



# The influence of marketing communications agencies on activist brands' moral competency development and ability to engage in authentic brand activism: Wieden+Kennedy 'Just Does It'

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## Abstract

To compel people to bring about social change, activist brands must develop moral competency to ensure that they are perceived as authentic. However, there is limited research on the processes underpinning brands' moral competency development. Furthermore, prior research on authentic brand activism has largely conceived of brands as singular entities as opposed to networks of diverse actors. Consequently, little is known about how inter-organisational collaborations influence brands' moral competency development and ability to engage in authentic activism. We address this gap by presenting a case study of Nike, Inc./Wieden+Kennedy campaigns from 2017 to 2021 centred on women's empowerment and of controversies from this period surrounding discrimination of female employees at Nike, Inc. By locating brand activism within the advertising client–agency relationship, we develop a cyclical model of activist brands' moral competency development. Our model highlights that moral competency is not a static feature of brands but develops dynamically, and we identify the mobilisation of interactional expertise as a key driver of moral competency development. Furthermore, our model shows that a brand's moral competency is not developed by a single organisation but through inter-organisational collaborations. We also demonstrate the challenges emerging from these collaborations and develop practical implications for activist brands.

**Keywords** Authentic brand activism · Moral competency development · Interactional expertise · Inter-organisational collaboration · Advertising client–agency relationship

## Introduction

In recent years, an increasing number of brands have begun to regard brand activism as central to achieving and maintaining a competitive advantage as well as an effective tool for bringing about social change (Koch 2020; Kotler and Sarkar 2017; Moorman 2020). While consumers have expected brands to do good and act as legitimate partners in society for some time, as is captured well by the long-standing literature on corporate social responsibility (see, e.g. Andrés et al 2019), consumers expecting brands to publicly take a nonneutral stance on often partisan sociopolitical issues is a much more recent phenomenon (Bhagwat et al 2020; Edelman 2018; Hoppner and Vadakkepatt 2019).

Unfortunately, plenty of brands have attempted to opportunistically capitalise on this trend by merely communicating activist messaging but without making any efforts to embed the messaging's activist values in their organisations. However, these brands are frequently accused of green- or woke-washing and are attacked by consumers as a result (Vredenburg et al 2018). Authentic brand activism has thus emerged as an important concept to highlight that brand activism is not merely about a brand's messaging, but about a brand's strategic decision to fully embrace a long-term commitment to a cause (Vredenburg et al 2020).

A focal aspect of authentic brand activism concerns the alignment of prosocial messaging, corporate practices, purpose, and values (Vredenburg et al 2020). Furthermore, according to Sibai et al (2021), for brands to authenticate their activism they must demonstrate moral competency, i.e. the ability to continuously navigate morally complex and pressing issues and to keep defining meaningful goals that are morally consistent and that clearly go beyond a primary concern for profit. If brands fail to align their messaging,

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practices, purpose, and values and to demonstrate moral competency, and thus to authenticate their activism, they are judged as deviant, conformist, or opportunistic (Sibai et al 2021). Engaging in authentic brand activism, then, is clearly no straightforward task, especially when considering that brands are not singular entities, but complex networks comprised of a multitude of actors. Certainly, when considering the centrality of prosocial messaging in brand activism, the significant role played by marketing communications agencies becomes apparent. Aligning messaging and corporate practices thus frequently involves inter-organisational collaborations between actors with potentially varying degrees of moral competency. An important question which therefore arises is how marketing communications agencies and their collaborations with brands influence brands' ability to engage in authentic activism.

Helping activist brands succeed at authenticating their activism is of great importance. As the number of brands found to be engaged in green/woke-washing grows, so too does the scepticism among consumers regarding the authenticity of brand activism in general. For example, a recent study found that 56% of consumers think that too many brands use activism purely as a marketing ploy (Edelman 2019). Consequently, activist brands are at risk of having to work ever harder to ensure that their activism is not only authentic but also clearly perceived as such so that they can compel a critical mass of stakeholders to successfully bring about social change. It is therefore valuable for activist brands to understand the role that marketing communications agencies play in the creation of compelling and authentic activist messaging as well as the challenges that such inter-organisational collaborations pose for brands' ability to engage in authentic activism. Prior research, however, has not yet explored in detail the processes underpinning the creation of authentic activist campaigns and has instead largely focused on how consumers and investors evaluate activist campaigns. Here, studies have found that consumers and investors take into consideration the amount of time that a brand has been engaged in a particular cause and the extent to which a brand's activist messaging is aligned with its current and past value articulations and corporate practices (see Key et al 2021; Mirzaei et al 2022; Moorman 2020; Schmidt et al 2022; Vredenburg et al 2020). Thus, despite emphasising the importance of aligning activist messaging with corporate practices, there remains limited research on how activist brands can best achieve this, especially when it requires inter-organisational collaborations between actors with potentially varying degrees of moral competency.

We address this gap in research by locating brand activism not within a *singular* brand but within the advertising client–agency relationship. In the next section, we develop our analytical lens. We focus on the concept of moral competency (see Sibai et al 2021) and identify interactional

expertise (see Collins 2004) as a principal element in moral competency development. Following an overview of our study's methodology, we present a case study of Nike, Inc./Wieden+Kennedy (W+K) campaigns from 2017 to 2021 centred on women's empowerment and of the controversies from this period surrounding discrimination of female employees at Nike, Inc. We then develop a cyclical model of activist brands' moral competency development. Here, a dynamic emerges whereby a highly morally competent actor, in our case W+K, continuously pushes the brand's activism beyond the capabilities of less morally competent actors, in our case Nike, Inc., and thereby continuously forces the latter to improve their moral competency to ensure alignment between all the actors' brand messaging and practices. We conclude by presenting our contributions to the literature on authentic brand activism. Our model shows how inter-organisational collaborations between actors with varying degrees of moral competency advance activist brands' moral competency development, and thus their ability to engage in authentic brand activism, but also open brands up for accusations of inauthentic brand activism along the way by creating misalignments between different actors' brand messaging and practices.

