

Cross-Cultural Perspectives On Generative Ai-Driven Brand Activist Messages: A Comparative Thematic Analysis Of The United States, Sweden, And Italy

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Abstract

In an era where consumers increasingly demand authenticity from brands, the emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) in activist communication poses new challenges. This study explores cross-cultural perceptions of GAI-generated brand activist messages through a qualitative thematic analysis involving 38 participants from Italy, Sweden, and the United States. It examines how different national contexts shape expectations of authenticity, emotional resonance, transparency, and responsibility in AI-generated communication. Findings reveal five key themes: authenticity and consistency, the role of human agency, transparency and accountability, limited empathy, and context-specific appropriateness. While AI was broadly accepted as a supportive tool, participants emphasized that credible activism still requires human presence: a deliberate, value-driven commitment rooted in authentic beliefs, along with the ability to feel, express, and respond to complex emotions, which AI tools are evidently unable to replicate. GAI was seen as more appropriate for environmental causes, perceived as data-driven, than for social justice issues demanding personal understanding and a human voice. Cultural differences shaped these views: Italians focused on sincerity and alignment with brand values, Swedes adopted a practical approach, assessing functional relevance and transparency, and US respondents evaluated whether activism matched the brand's business and offerings. Despite these differences, shared skepticism emerged toward fully AI-authored activism lacking human oversight and emotional credibility. This study contributes to branding and communication research by highlighting the sociocultural filters through which GAI-generated activism is interpreted. It calls for hybrid, culturally sensitive strategies that preserve human authenticity while leveraging technological innovation in cause-related messaging.

Keywords: Brand Activism, Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI), Brand Communications, AI-generated content (AICG), Thematic analysis, Cross-cultural study

1. Introduction

In recent years, brand activism has emerged as a contemporary corporate and marketing communication strategy (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). Unlike traditional corporate social responsibility, which often centers on risk mitigation and compliance, brand activism entails companies taking a public stand on contentious social, political, or environmental issues

(Vredenburg et al., 2020). This approach reflects a broader shift toward purpose-driven branding, where organizations align themselves with causes that resonate with consumer values in order to build deeper emotional connections and longterm loyalty (Hajdas & Kleczek, 2021). In doing so, brands become active participants in public discourse, influencing societal norms and expectations.

This rise of brand activism reflects a growing consumer expectation: audiences demand concrete action over declared values and reject superficial “greenwashing” or “wokewashing” that lack authenticity or substance (Mirzaei et al., 2022).

As consumers increasingly expect activist brands to demonstrate authenticity not only through their actions but also in how they communicate their values, this demand now risks colliding with a major technological shift. Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) is transforming the way brand messages are conceived and delivered, automating the creation of content that was once crafted by humans. Companies can now generate complex campaign materials, including texts, visuals, and multimedia, automatically and at scale, using tools such as ChatGPT, DALL·E, and Midjourney (De Cicco et al., 2025).

The rise of GAI presents a new paradox for brand activism: while audiences expect activist campaigns to convey personal commitment, emotional connection, and genuine values, brands may increasingly rely on automated systems that lack the human depth as well as the moral and emotional resonance typically associated with authentic activist messaging. This introduces important tensions: although GAI offers efficiency, creativity, and cost savings, it may also raise concerns about perceived authenticity, especially in domains that require emotional or moral engagement (Brüns & Meißner, 2024).

To date, there is a surprising lack of research exploring how GAI-generated content is perceived when used in brand activism. While a growing number of studies have examined consumer responses to AI-generated content (AIGC) in marketing (De Cicco et al., 2025; Song et al., 2024; Arango et al., 2023), none have focused on the emotionally and ethically charged context of activist communication, where authenticity, empathy, and trust are not just desirable but essential. This represents a critical gap, especially as more brands begin to experiment with GAI to scale up their value-driven messaging.

Another important aspect that has been largely overlooked in the literature is that understanding consumer perceptions of GAI content by activist brands requires acknowledging that cultural context can shape how brand activism and emerging technologies like GAI are interpreted.

To address this gap, the present study explores aspects such as consumers’ perceptions of authenticity, emotional resonance, and ethical expectations in response to GAI-generated activist campaigns.

