

Brand Activism

Factors influencing consumers' negative eWOM intentions towards brand activism on social media

Master Thesis

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Graz, April 25, 2023

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Abstract

Factors influencing consumers' negative eWOM intentions towards brand activism on social media

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Despite growing attention to brand activism and the divergent consumer reactions including highly polarized discussions on social media that result in negative electronic word-of-mouth, little is known about the underlying consumer intentions. Thus, drawing from the literature of brand activism and electronic word-of-mouth intentions this study investigates dominant themes underlying consumer comments towards brand activism campaigns. Based on a qualitative content analysis of 2,627 *YouTube* comments across three brand activism campaigns, the study suggests social interaction, lack of brand authenticity, misinterpretation of the message, personal beliefs, and perceived limitation of free speech as factors influencing negative electronic word-of-mouth intentions towards brand activism on social media. Thereby, the study adds to the so far limited literature of brand activism research from the consumer point of view and contributes to a better understanding of negative electronic word-of-mouth intentions.

Keywords: negative eWOM, eWOM intentions, brand activism, qualitative content analysis, social media analysis

Zusammenfassung

Einflussfaktoren auf die negativen eWOM-Intentionen gegenüber Markenaktivismus auf Social Media

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Obwohl die Präsenz von Markenaktivismus und die damit einhergehenden polarisierenden Diskussionen in den sozialen Medien, einschließlich negativer elektronischer Mundpropaganda, zunehmen, ist nur wenig über die zugrundeliegenden Absichten der Konsument*innen bekannt. Ausgehend von der Literatur zu Markenaktivismus und elektronischem Word-of-Mouth untersucht diese Studie die negativen Intentionen anhand einer qualitativen Inhaltsanalyse von 2.627 *YouTube*-Kommentaren zu drei Kampagnen. Dabei legt die Forschung nahe, dass soziale Interaktion, mangelnde Markenauthentizität, Fehlinterpretation der Botschaft, persönliche Überzeugungen und die wahrgenommene Einschränkung der Meinungsfreiheit Faktoren sind, die negative Mundpropaganda-Absichten gegenüber Markenaktivismus in sozialen Medien beeinflussen. Damit ergänzt die Studie die bisher begrenzte Markenaktivismusforschung aus Sicht der Konsument*innen und trägt zu einem besseren Verständnis negativer elektronischer Word-of-Mouth-Absichten bei.

Keywords: negatives eWOM, eWOM-Intentionen, Markenaktivismus, qualitative Inhaltsanalyse, Social Media Analyse

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Introduction

The economy has seen a rise in brands that express their stand in socio-political issues, such as racial equality, public health, LGBTIQ+ rights or immigration - a phenomenon known as brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 445). Brand activism or corporate socio-political activism (CSA) describes an evolution of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and refers to a brand's positioning on a socio-political matter in public (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1). Brand activism goes beyond supporting social activities and addresses major issues in society. In doing so, companies strive to foster social, political, and economic change and drive improvements in society (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020, pp. 24–25).

At the same time, taking a stand on socio-political issues can result in divergent consumer reactions. Companies are increasingly facing consumer scepticism, questioning whether an activity serves merely to increase sales or whether there is a real social benefit behind it (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 2). For instance, when *Nike* aimed to express its stand against racism by using Colin Kaepernick as the face of a campaign, consumer reactions were split. While some supported the brand's political stand, others criticized it and published videos burning their *Nike* gear on social media (Hydock et al., 2020, p. 1). Such brand activism initiatives can be perceived as inauthentic or be classified as "woke washing" (Moorman, 2020, p. 390; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 449). Consequently, the brand image and reputation can be affected (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 4; Weinzimmer & Esken, 2016, p. 2). Thus, also a firm's performance can be impacted (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 6; Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019, p. 7). Hence, such negative consumer responses constitute a major risk for brands, especially in the online context, where

consumers can spread their negative emotions in seconds using the Internet or social media (Fu et al., 2015, p. 616).

Despite the fact that there has been a growing demand from consumers for brands to take a stand on socio-political issues and an increase of brands following these, academic literature in this area is sparse. This is especially true when it comes to the understanding of consumer responses (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 14; Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019, p. 7; Klostermann et al., 2021, p. 11; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 456). Prior research has examined the conceptualization of CSA typologies (Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020) or its impact on stock market returns (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Previous studies also explore stakeholder responses to CSA. However, the consumer perspective has received little attention so far (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hambrick & Wowak, 2021; Nalick et al., 2016).

While existing corporate social responsibility (CSR) literature sheds light on the intentions to engage in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) due to CSR activities (Aguirre et al., 2023; Chu & Chen, 2019; Chu et al., 2020; Fatma et al., 2020; Mar García-de los Salmones et al., 2021; Martínez et al., 2020), to the author's best knowledge no research has evaluated the eWOM intentions of brand activism. However, brand activism seems to be associated with bigger risks as well as rewards compared to CSR activities because of its partisan character (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 2; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 2). Therefore, the aim of this research is to close this gap and identify: Which factors influence negative eWOM intentions towards brand activism campaigns on social media?

