of marketing stimuli on intentions in SEM/PLS SEM studies, highlighting the significance of identity congruence in the perception-behaviour continuum.

SIT and CCT perspectives:

SIT accounts for in-group cohesion and out-group separation in brand attitudes, whereas CCT understands consumption as identity work within social processes; the synergy produced by the two perspectives points toward activist brands as symbolic sources for identity projects, although class-based identities within this field remain underexamined.

Key discussions and gaps:

Discussions are centred around whether brand activism is a tool of instrumental marketing, or a transformative tool of activism with tensions around privatised politics and cause marketing; simultaneously, class orientation is frequently under-theorised in comparison to lifestyle or psychographic, thus the contributions of socioeconomic identity and class consciousness to activism response are relatively underinvestigated.



Systematic Literature Review: Extended Tabular Synthesis

Table 1. Brand Activism and Consumer Response

No	Study	Context & Sample	Method	Key Constructs	Main Findings	Relevance
1	Khamitov, Mirowska, & Grégoire (2025), Journal of Business Research	Experimental consumer studies across multiple brands with varying CSR reputations.	Series of experiments; structural modelling of motives, emotions, and outcomes.	Brand activism, CSR reputation, value-driven vs egoistic motives, admiration, anger, advocacy, and boycotting.	Strong prior CSR reputation increases value-driven motive attributions, enhancing admiration and reducing anger in response to activism; these emotions drive advocacy and reduce boycotting.	Shows that perceived motives and emotions mediate responses to activism; highlights that consumer heterogeneity (e.g., by class-based identity) conditions these reactions.
2	UTS Case Study (2026), "How Brand Activism Impacts Consumer Loyalty"	Case-based evidence from brands engaging in activism and tracking loyalty and sales outcomes.	Mixed-method case analysis of brand values, consumer attitudes, and behavioural metrics.	Brand activism, authentic engagement, consumer attitudes, loyalty, and sales.	Authentic, value-aligned activism is associated with enhanced loyalty and positive sales effects, whereas perceived opportunism undermines trust and support.	Provides applied evidence that activism can be commercially beneficial under authenticity conditions; underscores the need for identity-based alignment in designing activism.
3	Society Journal (2025), "The Influence of Brand Activism on Consumer Loyalty and Social Change"	Indonesian consumers previously exposed to brand activism campaigns (N ≈ 300).	Survey-based study using Structural Equation Modelling.	Brand activism, perceived authenticity, consumer loyalty, perceived social change, and mediation by loyalty.	Brand activism significantly increases consumer loyalty and perceptions of social change; loyalty mediates the relationship between	Demonstrates that activism can function as a bridge between corporate behaviour and perceived societal outcomes; suggests that identity-based loyalty may be an



					activism and perceived social change.	important mechanism.
4	Service/Retail Studies on Activism and Resistance to Negative Information	Consumers evaluating activist versus non-activist brands under negative information conditions.	Experimental comparisons of attitudinal outcomes.	Brand activism, resistance to negative information, brand attitudes, and trust.	Brands with credible activist histories show greater resistance to negative information than non-activist brands.	Supports the idea that activism becomes part of brand equity; class-based congruence may determine which groups extend this "insurance" effect to the brand.
5	Sprout Social (2025) and The Drum (2025) practitioner reports on activism	Global brands across sectors; focus on younger, value-driven consumers.	Qualitative industry analyses and case illustrations.	Brand activism, authenticity, consumer expectations, and reputational risk.	Highlight that activism is increasingly expected but heavily scrutinised; superficial or inconsistent activism triggers backlash.	Provides practitioner context for academic findings; supports the review's focus on deeper sociological mechanisms (e.g., class consciousness) that shape when activism is rewarded or punished.

Table 2. Social Class, Socioeconomic Identity, and Consumer Culture

N o	Study	Context & Sample	Method	Key Constructs	Main Findings	Relevance
6	Shavitt, Jiang, & Cho (2016), Journal of Consumer Psychology	Working-class vs middle-class consumers in stratified markets.	Conceptual and empirical synthesis (research dialogue).	Objective and subjective social class, culture cycles, persuasion, material vs experiential consumption.	Shows that social class predicts distinct consumption patterns and persuasion responses linked to independent vs interdependent cultural orientations.	Confirms that class systematically structures consumer behaviour; supports integrating socioeconomic identity into brand activism research.
7	Shavitt et al.	Overview of	Conceptual	Social class	Reaffirms that social	Provides



