



26 EISIC – 2023

University activism: a new dimension of the university public engagement?

Antonella Cammarota

Department of Law, Economics, Management and Quantitative Methods (DEMM)
University of Sannio, Italy
Email cammarota@unisannio.it (*corresponding author*)

Francesca Avallone

Department of Law, Economics, Management and Quantitative Methods (DEMM)
University of Sannio, Italy
Email f.avallone@studenti.unisannio.it

Vittoria Marino

Department of Law, Economics, Management and Quantitative Methods (DEMM)
University of Sannio, Italy
Email vmarino@unisannio.it

Riccardo Resciniti

Department of Law, Economics, Management and Quantitative Methods (DEMM)
University of Sannio, Italy
Email resciniti@unisannio.it

Abstract

Purpose. This study aims to provide a first conceptualization of *university activism* by understanding its dimensions, implementation, communication, involved actors, target audience, socio-economic outcomes, and impacts on universities.

Methodology. We performed a content analysis of fifty high-ranked American universities' websites to identify explanatory factors of the phenomenon.

Findings. Findings show a growing trend of university activism implemented through three strategies: *dissemination, promotion, and direct action*. The results highlight a notable presence of activism communicated on universities' websites with a continuous exchange between involved actors and internal/external target groups. Positive outcomes seem to result from this phenomenon for both the community and the university itself, communicated often in reports and/or at events during that future objectives are also announced.

Research implications/limitations. This study can be a first guide for both scholars in developing future research and universities desiring to play a social role in society by starting to engage in activism. Additionally, limitations were provided.

Originality/Value. Based on the public engagement and brand activism literature, the current research appears to be the first conceptualization of university activism by providing specifically a definition, explanation, and mapping of the phenomenon.

Keywords Public Engagement · University Activism · Brand Activism · Social Impact · Higher Education

1. Introduction

In recent years, the debate on the role of the university institution in contemporary society has reached unprecedented levels of intensity and urgency (Pee & Vululleh, 2020). The growing sociopolitical challenges affect the relationships between society and academia, research and understanding of its outcomes, job market skill requirements, and the ability to learn and teach innovatively, resulting in a broad discussion on the topic (Lo Presti & Marino, 2020). Universities need to adjust to the ever-changing landscape by tackling these urgent questions, in fact, they seem to have a crucial role in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established in the 2030 Agenda.

According to Dewey (1977), universities are responsible for actively engaging with society and advocating for democratic ideals in education. This involves integrating the academic and practical aspects, where students actively participate in real-world problem-solving through direct actions (Bacon & Sloam, 2010). This idea aligns with the *Third Mission* concept, which emphasizes universities' crucial role as democratic institutions that strive to improve society.

As Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff (1998) highlighted, universities experienced a significant change in their missions during the 1980s by introducing a Third Mission focused on external service. This shift has been referred to as the "second academic revolution" and continues to shape their role in civil society. The third mission acknowledges universities' broader role by creating a dialogue between science and society to generate socio-economic advantages (Predazzi, 2012; Thorn & Soo, 2006) and engaging all stakeholders (Marino et al., 2019). Hence, *University Public Engagement* drives societal transformation and collaboration, integrating academia, industry, and government (Marino & Lo Presti, 2020) by aligning the third mission with traditional goals (Cognetti, 2013). Its main dimensions include public access, student/faculty engagement, economic regeneration, and partnerships (Hart & Northmore, 2011).

According to Nussbaum (2010), universities are crucial in promoting democratic citizenship, fostering capabilities, and addressing societal challenges; they appear to be the key element to reaching social justice and equality while also promoting opportunities for growth and improvement within communities and society (Gluchman, 2018). More and more often, universities begin to be deeply committed to supporting sociopolitical causes and contributing to enhancing the wellbeing not only of the academic community but also of the local community. Their "new role" appears to be very similar to the phenomenon of *brand activism*, namely, brands that decide to publicly support specific sociopolitical issues through actions and/or declarations (Bhagwat et al., 2020) to generate improvements for society (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

Consequently, the purpose of this study is to investigate the still unexplored and new phenomenon of *university activism* by attempting to understand "whether" and "how" universities engage in social, political, economic and environmental causes by beginning to be a voice in society (Barnett, 2021) capable of generating a substantial impact and involving all stakeholders.

Based on these premises, the following research questions guided this analysis:

- R1. How can university activism be defined?*
- R2. How do universities implement activism?*
- R3. Who are the actors involved in this activist commitment?*
- R4. To whom is the university activism addressed?*
- R5. What are the social and economic goals of this new strategy?*
- R6. What impacts could this strategy have on the university itself?*

These research questions aim to map the potential dimensions of university activism, its implementation strategies, the actors involved, the target audiences, the possible social and economic purposes, and the potential impacts on the university itself.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 University Public Engagement

University Public Engagement is a wide range of initiatives to engage stakeholders (Marino & Lo Presti, 2020). The National Coordinating Center for Public Engagement defines it as “the myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public. Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit” (National Coordinating Center for Public Engagement, 2010).

From this standpoint, the Triple Helix Model highlights the importance of the collaborative relationship between universities, industry, and government (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). This model recognizes universities as crucial players in innovation, knowledge exchange, and economic and social growth. Universities engage with external stakeholders to build a dynamic environment that encourages knowledge sharing, research collaboration, and practical solutions to societal challenges.

The symbiotic relationship between higher education and the community can offer a valuable opportunity for an active role of universities by creating a mutually beneficial relationship where universities can get a better understanding of societal needs developing actions and programs that can benefit both the university and the local community (Watermeyer & Lewis, 2018).

As highlighted by Lo Presti et al. (2021), public engagement strategies can have a substantial influence on the success of the third mission, positively impacting the economic social and cultural development of surrounding communities (Cognetti, 2013).

From this point of view, in the early 1990s, the US government established several federal grant programs to facilitate campus partnerships and encourage colleges and universities to engage more fully in addressing local societal issues. These programs have encouraged the university’s commitment to engaging communities (Furco, 2010). Besides, Kerr (2001) introduced the concept of “multiversity” to highlight the cooperative role of universities in developing scientific knowledge alongside their respective communities.