Therefore, the key objective of this study is to analyze the intentions behind a consumer's decision to participate in negative eWOM about brand activism: The study aims to identify dominant themes underlying the consumer responses to CSA activities that indicate the intentions to engage in negative eWOM, as suggested also by Klostermann et al.

(2021) and Romani et al. (2015) as a further research area (Klostermann et al., 2021, p. 12; Romani et al., 2015, p. 670). This also supports the suggestions from Bhagwat et al. (2020) and Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) to analyze the effect of CSA on consumer behavior (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 17; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 14). Additionally, Gambetti and Biraghi (2023) suggest that more research is required that investigates the drivers of brand activism (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023, p. 2). Following the suggestion from Ahmad et al. (2022) to study the negative effects of brand activism (Ahmad et al., 2022, p. 620), while adding to the scant research about negative brand relationships (Fetscherin, 2019, p. 125; Zarantonello et al., 2016, p. 12), the given study will focus on negative eWOM intentions. Additionally, Donthu et al. (2021) suggest in their eWOM research that determinants of eWOM are among the most popular research streams (Donthu et al., 2021, pp. 767–768). Thus, this study aims to extend the existing eWOM intention research to the context of brand activism.

Chapter 1: Literature

The following chapter aims to shed light on the theoretical and managerially relevant discussions the given study is joining and highlights what other researchers have discovered to date.

The shift in branding

At its core, branding includes the creation and maintenance of a brand's identity, personality, and recognition with the aim of creating a unique image that distinguishes a brand's products or services from those of its rivals (Kotler et al., 2019, p. 240).

Studies about branding have evolved to encompass cultural, social, and theoretical angles that complement and extend the traditional framework of business, economics, and management, making brands part of a culture rather than solely a management tool

(Schroeder, 2017, p. 1522). According to Holt (2004), a brand develops based on different creators that tell a story around the brand: companies, culture, intermediaries, and customers. The meanings and associations created by these authors interact and shape one another to create the overall meaning of a brand, which is constantly evolving over time as a result of changes in the marketplace, culture, and society (Holt, 2004, p. 20). These arguments align with the suggestion from Schroeder (2009) that a brand is build based on the identities of consumers, employees and organizations, while cultural processes constrain how brands evolve (Schroeder, 2009, p. 123). Nowadays, brands provide value that extends beyond the product or service itself, include the social and political beliefs of both the brand and its consumers and encompass a wider spectrum, where culture and brand culture as a whole are intertwined (Schmidt et al., 2021, p. 41). This means that changes in the cultural, social or political landscape impact the evolution of brands (Schroeder, 2017, p. 1526).

As part of this discussion is the concept of cultural branding, which highlights how brands can leverage social and cultural tension to build connections with consumers and establish a brand's iconic status (Holt, 2004, p. 24; Koch, 2020, p. 595; Schroeder, 2009, pp. 123–124). Iconic brands, such as *Apple*, *Nike* or *VW*, act as activists and inspire individuals to think in a different way about themselves (Holt, 2004, pp. 22–23).

The phenomenon of brands connecting with conflicting issues is not new. For instance, in 1960 *Lucky Strike* promoted the freedom of women to smoke or *Pepsi's* adoption of the counter-culture (Schmidt et al., 2021, p. 42). *Dove* started to build a brand positioning around the concept of "true beauty" as of the 2000s or *McDonalds* used obesity, as a new global challenge to reposition the brand (Rey et al., 2019, p. 111). Nowadays, the concept of cultural branding has evolved to include brand activism as a new form of supporting socio-political issues (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1; Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023, p. 3).

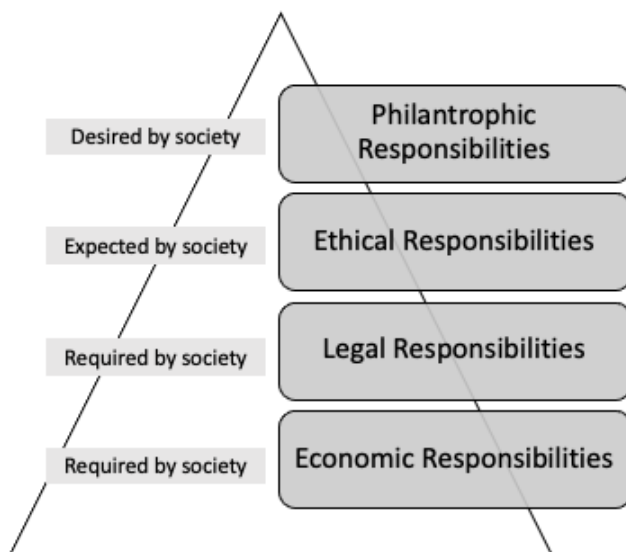
Distinction of brand activism from other related constructs

Due to the novelty of the topic of brand activism and its connection to related concepts such as CSR (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 2; Vredenburg et al., 2020, pp. 445–446) or corporate political activity (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 3; Lux et al., 2011, p. 223), the upcoming chapter aims to provide a definition of brand activism while also distinguishing it from other related constructs.