The study adopts a qualitative approach and a cross-cultural perspective by comparing Italy, the United States, and Sweden. These nations differ in their levels of cultural tightness-looseness, that is the extent to which societies enforce social norms and tolerate deviations (Gelfand et al., 2011), which may help explain varying degrees of openness to disruptive innovation and to brands that adopt unconventional or valuedriven stances.

In sum, this exploratory research investigates i) how AI-generated activist campaigns are perceived by individuals and (ii) how cultural context shapes responses to such communication, offering timely insights for brands operating within an increasingly technological and purpose-driven landscape.

2. Literature background and conceptual framework

In an increasingly polarized and socially conscious marketplace, brands face growing pressure to take public stances on sociopolitical issues. This form of engagement, known as brand activism, represents both a powerful strategic tool and a potential reputational minefield (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). Research conducted to date on this topic has established that brands perceived as genuinely engaged in activism, and whose actions align with their historical mission and business practices, are more likely to gain consumer legitimacy. In contrast, when activism is perceived as a reactive marketing tactic or lacks substantive commitment, it is often regarded as inauthentic (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

A cornerstone of effective brand activism is perceived authenticity, defined as the extent to which consumers believe that a brand's activist messaging genuinely reflects its core values and practices (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018). Authenticity is not a decorative feature, but a prerequisite for credibility and impact. When absent, activism risks being perceived as opportunistic and merely performative, potentially provoking backlash and eroding consumer trust (Key et al., 2023). Authentic brand activism demands deep alignment between a brand's values, its internal culture, and its public messaging. Empirical evidence underscores that authenticity enhances brand trust, particularly when consumers perceive alignment between the brand's stance and their own values (Nguyen et al., 2023). This effect is amplified when the brand's messages are seen as transparent, emotionally attuned, and consistent across platforms such as social media, advertising, and corporate behavior (Chu et al., 2023).

The need for a deeper comprehension of this dynamic emerges when examining how authenticity is perceived and negotiated. Consumers are far from passive recipients; they actively assess not only the content of a brand's message but also the way it is conveyed, paying close attention to whether the brand listens and responds in a meaningful way. Moral clarity, openness to dialogue, shared empathy, and the ability to address complex and potentially controversial topics without appearing self-serving are essential to this process (Sibai et al., 2021).

The heightened vigilance of today's audiences requires brands to ensure strong internal coherence before engaging in activist communication, in order to avoid the risks and repercussions of lacking genuine commitment to the values they publicly endorse (Ahmad et al., 2024). When audiences detect such dissonance, the reputational fallout can be severe (Francioni et al., 2025).

Authenticity must be cultivated at every level of the organization, as without this holistic integration, activist messages are unlikely to persuade or endure (Ahmad et al., 2024). Rather than being a static attribute, authenticity should be understood as a dynamic construct shaped by consumers' ongoing interpretation of a brand's values, actions, and communications. It is formed through a continuous evaluation of cues that go beyond the message itself (Mathur & Nayak, 2025).

Among the various cues considered by consumers, the authorship of content has gained relevance in the era of GAI. Emerging research indicates that GAI content is often perceived differently compared to content created by humans, with implications for authenticity judgments that are not uniformly positive (Arango et al., 2023). Studies demonstrate that audiences tend to judge content more harshly when it is attributed to GAI rather than a human, highlighting that AI-driven messages, even when factually correct or stylistically effective, can elicit discomfort or distrust if they are not accompanied by signals of human sensibility and oversight (e.g. De Cicco et al. 2025). As brands explore GAI-driven campaigns, attracted by their potential for efficiency, personalization, and scalability, they

also encounter a new challenge: preserving authenticity when the ‘communicator’ is no longer human (Brüns & Meißner, 2024). While GAI content may be widely accepted in contexts that are informational or functional, its application in emotionally or morally significant messaging creates a delicate balance between efficiency and credibility (Kirk & Givi, 2025; Arango et al., 2023). Consumers often perceive messages authored by humans as more emotionally resonant, morally grounded, and trustworthy (Kirk & Givi, 2025). These qualities are particularly important in the context of activist communication, where sincerity and ethical awareness are essential to establishing credibility. When the source of a message is understood to be an algorithm rather than a human being, doubts about the message’s authenticity may emerge. This skepticism becomes especially pronounced when GAI content is perceived as emotionally flat and lacking in contextual sensitivity (Garcia, 2024).