Based on the Triple Helix Model (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000), a university represents a natural incubator of scientific knowledge operating within a system of actors such as governmental institutions, associations, non-profit organizations, and the private sector through partnerships of mutual exchange (Bencardino & Napolitano, 2011; Slowey, 2003). Therefore, universities have integrated traditional missions, teaching, and research, with the Third Mission (Urdari et al., 2017; Abreu et al., 2016), including innovation, technology transfer, lifelong learning, and public involvement (Boffo et al., 2015).

However, public engagement appears to be still a pillar that needs to be established, especially compared to the other sections of the third mission researchers are converging on the creation of a clear definition and description of the construct’s dimensions (Marino & Lo Presti, 2020; Hart & Northmore, 2011).

The framework proposed by Hart and Northmore (2011) encompasses seven dimensions integral to public engagement in universities: public access to facilities, public access to knowledge, student engagement, faculty engagement, widening participation, encouraging economic regeneration and enterprise, institutional relationship, and partnership building. Each of these dimensions addresses a goal for a particular group of stakeholders, including students, administrative staff, teachers, and potential users like public institutions and professionals (Marino & Lo Presti, 2020).

To conclude, social good is entering the mainstream (Vredenburg et al., 2020), and universities, being one of the primary social actors (Ali et al., 2021), seem to have embraced the commitment by implementing actions, programs and goals similar to those of activist brands. Additionally, the activist strategy appears to be ideally in line with the purposes of university public engagement and the third mission; this could explain the growing interest of higher education in activism.

2.2. Brand Activism

The social demand towards firms (Chandy et al., 2021; Mende & Scott, 2021) has pushed them to take an increasing number of social responsibilities, even frequently stepping into the complicated world of activism to achieve both economic and social goals (Pasirayi et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023).

Businesses are frequently referred to as “social actors” or “citizens” (Carroll, 1979), responsible for the surrounding community in which they operate, and whose goal should be to generate shared value (Porter & Kramer, 2011). As a result of these rising expectations, stakeholders began to believe that corporate social responsibility (CSR) was no longer sufficient as a company’s social engagement but rather that their role

should be even more decisive and profound in contemporary polarized society (Weber et al., 2023; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018), leading them to begin to compete also in the political sphere (Korschun et al., 2020).

Based on these premises, many scholars have begun to talk about *brand activism* (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018), to describe brands that through public demonstrations of statements and/or actions support or oppose specific controversial sociopolitical issues (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020) such as gender, immigration, police brutality, gun control, environmental issues, abortion, LGBTQIA + or racism (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Chatterji & Toffel, 2019). Brand activism takes place in advertising, social media, public relations, and other overt forms of expression (Korschun, 2021).

As argued by Sarkar & Kotler (2018), this phenomenon can be considered as a progression of CSR and defined as “business efforts to promote, prevent or direct social, political, economic and/or environmental reforms or stagnations with the desire to promote or prevent improvements in society” (p. 468).

Considered a new marketing strategy (Shoenberger et al., 2021), a positioning strategy (Sibai et al., 2021), and an intersection between marketing and politics (Jung & Mittal, 2020), it is definitely a phenomenon that is changing in-depth the entire brand management (Andersen & Johansen, 2023). This trend appears to be in line with the growing consumer expectations towards the social role of companies (Mukherjee & Althuisen 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020), but also it seems to derive from a mistrust of institutions often considered unable or lacking the necessary resources to address the urgent challenges of modern society (Radanielina Hita & Grégoire, 2023).

Brand activism has several goals, being a marketing strategy, it is aimed at optimizing the economic value while also achieving the social one. However, the main purpose is to create a change in society (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020), both by putting pressure on policymakers and institutions (Den Hond & De Bakker.), and by positively affecting consumer attitudes and behaviors (Weber et al., 2023).

As a result, activist brands seem to be characterized by their engagement in the societal agenda by offering a critical voice to dominant cultural norms and social conventions, representing alternative visions and ideas of a better society, and acting disruptively to create social change (Andersen & Johansen, 2023).

Nevertheless, brand activism is an extremely risky strategy (Bhagwat et al., 2020) and more research is needed to understand its effects on business and society (Weber et al., 2023). Since public opinion on critical socio-political problems is frequently divided and non-homogeneous, taking a stand on these issues can be risky and may result in a backlash against the brand’s active stance (Johnson et al., 2022). Consumer reactions to brand activism are still unpredictable and polarized (Guha & Korschun, 2023) with potential reputational and economic-financial damages (Vredenburg et al., 2020). In fact, the lack of authenticity in the brand’s activist stand frequently causes consumers, and generally, stakeholders, to react negatively to brand activism. To date, researchers agree that authenticity is the key factor of successful brand activism (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Ahmad et al., 2022; Zhou & Dong, 2022). As underpinned by Vredenburg et al. (2020), authentic brand activism results firstly from a congruence between corporate practice and online and offline brand communication; secondly, from an alignment between the brand’s values, purpose, and promises made to its stakeholders with respect to the activist position it adopts.

2.3. University Activism

Activists can be defined as individuals who have strong social and ethical motivations that drive them to take action through campaigns, protests or other efforts to create a change in society (Eilert & Cherup Nappier, 2020) by seeking to exploit the power of persuasion (Macfarlane, 2021) to influence the behaviour of people (Weber et al., 2021) and to put pressure on policymakers and institutions (Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007). Recently, companies (Andersen & Johansen, 2023), nonprofit organizations (Lee et al., 2023), and universities (Barnett, 2021) have started to act as activists in the struggle for controversial sociopolitical issues, on which public opinion is frequently fragmented (Guha & Korschun, 2023). Particularly, American universities have recently significantly increased their engagement in sustainable and social practices (Hudler et al., 2021), becoming living laboratories (Marans & Callewaert, 2017; Evans et al., 2015) for addressing social good (Vredenburg et al., 2020). These initiatives are often referred to as *win-win strategies* since they can benefit the university as well as the local community through cost savings, a greater chance of collecting donations and attracting students (Hudler et al., 2021).