The concept of corporate social responsibility

While academic research has attempted to define the concept of CSR, a unified definition is still missing in the literature (Dahlsrud, 2008, p. 1). According to Kang et al. (2016) CSR refers to companies' activities that contribute to the greater public welfare beyond what is required legally (Kang et al., 2016, p. 59). Carroll (1991) suggests four different forms of CSR responsibilities (economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic), that are depicted in the CSR pyramid in Figure 1 (Carroll, 1991, pp. 40–42).

Figure 1 - The CSR Pyramid



Note. This figure demonstrates the CSR pyramid including four different forms of CSR responsibilities. Figure adapted from Carroll (1991), p. 42; Carroll (2016), p. 5.

Economic responsibility builds the basis of all responsibility types and addresses topics such as being profitable as a firm, maintaining a competitive position and high levels of efficiency. While legal responsibility refers to being compliant with legal requirements, ethical responsibility extends this perspective by integrating norms that are not required by law, but by society's ethical standards. Ultimately, the expectation that companies will act as good corporate citizens, by contributing both financial and human resources to raising the standard of living, is based on the philanthropic obligation. The latter dimension is also often referred to as a discretionary or voluntary responsibility, as companies are not seen as unethical when it is not fulfilled (Carroll, 1991, pp. 40–42). Society demands economic and legal responsibilities, it anticipates ethical responsibility, and aspires for philanthropic responsibility. Additionally, as part of the CSR pyramid, the definition of total corporate social responsibility occurs, which refers to companies that engage in all four types of responsibilities and can therefore be seen as companies that are driven by CSR (Carroll, 2016, pp. 5–6).

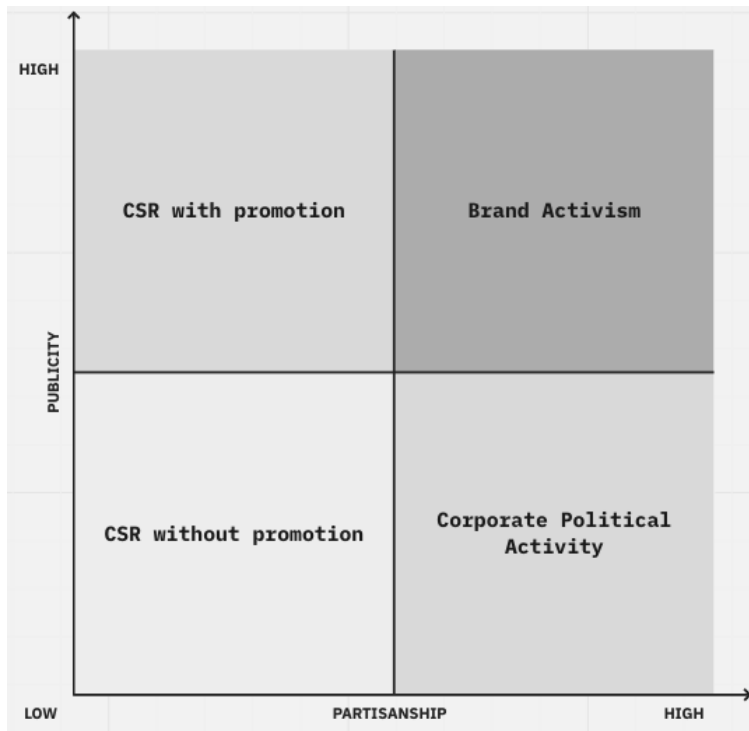
Besides the framework by Carroll (1991), Wood (1991) put forth three different components of corporate social performance. The components include CSR principles, corporate social responsiveness procedures and consequences of business behavior. To begin with, the CSR principles are split into institutional, organizational, and individual levels. Institutionally, businesses participate in CSR to establish and uphold the credibility of their social duties. At the organizational level, companies become involved in CSR to meet their public responsibilities and solve problems related to their business activities. At the individual level, CSR initiatives are practiced voluntarily, advanced by management decisions (Markovic et al., 2022, p. 1777; Wood, 1991, pp. 695–698). The procedures of corporate social responsiveness include the brand's evaluation of the environment and how it deals with social

issues and stakeholders (Markovic et al., 2022, p. 1777). Finally, outcomes of corporate behavior according to Wood's framework (1991) deal with the brand's social impact, the used programs to achieve responsibility and the policies developed by the brand for it (Wood, 1991, p. 708). The combination of Carroll's (1991) and Wood's (1991) approaches can assist in evaluating CSR efforts through initially determining the responsibility areas and consequently evaluating the constitution of principles, procedures, and results within each area (Markovic et al., 2022, p. 1777).