Consumers critically assess the alignment between a brand’s activist messaging and its broader values (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Sibai et al., 2021), paying particular attention to the perceived authenticity and depth of commitment in how such messages are delivered. Considering recent literature on brand activism and consumer responses to GAI-generated content, this raises a pressing challenge: as brands increasingly rely on GAI technologies to communicate, questions arise as to whether this reliance may compromise perceived authenticity, and how any resulting decline in credibility and trust could be mitigated (Spálová, 2023).

The integration of GAI into brand communication has brought renewed attention to how authenticity is perceived, highlighting the influence not only of message content but also of the cultural context in which it is received.

Previous studies show that GAI-generated messages are perceived differently across distinct cultural settings, for example, between Western and East Asian countries (Wu et al., 2020), suggesting that such evaluations are culturally specific rather than universal. These differences are particularly relevant when GAI is used in emotionally and ethically sensitive areas such as activist communication. Examining how audiences from different cultural backgrounds respond to GAI activist messages is therefore a necessary step in assessing whether this type of communication supports or undermines the perceived legitimacy of brand activism.

This exploratory study examines three countries: the United States, which plays a central role in both technological innovation and public discourse on activism, and Italy and Sweden, two member states of the European Union that, despite their geographical proximity and shared European political framework, exhibit significant differences in their approaches to social issues and in the acceptance and adoption of AI. These national differences in cultural orientation and technological adoption provide a relevant foundation for understanding how GAI activist messages may be received differently across contexts.

Sweden is characterized by high levels of societal trust, proactive governmental policies on AI, and strong openness toward innovation (AI Commission, 2024). Italy, by contrast, adopts a more cautious stance toward technology, with AI uptake still limited among both citizens and businesses. A significant portion of the population faces difficulties with basic digital skills, and the country records the lowest percentage of ICT graduates in the European Union (European Commission, 2024). These factors contribute to the slow integration of AI into everyday life. The adoption of AI technologies remains limited among Italian companies, reflecting broader societal skepticism and relatively low levels of digital literacy (Eunews, 2025). By contrast, the United States holds a distinctive position in the global AI landscape, characterized by technological leadership and the early, widespread adoption of AI applications (Microsoft, 2025). US consumers are highly exposed to AI-powered services and tend to feel comfortable with technological innovation. However, their perception of AI

remains context-dependent, with more favorable attitudes emerging when applications are perceived to enhance efficiency and personalization (Pew Research Center, 2023). This comparison allows the study to explore how cultural factors influence the perception of messages created through GAI and intended to communicate meaningful brand values. It provides an important initial contribution to understanding whether GAI supports brands in conveying activist messages that resonate with audiences or, conversely, generates a sense of detachment and skepticism.

The research also investigates whether the reception of such messages varies according to the thematic focus of the campaign, such as social, political, or environmental issues, and how this may affect perceptions of authenticity and emotional engagement.

This line of inquiry offers significant contributions from both theoretical and managerial perspectives. From a theoretical standpoint, it deepens the current understanding of the relationship between GAI and value-driven communication in culturally diverse contexts. From a managerial perspective, it provides timely insights for brands aiming to engage in activist communication while preserving perceived authenticity and supports more informed decision-making when using AI in emotionally sensitive campaigns.

3. Methodology

In an increasingly polarized and socially conscious marketplace, brands face growing pressure to take public stances on sociopolitical issues. This form of engagement, known as brand activism, represents both a powerful strategic tool and a potential reputational minefield (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). Research conducted to date on this topic has established that brands perceived as genuinely engaged in activism, and whose actions align with their historical mission and business practices, are more likely to gain consumer legitimacy. In contrast, when activism is perceived as a reactive marketing tactic or lacks substantive commitment, it is often regarded as inauthentic (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

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4. Results and discussions

4.1 Sample Description

This section presents a general overview of the socio-demographic characteristics and attitudinal dispositions of the participants involved in the study. These insights help contextualize the explorative analysis by highlighting potential underlying factors that may shape participants' evaluations of AI-generated brand activism. The preliminary results serve as a foundation for the deeper, culturally based insights explored through the thematic analysis.