However, the legitimacy of universities to play a social role seems to be defined by their ability to encourage active stakeholder engagement, understand relevant issues and act consistently with their vision and mission

(Heath & Waymer, 2021; Rim et al., 2020). Nonetheless, it seems that universities are mainly focusing on environmental and economic issues while largely ignoring social issues (Hudler et al., 2021).

This has generated strong criticism defining them as merely for-profit institutions (Ball 2015; 2012; Giroux, 2005) which forget their crucial role in society (Ali et al., 2021). Nowadays, individuals are increasingly sensitive to sociopolitical issues and have extremely high expectations towards companies and other powerful stakeholders (Maks-Solomon & Drewry, 2020), such as universities (Chen & Vanclay, 2021) by demanding them to also pursue a social mission, which policymakers and, in general, institutions are no longer unable or unwilling to tackle (Radanielina Hita & Grégoire, 2023).

Based on these growing expectations, the demands towards universities are also changing, they can no longer limit themselves only to “do well by doing good” (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988) through actions of social responsibility (Ali et al., 2021), but they should drive the change, and above all, create a revolution in society (Eilert & Cherup Nappier, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). From this perspective, universities appear to have the legitimacy to take action, in fact, the academic voice is often established and recognized in the public sphere, and therefore, considered potentially able to generate a significant impact (Heath & Waymer, 2021). Additionally, universities play a relevant role in addressing issues related to science, health, and safety; some of these fights started in the academic environment and then continued in the external community (Heath & Waymer, 2021).

Hence, it can be hypothesized that as companies, also universities are required to go beyond mere social responsibility activities (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018) by generating progressive change for both the academic and civil society (Macfarlane, 2021). Activist universities could be catalysts of change (Health & Weymer, 2021), and to do so universities should be perceived as *authentic* in their activist role (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Sibai et al., 2021).

Firstly, this means that the values, goals, and mission that the activist university decides to pursue should be consistent with the implemented university practices. Secondly, there must be alignment between university practices and activist communication both online and offline; and finally, the promoted values should be in line with those of its stakeholders (Vredenburg et al., 2020), primarily students, faculty, and staff. Alternatively, activist universities could experience reputational and financial damages, similar to what happens to activist brands that are perceived as unauthentic and accused of woke-washing (Sobande, 2019). Furthermore, compared to activist brands, there would seem to be an additional problem for universities.

To date, universities are frequently considered as an “object” rather than a “subject” of politics (Macfarlane, 2021), but an activist cannot be suffered politics but should act in the political sphere to guide change and delete conflicts of interest (Korschun, 2021). University activism could function in different ways (Barnett, 2021), engaging firstly students, faculty, and staff, and directing many activist actions to them.

Consequently, activism may be exactly “the new social responsibility” of universities (Macfarlane, 2021). According to Barnett (2021) and Macfarlane (2021), academics have never been great revolutionaries, but education is one of the most powerful tools of change since it is based on numerous processes of activation, daily and profoundly transformative of social relationships and surrounding environment.

3. Methodology

To address the research questions of this study, we performed a website analysis of 50 fifty high-ranked American universities. Web-based communication was chosen for the analysis because it has become a powerful instrument for reaching a large target audience such as students, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders (Marino & Lo Presti, 2017; Dada & Hassenzahl, 2013). Moreover, universities use websites are used to communicate their organizational matters like sustainability practices, corporate social responsibility (Nejati et al., 2011) or even activism.

We decided to conduct this first study on American universities for different reasons. First, the United States is known for significant social movements like *Black Lives Matter* and is historically sensitive to social issues (Schmidt et al., 2022); secondly, they have a highly polarized society from a political standpoint (Klostermann et al., 2022). This seems to be a crucial factor because each form of activism is developed, especially on issues and in highly polarized contexts (Andersen & Johansen, 2023; Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020). Lastly, most of the research on brand activism was conducted in this country (Camarota et al., 2022) and this could be a relevant theoretical underpinning to investigate a new phenomenon such as university activism with scant or almost non-existent literature (Szadkowski & Krzeski, 2021).

According to Krippendorf (2013), we performed a content analysis of these universities' websites to identify interesting variables explanatory of the university activism phenomenon. This method, based on digital data, is one of the most suitable for exploring easily accessible content (Kim & Kuljis, 2010) and highlighting the linkage between texts and possible themes or concepts (Jose & Lee, 2007). Additionally, content analysis is a well-established method for the evaluation of websites (Schmidt et al., 2008), used to investigate their contents' characteristics and usability (Lo Presti et al., 2023; Gordon & Berhow, 2009).

Using the QS World Ranking 2023 as a guide, the top fifty universities were selected for the study's sample. We ran a pilot test of a few American universities to comprehend the tangible evidence and the current reach of the phenomenon before going on with a systematic investigation of the selected sample. Then, based on the reference literature and research questions, we identified a list of keywords needed to collect all relevant data, including: "activism," "advocacy," "social commitment," "environment commitment," "social justice," "social engagement," "societal well-being," "social mission," "gender equality," "racism," "diversity," "inclusion," "voting rights," "LGBTQIA+ rights," "health," "sexual and gender-based misconduct," "violence," "gender violence," "climate action," "racial equity," "social movements," "inclusion action," "Trans, intersex, non-binary (TIN) rights," "prevention," "feminist."

The data were manually collected between May and June 2023 and were all put systematically into a data matrix organized according to the research questions and the purpose of the study. In order to accurately detect even the most hidden or in-depth information on university activist commitment, we first examined the university homepage; from there, we looked for a menu item on activism. Then, following this item, we moved on to subsequent sections, going to a deeper level (Krippendorf, 2013). This approach aligns with studies on link prioritization and clicks behavior (Song et al., 2019). The research team annotated, examined, and coded all data (Durach et al., 2017). Using open coding in this exploratory investigation, we were able to pinpoint more distinct and explanatory factors (Barger et al., 2022) of university activism. Findings were reported and summarized in Figure 1, entitled "University Activism: An Explanatory Framework," and Table 1, named "University Activism: Dimensions and Key Elements."