The concept of corporate political activity

Besides CSR, another related construct worth distinguishing from brand activism, can be seen in "corporate political activity", which refers to political efforts taken by a company, such as lobbying, donations to political committees or campaign contributions (Lux et al., 2011, pp. 223–224). However, when brands engage in corporate political activity the main purpose is to gain financial benefits on the market rather than to support a social cause (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 3). Compared to brand activism that is publicly communicated, corporate political activity is carried out mainly silently (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 3; Lux et al., 2011, pp. 223–224). Hence, one of the differences between CSR, corporate political activity and brand activism can be seen in the different levels of partisanship and publicity included, as shown in Figure 2. While CSR possesses little partisanship and varies in publicity based on the promotional efforts made, brand activism and corporate political advocacy are both very partisan (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 3; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 2).

Figure 2 - Comparison between CSR, corporate political activity, and brand activism



Note. This figure illustrates the comparison between CSR, corporate political activity, and brand activism based on the level of partisanship and publicity. Figure adapted from Bhagwat et al. (2020), p. 4.

The concept of brand activism

Brand activism or corporate socio-political activism (CSA) can be defined as an evolution of CSR and refers to a brand’s positioning on a socio-political matter in public (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1). Thereby, a company contributes to one or more socio-political issues through its messaging and brand practices (Vredenburg et al., 2020, pp. 446–447). According to Nalick et al. (2016) socio-political issues are *“salient unresolved social matters on which societal and institutional opinion is split, thus potentially engendering acrimonious debate among groups”* (Nalick et al., 2016, p. 386). The domains that brand activism can include range from political, social, and economic to legal, environmental and workplace causes. For instance, while social activism contains domains such as equality, gender, race, age, education, or consumer

protection, political activism addresses voting rights, lobbying and policy. Environmental activism on the other hand concentrates on environmental laws and policies, air and water pollution, and nature protection (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020, p. 28).

While academic research has attempted to define the concept of brand activism, the literature still lacks a unified definition (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1; Mirzaei et al., 2022, p. 1; Sibai et al., 2021, p. 2; Vredenburg et al., 2020, pp. 446–447).

Sibai et al. (2021) suggest that brand activism is a type of market-driven activism that questions the concept of goodness in the marketplace, challenges established moral judgments, and seeks to foster alternative perspectives (Sibai et al., 2021, p. 2). Mirzaei et al. (2022) define woke brand activism as a “*brand being awake or alert to critical social issues, discrimination, and injustice*” (Mirzaei et al., 2022, p. 1). According to Vredenburg et al. (2020) a company who engages in brand activism is guided by values and purpose and deals with a controversial or polarizing socio-political topic (Vredenburg et al., 2020, pp. 446–447). In contrast, CSR places a greater emphasis on the actions taken and their consequences, rather than on the company's inherent values (Wettstein & Baur, 2016, p. 205).

Additionally, Sarkar and Kotler (2020) argue that brand activism can take on forms of progressive or regressive activism. For instance, tobacco companies that denied for years knowing about the harm that they are bringing to consumers while still promoting it, can be seen as regressive forms of brand activism. Progressive brand activism on the other hand are those brands that try to influence the biggest problems society is facing (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020, p. 24). While progressive brand activism aims to foster positive change in society, regressive activism is characterized by a focus on exclusionary or divisive values. Progressive brand activism emerges as a new competitive differentiator and more and more brands such

as *Patagonia*, *Unilever*, *Ben & Jerry* or *Nike* show their support for various socio-political issues (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020, pp. 31–34; Schmidt et al., 2021, p. 43).

While CSR often addresses widely accepted causes, brand activism deals with more controversial topics (Hydock et al., 2020, p. 2). The divisive character of brand activism distinguishes it from CSR or cause-related marketing (Chernev & Blair, 2015, pp. 1413–1414; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 2), as also shown in Figure 2. While CSR initiatives are generally regarded as positive by most of society, brand activism shows a lack of consent due to the absence of a single, recognized solution to the socio-political problems at hand (Nalick et al., 2016, p. 6). Brand activism goes beyond supporting social activities and addresses major issues in society. In doing so, companies strive to foster social, political, and economic change and drive improvements in society. Hence, brand activism can be seen as society-driven, compared to CSR activities that are mainly marketing-driven (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020, pp. 24–25).

As part of the academic research about brand activism, the terms corporate political advocacy and corporate social advocacy emerge (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 5; Klostermann et al., 2021, p. 2). Both concepts can be defined as a public expression of support for particular people, organizations or ideals, with the aim of influencing others to adopt a similar stance (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 5; Wettstein & Baur, 2016, p. 4). Thus, corporate political advocacy and corporate social advocacy can be described as a form of brand activism (Klostermann et al., 2021, p. 2). While corporate political advocacy puts a focus on issues with strong political relevance, social advocacy deals with social issues in society. However, both terms are often used interchangeably as they both focus on challenging views about socio-political issues that society is facing (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 5; Hydock et al., 2020, p. 2). The author focuses on brand activism as terminology within the present work.