Specifically, the Italian sample showed a higher average age (38 years) compared to the Swedish (29.5 years) and USA (29 years) participants. This age difference may have influenced the perspectives expressed, particularly in terms of ethical reflection maturity and exposure to long-term environmental and social narratives.

In terms of gender distribution, the Italian and Swedish samples were predominantly female (9F/4M and 8F/5M, respectively), whereas the U.S. sample skewed slightly male (7M/3F, with 2 unspecified genders).

After assessing the demographic characteristics, respondents were asked to report their attentiveness to social and environmental issues, as well as their general attitude toward AI. When evaluating environmental and social awareness, Italians reported the highest levels of both social ($M = 5.85$) and environmental attentiveness ($M = 5.15$). These results indicate a particularly strong sensitivity to issues related to social justice and environmental responsibility. The U.S. sample followed with slightly lower but comparable scores (Social $M = 5.3$, Environmental $M = 5.0$). Swedish respondents scored marginally lower (both around $M = 4.9$). Although slightly lower, these scores still exceed the midpoint of the scale, indicating that Swedish respondents demonstrate a considerable, though relatively less pronounced, attentiveness to social and environmental concerns.

When asked about their attitude toward AI, all three groups expressed a stance of cautious optimism. Among the Italian respondents, 7 described their attitude toward AI as “fairly favorable” and 3 as “very favorable.” A similar pattern was observed among the Swedish participants, with 6 moderately and 4 strongly supportive. Among the U.S. participants, 10 expressed a “fairly favorable” attitude.

However, when it came to GAI in content creation, neutrality dominated: Italians ($n = 8$) and U.S. participants ($n = 10$) showed a majority of neutral positions, while Swedes displayed a balanced mix of neutrality ($n = 6$), positivity ($n = 3$), and criticism ($n = 4$). The observed differences across national samples, particularly in social and environmental sensitivity and considerations, and openness to AI, provide important cultural and perceptual lenses through which subsequent themes are interpreted.

4.2 Thematic analysis: an interpretation through cultural tightness-looseness

Five major themes emerged from the thematic analysis, offering insight into the ways GAI-driven activist messages are interpreted across cultural contexts.

To enrich the interpretation of the qualitative data, the thematic findings were mapped against the average tightness-looseness scores of each country. According to the scores from the present sample, Sweden ($M = 4.2$) represents the least tight cultural context, followed by Italy ($M = 4.7$), which occupies an intermediate position between the two nations. The United States, with an average score of 5.0, reflects the tightest cultural environment among the three nations in the sample. This comparison provides additional insight into how cultural expectations and normative clarity may help contextualize participants’ responses to AI-driven activist communication.

When interpreting the results of the cultural tightness-looseness scale, some interesting variations emerge when compared to the general patterns outlined in Gelfand et al. (2011). While these comparisons should be made with due caution, they offer useful points of reflection. In the case of Sweden, a direct comparison is not possible, as the country was not included in the original cross-national dataset. Nevertheless, considering existing evidence from other Nordic countries included in their study, the relatively lower levels of perceived tightness observed in our Swedish sample may point to a slightly different pattern than initially assumed. For Italy, the findings appear broadly consistent with previous classifications that position the country as moderately tight. The United States presents an interesting case. Whereas prior studies have typically characterized it as one of the loosest cultures (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2011), our findings indicate a somewhat higher level of perceived tightness compared to Italy. This shift in the relative positioning between the two countries

may reflect changing cultural perceptions or context-specific factors influencing respondents' interpretation.

Overall, although our findings are not radically divergent from those of Gelfand et al. (2011), some variations in the relative ranking of countries are observable. These differences highlight the importance of considering both temporal and contextual influences when interpreting cross-cultural data and suggest that perceptions of cultural tightness-looseness may be more fluid than previously assumed. The following sections explore the main emerging themes.

Theme #1: Authenticity and consistency in activist branding

The first identified theme concerns how people perceive brands engaged in activism and highlights that perceived authenticity depends on the alignment between a brand's public messages and its concrete actions. Participants across all countries expressed distrust toward what they described as "performative" activism, indicating communication efforts that promote socially relevant causes without being backed by real, consistent actions. When evaluating AI-generated activist messages, respondents looked for specific evidence of consistency: for example, whether a brand that promotes gender equality also demonstrates inclusive hiring practices or shares progress on measurable diversity goals. Authenticity, in this sense, was judged not by the sophistication of the message but by whether the company "practiced what it preached" in visible, traceable ways.

