

Article

Brand Activism for Sustainable Development Goals: A Comparative Analysis in the Beauty and Personal Care Industry

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Abstract: National policymakers are now faced with the challenge of implementing the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and achieving the scopes envisioned through its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) worldwide. Diversity discrimination and social inequalities often responsible for sociopolitical uncertainty are at the heart of the agenda. Increasingly, corporations are pushed to take a public stance on controversial issues, promoting social improvements through their power to lead social change. This phenomenon is known in the academic literature as brand activism (BA). Many companies, for example, are exposing themselves to the need to cope with the equality gap that still exists on aspects such as gender, race and age, especially those operating in the beauty and personal care industry. The purpose of this paper is to explore how BA is being used as a driver for equality and inclusion, supporting the achievement of the related SDGs 5 and 10. Through a comparative analysis of the two inclusive brands Dove and L'Oréal, this study aims to capture BA under different corporate strategies in terms of stated values, initiatives and digital communication. Both theoretical and managerial perspectives are offered in the study, which emphasizes that different activist approaches can be successful, provided strong and consistent values are adhered to. The findings of this research show that although the two brands use different activist approaches, one more communicative and the other less so, both are successful because they reflect authentic and consistent values that are considered positively by consumers. Therefore, the study questions the dominant view that BA authenticity is linked to marketing, placing greater emphasis on prosocial corporate practices over communication.

Keywords: brand activism; communities; Agenda 2030; diversity; equality; inclusion; beauty and personal care industry; Dove; L'Oréal



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1. Introduction

The introduction in 2015 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the United Nations 2030 Agenda changed the voluntary and philanthropic nature that characterized corporate social responsibility (CSR), soliciting companies to reach certain thresholds towards sustainable development. Moving beyond the scope of the traditional “three-pillar” (Planet–People–Profit) approach to sustainable development [1], the SDGs’ integrated framework (made up of 169 targets and 232 unique indicators), leads businesses from being reactive to stakeholders’ mandates to assuming a proactive commitment, aware of their potential in influencing sustainable development trajectories. Business participation is considered as an imperative proponent in affecting both public and private sector attitudes, as well as mobilizing collective change in markets and societies towards shared well-being [2,3]. Some companies are engaged in socially responsible initiatives related to their businesses or benefiting their communities, while others have advanced their

commitment by supporting controversial causes related, or not, to their core business [2]. In fact, large companies are increasingly taking public positions on controversial issues that plague the planet at both the global and local levels, hoping to sway public opinion. Several brands have played this activist role through their campaigns, such as Nike [4], Patagonia [5], Gillette [6] and Unilever [7], supporting both environmental and controversial prosocial issues such as racial inequality, toxic masculinity, gender minority rights, etc. This phenomenon is recognized in the academic literature as BA. BA has the potential to create ‘win-win-win’ situations that simultaneously benefit companies, consumers and society [8]. Actually, some empirical studies have shown that corporate commitment and investments in activism determine a positive influence on marketing outcomes and guarantee a competitive advantage for the business in terms of purchase intentions, brand equity and corporate reputation [9]. The main reason why BA has become more widespread in recent years is the increased expectations of consumers who, unlike in the past, are beginning to ask not what is being sold but who is selling it [10]. According to Accenture (2019) [11]’s global research, 62% of customers expect companies to take a stand on social issues, the failure of which could mean companies will pay the price; 53% of consumers likely to complain if they are unhappy with the brand’s words or actions, 47% will switch to other brands and 17% may never come back. For this reason, some brands have started to pay more attention to meeting consumers’ expectations, strengthening the consumer–brand relationships through alignment with their values.