Current state of brand activism research

Brand activism builds a relatively new area of interest in academic discussions. Given the novelty of the topic, the current state of research is limited (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 445). Prior research often frames brand activism as an extension of CSR and takes findings from the CSR literature as a base for research (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 2; Vredenburg et al., 2020, pp. 445–446).

One research domain investigates the impact of brands taking a stand on socio-political issues on firm performance (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 6; Hydock et al., 2020, p. 2; Sibai et al., 2021, pp. 11–12). Bhagwat et al. (2020) analyzed the stock market reaction to corporate social activism and found that investors tend to react negatively to it (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 6). Hydock et al. (2020) identify market share and the level of authenticity as metrics to gauge the effect of brand activism. Furthermore, the study suggests that brand activism is riskier for brands with big market share compared to the ones with smaller market share (Hydock et al., 2020, pp. 2, 14). Sibai et al. (2021) examine the conditions under which brand activism leads to positive outcomes and conclude that it is dependent on a brand's ability to express its moral competence (Sibai et al., 2021, pp. 11–12).

There has been first research about different consumer behaviors in response to brand activism (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Klostermann et al., 2021; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Shetty et al., 2019). Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) analyze the impact of brand activism on consumer attitudes, intentions, and behavior, Dodd and Supa (2014) evaluate the impact of corporate social advocacy on financial performance via consumer purchase intentions, whereas Shetty et al. (2019) investigate millennials' perception towards brand activism (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 1; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, pp. 12–13; Shetty et al., 2019, pp. 171–172). Additionally, Klostermann et al. (2021) explore the impact of corporate political

advocacy on consumers' brand perceptions and suggest a negative impact, which is even stronger for customers compared to non-customers (Klostermann et al., 2021, p. 10). While researchers tackle different behavioral aspects, there seems to be consent that consumer responses to brand activism depend on the extent to which such responses match with their own beliefs (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 1; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, pp. 12–13; Shetty et al., 2019, pp. 171-172). Additionally, Hydock et al. (2020) agree that consumers' responses to brand activism are contingent upon the consumers' stand (Hydock et al., 2020, p. 2).

Another research stream is dedicated to brand communication towards controversial topics and its effect (Ahmad et al., 2022; Jungblut & Johnen, 2021; Romani et al., 2015). Jungblut and Johnen (2021) suggest in their research that political brand communication can lead to boycotting and can thus be considered as a risky strategy. Moreover, they suggest political interest and category involvement as moderators of this effect (Jungblut & Johnen, 2021, p. 17). Ahmad et al. (2022) analyzed effective messaging strategies towards socio-political topics that increase brand love. It is found that low brand equity brands should aim for non-financial commitment and brands with high brand equity should foster financial commitment in their messaging (Ahmad et al., 2022, p. 620). Romani et al. (2015) examine consumer anti-brand activism and suggest ways for limiting anti-brand actions such as negative word of mouth (Romani et al., 2015, p. 669).

Prior research has also examined the conceptualization of CSA typologies (Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Due to the novelty of the topic of brand activism, various future research areas are yet to be explored (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 445). Especially, the consumer perspective has received little attention so far and researchers call for more studies in this domain (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 17; Klostermann et al., 2021, p. 12; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 14; Romani et al., 2015, p. 670).

Chapter 2: Theory construction

Based on and grounding in the review of the existing literature, the following chapter will provide the foundation for the empirical study.

Brand Activism

Social movements such as Black Lives Matter, Covid-19 pandemic protests and #MeToo have led an increasing number of brands to show support and express their stand on controversial issues. Such actions, as mentioned in chapter 1, can be described as brand activism, which refers to a brand's public stand on a socio-political issue through its messaging and brand practices (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1; Vredenburg et al., 2020, pp. 446–447). As the number of brands participating in brand activism grows, it becomes of utmost importance to understand how those initiatives effect consumer responses (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 2; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 445; Weinzimmer & Esken, 2016, p. 6).

Brand activism campaigns on social media

Companies are increasingly communicating their socio-political stands within their social media campaigns (Livas, 2021, p. 1). Such behaviors can also be referred to as political brand communication, which is a brand's public position on a political issue that is not directly linked to its business models (Jungblut & Johnen, 2021, p. 4). While social media is used by brands to promote their socio-political stances and to strive positive change, individuals use social media as a platform for challenging corporate power and exposing opportunistic behavior by brands (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023, pp. 4–5). Social media has emerged as a powerful way for consumers and brands to engage in socio-political activities, as it provides an easy way to share information and reinforce their personal beliefs (Chu & Chen, 2019, p. 454). In fact, social media has enabled brand activism to become an inherent part of daily life,

placing brand statements under ongoing public review from users. Depending on their personal beliefs, users may praise a brand for upholding woke principles or disagree with it for wrongdoing, perceived opportunism, or a lack of authenticity (Gomez-Mejia, 2020, p. 320).