Interestingly, the interpretative lens of authenticity varied across cultures. In Italy, authenticity was mainly defined in terms of alignment between declared values and actual behavior, especially on ethical and moral grounds. Participants underscored the necessity of value alignment: "If it supports a cause, I want to see consistency in its daily choices: how it produces, who it works with, how it treats people. (...) Most importantly, when it shows the results of what it says (completed projects, measurable impact, tangible change) only then do I feel there is sincere commitment and not just marketing" (IT2).

While the Swedish participants demonstrated a trend broadly aligned with that of the Italian respondents, nuanced distinctions were observed. In Sweden, participants judged brand activism not only by what companies claimed in their messages within a single market, but also by whether those claims were supported by consistent actions across different markets. For example, one respondent criticized Nike for changing its logo to support Pride in countries where such support is widely accepted, but not doing so in more conservative regions like the Middle East: "Nike, for example, changes their logo on social media in countries where Pride is accepted, but not in places like the Middle East" (SE3). This inconsistency led the participant to question the sincerity of the company's values. Rather than seeing the support as genuine, the respondent interpreted it as a calculated business move, tailored to local expectations rather than reflecting a true commitment to the cause.

U.S. participants appeared to adopt a more pragmatic approach to authenticity. They evaluated authenticity based on the alignment between a brand's core business and the cause it promotes, questioning whether the company's products or services had any meaningful connection to the issue raised by the campaign. As one participant noted: "I genuinely believe a brand if I see their message being aligned in its products. If their products have nothing to do with the cause, I have a hard time believing them. For instance, I would find it difficult to fully believe if a shoe company is trying to make a social statement because their line of business has nothing to do with it" (USA7).

The findings strengthen the results of Vredenburg et al. (2020) and Dwivedi & McDonald (2018) by showing that cultural background influences the type of alignment consumers expect between a brand's values, messages, and tangible practices.

Participants expected companies to act in ways that were visibly consistent with the values they publicly endorsed. Italian respondents, reflecting moderately tight cultural norms, emphasized the importance of sincerity and personal commitment behind a brand's advocacy. Rather than simply reacting to contradictions, they questioned whether a brand truly believed in the cause it promoted. Swedish participants, from the loosest cultural context of the study, were somewhat more flexible, yet still critical of brands that appeared to tailor their messages based on where they operated.

Theme #2: The role of human agency in AI-driven messages

Participants consistently indicated that human involvement is essential in creating activist messages. While AI was generally accepted as a helpful support tool, respondents believed it could not replace human empathy, real-life experience, and the sense of genuine concern that a human communicator brings when addressing these issues.

Respondents emphasized that human involvement remains indispensable in campaigns addressing morally or emotionally charged topics.

In Italy, this concern emerged with an affective emphasis: "I believe that a message created by generative AI can evoke emotion and convey empathy, but only if there is genuine human guidance and sensitivity behind it. AI can help find the right words, but authenticity comes from the intentions of those who use it. If a team that truly believes in the cause uses AI as a tool and not as a shortcut, then the engagement can be genuine. Otherwise, it risks coming across as cold or artificial" (IT1). Swedish respondents adopted a pragmatic stance: "It depends on what the model is trained on. Models nowadays are getting increasingly good at conveying more "human" sounding messages, most likely because the models are trained on materials that have empathetic or emotional content, or content that displays human behavior. In that sense, if the model is trained with content related to the activist cause, especially containing emotionally charged topics, I could see it producing content that people would respond and relate to (although it might of course still need editing)" (SE2). U.S. participants highlighted embodiment and lived values: "I think that AI is capable of making good reasoning when inclusion, diversity etc. topics are concerned - so I am pretty sure it would do a good job at supporting human creativity and even reducing bias or discrimination, if properly used" (USA5) and "Especially with such prevalent issues, it is important that human ideas and visions are at the forefront of such initiatives" (USA8).