4. Findings and Discussion

Findings of the content analysis of the 50 US university websites allowed us to start conceptualizing the university activism, firstly by providing a definition and secondly by identifying its implemented strategies, involved actors, targets, activist commitments and outcomes on both community and the university itself.

4.1 University Activism: A First Definition (R1)

To the best of our knowledge, to date, the activist role of universities is completely unexplored and no substantial and clear definition of the phenomenon has been provided by the existing literature. Thus, to address the R1 we attempt to provide a first definition of university activism.

Based on the results of the 50 university websites and considering the literature on brand activism (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Moorman, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Wettstein & Baur, 2016) and public engagement (Lo Presti et al., 2021; Retzbach & Maier, 2015; Boland, 2014; Kimmel et al., 2012; Denson & Bowman, 2013; Persell & Weglinsky, 2004), we define "*University Activism* as university efforts through dissemination, promotion, and direct action to address controversial social, environmental, political and/or economic issues by generating public engagement and societal change."

Hence, according to the findings, university activism appears to be mainly carried out through three strategies: *Dissemination*, *Promotion*, and *Direct Action*.

Specifically, *Dissemination* aims at the transmission and dissemination of culture in society to generate social change (Huang et al., 2019; Hudaverdi & Yankova, 2016), by implementing the university's third mission.

The *Promotion* aims to communicate the university's activist commitment through a mix of activities such as services offered to raise awareness of and fight these social issues, partnerships with companies, non-profit organizations (ONGs) and other institutions, specific university centres dealing with these issues, events and public relations (Lo Presti & Marino, 2019; Kotler & Keller, 2012).

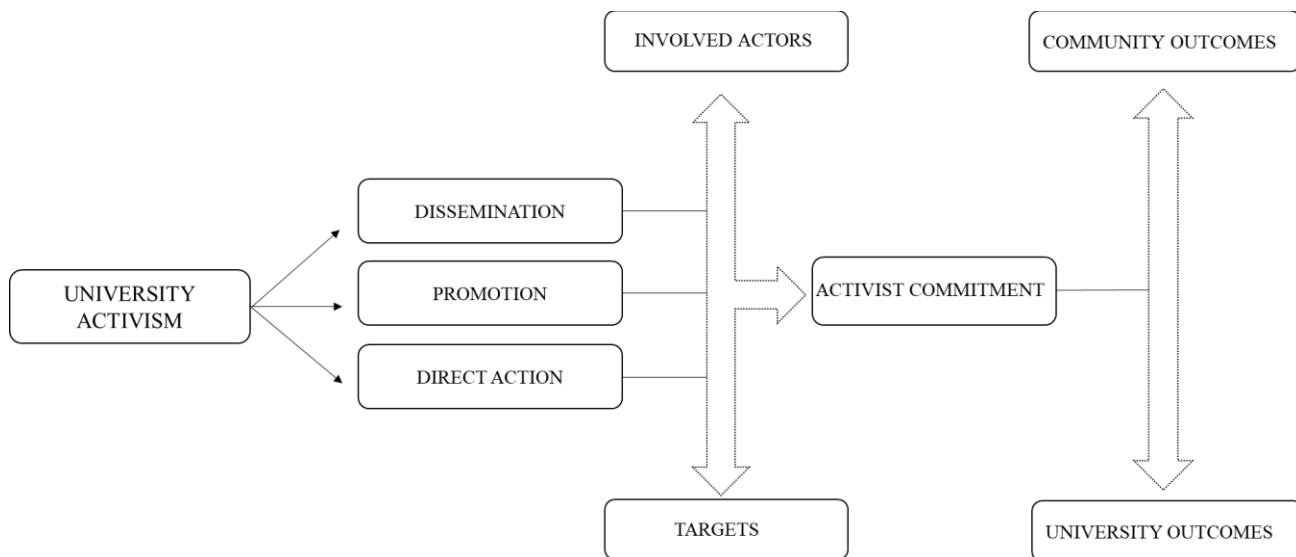
Finally, the last dimension is *Direct Action* which could be defined exactly as a "direct fight in the field" (Cammaerts, 2007). The university begins to participate actively, to be a real activist by collaborating with activist groups, and taking part in protests, strikes, demonstrations or boycotts aimed at creating pressure on decision-makers to take action on such sensitive and urgent issues (Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007).

The main purpose of these three efforts would seem to actively engage stakeholders on these issues, which often turn out to be controversial, to promote social change.

4.2. University Activism: Strategies and Key Factors (R2 – R6)

Figure 1 offers a first guide on the articulation and complexity of the phenomenon under investigation. In order to understand university activism, it is essential to identify its three strategies and the related activities, the involved actors, the target, the activist commitment of the university, and finally, the possible outcomes both for the community and the university itself.

Figure 1. University Activism: An Explanatory Framework



First of all, as reported in Figure 1 and Table 1, universities can implement activism through three strategies. Specifically, Table 1 shows which universities adopt dissemination strategies, which promotion and which direct action. These are three ways of implementing activism that can be adopted all three or only some of there. For instance, findings show that *Stanford University* seems to adopt all three strategies; this university offers a plethora of courses and seminars on sociopolitical issues, additionally, it provides centers that support specific events. Furthermore, *Stanford University* takes direct action in protests, strikes, and demonstrations, primarily organized by students. Instead, the *Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)* emphasizes its Dissemination strategy through courses and events, with less emphasis on promotion and direct action strategies.