Because much of the value of a brand is the result of brand–consumer relationships, at the basis of which is consumer engagement, a brand’s commitment to activist causes can help companies increase their relevance and strengthen their bond with customers [12]. Moving from utilitarian to communal relationships, moreover, supports the construction of a loyal customer base (Fernandes & Moreira, 2019-UK). Social media platforms play a fundamental role in building engaging relationships with consumers and provide an added boost to activist branding initiatives, as a large group of users and consumers become more aware of the impacts of products and corporate practices [13]. Especially younger consumers tend to make purchasing decisions by evaluating products not only for quality, but also by choosing those brands with which they share the same values on delicate issues they hold dear [14], such as global warming, abortion, the gender gap, female empowerment, body shaming, etc. Social movements that have caught on and grown on social media in recent years, such as #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, #BreakTheBias, #TimesUp and #GenerationEquality, among others, demonstrate that the themes of equality and inclusion are particularly alive and felt by consumers. It is no coincidence that these issues are also among the SDGs, whose indicators encompass a broad range of possible aspects to address for a better society. In particular, this study wants to focus on SDG 5, ‘Gender equality’, and SDG 10, ‘Reduce inequality within and among countries’; these are aimed at eliminating gender disparity (SDG 5) and in achieving equality in all aspects (economic, social, racial, age, religious, etc.) (SDG 10), through the promotion of equal opportunities and the social and political inclusion of all. Gender, race, age, religion, profession and physical appearance are just some of the aspects that define the diversities between individuals, which are at the base of most of the sociopolitical conflicts on which public opinion is divided. The term diversity, in fact, concerns how people are different from each other, including how every individual is beautiful in their own way. Furthermore, the issue about self-acceptance is growing strongly, also due to the pressure derived from social media in complying with high beauty standards, which influences the way people perceive themselves [15]. The beauty and personal care industry is one of those sectors in which, more than in others, this problem has been perceived, and companies are consequently engaging both towards consumers and society.

Through an explorative analysis of two international brands—Dove and L’Oréal-Italy—indexed among the most inclusive in the beauty and personal care industry by the 2022 Diversity Brand Index, this paper aims to investigate how BA is used as a driver of equality and inclusion, supporting the achievement of SDGs 5 and 10 of the

UN Agenda 2030. This study focuses on framing BA between the corporate strategies of these two brands, and comparing their activism towards inclusion as expressed through their values, initiatives and digital communication.

2. Conceptual Background

2.1. Pursuing SDGs: From CSR to Brand Activism

In the 2022 report on Sustainable Development Goals, it is highlighted that the encouraging signs of progress before the COVID-19 crisis are now reversing, with the risk of falling behind. Emerging markets and developing economies are experiencing slow recoveries, there were widening disparities within and between countries, and structural and systemic discrimination were intensified. The area of inequalities and disparities is now calling for urgent collective attention, commitment and bold action to boost progress towards a more inclusive society. BA is the way companies respond to this urgent call beyond profit maximization [16] arising from the use of social issues as marketing ploys [17]. As defined by Sarkar and Kotler [18], BA refers to the set of corporate efforts to promote, prevent or guide reforms or states of social, political, economic and/or environmental inertia with the desire to promote improvements in society. It could be intended as a public demonstration of support or opposition to sociopolitical issues that turns into “company actions that advance social good beyond that which is required by law” [19]. In the academic literature, equivalent definitions are also given for the concepts of corporate sociopolitical activism [20] and corporate activism [21]. For instance, Eilert and Nappier Cherup [21] talk about the company’s willingness to take a stand on social, political, economic and environmental issues with the aim of influencing attitudes and behaviors of a target, which can include employees, the marketplace, other organizations or the government, and thus creating social change. Although BA is often linked to political causes, it should not be confused with corporate political activity [22], which is more directly related to engaging in political activities, including campaign contributions, lobbying and donations to political action committees. Corporate political activity is intended to further a specific goal with direct financial payoffs rather than support a social cause.

According to the American Marketing Association [23], ‘BA consists of commercial attempts to promote, obstruct, or direct social, political, economic, and environmental change or stasis with the intent to encourage or impede improvements in society’.

Indeed, BA has the potential to transform markets and society by ‘shaping what is considered right/wrong, good/bad or worthy/unworthy in the industries in which [brands] operate’ [24]. This definition highlights the salient features of the phenomenon, underlying conceptual differences with CSR. CSR initiatives aim to improve the way corporations conduct their business in order to become more responsible, embracing environmental and social objectives considered fair and appropriate by the majority of society (such as combating poverty and climate change). BA, on the other hand, expresses itself on sociopolitical causes on which there is no unanimous consensus in public opinion (immigration, abortion, diversity, etc.). Another difference is that CSR campaigns are usually part of a company’s strategic plan [25], whereas BA actions may be ad hoc or accidental. Given the divisive nature of activism practices, companies risk polarizing opinions among stakeholders [20,26]. Some studies have highlighted the negative effects of BA on consumers [27,28] and investors [20].