As part of this discussion is the rise of new forms of activism, such as digital activism. Digital activism describes a new way of participating in social movements using digital technologies to promote or engage collectively around a shared cause. Especially social media (e.g. Twitter, YouTube, Facebook) offers important ways for participating in activism activities from both, a company's as well as a consumer's perspective (George & Leidner, 2019, p. 1). Depending on the socio-political side the brand decided to jump on and the stand the public holds, some users will support the brand's stand, while others will deny it (Rim et al., 2020, p. 2). The disapproval of users with a brand's stand repeatedly leads to highly polarized discussions on social media simultaneously triggering others to join in with similar opinions (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023, p. 4).

For instance, in 2018 *Nike* promoted its stand against racism with the "Dream Crazy" campaign, using Colin Kaepernick as the face of the campaign. While some applauded the brand's political stance, others voiced their dissent by publishing videos of themselves burning *Nike* products (Hydock et al., 2020, p. 1). Hoffmann et al. (2020) discovered that most *Twitter* reactions to *Nike's* campaign were unfavorable, and the most vehement reactions included allusions to school shootings, terrorism, and slavery. Consequently, the campaign triggered strong anti-brand behaviors aimed at *Nike* (Hoffmann et al., 2020, pp. 20–22). Another example is *Gillette's* "We believe: The Best Men Can Be" advertisement addressing toxic masculinity through a viral video campaign (Mirzaei et al., 2022, p. 2; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 444). The advertisement generated significant buzz on social media, with over 15

million views within the first five days of its release. At the same time the hashtag #Gillette began trending on *Twitter*, with users sharing a range of divisive opinions about it (Bogen, Williams, et al., 2021, p. 3).

Similarly, during the Black Lives Matter protests that took place globally in 2020, brands reinforced their messaging in support of racial justice (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 444). For instance, *Ben & Jerry's* showed its support via a Facebook post and *Nike* started the "For Once, Don't Do It" campaign as a reaction to the murder of George Floyd and in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. Both campaigns resulted in divergent consumer responses (Ciszek & Logan, 2018, p. 119; Schmidt et al., 2021, p. 40). Another example is the "The President Stole your Land" campaign from *Patagonia* as a response to the president's announcement that Bears Ears National Monument and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Park will be cut in size. While some users praised the action as evidence of the company's commitment to social responsibility in advocating for outdoor recreation and environmental conservation, others criticized it, highlighting the conflict between a company that benefits from consumption and its effort to protect the environment (Dawson & Brunner, 2020, p. 59). After president Trump declared the travel ban for seven muslim-majority countries in 2017, several companies showed support towards the political issue. For example, *Starbucks* announced to hire 10,000 refugees over the next five years, which resulted in some users boycotting the brand with the hashtag #BoycottStarbucks, while others embraced it using #DrinkStarbucks. Additionally, *Airbnb* announced to support the issue and provide among others free housing for people affected by the travel ban (Rim et al., 2020, p. 3).

Factors influencing consumer reactions towards brand activism

Consumers' varying responses to a brand's socio-political stand (Ciszek & Logan, 2018, p. 119; Hydock et al., 2020, p. 1; Schmidt et al., 2021, p. 40) might be, on the one hand, due to the partisan nature of brand activism (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 2). On the other hand, it might be traced back to a phenomenon called "politicized consumer activism" as investigated by Chen (2020) as a new type of consumer behavior that he describes as "*consumers ascribe political meanings to and/or interpret the political stances of corporate conduct, and they then act collectively to pressure corporations based on these perceptions*" (Chen, 2020, p. 1).

The different reactions of consumers and the various underlying influencing factors have led first researchers to examine factors influencing consumer reactions towards brand activism. Thereby, studies suggest that consumer reactions towards brand activism depend on the alignment with their own beliefs. This means that consumers react less favorably to brand activism activities with which they disagree than to those that are consistent with their own beliefs (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 1; Hydock et al., 2020, p. 2; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, pp. 13–14). For instance, Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) analyzed the impact of brand activism on consumer attitudes, intentions and behavior. The study suggests a dependency between the impact and the consumer's level of agreement with a brand's stand. That means when consumers agree with the positioning, the reaction is positively influenced (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, pp. 12–13). This is consistent with the findings from Dodd and Supa (2014) who evaluate the impact of corporate social advocacy on financial performance via consumer purchase intentions and find that consumers are more likely to purchase when their personal beliefs are reflected in the company's stand (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 1). Additionally, it aligns with the findings from Hydock et al. (2020) that consumers' response to brand activism

depends on the consumers' stand (Hydock et al., 2020, p. 2). At the same time, that raises the question of how big brands such as *Nike*, *Coca-Cola* or *Apple* should integrate the different belief systems and socio-political ideologies of their consumer bases (Schmidt et al., 2021, p. 49).