Table 1. Universities activist strategies

UNIVERSITY	ACTIVIST STRATEGIES		
	Dissemination	Promotion	Direct Action
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)	✓		
Stanford University	✓	✓	✓
Harvard University	✓	✓	✓
California Institute of Technology		✓	
University of Chicago	✓	✓	
University of Pennsylvania		✓	✓
Pricertorn University		✓	✓
Yale University	✓	✓	✓
Cornell University	✓	✓	
Columbia University	✓	✓	
Johns Hopkins University (NYU)	✓	✓	✓
University of Michigan-Ann Arbor	✓	✓	
Northwestern University	✓	✓	✓
New York University (NYU)	✓	✓	✓
University of California (UCLA)	✓	✓	✓
Duke University	✓	✓	✓

Carnegie Mellon University	✓	✓	
University of California (UCSD)		✓	✓
Brown University	✓	✓	
University of Texas at Austin	✓	✓	
University of Washington	✓	✓	
University of Wisconsin-Madison	✓	✓	✓
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign		✓	
Georgia Institute of Technology	✓	✓	
Pennsylvania State University	✓	✓	
Rice University		✓	
University of California, Davis	✓		
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	✓		
Boston University		✓	
Washington University in St.Luis	✓	✓	✓
Purdue University	✓	✓	
University of Southern California	✓		
The Ohio State University	✓	✓	✓
University of Rochester	✓	✓	
University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB)	✓		
Emory University		✓	
Michigan State University	✓		✓
Texas A&M University	✓	✓	
University of Maryland, College Park	✓		✓
University of Pittsburgh	✓	✓	
Case Western Reserve University	✓	✓	
University of Minnesota Twin Cities	✓	✓	✓
University of Florida	✓	✓	
Vanderbilt University	✓	✓	
Dartmouth College	✓	✓	✓
Arizona State University	✓	✓	✓
University of California, Irvine		✓	
University of Notre Dame	✓	✓	✓
Yeshiva University	✓	✓	

Hence, the *dissemination strategy* seems to represent the activist engagement of university staff, students, alumni, and sometimes specific centers or offices at university to promote social change through distinguishing courses, research, seminars, and workshops that focus on the dissemination of knowledge related to social, political, and environmental issues. A strong pillar of educational activism appears to include the publication of research that challenges existing power structures, inequalities, and injustices.

After that, the *promotion strategy* regards specific offices or centers established by the university, such as the center for inclusion, discrimination, or equity, aimed at addressing the social issues. This strategy also includes actions and initiatives to address systemic issues and foster positive change within their organizational structures. Promotion could require significant financial investments (Klostermann et al., 2022), considering that are finalizing to create offices, centers, and departments to address sociopolitical issues. These structures are in charge of communicating activist efforts, implementing policies, promoting engagement, and providing resources to create an inclusive campus environment (King, 2020). Artistic expressions, such as performances, exhibitions, and creative projects, could be commitments to potentially convey messages and inspire dialogue. Besides, the promotion strategy seems to be also implemented through initiatives and entrepreneurship programs that support social innovation, sustainability, and community engagement.

Lastly, *direct action strategy* looks to refer to specific, deliberate strategic actions taken by some individuals or groups within the university community in order to advocate for social, political, or environmental change. This strategy appears to be especially non-financial and rhetorical (Ahmad et al., 2022), and it could include participating in social movements, organizing, and maybe participating in protests and demonstrations, occupying spaces, and engaging in strikes.

Some universities are engaging in launching advocacy campaigns and petitions in order to raise awareness (Webert et al., 2023), potentially influence public opinion, and maybe attempt to affect policymakers

(Korschun et al., 2020). The activist university's direct action could challenge existing norms, confront injustices, and promote human rights, equality, and sustainability. It may involve mobilizing collective action, fostering dialogue and solidarity, and engaging with wider society to potentially create transformative social impact (Barnett, 2021; Macfarlane, 2021).

Each strategy presents possible commitments, which are communicated through dedicated sections of universities' web pages, mainly associated with offices and centers focused on these causes.

The dissemination is based foremost on activist commitments such as specific courses, seminars, and workshops on social issues for the university community, companies, policymakers, other institutions or in general for civil society.

The promotion includes many activities that appear to be supportive measures to ensure the well-being of students and reduce discriminations and inequalities issues. For instance, many universities provide counseling & supportive measures focused on these problems; others offer the possibility to signal misconduct incidents even anonymously. Additionally, in order to prevent and reduce problems like harassment, discrimination, or abuse, 30% of the investigated universities, conduct these actions through specific centers and offices.

Finally, the "direct fight in the field" encapsulates typical actions of activists, taking part in protests, boycotts, strikes or demonstrations with the aim of supporting activist initiatives of other stakeholders, fighting with them and putting pressure on policymakers (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Besides, many universities of our sample provide a call to action by requiring *donations* to fund initiatives related to social, environmental, and political causes. This could be also hypothesized as one of the university outcomes resulting from activism jointly to an improvement in ranking, visibility (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021), and reputation (Zhou & Dong, 2022).

The results show that university activism actively engages several actors, especially within the academic context, such as students, university administration, professors, lecturers, and staff. These various actors are key to driving activism forward, leveraging their collective knowledge, resources, and influence.

Furthermore, the target audiences seem also to be wide and varied: university staff, students, alumni, governmental and political organizations, companies, non-profit organizations, activists, and also civil society. By focusing their efforts on these target groups, university activists seek to achieve positive change, promote dialogue, and foster a sense of social responsibility and engagement.

Finally, beyond the potential university outcomes, findings seem to highlight that university activism could have relevant impacts also on the external community.

Outcomes such as *disseminating research outputs* can generate significant benefits for the community and begin discussions and collaborations with interested stakeholders. Providing *educational courses* focused on these topics and *opening spaces for debates* allows to raise awareness of social, political, legal, and environmental issues (Weber et al., 2023), resulting probably in a greater sensitivity on the part of the community on these topics. Through its physical gathering spaces and centers, structural activism could foster a strong *sense of belonging*, *inspire ideas*, and engage people to take part in *concrete actions* that address these problems both inside and beyond the academic environment.