These distinctions support prior observations that AI's credibility is often conditional on visible human oversight and authorship (Kirk & Givi, 2025). Across all three countries, respondents rejected the idea that AI could fully replace human input in activist messaging. Yet their reasons diverged in culturally meaningful ways. U.S. participants grounded their views in the value of authentic human representation. Italians emphasized the importance of emotional "credibility" and the need for messages to reflect a real sense of care and responsibility. In contrast, Swedish participants were open to the use of AI as a supporting tool but did not accept it as a full-fledged communicator. The relatively loose Swedish cultural context may allow for greater technological mediation, provided that human intention and oversight remain evident.

Theme #3: Transparency and technological accountability

Transparency was a non-negotiable condition for activist communication. Participants from all three countries expected brands to clearly disclose the use of GAI. Italian participants, in particular, saw openness about the creation process as a key factor in building trust: “Transparency about how the campaign was created makes a difference” (IT1). In Sweden, transparency was tied to informed consumer rights through clear labeling: “Be transparent in the making of campaigns, maybe if there’s a stamp/certification that clarifies transparency?” (SE9). In the USA, participants stressed that knowing whether a campaign was created using AI affects how much they trust it. Disclosure was seen as essential to prevent misunderstandings and preserve brand credibility: “Discovering that an activist campaign was created using AI might raise doubts, especially if transparency is lacking... its credibility could decrease significantly” (US12).

This mirrors the growing demand for algorithmic transparency in the AI ethics literature (Brüns & Meißner, 2024) and reaffirms that perceived openness significantly shapes trust.

Tightness may help explain the different ways transparency was understood across countries. Swedish participants, representing the least tight group in the sample, viewed it more pragmatically, as a functional requirement for making informed consumer choices. They found the omission problematic, but not necessarily a dealbreaker. Italian participants, from a moderately tight cultural context, saw transparency as a matter of ethical respect. In the United States, which represents the tightest cultural context in this study, hidden AI involvement was perceived as manipulative, and transparency was framed as a non-negotiable principle tied to individual rights.

Theme #4: The limits of AI-generated empathy

Another recurring theme was the limited emotional and empathetic authenticity of AI. While some participants acknowledged that AI can trigger emotional reactions, they emphasized that genuine empathy comes from human involvement, particularly from people who understand the issue, believe in the cause, and take responsibility for the message. Italian respondents, for instance, highlighted that meaningful communication should be shaped by human values and guided by real-world experience rather than automated tools: “Using AI ethically and responsibly, for a brand running activist campaigns, means always starting from a vision and human values. Actions should be designed, guided, and overseen by people who deeply understand the cause and genuinely want to make a difference. AI can be a useful tool, but it should never replace critical thinking, empathy, and human responsibility” (IT2).

Swedish participants recognized that, with the right instructions, AI can produce messages that feel emotionally engaging, highlighting a practical, tool-based approach to communication: “With correct prompting the message can be emotional and empathetic enough, for sure.” (SE8). U.S. participants were skeptical about emotional simulation: “(...) because I think that any campaign trying to capture people’s hearts and draw concern has to be created by real people who would genuinely be concerned and actually be on the receiving end of that campaign. Otherwise, it’s like asking a boy to empathize with a girl: they can to an extent, but will never be able to truly understand the other’s feelings and experiences” (USA11).

Although some participants acknowledged that GAI can create emotionally engaging messages, they doubted its ability to express true empathy. Authentic emotion was seen as inherently human.

The results align with the findings of Garcia (2024) and Arango et al. (2023), showing that emotionally charged AI-generated content raises doubts about the message’s sincerity and the brand’s intentions. In this study, participants expressed skepticism when emotional and

ethical appeals appeared disconnected from human experience, reinforcing how cultural background can influence whether AI-driven empathy is seen as convincing or strongly artificial.

Notably, all participants expressed doubts about AI's capacity to convey genuine empathy, though with varying degrees of skepticism. U.S. and Italian respondents were more categorical, rejecting AI-generated emotional appeals. Swedish participants, consistent with a more flexible cultural outlook, were more open to the idea that AI could generate emotional content, provided its use was transparent, such as indicating that AI was involved, and limited to supporting rather than replacing authentic human voices and narratives.

Theme #5: Context-specific appropriateness: environmental vs. social causes

Participants drew a clear distinction between environmental and social issues in terms of AI's perceived suitability.