Other studies support the idea that being an activist brand requires a paradigm shift in the interpretation of social responsibility, which is no longer marketing-driven (as in cause-related marketing), nor corporate-driven (as in CSR) but purpose-driven [2,18,29]. In fact, purpose is the new brand currency, useful in creating trust among stakeholders and emotional connections with consumers, which are the basis of consumer–brand engagement and which can lead to positive business outcomes, such as purchase intention, brand loyalty and brand commitment [30].

2.2. *The Prerequisites for Brand Activism: Purpose*

Part of the academic literature agrees that BA is linked to the approach of corporate social advocacy (CSA), which refers to adopting a specific stance on a political or social issue [2,29,31–33]. According to Wettstein and Baur [34], the criteria to truly advocate for a cause are (a) consistency—the issue must be consistent with the values of the company; (b) plausibility—the topic chosen must be part of a long-term commitment to specific causes or issues; and (c) authenticity—supporting a cause implies more concrete actions than words. ‘Walking the talk’ represents the prerequisites for authentic BA practices [29,35]. Vredenburg et al. [29] focus on the notion of authenticity, which includes brand purpose, values, messaging and business practices that reinforce and support each other. According to these authors, the authenticity of BA is determined by the congruence of three key brand characteristics: (1) its purpose and core values as a reflection of employees, brand promise and consideration of stakeholder needs and desires, and how these are articulated and understood in the marketplace; (2) the nature of the messages and content disseminated through brand vehicles, traditional media vehicles and peer-to-peer and social media vehicles/channels; and (3) prosocial corporate practices and how key stakeholders catalog, represent and interpret these practices in the marketplace. In contrast, a misalignment between the value goal (purpose) and actions taken will negatively impact brand equity and result in wokewashing, which is an example of inauthentic BA [29,32].

Brand activism thus offers consumers the opportunity to assess the level of similarity with their brand in terms of the principles and values that lead them to support or not support a cause. Authenticity is, therefore, fundamental in achieving the consumer–brand identification that is likely to motivate consumers to positively evaluate the brand [36].

2.3. *The Prerequisites for Brand Activism: Initiatives*

Demonstrating a real commitment can be very difficult. In fact, it is not sufficient to publicly defend a cause, nor is it convenient. Brands that take a stand, in fact, often also experience greater scrutiny of their actions [37]. An activist brand has to engage in highly visible (and therefore possibly more forceful) initiatives that could lead to more rapid change [21] and that actively pursue the common good [18]. Therefore, if a brand supports diversity and racial equality, this value must be reflected in the composition of its workforce. In an institutional environment where the BA is aimed at changing attitudes and behavior in order to resolve an issue, companies can implement several initiatives aimed at different institutional actors with the goal of creating pressure and entailing change by influencing these actors. Briscoe and Gupta [38] distinguish different activist influence tactics in this regard: persuasive tactics are intended to convince targets of BA about the merits of a cause. Instead, disruptive tactics are geared towards creating material or reputational damage through the forms of protests or boycotts. Vredenburg et al. [29] construct an interesting theoretical typology of BA in which the different forms of BA are distinguished in terms of the adoption of activist marketing messages (high to low) and a brand’s use of prosocial corporate practices in support of a sociopolitical cause (high to low). In particular, the typology identifies four types of BA: absence of BA (low-low), silent BA (low-high), authentic BA (high-high) and inauthentic BA (high-low).

2.4. *The Prerequisites for Brand Activism: Communication*

From the academic literature, it emerges that BA manifests itself mainly through communication initiatives such as cause-related advertising and campaigns [14]. Nowadays, communicating and engaging in activism are empowered by social media [39]. These channels provide a space for political and social discussion in which each user can freely express their personal opinions, facilitating the development of the necessary collective identity to recruit and mobilize people in favor of the same cause [40,41]. The possibilities of engagement offered by social media platforms configure the opportunity to demonstrate the authenticity of the activist brand’s purpose [35]. In fact, through practices of involvement, the brand can nurture the authenticity of its purpose by demonstrating its

closeness to the community, noticing its concerns and nurturing relationships with the intention of generating social participation in an evident and concrete way [42]. Moreover, by exploiting the possibility of using multiple social media platforms, the activist brand can also differentiate its communication to meet all the transparency requirements necessary to testify to its work [43]; for example, through corporate blogs and corporate websites, the activist brand can provide concrete evidence of its actions and can focus on the narration of its principles and values, also making them verifiable by publishing proof of its work.