	(2016) PDF teaching summary	social-class constructs and segmentation applications.	review and pedagogical synthesis.	indices, status consumption, segmentation strategies, class-based tastes.	class remains a robust basis for segmentation and predicts unique preferences and behaviours.	measurement and conceptual tools for operationalising socioeconomic identity in empirical work on activist brands.
8	Educational summaries on social class and consumer behaviour	Teaching-oriented materials summarising classic class and consumption research.	Secondary synthesis based on marketing and sociology texts.	Social class hierarchy, subjective vs objective measures, class-specific preferences, status signalling.	Emphasise that people compare themselves to others and use consumption to signal class position.	Reinforces that socioeconomic identity and signalling are central to class and consumption.
9	Arnould & Thompson (2005), Journal of Consumer Research – Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)	Overview of 20 years of CCT research.	Integrative conceptual review of interpretive consumer research.	Consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures, socio-historic patterning of consumption, marketplace ideologies.	Argues that consumption is a cultural practice embedded in class, gender, and ethnicity; highlights the role of markets in constructing identities.	Provides a theoretical backbone for viewing brand activism as a cultural resource for class-based identity work.
10	CCT overview chapter (Sage)	Updated discussion of CCT domains and evolution.	Conceptual synthesis.	Identity projects, marketplace cultures, socio-historic patterning, market ideologies.	Emphasises fragmentation and hybridisation of consumption traditions while noting class as a key structural influence.	Supports the argument that socioeconomic identity links class structures and activist branding within a broader cultural system.
11	Social Identity Theory overviews (Wikipedia, SimplyPsychology, Thematic Education)	General explanations of SIT and its application to group processes.	Theory summaries drawing on Tajfel and Turner.	Social identity, in-group vs out-group, positive distinctiveness, intergroup bias.	Show that group membership is a core part of self-concept and drives in-group favouritism and out-group derogation.	Provides rationale for treating socioeconomic identity (class-based group membership) as an important



						lens for understanding responses to activist brands.
12	Encyclopaedic entries on Social Identity Theory (Wiley, etc.)	Advanced accounts of SIT's development and applications.	Scholarly reference entries.	Social identity approach, self-categorisation, intergroup conflict, communication .	Highlight SIT's versatility and its extension to domains such as organisational behaviour and media consumption.	Reinforces the applicability of SIT to consumer-brand relationships and activism, with socioeconomic identity as a specific group basis.

Table 3. Purchase Intention, PLS-SEM, and Identity-Based Models

No	Study	Context & Sample	Method	Key Constructs	Main Findings	Relevance
13	Islam & Ali Khan (2024), Sustainability	Saudi consumers' sustainable product purchase behaviour (N ≈ 744).	PLS-SEM on web-survey data.	Attitudes, values, environmental awareness, perceived environmental impact, product attributes, and purchase intention.	Attitudes, values, and perceived environmental impact significantly predict green purchase intention; this validates PLS-SEM for complex intention models.	Provides methodological support for PLS-SEM and illustrates how identity-relevant beliefs mediate structural factors in consumption.
14	Digital platform purchase intention study (Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship, 2023)	Ethiopian consumers are using digital business model platforms.	Survey with PLS-SEM.	Perceived usefulness, trust, satisfaction, and purchase intention.	Identifies technological and trust antecedents of purchase intention and validates PLS-SEM in an emerging-market context.	Demonstrates transferability of PLS-SEM purchase-intention models to non-Western contexts; useful analogue for modelling activist brands



						in stratified societies.
15	Abreu-Ledón et al. (2026), Technological Forecasting and Social Change	Meta-level evaluation of SEM usage in online purchase intention research.	Systematic review of SEM and PLS-SEM applications.	SEM, PLS-SEM, methodological quality, reporting standards.	Concludes that PLS-SEM is widely used and appropriate for complex, predictive models but calls for improved reporting and theory alignment.	Supports methodological choices in future empirical extensions of the current conceptual review and underscores the need to specify constructs like socioeconomic identity.
16	International Journal of Professional Business Review – SEM/ANN study on e-reviews and online shopping	Online shoppers evaluating the influence of e-reviews.	PLS-SEM combined with Artificial Neural Networks.	E-review quality/quantity, e-satisfaction, and online shopping intention.	Finds that e-review attributes influence e-satisfaction, which in turn drives online shopping intention; demonstrates hybrid PLS-SEM/ANN modelling.	Illustrates advanced modelling of purchase intention and suggests possibilities for integrating structural factors (e.g., class-linked access) with digital cues.
17	Green self-identity and consumption values study (Yogyakarta, 2024)	Indonesian consumers of green products (N ≈ 242).	PLS-SEM on survey data.	Green self-identity, functional/conditional/emotional value, green purchase intention.	Green self-identity positively affects consumption values and green purchase intention; conditional value mediates between self-identity and intention.	Shows that identity constructs can be central antecedents of purchase intention; conceptually parallel to socioeconomic identity in activist-brand contexts.



Limited Integration of SIT, CCT, and Class-Based Constructs

While SIT and CCT are widely used in consumer research, they are often applied in parallel rather than in combination, and class-based identities are frequently overshadowed by other identity categories. SIT-based studies may incorporate group membership without interrogating the structural basis of those groups, while CCT studies may richly describe classed experiences without formal modelling of identity-based pathways to behavioural outcomes.

There is a gap for frameworks that explicitly link class structures (as documented in stratification research), socioeconomic identity (as a psychological construct), and brand activism (as a meso-level practice) within a unified theoretical model. Such frameworks would facilitate more precise empirical testing and richer interpretations.