Additionally, intentional activism can generate significant impacts for the referred communities, as it sees the university engaged in supporting local initiatives or other stakeholders, fighting with them to create social change (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018), and dialogue with other powerful institutions. These outcomes could be fundamental components to obtaining a successful university activism that is recognized and perceived as authentic by the stakeholders (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Sibai et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Lastly, all these activist activities, in addition to being communicated on websites, are communicated in reports and/or events during that future objectives are also announced.

5. Conclusion, implications, and future research

University activism is an emerging phenomenon, still unexplored and needs a clear and comprehensive definition in the literature. Instead, university public engagement continues to be the strategy for implementing a participation process and interacting with stakeholders and society at large (Lo Presti et al., 2021).

This topic could be explained by taking the literature on public engagement and brand activism thanks to several common elements with these two literature strands. Although university activism and public

engagement are two different concepts, from our exploratory study they intersect and influence each other, providing new insights into public engagement itself.

Based on the definition provided in this article and the results obtained, the purpose of university activism seems to be to engage stakeholders actively, on sociopolitical issues, often controversial, by attempting to promote improvements for both internal and external communities; and this is precisely the union between the literature of university public engagement and brand activism. This reading lens of the phenomenon has allowed us to identify, map and analyze university activism for the current study.

In an era where environmental and social challenges are increasingly urgent, the activist commitment of influential stakeholders such as universities (Health & Weymer, 2021; Macfarlane, 2021) could really create social change by influencing both individual behavior and political processes (Weber et al., 2023).

Higher education can foster conversations on these issues both online and offline; additionally, they can share their objectives and research with communities and educate them on social topics. As a result, it appears that university activism contributes to university public engagement, which continues to be a necessary tool for activism; in summary, the two phenomena are linked and mutually reinforcing.

The current study has significant managerial and theoretical implications. From a theoretical point of view, this research contributes to the literature on brand activism and university public engagement; moreover, it provides a first relevant definition and explanation of a new and still unexplored phenomenon. This article can be an initial theoretical basis for future research needed to confirm these initial results, and above all, to define the phenomenon of university activism in a robust and structured way. To date, conceptual, qualitative, and lastly quantitative contributions seem to be required to understand the topic.

From a managerial perspective, this study seeks to explain the activist efforts of American universities, consequently, it offers a first guide in understanding and implementing university activism. Hence, in keeping with the goals of the third mission (Lo Presti et al., 2021), it may be a beneficial study for universities looking to play a social role (Macfarlane, 2021).

Finally, there are some limitations to the current study. Firstly, in order to reach full generalizability of findings, the analysis should be conducted on a larger sample size and additional countries, or for instance, on countries less sensitive to activism than the United States of America. Secondly, this research is based only on the institutional communication of universities, not examining the communication on social media platforms, which are the main communication channels of activist communication (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022; Hesse et al., 2020). Lastly, this study did not integrate the analysis of the social reports produced by universities, documenting their social commitment; these should be examined to understand the measurement tools of activist activities and related outcomes from a quantitative perspective.

REFERENCES

- Abreu, M., Demirel, P., Grinevich, V., & Karataş-Özkan, M. (2016). Entrepreneurial practices in research-intensive and teaching-led universities. *Small business economics*, 47, 695-717.
- Ahmad, F., Guzmán, F., & Kidwell, B. (2022). Effective messaging strategies to increase brand love for sociopolitical activist brands. *Journal of Business Research*, 151, 609-622.
- Ali, M., Mustapha, I., Osman, S., & Hassan, U. (2021). University social responsibility: A review of conceptual evolution and its thematic analysis. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 286, 124931.
- Andersen, S. E., & Johansen, T. S. (2023). The activist brand and the transformational power of resistance: towards a narrative conceptual framework. *Journal of Brand Management*, 1-13.
- Bacon, M. P., & Sloam, J. (2010). John Dewey and the Democratic Role of Higher Education in England. *Journal of Political Science Education*, 6(4), 336-352.
- Bencardino, F., & Napolitano, M.R. (2011). L'Università nei processi di sviluppo economico e sociale. *Bianchi A., (a cura di), Le Università del Mezzogiorno nella Storia dell'Italia Unita, 2011*, 123-134.