2.5. Brand Activism for Inclusion

Kotler and Sarkar [44] identify six subcategories of brand advertising: social, legal, business, economic, environmental and political activism. Social activism is one of the most prone forms of activism, and in fact most of the academic contributions on the subject concern social issues, such as equality and gender, race and LGBTQ+ [45]. This is also the field where brands have the potential to make a difference by representing historically underrepresented and oppressed individuals as a means of virtue signalling, rather than explicitly calling out specific and overlapping social injustices [46]. Indeed, brands have always been a key cultural force in establishing hegemonic cultural identities and conditioning the identities of individuals [47]. As also argued by Fournier and Alvarez (2019) [48], brands also acquire cultural significance through the operation of social identity processes. By producing representations of ethnicity and gender that break with stereotypes, brands can create a culture that is more representative of modern society, increasing social acceptance [49]. Globally, the stereotype of the white, heterosexual, employed, model parent customer does not reflect the coexisting heterogeneity of consumer characteristics, values, beliefs, experiences and expectations. In this sense, it is appropriate to believe that BA on the social front can strongly connect to inclusive marketing [50]. It means intercepting all types of consumers with the same due respect, so that everyone can potentially feel part of the audience to which the brand is aimed [51,52]. Inclusive marketing shares the communicative approach with BA: inclusive communication must in fact leverage empathy to fully understand its audience and represent it in all its nuances; shades inherent in personality and preferences can no longer be overlooked but must instead be contemplated and valued; and diversity for which the brand decides to expose itself must be in line with the principles of the BA.

3. Materials and Methods

According to the qualitative exploratory method, this research examines how the BA can contribute to diversity, equity and inclusion within a company's strategies. Two case studies in the beauty and personal care industry were analyzed from a critical comparative perspective in terms of inclusive values, initiatives and digital communication campaigns.

3.1. Multiple-Case Studies Method

As argued by Yin [53], the case study is an appropriate research methodology when (a) the goal of the study is to answer 'how' and 'why' questions; (b) the researcher may not manipulate the behavior of people involved in the study; and (c) the researcher wants to cover contextual conditions because of a belief that they are relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. According to Baxter and Jack [54], the case study method helps to 'analyze' the difference between organizations. This method, in fact, 'explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information . . . and reports a case description and case themes' [55]. This study uses a multiple-case-studies approach as it is considered stronger and more reliable and it helps to create more convincing conclusions, grounded in several sources of empirical evidence [56].

It is possible to use multiple case studies to conduct a comparative review to verify the existence of similar or conflicting results in the same context [53]. In this way the

researchers also can provide the literature with important implications from these contrasts and similarities [57].

3.2. Case Studies Selection and Presentation

The two selected cases for this study are the brands Dove and L'Oréal. The two brands were shortlisted from the 2022 Diversity Brand Index as they emerged as the most inclusive in consumer perceptions of the beauty and personal care industry. Consumers around the world spend over \$330 billion a year on fragrances, cosmetics and toiletries [58]. The global beauty business pervades our lives, influencing how we perceive ourselves and what it means to be beautiful. The use of cosmetics has historically been a way for women to reinvent themselves and transform, and to articulate different aspects of themselves. For these reasons, this sector was considered suitable to investigate the activist efforts of brands in the pursuit of SDGs 5 and 10, which are the focus of this study. In addition, the choice of these two brands was supported by the fact that they share the same target market, longevity in the market and above all, a long-standing commitment to social responsibility.

Founded in the United States, the Dove brand, owned by Unilever Group, is today considered not only one of the 50 strongest cosmetic brands in the world at a financial level, but also one of the 30 meaningful brands globally that contribute most to the well-being of individuals, communities and the environment. This positioning in the market is the result of a business and marketing approach (especially digital marketing) with a strong activist influence, of which Dove was a pioneer. In fact, it has established and strengthened a business philosophy completely focused on favoring the consumer and society, rather than corporate profit.

L'Oréal is a French company founded in 1909 by Eugène Schueller. Initially, it focused on the production of hair colorants, but over time it expanded its offerings to include beauty products and cosmetics. Today, L'Oréal is one of the world's largest manufacturers of beauty products and cosmetics, with well-known brands such as Maybelline, Lancôme and Kiehl's. For several years, Global RepTrak has recognized L'Oréal as one of the top 100 most reputable companies for its long-standing reputation. In fact, as a global leader in the industry, L'Oréal's mission is to protect the beauty of the planet and contribute to the well-being of its employees and the communities with which it engages.