Italians highlighted the importance of lived experience in social issues “For me, there's a difference between topics: for environmental issues, AI use may be more acceptable, as it often involves data, forecasts, and technical messages. But when it comes to social issues like rights or inclusion, I believe it's essential that the message at least partly comes from real human experiences, not just generated ones” (IT1). Swedes viewed AI as a data-processing support for ecological causes: “Some AI content might evoke a good response on environmental causes but showing possible future scenarios, which could be an efficient form of communicating, but couldn't those scenarios be created by an artist instead? AI bots also use a lot of energy which makes it contradict environmental marketing, but I guess I could see the point of creating striking images to make a point. For social issues I find it more difficult to accept. Social issues revolve around how we think and act towards other humans and putting AI into that somehow removes the whole point of how we are all a part of the human experience. (...) It's a fine line to thread.” (SE4). U.S. participants made a distinction between types of causes: they saw AI as suitable for environmental topics grounded in scientific facts and data visualization. However, when it came to social causes—such as those involving personal stories, discrimination, or the representation of marginalized groups—they believed that messages needed to come from people with direct, lived experience. In these cases, relying solely on AI risked producing messages that felt emotionally disconnected or lacked credibility: “For environmental topics, which are often supported by data and scientific evidence, AI can help structure clear, informative messages that raise awareness. However, when it comes to social causes involving lived experiences, identity, or justice, a purely AI-generated voice risks sounding detached or artificial” (USA4).

This theme underscores that participants did not perceive GAI as equally suitable across all activist domains and communications. Rather than being seen as a neutral tool, the acceptability of AI was shaped by the type of cause it supported and the cultural expectations surrounding that cause. In line with Spálová (2023), these perceptions reflect how AI's role in public discourse is contextually built and shaped by cultural values, norms, and the symbolic perception of the topic. Participants were more open to AI use in environmental messaging, often associated with data and efficiency, while social causes, which deal with human experience, vulnerability, or marginalization, were seen as requiring a human voice.

AI was deemed more acceptable for environmental messaging, especially when data-driven, and less appropriate for social justice topics, which require empathy, presence, and moral voice. U.S. and Italian participants were particularly vocal about the inadequacy of AI in representing complex human struggles. Swedish respondents, while similarly cautious, were more pragmatic, suggesting that AI's appropriateness depends on the campaign's objective and design.

For a clearer overview, the main themes are summarized in Table 1.

Theme	Description	Key findings
Authenticity and consistency in activist branding	The theme focuses on how participants assess the credibility of a brand's activist communication based on the match between what a brand says and what it does. Participants paid close attention to whether companies show genuine support for causes through real actions, not just words.	Respondents from all countries expressed skepticism toward companies that adopt activist messaging without backing it up with consistent and actual behavior. Italians often evaluated credibility through ethical behavior and long-term commitment. Swedish participants were concerned with inconsistencies between external messaging and internal practices. U.S. participants focused more on how visible misalignment could damage brand reputation and reduce trust.
The role of human agency in AI-driven messages	The theme explores people's opinions about the importance of human involvement in creating activist messages. While many accepted AI as a tool, they insisted that only humans can share real experiences and connect emotionally with audiences.	Participants saw human involvement as essential when communicating about sensitive or emotional topics. Italians emphasized that only humans can fully understand and speak about social issues. Swedes were open to using AI, but only under human supervision. Participants from the USA highlighted the importance of human contribution to make messages feel sincere and grounded in lived experience.
Transparency and technological accountability	The theme addresses the expectation that brands clearly communicate when they use GAI in activist campaigns. Participants viewed honesty about AI use as a sign of respect and a way to build trust.	Across countries, participants believed brands should always reveal if AI was used in campaign development. Italians linked transparency to a sense of responsibility and consumer trust. Swedish respondents supported clear labeling to allow people to make informed decisions. U.S. participants felt that not

		disclosing AI use could be seen as a dishonest behavior, especially if the campaign dealt with serious social issues.
The limits of AI-generated empathy	The theme looks at how participants viewed AI's ability to express emotions in activist communication. While AI might imitate emotional and empathetic language, many felt it lacks the human experience needed to express real empathy.	Italians believed that real empathy comes from people who understand a cause through personal involvement and real-life experiences. Swedes pointed out that AI can sometimes create emotional messages, but only when guided by people who understand the topic well. U.S. participants were more critical, saying AI lacks the capacity to understand emotions or lived struggles, making its messages feel artificial or disconnected to reality.
Context-specific appropriateness: environmental vs. social causes	The theme highlights how participants judged the use of AI based on the type of cause. AI was seen as more acceptable for environmental topics, which often involve data and analysis, but less suitable for social issues that require emotional sensitivity.	Italians said AI may help with environmental topics but cannot replace the human touch in social justice messages. Swedes accepted AI for technical and environmental communication but were hesitant about its use in messages involving human identity and relationships. U.S. participants consistently emphasized that campaigns dealing with inequality or lived experience must be led by people, not algorithms.