Besides the alignment with one's own beliefs (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 1; Hydock et al., 2020, p. 2; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, pp. 13–14), Schmidt et al. (2021) indicate that consumers expect brands to take a stand on socio-political issues and that brand authenticity positively impacts consumers' perception towards brand activism (Schmidt et al., 2021, p. 49). These findings are consistent with those from Shetty et al. (2019) who analyzed the perception of millennials towards brand activism and found that they prefer to buy brands that actively engage in socio-political matters and stop buying from brands that behave unethically (Shetty et al., 2019, pp. 171–172). In general, consumers are increasingly expecting brands to express their stance on socio-political issues in order to foster improvements in society (Klostermann et al., 2021, p. 1; Mirzaei et al., 2022, pp. 2–3).

Furthermore, Feng et al. (2021) assert that social norms influence how consumers evaluate brand activism campaigns on social media. This implies that if consumers express negative views about the campaign's ideology on social media and those comments receive likes (e.g. top comments on YouTube), it can contribute to the formation of social norms and hence impact the consumer's evaluation of brand activism efforts (Feng et al., 2021, p. 542). Additionally, Ciszek and Logan (2018) analyzed consumer responses to *Ben & Jerry's* announcement of the Black Lives Matter movement support and suggest that the consumer perception depends on the understanding or misunderstanding of the socio-political topic (Ciszek & Logan, 2018, p. 122).

Authentic brand activism and the danger of woke washing

Brands are increasingly willing to take a stand on controversial socio-political issues, such as sexual harassment, systemic racism, public health, LGBTQIA+ rights, reproductive rights, gun control, and immigration (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 444). Thereby, brand activism has the potential to raise awareness about socio-political issues, but it also reinforces the evidence of inconsistency between a brand's stated purpose and its actual behavior (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023, p. 3). Especially, due to the partisan nature of brand activism it can result in divergent consumer reactions and companies are increasingly facing consumer scepticism (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 2). In other words, such brand activism initiatives can be perceived as inauthentic or be classified as “woke washing” (Moorman, 2020, p. 390; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 449).

A growing body of research suggests factors of authentic brand activism (Mirzaei et al., 2022, pp. 8–10; Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020, pp. 449–451). For example, Vredenburg et al. (2020) suggest that brand activism is perceived as authentic when a brand's purpose and values, activist marketing messaging and its prosocial corporate practice are aligned (Vredenburg et al., 2020, pp. 449–451). Moorman (2020) describes brand authenticity as part of a brand's political activism perspectives and argues that companies should avoid being political unless they can do so in a way that aligns with their brand and resonates authentically with their target audience (Moorman, 2020, p. 389).

Mirzaei et al. (2022) explore different drivers of woke activism authenticity, among them social context independency, inclusion, sacrifice, fit and motivation. First, brands such as *Patagonia* who are known for their stand against climate change tend to be seen as authentic when engaging in similar related initiatives. Second, social context independency can impact the fit on perceived authenticity. For example, when a firm participates in a socio-

political issue, but the topic does not fit to its core business, perceived images, and brand culture it is likely to be seen as inauthentic. Third, the findings suggest that brands who stay neutral and inclusive about complex topics are perceived as authentic (Mirzaei et al., 2022, pp. 8–10).

The findings about brand activism authenticity are also largely reflected in the general brand authenticity literature. For instance, according to Morhart et al. (2015), the concept of brand authenticity is closely tied to a brand's ability to demonstrate loyalty and truthfulness toward both itself and its customers, while encouraging its customers to stay true to themselves. Thereby, continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism are proposed as impact factors towards the perception of brand authenticity. Continuity refers to a brand's timeless power, while credibility is a brand's ability to keep promises. Authentic brands show integrity by delivering on values, and symbolism allows customers to relate to values and develop themselves (Morhart et al., 2015, pp. 202–203). Similarly, Beverland and Farrelly (2010) describe authenticity as the desire for the real, true, and genuine (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010, pp. 853–854).

In contrast to authentic brand activism, inauthentic brand activism refers to brands that make use of activist marketing messaging, but the communication measures do not align with their actions (Vredenburg et al., 2020, pp. 449–451). Inauthentic brand activism is also known as “woke washing” (Moorman, 2020, p. 390; Sobande, 2019, p. 2740). For instance, when *Pepsi* took a stand on the Black Lives Matter movement featuring Kendall Jenner while not having business practices that support the message, it was considered as woke washing (Sobande, 2019, pp. 2740–2741; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 451). This characterization aligns with the argumentation of Warren (2022) that woke washing describes a company's inconsistencies between corporate social initiatives and the firm purpose, values or practices

(Warren, 2022, p. 170). Hence, while being woke generally refers to “*a brand being awake or alert to critical social issues, discrimination, and injustice*” (Mirzaei et al., 2022, p. 1), woke washing can be described as a perceived marketing trick from brands that try to use socio-political issues in order to gain a benefit on the market (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023, p. 3).