3.3. Measures, Data Sources and Analysis

The key stage of the multiple-case analysis is the comparison of cases, or cross-case analysis. This study follows the three-track procedure of Stake [59], which can be sequential processes or can be self-contained. The first track, which maintains the maximum level of situational detail, identifies the themes to be traced in each of the cases. The second track passes from the themes to the identification of the factors that characterize each theme. The third track concerns cross-analysis, which must be based on a descriptive matrix to compare cases on factors.

This procedure was conducted by three researchers independently to ensure data triangulation [60]. The three researchers, two from the marketing area and one from the communication area, are mainly trained in qualitative research methodologies and have a predominantly positivist approach to analysis [61,62]. The themes were identified in the key elements of BA that emerged from the literature review: values, initiatives and communication. These three themes have been sought, especially in the context of social activism aimed at inclusion. Related building blocks (factors) were identified for each theme by mutual agreement of researchers with intercoder reliability = 0.82 [63].

The factors of the theme 'values' are:

1. Brand purpose, which relates to the aims, prospects and premises that focus the brand's contribution to wider public interest and societal goals [64,65]; and
2. Inclusive common starting points (or core themes), which are strategic keywords that relate to specific inclusive values, strengths and ethical principles on which the

corporate culture is based and which, by permeating the corporate vision, act as inspiration for communications to the various stakeholders [66].

The factors of the theme ‘initiatives’ are:

1. Causes, which are intended as the social movement to which the brand is committed and prepared to defend or advocate;
2. Target, which is understood as the particular group of people interested in the cause and to whom the related BA initiatives are addressed;
3. Projects, which are considered to be the planned prosocial corporate practices implemented to achieve the brand purpose and/or support the causes; and
4. Collaborations, which are intended as the long-term partnership with other entities (NGOs, associations, enterprises, etc.) established to carry out the initiatives.

The factors of the theme ‘communication’ are:

1. Campaigns, referring to actions and activities aimed at promoting inclusive causes and projects by spreading related messages during a period of time;
2. Topics that are the subjects of the campaign; and
3. Social media, which is activated to convey the campaigns’ messages.

These factors’ data were retrieved from different data sources: corporate websites, corporate non-financial reports and official brands’ social media accounts.

4. Results

Table 1 presents the results of the cross-analysis of the cases. This section shows the main similarities and contrasts between the brands that emerged from the comparison of the three macro sections (themes): values, initiatives and communication.

Table 1. The BA comparison matrix of the brands Dove and L’Oréal.

BA Themes	Themes’ Factors	Dove	L’Oréal
Values	Brand purpose	‘Let’s change beauty. We believe beauty should be a source of confidence, and not anxiety. That’s why we are here to help women everywhere develop a positive relationship with the way they look, helping them raise their self-esteem and realise their full potential.’	‘Create the beauty that moves the world. Our goal is to offer each and every person around the world the best of beauty in terms of quality, efficacy, safety, sincerity and responsibility to satisfy all beauty needs and desires in their infinite diversity.’
	Common starting points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Beauty – Empowerment – Self-confidence – Self-care – Body positivity – Self-esteem – Youth – Expertise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Beauty – Empowerment – Self-confidence – Self-care – Gender equality – Feminine – Feminist – Sisterhood
Initiatives	Causes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Increasing women’s self-esteem – Fighting manipulation on social media – Combating stereotypes associated with beauty – Fighting discrimination (e.g., bullying) and racism (e.g., related to hair) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Training people to fight street harassment – Respecting human rights – Supporting highly vulnerable women – Research and innovation for beauty in all its diversity – Fighting poverty, achieving living wages for all – Open for business (coalition), promoting LGBTQIA+ rights globally

Table 1. Cont.

BA Themes	Themes' Factors	Dove	L'Oréal
	Target	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Women – Young girls – Community – Children – Consumers – Non-binary people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Women – Employees – Young people – LGBTQIA+ community – Diverse consumers
Initiatives	Projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (A) Self-esteem: helping young people overcome body image issues and fulfill their potential by building positive body confidence and self-esteem (B) Show us: building a collection of 10,000+ images that offer a more inclusive vision of beauty for all media and advertisers to use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (A) Stand Up: to raise awareness about street harassment and training people to help someone who is being harassed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Share & Care: to ensure that all employees worldwide have access to the best social protection, health care and well-being at work – The L'Oréal Fund for Women: to actively contribute to the resilience of women and girls by funding social and professional inclusion projects and fighting for equal access to education – L'Oréal's Mutual Ethical Commitment Letter – L'Oréal Speak Up: to encourage employees to openly report unethical behavior within the company (whistle-blowing) using a dedicated web platform – L'Oreal for Youth: to provide young people with various work opportunities for their first professional step and concrete actions to boost their employability – OUT@L'Oréal, L'Oréal USA's LGBTQIA+ think tank: to foster an inclusive employee environment and drive awareness and recognition across the community – Beauty for a Better Life program: to provide people with beauty and wellness treatments – Opération Sourire: to help fund reconstructive and plastic surgery for women and children in Asia and Africa – L'Oreal Italia "For women in science": to encourage the further training of young Italian female researchers

Table 1. Cont.