- Bhagwat, Y., Warren, N.L., Beck, J.T., & Watson IV, G.F. (2020). Corporate sociopolitical activism and firm value. *Journal of Marketing*, 84 (5), 1-21.
- Ball, S. J. (2012). Performativity, commodification and commitment: An I-Spy guide to the neoliberal university. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 60(1), 17–28.
- Ball, S. J. (2015). Education, governance and the tyranny of numbers. *Journal of Education Policy*, 30(3), 299–301.
- Barger, A. P., Leffel, K. G., & Lott, M. (2022). Plotting academic innovation: A content analysis of twenty institutional websites. *Innovative Higher Education*, 47(1), 95-111.
- Barnett, R. (2021). The activist university: Identities, profiles, conditions. *Policy Futures in Education*, 19(5), 513-526.
- Boffo, S., & Moscati, R. (2015). University third mission: origins, problems, and indicators. *Scuola democratica*, 2, 251-272.
- Bonollo, E., Lazzini, S., & Occhipinti, Z. (2022). Third Mission and Intellectual Capital External Dimension: The Implications in the European University Planning Process. *Governance and Performance Management in Public Universities: Current Research and Practice*, 149-177.
- Cammarota, A., Marino, V., & Resciniti, R. (2022). A bibliometric analysis of a risky marketing strategy: brand activism. In *NEXT GENERATION MARKETING People, Planet, Place: cooperation & shared value for a new era of critical marketing* (Vol. 1, pp. 1-17).
- Cammaerts, B. (2007). *Activism and media*.
- Carroll, A. B. (1979). A three-dimensional mode of corporate performance. *Academy of Management Review*, 4, 497–505.
- Chandy, R.K., Venkataramani Johar, G., Moorman, C., & Roberts, J.H., (2021). Better Marketing for a Better World. *Journal of Marketing*, 85, (3) 1-9.
- Chen, C., & Vanclay, F. (2021). Transnational universities, host communities and local residents: social impacts, university social responsibility and campus sustainability. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 22(8), 88-107.
- Cognetti, F. (2013). La third mission dell'università. Lo spazio di soglia tra città e accademia. *TERRITORIO*, (2013/66).
- Cognetti, F. (2013). La third mission dell'università. Lo spazio di soglia tra città e accademia. *TERRITORIO*, (2013/66).
- Den Hond, F., & de Bakker, F.G.A. (2007). Ideologically motivated activism: how activist groups influence corporate social change activities. *Academy of Management Review*, 32 (3), 901–24.
- Dewey, John. 1977. *Moral Principles in Education* in Jo Ann Boydston (ed.) *The Middle Works of John Dewey 4: 1907 - 1908*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Durach, C.F., Kembro, J., & Wieland, A. (2017). A new paradigm for systematic literature reviews in supply chain management. *Journal of Supply Chain Management*, 53(4), 67-85.
- Eilert, M., & Nappier Cherup, A. (2020). The activist company: examining a company's pursuit of societal change through corporate activism using an institutional theoretical lens. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 39 (4), 461-476
- Etzkowitz, H., & Leydesdorff, L. (1998). The endless transition: a "triple helix" of university-industry-government relations: Introduction. *Journal of Technology Transfer*, 24(2/3), 111–123.
- Etzkowitz, H., & Leydesdorff, L. (2000). The dynamics of innovation: from National Systems and 'Mode 2' to a Triple Helix of university-industry-government relations. *Research Policy*, 29(2), 109-123.
- Evans, J., Jones, R., Karvonen, A., Millard, L., & Wendler, J. (2015). Living labs and co-production: university campuses as platforms for sustainability science. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 16, 1-6.
- Furco, A. (2010). The engaged campus: Toward a comprehensive approach to public engagement. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 58(4), 375-390.
- Giroux, H. A. (2005). The terror of neoliberalism: Rethinking the significance of cultural politics. *College Literature*, 32(1), 1–19

- Gluchman, V. (2018). Nussbaum's philosophy of education as the foundation for human development. *Human Affairs*, 28(3), 328-338.
- Gordon, J. & Berhow, S. (2009). University websites and dialogic features for building relationships with potential students. *Public Relations Review*, 35(2), 150-152.
- Guha, M., & Korschun, D. (2023). Peer effects on brand activism: evidence from brand and user chatter on Twitter. *Journal of Brand Management*, 1-15.
- Hambrick, D.C., & Wowak, A.J. (2021). CEO political activism: a stakeholder alignment model. *Academy of Management Review*, 6 (1), 33-59.
- Hart, A., & Northmore, S. (2011). Auditing and evaluating university–community engagement: Lessons from a UK case study. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 65(1), 34-58.
- Hassinen, M. (2018). A critical approach to Kotler and Sarkar's brand activism: a comparison to a theoretical framework of CSR, CC, and activism.
- Heath, R. L., & Waymer, D. (2021). University engagement for enlightening CSR: Serving hegemony or seeking constructive change. *Public Relations Review*, 47(1), 101958.
- Hesse, A., Niederle, F., Schön, L., & Stautz, D. (2021). Consumer responses to brand communications involving COVID-19. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 37 (17-18), 1783-1814.
- Hudler, K., Dennis, L., DiNella, M., Ford, N., Mendez, J., & Long, J. (2021). Intersectional sustainability and student activism: A framework for achieving social sustainability on university campuses. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 16(1), 78-96.
- Jose, A., & Lee (2007). Environmental reporting of global corporations: A content analysis based on website disclosures. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 72(4), 307-321.
- Jung, J., & Mittal, V. (2020). Political identity and the consumer journey: a research review. *Journal of Retailing*, 96 (1), 55-73.
- Kerr, C. (2001). *The uses of the university* (Vol. 29). Harvard University Press.
- Kim, I., & Kuljis, J. (2010). Applying content analysis to web-based content. *Journal of Computing and Information Technology*, 18(4), 369–375.
- Kilgo, C. A. (2020). *Supporting success for LGBTQ+ students: Tools for inclusive campus practice*. The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience.
- Koryakina, T., Sarrico, C. S., & Teixeira, P. N. (2015). Third mission activities: university managers' perceptions on existing barriers. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 5(3), 316-330.
- Korschun, D., Martin, K. D., & Vadakkepatt, G. (2020). Marketing's role in understanding political activity. *Journal of public policy & marketing*, 39(4), 378-387.
- Korschun, D. (2021). Brand Activism Is Here to Stay: Here's Why. *NIM Marketing Intelligence Review*, 13(2), 11-17.
- Kotler, P., & Keller, K. L. (2012). *Marketing Management* (13th ed.). New Jersey: Person Preantice Hall. Inc.
- Krippendorff, K. H. (2013). *Content analysis - (3rd ed.)*. SAGE Publications Inc.
- Lee, Z., Spry, A., Ekinci, Y., & Vredenburg, J. (2023). From warmth to warrior: Impacts of non-profit brand activism on brand bravery, brand hypocrisy and brand equity. *Journal of Brand Management*, 1-19.
- Leydesdorff, L., & Etzkowitz, H. (1998). The triple helix as a model for innovation studies. *Science and public policy*, 25(3), 195-203.
- Lo Presti, L., & Marino, V. (2020). Is online public engagement a new challenge in the university communication plan? A managerial perspective. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(7), 1380-1397.
- Lo Presti, L. & Marino, V. (2020). *Il Public Engagement Universitario. Dimensioni, approcci manageriali e best practices*. Giappichelli editore, 1-195.
- Lo Presti L., Maggiore, G., & Marino, V. (2021). Online public engagement is the New Deal! Along the distinctive pathway of the Italian University. *Sinergie Italian Journal of Management*, 39(2), 95-115.