## Literature review

Following the conceptualisation of brand activism by Sarkar and Kotler (2018), others have developed our understanding further through investigations into, most notably, corporate sociopolitical activism (Bhagwat et al 2020), brand political activism (Moorman 2020), and authentic brand activism (Vredenburg et al 2020). Here, brand activism is commonly understood as a purpose- and values-driven strategy in which a brand publicly takes a nonneutral stance on a typically partisan sociopolitical issue through messaging or actions designed to have a social impact that go beyond the brand's immediate financial gain. It is worth highlighting that some authors consider addressing divisive, unresolved, emotionally charged, and institutionally contested sociopolitical issues central to brand activism (e.g., Bhagwat et al 2020; Nalick et al 2016). Others, however, define brand activism in terms of the mobilisation of moral agency and the explicit working towards social change, even when this concerns non-divisive issues (e.g. Holt 2002; Sibai et al 2021). While we consider both definitions useful, we follow the latter in our conceptualisation of brand activism.

## Authentic brand activism

One stream of research within the literature on brand activism that has garnered much attention concerns the factors influencing whether stakeholders perceive a brand's activism



as an authentic attempt to bring about social change versus inauthentic woke-washing (Vredenburg et al 2018). Vredenburg et al (2020) define authentic brand activism as the alignment of activist messaging, prosocial corporate practices, purpose, and values. Stakeholders such as consumers and investors then evaluate the authenticity of a brand's activism based not only on its current alignment of messaging, practices, purpose, and values, but also on its consistency with past actions and value articulations (Becker et al 2018; Bhagwat et al 2020; Key et al 2021; Mirzaei et al 2022). Consequently, for activist brands to ensure that they are perceived as authentic, they need to continuously engage in brand activism, treating this as a purpose- and values-driven strategy that fully embeds a long-term commitment to a cause in the organisation (Mirzaei et al 2022; Schmidt et al 2022; Vredenburg et al 2020). As Moorman (2020) notes, this can pose a challenge for brands that have not previously engaged in brand activism and that are thus unable to evidence consistency with past actions and value articulations, which may even deter them from engaging in brand activism in the first place.

Authentic brand activism has also been defined in terms of a successful reform of moral judgments (Moorman 2020; Sibai et al 2021; Vredenburg et al 2020). Here, Sibai et al (2021) explore how brands authenticate their activism by successfully negotiating the boundaries of free speech to challenge sociocultural norms. In their study, they specify three markers that define an activist brand. First, activist brands are "*moral subjects*" (Sibai et al 2021, p. 1652), i.e. stakeholders consider them capable of influencing others' morality through the mobilisation of a moral conscience in a purpose- and values-driven manner (see also Hoppner and Vadakkepatt 2019; Sarkar and Kotler 2018; Vredenburg et al 2020). Second, activist brands "*reform moral judgments*" (Sibai et al 2021, p. 1652), i.e. they challenge existing judgments and promote alternatives by performing ideological edgework and acting like moral entrepreneurs (see also Schöps et al 2017; Wieser et al 2019). Third, activist brands explicitly aim to "*promote social benefits*" (Sibai et al 2021, p. 1652), which delineates them from controversial brands who also challenge judgments though not explicitly for moral reasons (see also Brown and Schau 2001; Giesler 2012; Laermer and Simmons 2007). An activist brand is then considered authentic if it successfully demonstrates "moral competency", i.e. an "ability to pass accurate moral judgments" (Sibai et al 2021, p. 1652).

### Moral competency

According to Sibai et al (2021, p. 1652), stakeholders assess the moral competency of an activist brand based on its ability to demonstrate proficiency in all of three "*moral skills*". The first of these is "moral sensitivity", i.e. "a brand's ability

to recognise the moral content of situations" (Sibai et al 2021, p. 1659). Moral sensitivity allows brands to navigate difficult situations that are morally ambiguous and, despite this ambiguity, to identify and raise pressing moral issues (see also Jordan 2007). In contrast, a lack of moral sensitivity will cause brands to overlook pertinent moral issues, including those created by their very own actions. A brand is perceived as transgressing moral norms and judged as "*deviant*" if it fails to demonstrate moral sensitivity (Sibai et al 2021, p. 1652), which tends to lead to the emergence of doppelganger brand images (Freund and Jacobi 2013; Giesler 2012; Thompson et al., 2006).

The second moral skill is "moral vision", i.e. "brands' insight into the future of morality" (Sibai et al 2021, p. 1660). Moral vision enables brands to define ethical and meaningful goals and actions that go beyond a primary concern for the brand's financial performance (see also Sangharakshita 2007). According to Sibai et al (2021, p. 1660), "Brands show a clear moral vision when articulating challenges to free speech that help solve contemporary problems for markets and society". In contrast, championing inappropriate or ineffective changes is a sign of poor moral vision. A brand that fails to demonstrate moral vision is perceived by stakeholders as merely reproducing dominant moral norms and judged as "conformist" (Sibai et al 2021, p. 1660). According to Sibai et al (2021, p. 1660), "As the boundaries of free speech change overtime, activist brands must also continuously update their moral vision to avoid stakeholders downgrading them to conformist status".