BA Themes	Themes' Factors	Dove	L'Oréal
Initiatives	Collaborations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The World Association of Girl Guides and Girls Scout (WAGGS) – The Center of Appearance Research (CAR) – Women's Dermatologic Society (WDS) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – NGO * Hollaback – Danish Institute for Human Rights – Fair Wage Network – Shift – Open For Business – Médecins du Monde – UNESCO
		<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Project (A)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - (1) #girlcollective - (2) #nodigitaldistortion - (2) #theselfietalk - (2) #reverseselfie - (3) #detoxyourfeed - (4) #womengettold - (5) #beconfidentgirl - (6) #hourwithher <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Project (B)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - (7) #showus - (8) Beauty portrait 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Project (A)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">(5) #westandup</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Not linked to any project</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - (2) #worthit - (3) #AllLoveIsWorthIt - (4) Your Skin, Your Story - (5) «This is an ad for men» - (6) It takes boldness to be nude (China)
Communication	Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Building body confidence and challenging beauty stereotypes (2) Always portray women as they are in real life—and never using the manipulated, unachievable images of 'perfect' beauty created by image distortion (3) Help every young person detoxify their social media feeds today (4) Fighting statements and clichés towards women (5) Helping a girl that you know believe in herself and her body (6) Raising a confident child (7) Representing a more inclusive vision of beauty (8) Collecting bold, unique perspectives and real, inspirational stories from women around the world, and asking the question—what does beauty mean to you? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Support the movement 'Stand Up' against harassment in public places (2) Promoting the value and empowerment of women (3) Highlighting LGBTQIA+ people, including employees and friends of the brand so they can express themselves and tell their stories using the related hashtag (4) Celebrates the intrinsic worth and beauty of everyone (5) Communicate a specific message to society that women in leadership positions are valuable to the business (6) Make Chinese women feel comfortable in their own skin
		Social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Facebook – Instagram – Twitter – YouTube – TikTok

* NGO means non-governmental organization.

4.1. Comparative Analysis on the Theme 'Values'

The brand purpose of Dove is as follows: 'Let's change beauty. We believe beauty should be a source of confidence, and not anxiety. That's why we are here to help women everywhere develop a positive relationship with the way they look, helping them raise their self-esteem and realise their full potential'. The brand purpose of L'Oréal is as follows:

‘Create the beauty that moves the world. Our goal is to offer each and every person around the world the best of beauty in terms of quality, efficacy, safety, sincerity and responsibility to satisfy all beauty needs and desires in their infinite diversity’. Thus, both Dove and L’Oréal have at the heart of their purposes the concept of beauty, to be read as a source of confidence, especially for women. Some of the common starting points detected are the same, such as ‘empowerment’, ‘self-confidence’, ‘self-care’ and obviously ‘beauty’. Dove pushes a lot on the concept of ‘authentic beauty’, to be valued in its uniqueness and diversity, fighting unrealistic standards of beauty. L’Oréal, on the other hand, with the expression ‘best of beauty’ intends to pursue an inclusive, responsible, innovative beauty, focusing strongly on the quality, efficacy and safety of its products. The different core themes help us understand the different approaches to the activism of the two brands. The keywords ‘body positivity’, ‘self-esteem’, ‘youth’ and ‘expertise’ tracked in Dove emphasize the brand’s willingness to be active towards young women by supporting them to grow in harmonious relationship with their bodies. As for the keywords that characterize L’Oréal, however, the following can be noted: ‘gender equality’, ‘feminine/feminist’ and ‘sisterhood’, indicating greater activism in defending and enhancing the role of women in society that are all encompassed, for 50 years, in the militant tagline (as they defined it) ‘you’re worth it’.