Methodological and Contextual Limitations

A final set of gaps concerns methodology and context. Much of the existing work on brand activism focuses on Western, urban, and digitally connected populations, potentially limiting its applicability to rural, informal, or Global South contexts where class structures and political economies differ markedly. Moreover, cross-sectional designs dominate, constraining insight into how identities and responses evolve.

There is room for longitudinal, cross-cultural, and mixed-methods research that examines how class consciousness and socioeconomic identity interact with activism in diverse settings, including contexts where brands and states play different roles in social provision.

Conceptual Insight: Socioeconomic Identity as a Central Mechanism

Synthesising the reviewed literature, this paper advances a conceptual insight: **socioeconomic identity can be positioned as a central mechanism through which class consciousness shapes consumer responses to brand activism and, ultimately, purchase intention.**

From this perspective, macro-structures of inequality (e.g., income distribution, labour markets, welfare regimes) shape class positions and experiences. These experiences, filtered through cultural narratives and political discourse, inform class consciousness/awareness of inequality and perceptions of shared interests. Socioeconomic identity captures how individuals internalise these positions, locate themselves in relation to others, and define group memberships.

Brand activism then acts as a set of symbolic and material interventions into this structure. Activist campaigns that explicitly address class-related issues, such as fair wages or affordable access to essential goods, are interpreted through the lens of socioeconomic identity. When consumers perceive alignment between their identity and the brand's stance, activism may reinforce a sense of recognition and solidarity, increasing supportive attitudes and purchase intentions. When they perceive misalignment or hypocrisy, activism may reinforce feelings of exclusion or exploitation, leading to rejection.

This conceptualisation integrates insights from stratification research, SIT, CCT, and brand activism scholarship into a coherent framework. It does not deny the importance of other identities or motives, but it foregrounds class as a foundational axis that structures the meaning and efficacy of activism.

Future Research Agenda

Building on this conceptual insight, several avenues for future research emerge:

Operationalising Socioeconomic Identity in Brand Activism Contexts

Future research needs to identify and include constructs that capture SEI in the sense-based and value relevance-focused brand activism context that is more relevant in differentiating from the general social identity or status consumption measures. Such instruments should take into account both subjectivity – how people perceive their own position in society – and perceived group interests.

Linking Macro-Structures, Identity, and Behaviour

Multi-Level Theoretical Research designs holding promise for such a project are multi-level research designs, enabling the study of macro-level indicators of inequality (such as Gini coefficients or the state of labour market arrangements)



on the one hand, with individual socio-political identity and behaviour on the other, investigating how socio-economic identity mediates the effects of structural indicators on consumer postures toward activist brands.

Integrating Class with Other Identity Dimensions

Future work should explore how socioeconomic identity interacts with gender, race, ethnicity, and political ideology in shaping responses to activism. Intersectional analyses would provide a more nuanced understanding of how different axes of identity combine to influence consumer behaviour.

Longitudinal and Cross-Cultural Studies

Longitudinal research could observe the evolution of class consciousness, SES identity, and reactions to activism, particularly though not necessarily limited to periods of economic hardship or social movement energisation. Comparative research could seek to contrast with other regions with less pronounced class divides and different welfare and corporate involvement in social welfare.

Critical and Participatory Approaches

Qualitative and participatory approaches, such as in-depth interviews and co-creation workshops, have the potential to give voice to consumers from vulnerable or marginalised class positions by delving into how they make sense of and appraise activist brands beyond the surface of survey findings.

Normative and Ethical Analyses

There is room for more normatively oriented research that critically assesses the ethics of brand activism with respect to class. Such an inquiry could explore the extent to which activism engenders material change and when it may contribute to the depoliticisation of structural matters by presenting them as decisions of personal consumption.

II. CONCLUSION

This Critical Thematic Systematic Literature Review has integrated studies of brand activism, social class and consumer behaviour (consumption and purchase intentions), socioeconomic status and identity and identity-based purchase intentions grounded in Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). It has been asserted that social class and class consciousness are still important concepts in understanding consumption, even though marketing discourse tends to focus on more individualised concepts.

The review highlights a major conceptual challenge: how to best integrate class-based notions within models of brand activism and consumer reaction. To this end, it puts forward the idea of socioeconomic identity (SEI) as the key mechanism through which class consciousness influences consumers' processing of activism-oriented messages and their potential translation into supportive or resistant actions. In so doing, it links macro-structures of inequality, meso-level brand strategies, and micro-level identity work in a multilevel perspective. For a scholarly audience, it provides a guide for the next steps in combining theorising stratification, identity, and cultural approaches to consumption. For the corporate world, it signals that successful, ethical brand activism is more than a matter of messaging, but rather one of understanding the class-based experiences of consumers and having company practices that align with the causes they champion.

With global trends of widening income disparity and politicised consumption, the stakes for brand activism will only continue to increase. Formulating robust, class-attuned theories and empirical investigations of socioeconomic identity in practice is thus vital for academic as well as managerial responsibility.

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