The third moral skill is "moral integration", i.e. "brands' ability to pursue their moral beliefs in all situations", and this is demonstrated by brands' ability to consistently stay morally coherent across audiences and over time (Sibai et al 2021, p. 1660). Brands are judged as "opportunists, manipulating the boundaries of free speech to serve personal interest rather than reform morality" if they fail to demonstrate moral integration (Sibai et al 2021, p. 1652). The actions of brands accused of being opportunistic will frequently be labelled woke- or green-washing by stakeholders. However, while these insights into moral competency are very useful, by focusing on brand controversies as the unit of analysis, Sibai et al (2021) did not explore how brands develop and lose moral skills over time. To advance our understanding of authentic brand activism in this regard, we now turn to the literature on interactional expertise, which has been considered a prerequisite for actors' ability to engage in moral imagination and thus a key driving force behind moral competency development.

### Interactional expertise

Interactional expertise refers to the capability to speak the language of a social group of which one is not a member



so fluently that one is indistinguishable from members of that social group (so long as one is not required to demonstrate any practical expertise specific to that social group) (Collins and Evans 2014; Evans and Collins 2010; Gorman and Werhane 2010). For example, if non-athlete advertisers created a campaign that so accurately portrayed the language of athletes that no athlete would be able to ascertain that the campaign was created by non-athletes, then these advertisers would be considered interactional experts. The concept of interactional expertise thus differentiates between discursive performance and practical expertise (Collins and Evans, 2015) in that interactional expertise does not grant the capability to perform the specific practices of another's social group (Arminen et al 2019). As such, acquiring interactional expertise does not involve any practical socialisation (Collins et al 2010) or any embodied skills that would allow the interactional expert to participate in the activities of another's social group (Collins 2004).

Acquiring interactional expertise instead involves a process of linguistic socialisation, internalising the tacit elements of the language of another social world, which requires considerable time and effort (Evans and Collins 2010). For example, the non-athlete advertisers above would have been able to accurately portray the language of athletes in their campaign not by becoming athletes but by spending considerable time and effort researching and engaging with athletes. While this might well have been less time-consuming and arduous than actually becoming athletes, the concept of interactional expertise nonetheless highlights the amount of work required to learn the language of another social world. More specifically, acquiring interactional expertise involves learning the language-games of another form of life (see Wittgenstein 1963) so that one can grasp its conceptual structure (Collins and Evans 2014), including its logics, orders of worth, and evaluative frameworks (see Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Stark 2016). This then enables interactional experts to fully understand and communicate the values and moral challenges of those from other social worlds (Gorman and Werhane 2010).

We therefore consider interactional expertise to be a prerequisite for and a key driving force behind moral competency development. Gorman and Werhane (2010), for example, have noted that interactional experts who are immersed in multiple social worlds can view and understand problems through a variety of distinct evaluative frameworks, and that this ability is essential to avoiding issues of normalised deviance within organisations. Normalised deviance can occur when evidence pointing to a problem within an organisation becomes reclassified as normal such that any future instances no longer serve as warning signs. These normalised problems then become part of the organisation's mental model and eventually become translated into scripts that tell the organisation and its employees how to

behave. Consequently, even though there is a strong need for the organisation to change, this need is not being recognised, which thus stifles the organisation's moral competency development. Interactional experts, however, having internalised the distinct evaluative frameworks of multiple social worlds, are much more likely to perceive an organisation's problematic practices as such and are therefore better equipped to help avoid problems of normalised deviance, enabling moral competency development as a result. For example, any employee who fully understands and has internalised the values of communities fighting for equality would readily be able to not only spot discriminatory practices but also suggest constructive alternatives.

Gorman and Werhane (2010) therefore encourage interactional experts to exercise moral imagination, which according to Werhane (1999, p. 5) "entails the ability to understand [a] context or set of activities from a number of different perspectives, the actualizing of new possibilities that are not context-dependent, and the instigation of the process of evaluating those possibilities from a moral point of view". According to Gorman and Werhane (2010), moral imagination thus involves an awareness of one's own mental model concerning a particular issue, the ability to imagine alternative mental models to consider the issue, an evaluation of the issue using these alternative mental models, and lastly the development of a better mental model concerning the issue. This, then, will lead to more potential options for resolving issues, enabling interactional experts engaged in moral imagination to become key drivers of moral competency development.

In summary, the literature on authentic brand activism has largely focused on the factors influencing whether an activist brand's activities are perceived as authentic or not. Here, research has emphasised the importance of aligning activist messaging, prosocial practices, purpose, and values over time, and thus the need for activist brands to treat brand activism as a purpose- and values-driven strategy that fully embeds a long-term commitment to a cause in the organisation (see Key et al 2021; Mirzaei et al 2022; Schmidt et al 2022; Vredenburg et al 2020). However, the literature to date has not explored the inter-organisational dynamics that facilitate or hinder such a long-term alignment of messaging, practices, purpose, and values. Research has also identified moral competency and the specific moral skills that this encompasses as a necessary requirement for activist brands to authenticate their activism (see Sibai et al 2021). However, the literature to date has not explored how brands develop and lose moral skills over time, nor how these skills might be distributed across the various actors comprising a brand. To address this gap in research, we first give an overview of our study's methodology before presenting findings from a case study concerning how the advertising client–agency relationship between Nike, Inc. and W+K has



shaped Nike's moral competency development and ability to engage in authentic brand activism.