4.2. Comparative Analysis on the Theme ‘Initiatives’

The social causes on which the two brands take a stand also reflect the different nature of their activism. In fact, Dove is committed to three main fronts, namely: boosting young women’s self-esteem; eliminating beauty stereotypes by contrasting the manipulation conveyed by social media; and fighting racial discrimination and (cyber)bullying. On its side, however, L’Oréal is more committed to the following causes: respecting human rights and gender equality; eradicating poverty; supporting highly vulnerable women; and training people to fight street harassment. For Dove, the Self-Esteem Project represents the pivotal initiative that incorporates within it most of the activities related to the aforementioned causes. Instead, L’Oréal has multiple active projects with different purposes often related to women’s personal and professional fulfillment. Both brands have partnered with many associations and NGOs to pursue activist causes.

4.3. Comparative Analysis on the Theme ‘Communication’

The difference between the two brands emerges in the approach of activist digital communication practices. Dove frequently launches campaigns on social media marked by different hashtags always focused on the concepts of self-esteem, self-confidence and body positivity. The delivery of the campaigns involves multiple social networks such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, among the main ones. L’Oréal, on the other hand, has fewer social media campaigns focused on inclusive topics not directly attributable to the activated projects, as the brand tends to enclose all posts within the single common thread #worthit. The only campaign immediately traceable to one of the projects is #we-standup. By delving into digital communication practices in a more analytical way, the researchers observed another important difference. For Dove, the brand posts to social media almost daily; is diversified in the types of content posted; and each post or story can be traced back to one of the ongoing activist communication campaigns. Compared to this communication strategy, which emphasizes inclusivity overwhelmingly, there are very few commercial messages. The strategy of Dove is to rely heavily on content creators to generate engagement and a sense of belonging in its community. In particular, re-sharing user-generated content (UGC) allows its consumers to feel themselves to be brand advocates and organically increase the user base of the brand’s official social media profiles. As for the testimonials chosen to represent the brand, Dove does not involve famous faces, but more ‘real people’, or commoners. UGCs are strongly emphasized: most of the product images on Instagram, for example, are shots of influencers that are repurposed through sharing. In addition, Dove chooses to work with a range of influencers, often drawn from

its own community, with different skin types, body shapes and cultural backgrounds, and allows them to freely choose how to present products. In other words, Dove relies on the power of spontaneous and credible peer-to-peer recommendations. All these actions only enhance the authenticity of the brand which remains, thus, constantly true to its idea of beauty and consistent with the messages of its communication. In contrast, L'Oréal's social media content is less explicitly focused on issues of inclusion. Despite its deep activist commitment to the causes of inclusivity and multiple projects, L'Oréal's communication is much more marketing-oriented and product-focused. This is in line with the fact that its social media communication is centralized and that the brand's testimonials are always given by models, influencers and known people.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the Dove and L'Oréal case studies offered interesting insights into BA and the role this approach can play in relation to SDG 5 and SDG 10. At first glance, BA seems to be a practice structured around medium- to long-term initiatives and communications as opposed to just a 'spot' activity. These two examples demonstrate that CSR can translate into an ongoing activist commitment that is fueled by important new challenges for change instead of being interrupted by a single success (or failure). Over the years, Dove and L'Oréal have pursued their purpose by addressing and supporting the insecurities of women, the frailties of younger people, the fears of minorities and so much more, with a series of initiatives that have been able to create synergistic and emotionally engaging experiences. It is clear from this choice that both want to position themselves as thought leaders on inclusion, starting with rethinking beauty, which, nowadays, is becoming increasingly complex and plural. The difference that can be traced is that Dove activism manifests in a more educational and divulging approach as a guide for young girls, creating initiatives to this end based on synergistic relationships with parents and educators. L'Oréal, on the other hand, takes a more purely activist, combative approach, declaring itself explicitly feminist and aiming to create empowerment and incentivize the mobilization of women.