Table 1: Findings from the thematic analysis (author's own elaboration).

5. Implications and final remarks

The present study contributes to the growing body of literature on branding and ethical communication by providing a cross-cultural perspective on how GAI is perceived when employed in brand activist messaging. Through thematic analysis of 38 qualitative responses from Italy, Sweden, and the United States, five thematic clusters emerged: authenticity and consistency, human agency in AI-driven messages, transparency and accountability, limited empathy, and contextual appropriateness of AI across causes. These themes collectively

reveal how audiences interpret AI-generated brand activist campaigns not only through a technological lens, but also within deeply human, moral, and cultural frames.

One key implication of the study is that people do not judge authenticity based solely on what the brand claims about itself. Instead, they assess whether the brand's use of AI in activist campaigns feels genuine and whether it meets their cultural expectations about sincerity, human involvement, and consistency between words and actions. Consumers from all three countries showed increasing sensitivity to inconsistencies between what a brand claims and how it behaves, particularly when activism is communicated via artificial systems. While Italian participants focused on whether brands acted consistently with the values they promoted, often questioning if AI use showed real commitment or just a marketing tactic, U.S. respondents evaluated whether the activist message was meaningfully connected to the brand's core business and products. Swedish participants, meanwhile, paid attention to whether brands applied the same activist messages across different markets or adapted them to fit local expectations, an inconsistency that affected how genuine they perceived the communication to be.

Another fundamental implication is that while GAI can simulate affective tone or creative output, respondents across cultures maintained that human presence, lived experience, and ethical deliberation are central to credible and emotionally resonant activism. This aligns with broader critiques of "technological solutionism" (Morozov, 2013), suggesting that efficiency or innovation alone cannot replace the depth of meaning, storytelling, and emotional understanding that human communicators bring. Brands that entirely rely on AI for sensitive or socially related messages risk creating content that feels impersonal and disconnected from their audiences. In discussing empathy, the responses challenge the capacity of AI to serve as a meaningful communicator of emotional narratives. While some participants acknowledged AI's ability to generate persuasive or affective content, the majority emphasized that real empathy requires human vulnerability, intentionality, and context-awareness. The emotional intelligence of activism must be grounded in experience. In this regard, GAI is seen as a tool that can enhance or support messages created by humans, but not replace them. For marketers, this suggests the importance of combining AI with human input, allowing AI to assist in content creation while people ensure that messages remain meaningful and anchored in real experiences.

Moreover, transparency emerged as a widely shared expectation, with respondents calling for clear disclosure of when and how AI is used in activist content generation. This concern extended beyond compliance with regulations and consumer rights; it also involved enabling individuals to trace the origin and intent of a message, thereby enhancing transparency in both source and purpose. Participants expressed a desire to know whether AI is involved, as this helps them better assess the credibility and intentions behind a campaign. From a managerial perspective, this suggests that brands should explicitly disclose the use of AI within their communication strategies, particularly when addressing politically or emotionally sensitive issues.

Lastly, the study underscored the importance of matching the type of cause to the communication tool. AI was seen as more suitable for environmental campaigns, where its strengths in data processing and forecasting offer clear advantages, and less appropriate for social justice issues, which require moral sensitivity, historical awareness, and human experience. The findings suggest that cause typology influences not only perceived appropriateness, but also emotional resonance and credibility. This has important implications for strategic segmentation and message design: while GAI may be effectively embraced in campaigns related to climate efficiency or sustainability, it should be applied more cautiously in domains that demand moral engagement and identity affirmation.

The debate around AI is no longer limited to its capabilities but extends to how it should be used in contexts where brand communication involves social values and moral dilemmas.

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