## Methodology

To answer this paper's central research question of how marketing communications agencies and their collaborations with brands influence brands' moral competency development and ability to engage in authentic activism, we chose to focus on Nike for several reasons. Firstly, Nike has a well-established history of successfully using marketing campaigns to make social statements. This dates back to Nike's first 'Just Do It' campaign which launched in 1988 and which addressed ageism by featuring the iconic 80-year-old Walter Stack who ran approximately 62,000 miles in his lifetime (Tyler 2018). Secondly, Nike has a well-established relationship with its advertising agency, W+K. W+K not only created Nike's first ever 'Just Do It' campaign in 1988 and has worked with the brand ever since, Dan Wieden is also credited with coining the brand's iconic 'Just Do It' slogan (Bostock 2019). W+K's impact can therefore not be overstated; it constitutes an integral component of the Nike brand. Lastly, while Nike's activist campaigns have generally been very successful, Nike's corporate practices have come under repeated attack. This dates back to 1991 when the activist Jeff Ballinger first published a report documenting low wages and poor working conditions at Nike's Indonesia factory (Nisen 2013). This frequent misalignment between Nike's activist messaging and corporate practices thus suggests a non-straightforward dynamic between the brand's marketing department/W+K and other areas of the business, as well as an uneven distribution of moral skills across the brand, which we have sought to investigate.

We began data collection in 2021 by compiling a dataset of publicly available online sources pertaining to major Nike activist campaigns from 2017 to 2021 as well as major controversies involving Nike from this same period. An overview of our dataset is presented in Table 1. We consider

publicly available data useful for our study since controversial arguments frequently occur in the public sphere. We used Google to identify relevant sources by composing an initial list of search terms, which we adjusted and expanded as data collection progressed. We stopped data collection once we had reached data saturation in relation to the main campaigns and controversies we had identified. Regarding social media, our dataset consists predominantly of Twitter posts since Twitter is widely used for public debate, especially by social movements, including both those in support of Nike's activist campaigns as well as those opposed to Nike's corporate practices. Here we also used Twitter's advanced search tool to filter posts by relevant hashtags, including #DreamSister, #DreamCrazier, #NikeMeToo, and #DreamMaternity, among others.

When conducting our analysis and constructing our case study, we first arranged our data into a chronological timeline to get a complete picture of how events unfolded over time (Yin 1994; Miles and Huberman 1994). We then identified key actors and their actions in the emerging narrative to uncover the social processes shaping the focal events of our study (Bhaskar 1979; Lindgreen et al 2021). These key actors include W+K, Nike senior managers, current and former Nike employees, and several social movements. We then employed our analytical lens, coding any instance where the actors in our study mobilised, successfully demonstrated, or failed to demonstrate interactional expertise, moral sensitivity, moral vision, or moral integration. Our data cover three notable sociocultural topics, namely women's empowerment, Black Lives Matter, and workers' rights in developing countries. Of these, women's empowerment is the most prevalent in our data, and we thus decided to further narrow our focus, developing a case study centred specifically on both Nike's ability and Nike's failures to demonstrate moral competency regarding women's empowerment from 2017 to 2021. Lastly, we conducted an interview in September 2022 with a former W+K creative to confirm that our findings are representative of W+K's approach to creating campaigns and collaborating with clients.

**Table 1** Overview of Dataset

Type of Data	Size of Data Set	Purpose of Data
Nike/W+K Owned	16 company reports 19 press releases 17 blog posts 4 published staff interviews	Insight into the rationale behind the brand's campaigns as well as into the brand's official responses to controversies
Media Publications	295 online newspaper/magazine articles	Documentation of the performance of campaigns and coverage of controversies as they unfolded
Public Posts	1,853 YouTube comments 148 blog posts 10 online forum discussions 768 social media posts 4 Twitter threads	Insight into the public's responses to Nike's campaigns as well as to the revelations of corporate wrongdoings



## Findings

In this section, we present our findings regarding Nike, Inc./W+K's three major activist campaigns centred on women's empowerment from 2017 to 2021 as well as regarding the controversies from this period surrounding discrimination of female employees at Nike, Inc. To answer our central research question of how marketing communications agencies and their collaborations with brands influence brands' moral competency development and ability to engage in authentic activism, we use these findings to develop a conceptual framework, which is presented in Fig. 1. We now provide a summary of our framework before explaining each of its phases in detail and providing illustrative data from our case study.