What is further profoundly different is the use of social media channels for causes' advocacy. These represent essential tools that can engage consumers and allow them to connect and share ideas and opinions with like-minded individuals and brands in general [67,68]. In doing so, Dove has strategically facilitated consumer participation on digital platforms and empowered them through co-creating ownership of brand value [69]. Dove has demonstrated its ability to adapt to new digital logics and take advantage of emerging trends on social media platforms (such as TikTok). As a result, the brand has been able to leverage online channels to their full potential in recent years, typically tailoring its communication campaigns to a young, socially savvy audience in line with studies that have argued the importance of social media in the rise of BA [23]. Consistent with its values, many times Dove has taken a critical stance on the misuse of social media, arguing that these platforms should not be avoided but improved especially in relation to the distorted and utopian view they offer of the concept of beauty (e.g., campaigns such as #nodigitaldistortion, #detoxyourfeed, #reverseseflie). Considering that most beauty products are designed to hide or correct personal imperfections, this is a rather courageous value choice. Conversely, L'Oréal uses social media primarily for promotion and less for activism, information or advocacy. L'Oréal's activism is thus found more in its actions than in its communications. In fact, its inclusive social media campaigns do not promote specific BA initiatives but appear more to be inclusive marketing practices.

According to the typology raised in the literature by Vredenburg et al. [29], therefore, we can consider Dove as an authentic brand activist, with a high level of adoption of prosocial corporate practices and a corresponding high level of activist marketing messages, and L'Oréal as a silent brand activist, with a high level of adoption of prosocial corporate practices and a low level of activist marketing messages.

Although both brands are working on long-term integrated prosocial corporate practices in their modus operandi and consistently with their purpose and values, L'Oréal is more likely to operate quietly behind the scenes. Conversely, Dove's values-driven messaging and practices are in sync with its progressive social change.

The results of this comparative analysis show that the two brands take activist stances and communicate this to their consumers, albeit in different ways, consistent with corporate practices, considering the importance of the social variable even in their own corporate history. Relating the understanding of BA with a purely utilitarian view, our case studies show that voluntary activist engagement not solicited by financial return underlies positive results as both brands position themselves as market leaders with wide public acceptance. However, although according to the Vredenburg et al.'s [29] typology, L'Oréal could benefit more from publicizing its actions through marketing messaging in order to further consolidate its positive brand equity, both cases analysis lead us to believe that authenticity should be linked more to engagement in prosocial initiatives than in marketing communications. In their conception of silent activism, which differs from authentic activism, Vradenburg et al. [29] seem to want to emphasize that for authenticity to be perceived, activist commitment must necessarily be communicated to the public. However, the unquestionable success of the L'Oréal brand in the market demonstrates that being silent does not detract from the authenticity of the brand. Therefore, both cases analyzed lead to the view that authenticity should be sought and read moreover in the consistency between values and initiatives beyond communications. This consideration is in line with the work of Stanley (2020) [70], who associates the consistency between activist stances and corporate practices with consumers' perceptions of authenticity, credibility and trust. Finally, this work contributes to the BA debate and stands as a breakpoint from contemporary interdisciplinary conversations that understand BA predominantly as a means to achieve economic–financial goals [17] and about 'wokewashing' [29,46,71,72].

6. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

This paper aimed to explore how the BA within a company's strategies is addressed to pursue SDGs. This comparative analysis of the two case studies has both theoretical and managerial implications. From the two case studies analyzed, it can be hypothesized that one of the critical variables for successful, shared and consumer-supported activism is authenticity of purpose. A brand that is perceived as authentic in its values, its stance on an issue, its corporate practices and its history is most likely to be viewed positively by consumers because it is seen as credible. In addition to authenticity, which in fact is directly related to the reputation a company enjoys, in order to generate a positive response from its target audience, there must also be full consistency between the values promoted by the brand and the social norms, beliefs and ethics of its consumers [73]. Furthermore, considering BA from the theoretical standpoint, this study demonstrates that a standardized approach cannot be developed at the moment, and even pursuing it would be inappropriate, since each brand must remain true to itself. The results of this study suggest that for BA management, the value foundation and commitment to initiatives is what really matters, regardless of the approach to practices. Activism should not be understood as a trend nor undertaken in response to institutional pressures, but should be based on a philosophy consistent with corporate identity. Moreover, the difference at the communicative level between the two brands resizes the role of marketing in BA.

Considering that this research is vertically focused on the beauty and personal care industry, other studies in different fields should be conducted to confirm the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, this study was limited to the analysis of BA data obtained from the digital environment (corporate websites, non-financial reports and social media). However, BA should be studied from a perspective that also integrates offline data. Since this is an exploratory–qualitative study, future research is needed to deepen the understanding of the phenomenon of BA with mixed methodologies. In order to determine if one approach is more effective than the other, it might be interesting to investigate the perceptions of target

consumers regarding BA practices. In conclusion, it would be interesting to investigate the impact of BA on profit, brand equity and corporate reputation, thus understanding how the success or failure of social media activism campaigns can be measured.

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