- Lo Presti, L., Testa, M., Marino, V., & Singer, P. (2019). Engagement in healthcare systems: Adopting digital tools for a sustainable approach. *Sustainability*, 11(1), 220.
- Macfarlane, B. (2021). The conceit of activism in the illiberal university. *Policy Futures in education*, 19(5), 594-606.
- Maks-Solomon, C., & Drewry, J.M. (2020). Why do corporations engage in LGBT Rights activism? LGBT employee groups as internal pressure groups. *Business and Politics*, 23 (1), 124-152.
- Marans R.W., & Callewaert J. (2017). Evaluating sustainability initiatives on university campuses: a case study from the University of Michigan's sustainability cultural indicators program. In: *Leal Filho W, Brandli LL, Castro P, et al. (eds) Handbook of Theory and Practice of Sustainable Development in Higher Education*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 189-199.
- Marino, V., Lo Presti, L., & Pellicano, M. (2019b). Rediscovering public engagement in higher education: A bridge between university community and publics. *African Journal of Business Management*, 13(2), 71-81.
- Mende, M., & Scott, M., L. (2021). May the Force Be with You: Expanding the Scope for Marketing Research as a Force for Good in a Sustainable World. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 40(2) 116-125.
- Mirzaei, A., Wilkie, D.C., & Siuki, H. (2022). Woke brand activism authenticity or the lack of it. *Journal of Business Research*, 139, 1-12.
- Moorman, C. (2020). Commentary: brand activism in a political world. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 39 (4), 388-392.
- Mukherjee, S., & Althuizen, N. (2020). Brand activism: does courting controversy help or hurt a brand? *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 37 (4), 772-788.
- National Coordinating Center for Public Engagement (NCCPE) (2010). The engaged university. A manifesto for Public Engagement at: <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk>
- Nejati, M., Shafaei, A., Salamzadeh, Y., & Daraei, M. (2011). Corporate social responsibility and universities: A study of top 10 world universities' websites. *African Journal of Business Management*, 5(2), 440-447.
- Pasirayi, S., Fennell, P. B., & Follmer, K. B. (2022). #Activism: Investor Reactions to Corporate Sociopolitical Activism. *Business & Society*, 00076503221110457.
- Pee, S., & Vululleh, N. (2020). Role of universities in transforming society: challenges and practices. *International Perspectives on Policies, Practices & Pedagogies for Promoting Social Responsibility in Higher Education*, 67-79.
- Porter, M.E., & Kramer, M.R., (2011). Creating Shared Value: how to reinvent capitalism and unleash a wave of innovation and growth. *Harvard Business Review*.
- Pöyry, E., & Laaksonen, S. M. (2022). Opposing brand activism: triggers and strategies of consumers' antibrand actions. *European Journal of Marketing*, 56(13), 261-284
- Predazzi, E. (2012). The third mission of the university. *Rendiconti Lincei*, 23(S1), 17-22.
- Radanielina Hita, M. L., & Grégoire, Y. (2023). Marketing to Prevent Radicalization: A First Attempt at Delimiting the Field. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 42(1), 1-10.
- Rim, H., Lee, Y., & Yoo, S. (2020). Polarized public opinion responding to corporate social advocacy: social network analysis of boycotters and advocates. *Public Relations Review*, 46 (2).
- Sarkar, C., & Kotler, P. (2018). Brand activism: from purpose to action. IDEA BITE PRESS.
- Schmidt, S., Cantalops, A.S., & Dos Santos, C.P. (2008). The characteristics of hotel websites and their implications for website effectiveness. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 27(4), 504-516.
- Schmidt, H.J., Ind, N., Guzman, F., & Kennedy, E. (2022). Sociopolitical activist brands. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 31 (1), 40-55.
- Shoenberger, H., Kim, E.A., & Sun, Y. (2021). Advertising during COVID-19: exploring perceived brand message authenticity and potential psychological reactance. *Journal of Advertising*, 50 (3), 253-261.
- Sibai, O., Mimoun, L., & Boukis, A. (2021). Authenticating brand activism: negotiating the boundaries of free speech to make a change. *Psychology & Marketing*, 38 (10), 1651-1669.
- Slowey, M. (2003). Higher education and civil society. Higher education and the lifecourse, 135-51.

- Sobande, F. (2019). Woke-washing: “intersectional” femvertising and branding “woke” bravery. *European Journal of Marketing*, 54(11), 2723-2745.
- Song, L., Tso, G., & Fu, Y. (2019). Click behavior and link prioritization: Multiple demand theory application for web improvement. *Journal of the Association Society for Information Science and Technology*, 70(8), 80
- Szadkowski, K., & Krzeski, J. (2021). The future is always-already now: Constituent praxis and the activist university. *Policy Futures in Education*, 19(5), 554-567.
- Thorn, K., & Soo, M. (2006). Latin American Universities And The Third Mission : Trends, Challenges, And Policy Options. In *World Bank policy research working paper*.
- Urdari, C., Farcas, T. V., & Tiron-Tudor, A. (2017). Assessing the legitimacy of HEIs’ contributions to society: the perspective of international rankings. *Sustainability Accounting, Management and Policy Journal*.
- Varadarajan, P.R., & Menon, A. (1988). Cause-related marketing: a coalignment of marketing strategy and corporate philanthropy. *The Journal of Marketing*, 52 (3), 58–74.
- Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A., & Kemper, J.A. (2020). Brands taking a stand: authentic brand activism or woke washing? *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 39 (4), 444-460.
- Watermeyer, R., & Lewis, J. (2018). Institutionalizing public engagement through research in UK universities: perceptions, predictions and paradoxes concerning the state of the art. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(9), 1612-1624.
- Weber, T. J., Joireman, J., Sprott, D. E., & Hydock, C. (2023). Differential Response to Corporate Political Advocacy and Corporate Social Responsibility: Implications for Political Polarization and Radicalization. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 42(1), 74-93
- Zhou, Z., & Dong, C. (2022). Matching words with actions: understanding the effects of CSA stance-action consistency on negative consumer responses. *Corporate Communication: An International Journal*, 27 (1), 167-187