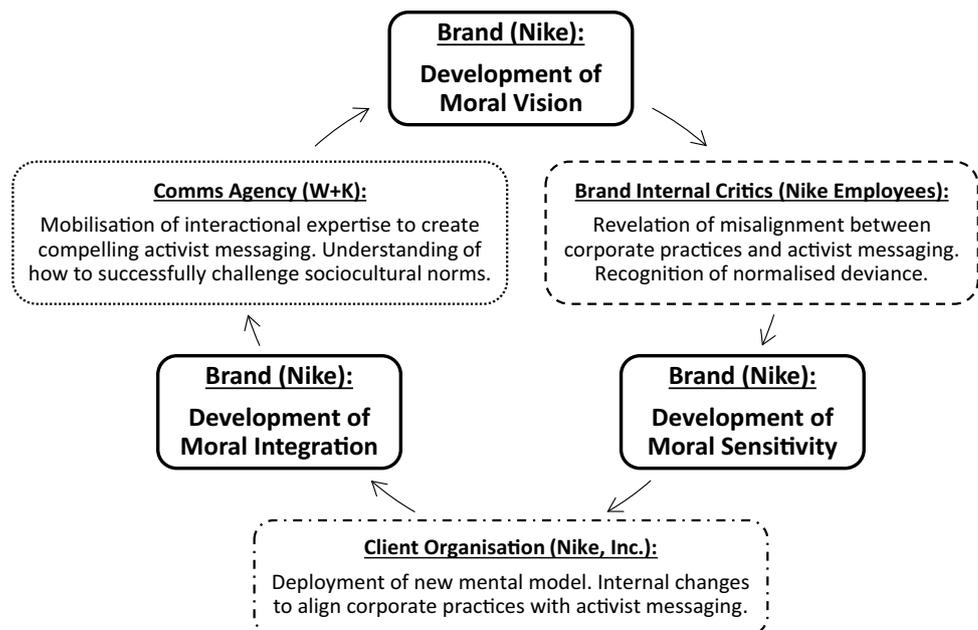
Our conceptual framework presents a cyclical model of an activist brand's moral competency development broken down into three main phases, namely the brand's development of moral vision, moral sensitivity, and moral integration. The development of moral vision is driven by the marketing communications agency. Having been commissioned by the client organisation to create an activist campaign, the agency mobilises its interactional expertise based on its research into and engagement with the campaign's target audience to devise messaging capable of successfully challenging sociocultural norms. However, since the client has outsourced the brand's interactional expertise to the agency, the agency has a higher degree of moral competency and thus develops the brand's moral vision beyond the client's capability, which results in a misalignment between the brand's activist messaging

and corporate practices. Consequently, while the activist campaign is initially perceived as authentic by its target audience, its prosocial messaging leads client employees (current and former) to recognise issues of normalised deviance within their organisation. To bring about internal change, these employees start to criticise their organisation and may even do so publicly, in which case the campaign's target audience begins to perceive the brand's activism as inauthentic and attacks the brand accordingly. This recognition of normalised deviance, and the internal and external pressures on the brand to change, drive the brand's development of moral sensitivity. The client organisation then deploys a new mental model based on its improved moral sensitivity and aligns its corporate practices with the brand's activist messaging. These changes drive the brand's development of moral integration. To ensure that the brand is once again perceived as an authentic activist, the client organisation commissions the agency to create a new activist campaign. However, the agency must now continue to develop the brand's moral vision and challenge sociocultural norms to ensure that the brand is not perceived as merely conformist. This causes the cycle to repeat.

### Development of moral vision

In the first phase of our conceptual framework, the marketing communications agency, W+K, having been commissioned by the client organisation, Nike, Inc., to create an activist campaign, mobilises interactional expertise to understand the moral issues and evaluative frameworks of the campaign's target audience. Table 2 provides an

**Fig. 1** A cyclical model of an activist brand's moral competency development through collaboration with a marketing communications agency



**Table 2** Overview of Nike's major 'women's empowerment' campaigns created by W+K, 2017–2021

Activist Campaign	Description & Responses
March 2017 'What will they say about you?'	According to W+K (2017b), the Middle Eastern version of the campaign, which launched alongside Russian and Turkish versions to celebrate International Women's Day, poses "a question many young Arab females are challenged with at home. Women are met with this phrase from family and friends when they endeavour to try something unexpected or try to push boundaries beyond social norms. Our campaign for Nike Middle East launched with a film highlighting five remarkable women who have achieved personal success through competitive and amateur sport. Despite concerns or criticism, these women hope that the world will say they're pioneers, role models and strong voices for their region".
February 2019 'Dream Crazier'	According to W+K (2019), the campaign, which launched in the lead-up to International Women's Day and which is narrated by Serena Williams, "shines a spotlight on female athletes who have broken barriers, brought people together through their performance and inspired generations of athletes to chase after their dreams"
March 2021 'The Toughest Athletes'	According to W+K (2021), the campaign, which launched on mothers' day in the UK and alongside the release of Nike's first maternity clothing collection (Nike News 2020), "captures the power and strength of women during one of the most transformative stages of their lives, pregnancy and early motherhood. 'The Toughest Athletes' illuminates the correlation of sport and motherhood through the lens of more than 20 mothers across various stages of their pregnancy and postpartum journeys and is underscored by the likes of Serena Williams, Alex Morgan, Perri Edwards, Bianca Williams, Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce and Nia Ali — along with everyday female athletes".

overview of our case study's three focal Nike activist campaigns created by W+K. For example, the 2017 *What will they say about you?* campaign aimed to address societal, physical, and cultural barriers faced by women engaged in sports in the Middle East, Russia, and Turkey. To come to understand these barriers, staff from W+K Amsterdam immersed themselves "into the culture of the three regions, through long stays, focus groups and constant check-ins with folks in the market" (W+K, 2017a). This prolonged immersion in the target audience's social world and direct engagement with its members represents a typical approach for W+K, which it has also used to connect with other kinds of audiences, including, for example, London youth (see, e.g. Kiefer 2018). Notably, members of client organisations do not participate in this immersive research.

When asked why W+K Amsterdam was better placed to create international campaigns than local agencies, W+K's Nike Creative Director Al Merry said, "It's also down to people in this place—we've got more nationalities in here than a Eurovision song contest" (W+K, 2017a). Fostering staff diversity and engagement with social causes is another key aspect of W+K that helps it more easily connect with diverse target audiences. W+K's global agency network is a Certified B Corporation (Lundstrom 2023). At W+K's Portland headquarters, nearly 70% of department heads and most paid interns were people of colour or women in 2019, and they participated in various creative projects such as *On She Goes*, a digital travel platform aimed at and run by women of colour (Beer 2019). One of W+K Tokyo's Executive Creative Directors described the agency as follows:

We're unlike anyplace else because of all the sparks that the rubbing together of different cultures and languages brings. So, you not only have to walk in stupid, you need to walk in like an open sandwich. Willing to accept a bunch of unlikely ingredients piled on top of all your well-baked assumptions and expectations. (W+K 2018)

The mobilisation of interactional expertise then enables W+K to develop and demonstrate the brand's moral vision by defining meaningful and ethical goals and actions in their activist campaigns that resonate with target audiences and that successfully contribute to solving contemporary sociocultural problems. Table 3 presents an overview of the overwhelmingly positive reactions to W+K's Nike campaigns related to women's empowerment, which were frequently praised for accurately capturing the social and cultural challenges faced by women. Even in those instances where people commented on social media that Nike was merely trying to sell trainers, they still tended to praise the campaigns' portrayal of women and prosocial messaging. Furthermore, positive social media comments regularly used the campaigns' official hashtags alongside other prominent hashtags, including #InternationalWomensDay, #WomenEmpowerment, and #WomenInSport, among others. The 'What will they say about you?' campaign even spawned the hashtag #DearSisters, which went viral as tens of thousands of Muslim women across the world shared their experiences of being undermined by men (Drury 2017). Thus, W+K successfully challenged sociocultural norms, motivating women to share their personal experiences publicly and to openly



**Table 3** Overview of the immediate and overwhelmingly positive responses to Nike's major 'women's empowerment' campaigns created by W+K, 2017–2021

Activist Campaign	Description & Responses
March 2017 'What will they say about you?'	<p>The campaign is widely praised for representing Muslim women and signifying the realities of women wearing hijabs as well as of those who do not cover (e.g. Eltahawy 2017; Natividad 2017)</p> <p>The YouTube ad is shared more than 75,000 times on Twitter and viewed more than 1.5 million times on the Nike Women YouTube channel in less than two days (Ahmed 2017)</p> <p>#DearSisters goes viral with tens of thousands of Muslim women across the world sharing their experiences of being lectured by men, often accompanying their tweets with other hashtags, such as #InternationalWomensDay, #WomankindWorldwide, #CultureNotReligion and #MillionWomenRise (Drury 2017)</p>
February 2019 'Dream Crazier'	<p>The campaign is widely praised by members of several social movements advocating for women's empowerment (e.g. House 2019; Hutchins 2019)</p> <p>Within one day, the ad is viewed over 6 million times on YouTube and more than 28 million times on Twitter (Anušić, 2022)</p> <p>Many use #DreamCrazier on Twitter alongside other hashtags such as #WomenEmpowerment, #WomenInSport, and #FreeToRun</p>
March 2021 'The Toughest Athletes'	<p>The campaign is widely praised by members of several social movements advocating for motherhood as well as by former Nike athletes who had previously criticised Nike's treatment of pregnant athletes (e.g. Pahr 2021; Stanford 2021; Williams 2021)</p>

criticise the status-quo. As a result, the brand was widely perceived as an authentic activist following each campaign. Through in-depth research and prolonged engagement with target audiences, W+K demonstrated the ability to compel a range of groups, including not only female athletes, Arab women, and mothers but also BLM protestors, London youth, and many others that are present in our dataset.

### Development of moral sensitivity

However, following each campaign, this successful challenging of sociocultural norms then led Nike, Inc. employees to publicly criticise any of the brand's corporate practices that they considered misaligned with the moral vision demonstrated in W+K's campaigns. The brand thus failed to demonstrate moral sensitivity, i.e. the "ability to recognise the moral content of situations" (Sibai et al 2021, p. 1659), including those created by its own actions. Consequently, Nike ended up being widely attacked by the public for being a deviant inauthentic activist. Table 4 provides an overview of our case study's two focal controversies regarding the discrimination of female employees at Nike Inc.

Again, it is important to note that the employees of client organisations do not typically participate in the research activities of their marketing communications agencies, and that these agencies tend to only interact with their clients' marketing departments. In the specific case of W+K, senior W+K staff have even emphasised the importance of maintaining some distance and separation from clients to be able to reflect critically on their ideas and practices, even if doing so risks upsetting them (Beer 2019). This highlights W+K's willingness to potentially develop the moral vision of a brand

to a greater level than what the moral skills of the client organisation can support. Thus, since the client organisation has essentially outsourced important interactional expertise, and since the development of the brand's moral vision is thus largely confined to the practices of the agency, the agency's successful mobilisation of interactional expertise is unlikely to have a direct impact on the client organisation's corporate practices, and thus the overall development of the brand's moral sensitivity and moral integration. Consequently, Nike, Inc. is more likely to be relatively lacking in moral sensitivity and thus to ignore pressing moral issues, including those created by its very own actions, and risks manifesting issues of normalised deviance.

In our case study of Nike, this happened first following the brand's successful 2017 'What will they say about you?' campaign. In 2018, the brand was widely attacked as part of the #MeToo movement after female Nike, Inc. employees revealed systematic sexual harassment and gender discrimination at the company (Creswell et al 2018). Nike was then attacked again following the brand's successful 2019 'Dream Crazier' campaign. After the campaign's launch, former female Nike athletes revealed how poorly Nike, Inc. had treated them once they had become pregnant and thus unable to compete at the highest levels as Nike brand ambassadors (Felix 2019; Montano, 2019). In direct response to the campaign's official 'DreamCrazier' hashtag, these former Nike athletes created the hashtag 'DreamMaternity', which quickly developed into a social movement of women sharing their personal experiences concerning maternity contracts publicly (Moore 2019). In their criticisms of the brand, the former Nike athletes made direct reference to the 'Dream Crazier' campaign, explaining how seeing it had



**Table 4** Overview of controversies following Nike's 'women's empowerment' campaigns, 2017–2021

Brand Controversy	Description
March 2018 Nike's #MeToo moment	Female Nike employees publish the findings of a survey on gender discrimination and sexual harassment at Nike in <i>The New York Times</i> . The findings reveal a “boys' club” culture where female employees had been belittled, discriminated against, and overlooked for promotion (Creswell et al 2018) Several activist groups criticise Nike, mostly on Twitter as part of the #MeToo movement. These criticisms gain momentum, and the brand is widely attacked
May 2019 Nike's maternity blunder	Alysia Montaña, former Olympian known as the “pregnant runner” for having competed in a race in 2014 while 34 weeks pregnant (Blades 2020), writes an opinion piece in <i>The New York Times</i> titled “Nike Told Me to Dream Crazy, Until I Wanted a Baby” (Montaña, 2019). According to Montaña, Nike's 'Dream Crazier' campaign is “just advertising” Allyson Felix, former Nike athlete and most decorated woman in Olympic track and field history, also shares her pregnancy story in <i>The New York Times</i> (Felix 2019). According to Felix, when she became pregnant in late 2018, Nike wanted to impose a 70% pay cut. She then underwent an emergency c-section due to severe pre-eclampsia, which threatened her life and that of her baby. In 2019, she accepted Nike's pay cut, however, she requested to not be financially penalised for not performing her best due to her pregnancy. Nike declined her request Former Nike athletes start the 'Dream Maternity' hashtag, calling for Nike to change its policies regarding pregnant athletes (Moore 2019) #DreamMaternity quickly develops into a social movement where women share their experiences regarding maternity contracts

motivated them to speak out against the brand's corporate practices. According to them, the campaign was “just advertising” (Montaña 2019).

There are other instances too where Nike, Inc. employees were directly motivated by the brand's own activist campaigns to voice criticisms against the company's practices. For example, black Nike employees, who were part of a diversity task force, objected internally to the brand's continued use of activist campaigns in 2020; these objections were later made public. After these employees had become aware of a new activist campaign under development, they urged the company to publicly declare its own diversity shortcomings, stating that they had “a growing feeling internally that we were talking the talk outside but not walking the walk inside” (Germano 2020). Thus, while W+K's mobilisation of interactional expertise did not impact Nike's development of moral sensitivity directly, it has done so indirectly by

successfully challenging sociocultural norms and successfully defining ethical goals and actions, thereby enabling employees of the brand to publicly criticise any normalised deviance and corporate practices not aligned with the moral vision demonstrated in the brand's messaging. Following the brand's development of moral sensitivity, the brand then initiates necessary changes to develop its moral integration.

### Development of moral integration

Following the attacks on the brand, Nike, Inc. implemented significant changes to develop and demonstrate the brand's moral integration, i.e. its ability to stay morally coherent across audiences and over time (Sibai et al 2021). In response to the #MeToo controversy, these changes included the resignations of several senior male employees (Rovell 2018; Creswell et al 2018), the appointments of Kellie



Leonard as Nike, Inc.'s first Chief of Diversity and Inclusivity and Amy Montagne as Vice President and General Manager of Global Categories (Duffy 2018, Business Wire 2018), and the implementation of mandatory management training concerning equality and inclusivity (Germano and Lublin 2018). In response to attacks initiated by former female athletes, Nike revised its maternity policy, giving greater financial protection to its pregnant athletes (Kilgore 2019).

Having aligned its corporate practices with its activist messaging, Nike could then launch new activist campaigns to demonstrate its improved moral competency. The fact that it changed its corporate practices following each controversy was sufficient for its follow-up campaigns to be widely perceived as authentic brand activism, as outlined above. Thus, following the #MeToo controversy, which had been initiated by female employees that then Nike CEO Mark Parker called "strong and courageous" (Hess 2018), the brand launched its 'Dream Crazier' campaign, shining "a spotlight on female athletes who have broken barriers, brought people together through their performance and inspired generations of athletes to chase after their dreams" (W+K 2019). However, to ensure that the brand was not perceived as merely conformist, W+K's campaign needed to continue to challenge sociocultural norms, giving rise to Nike's maternity controversy, as explained above. Following this controversy, the brand then launched its 'The Toughest Athletes' campaign, capturing "the power and strength of women during one of the most transformative stages of their lives, pregnancy and early motherhood" (W+K 2021), and thereby directly communicating that it had addressed the controversy and developed greater moral competency. In doing so, the brand once again demonstrated moral integration. Thus, as W+K continued to develop Nike's moral vision beyond the brand's other moral skills, Nike continued to face criticism and continued to be forced to develop its moral sensitivity and moral integration in line with the brand's moral vision developed by W+K.

## Discussion and conclusion

Through our case study of Nike, Inc./W+K activist campaigns and Nike controversies, we set out to address the question of how marketing communications agencies and their collaborations with brands influence brands' moral competency development and ability to engage in authentic activism. Our findings show that communications agencies play a significant role, particularly in the development and demonstration of brand's moral vision. Tasked with creating compelling messaging that resonates with target audiences, communications agencies are specialists in the mobilisation of interactional expertise, which enables them to define

ethical and meaningful goals and actions that successfully challenge sociocultural norms and help solve contemporary problems for society. By successfully challenging sociocultural norms, these communications agencies then help stakeholders, including employees from across a brand's network, to develop moral sensitivity, i.e. to better recognise the moral content of situations and to identify and raise pressing moral issues, including those created by a brand's own actions. As a result, these stakeholders recognise and can address any issues of normalised deviance. This revelation of deviant practices misaligned with activist messaging, however, is likely to result in accusations of inauthentic activism, which then forces brands to develop moral integration by changing their deviant practices to ensure that they stay morally coherent across all audiences, including external as well as internal stakeholders.

The above highlights two key contributions to the literature on authentic brand activism. First, our study shows that moral competency is not a static feature of activist brands but a dynamic one, whereby moral skills are developed (and lost) over time. Previous research into authentic brand activism has focused on how activist brands can authenticate their activism through, for example, effective storytelling (see Key et al 2021) and the successful communication of moral skills (see Sibai et al 2021) to create perceived authenticity (see, e.g. Mirzaei et al 2022; Schmidt et al 2022). These studies have thus framed activist brands as either having or lacking the moral competency required to authenticate their activism. Our study, in contrast, explores the practices underlying activist brands' moral competency development, and how these enable activist brands to authenticate their activism through both effective marketing communications as well as continuous improvements of corporate practices. Here, we have identified interactional expertise as a key driver of moral competency development. Interactional expertise, first, enables activist brands' marketing communications agencies to generate perceived authenticity by creating compelling stories that resonate with target audiences and successfully demonstrate a brand's moral competency. Furthermore, interactional expertise then enables actors within a brand to engage in moral imagination and to recognise and address any issues of normalised deviance, thereby ensuring alignment of corporate practices with activist messaging and thus the brand's ability to continue engaging in authentic activism.

Second, by demonstrating the influence of marketing communications agencies on brands' moral competency development, our study shows that brands' ability to engage in authentic activism is not developed by a single organisation but through a network of organisations and their collaborations. As noted above, the literature on authentic brand activism to date has tended to consider an activist brand authentic if it was perceived so by key stakeholders, such as



consumers or investors (see, e.g. Bhagwat et al 2020; Key et al 2021; Mirzaei et al 2022; Schmidt et al 2022; Sibai et al 2021). Thus, while previous studies have emphasised the importance of aligning prosocial messaging, corporate practices, purpose, and values over time (see, e.g. Vredenburg et al 2020), they have tended to explore only activist brands' ability to create the perception of such an alignment, not their ability to actually achieve this alignment, and have consequently not explored the underlying organisational complexities. In contrast, our study highlights that marketing communications agencies not only help their clients authenticate their activism through the creation of compelling messaging, but also through their own contribution of moral skills, underpinned by their interactional expertise, to brands' overall moral competency. Here, our study demonstrates that an unequal distribution of moral skills across a brand's network drives that brand's moral competency development. In particular, as morally competent actors within a brand successfully push sociocultural norms beyond the capabilities of less morally competent actors within that brand, misalignments between messaging, practices, purpose, and values emerge. While this can initially lead to criticisms of inauthentic activism, the resulting need to address these misalignments requires less morally competent actors to improve their moral skills, and thus the brand's overall moral competency.

### Practical implications

Several important principles can be derived from our study that brands should follow if they plan to engage in authentic activism. First, activist brands should conduct a set of moral competency audits, at the very least prior to the launch of each activist campaign. This should include a moral competency audit of the marketing communications agency (and of any other relevant collaborators) to ensure that the agency can successfully develop and demonstrate the brand's moral vision. Here, activist brands should pay attention to how well the agency is already immersed in the social world of the target audience and allow sufficient time for further immersion to facilitate the mobilisation of interactional expertise. Activist brands should then also conduct moral competency audits of their internal departments and corporate practices to ensure that the brand's moral sensitivity and integration are aligned with its campaign's moral vision. Doing so before each campaign's launch, e.g. by running it past relevant employee committees, will help safeguard the brand from being accused of inauthentic activism. Scoring the moral skills of internal departments and external collaborators could then be used to map how a brand's moral skills are distributed across its network to proactively highlight any gaps. Furthermore, activist brands should not rely entirely on communications agencies' ability to mobilise interactional

expertise. Instead, they should encourage actors from across their departments and collaborators to become immersed in the social worlds of their target audiences and to practice moral imagination to avoid issues of normalised deviance. Here, marketing departments (and any others engaged with external collaborators) can function as change agents by bringing other departments, such as HR for example, into the marketing communications creation process and by facilitating the exchange of interactional expertise and moral skills across the brand's network.

### Limitations and future research directions

While we have conducted one interview with a former W+K creative to confirm our general findings, our dataset does not contain any other sources internal to our focal organisations, such as interviews with current managers or ethnographic observations. Since our argument concerns the organisational practices underpinning moral competency development, this is a significant limitation of our study. Therefore, we call for future research to remedy this. As we argued previously, the literature on authentic brand activism has predominantly explored public perceptions of activist campaigns, as opposed to the skills and forms of expertise mobilised by the organisations comprising activist brands and how they are developed dynamically. Consequently, this literature has yet to capture fully the complexity of authentic brand activism as practiced by a network of actors with potentially varying moral competency. We therefore see great potential in the study of authentic brand activism from organisations' perspectives as well as in the development of moral competency audits and scales that brands can use to map moral skills across their networks.

### Declarations

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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