The inauthentic side of brand activism can result in several risks for brands. First, it can negatively impact brand equity through unwanted brand associations or lead to consumer distrust due to misleading statements (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 451). Consequently, the brand image and reputation can be affected (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 4; Weinzimmer & Esken, 2016, p. 2). Thus, also a firm’s performance can be impacted (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 6; Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019, p. 7). Second, woke washing also leads to highly polarized discussions on social media that can foster anti-brand movements when brand activism is perceived as misleading or inauthentic (Dessart et al., 2020, p. 1762; Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023, p. 4). Anti-brand actions define a type of consumer behavior that derives from consumers’ dissatisfaction with a company due to a functional problem or after a wider evaluation of a company’s ethics (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022, pp. 264–265), leading to reactions such as negative word-of-mouth (Romani et al., 2012, p. 123) or boycotts (Klein et al., 2004, p. 92).

Electronic word-of-mouth

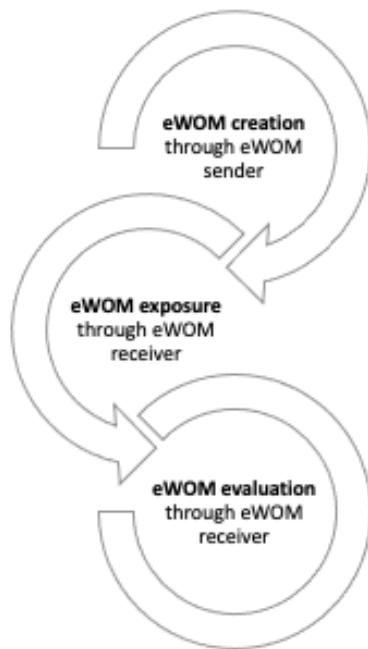
The importance of word-of-mouth (WOM) for shaping consumer behavior has been studied for decades (Nam et al., 2020, p. 1). WOM refers to consumers sharing information about products and services of a brand (Forman et al., 2007, p. 291; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). Research on WOM has been enlarged to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which can be seen as an evolution of traditional WOM emerged from the advent of the

Internet and refers to consumers sharing their opinions about products and services online with peers (Forman et al., 2007, p. 291; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39).

The existing literature provides several definitions of eWOM (Babić Rosario et al., 2020, p. 427; Forman et al., 2007, p. 291; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). For instance, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) define it as follows *“eWOM communication [is] any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet [and which] can take place in many ways (e.g., Web-based opinion platforms, discussion forums, boycott Web sites, news groups)”* (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). Another definition provided by Babić Rosario et al. (2020) describes eWOM as *“[...] consumer-generated, consumption-related communication that employs digital tools and is directed primarily to other consumers”* (Babić Rosario et al., 2020, p. 427). Traditional WOM and eWOM are distinct in a number of aspects. Unlike traditional offline WOM communication, which is restricted to a limited number of consumers, access to eWOM is virtually unlimited. Consumers can conveniently access various websites and read evaluations from complete strangers or participate in providing information themselves (Fu et al., 2015, p. 616).

Babić Rosario et al. (2020) propose a three-stage process of eWOM, as visible in Figure 3, that includes eWOM creation, eWOM exposure and eWOM evaluation. The eWOM process is suggested to be non-linear, with consumers potentially creating eWOM before purchase and skipping exposure and evaluation. The process is also recursive, as consumers can switch roles from eWOM receivers to eWOM creators multiple times (Babić Rosario et al., 2020, p. 428). A better understanding of the eWOM process is supposed to consequently support a better understanding of eWOM intentions (Chu & Kim, 2011, p. 49).

Figure 3 - Electronic word-of-mouth process



Note. This figure demonstrates the eWOM procedure including eWOM creation, exposure, and evaluation. Figure adapted from Babić Rosario et al. (2020), p. 428.

The creation of eWOM deals with consumer-generated content, which includes one-time evaluations, ongoing involvement in online discussions, and the distribution of content from other consumers or brands (Babić Rosario et al., 2020, p. 428). Users can generate eWOM through their responses to information about socially irresponsible behavior by companies on the Internet and social networks, such as liking, commenting, or sharing it on their social profiles (Mar García-de los Salmones et al., 2021, p. 585). Examples of eWOM sources include social media, forums, boycott websites, news groups and other forms of user-generated content (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). The stage of the eWOM process in which consumers, known as eWOM receivers, become aware of eWOM created by eWOM senders, is referred to as eWOM exposure (Babić Rosario et al., 2020, p. 436). This exposure can occur through intentional searching or accidental discovery, such as consumers browsing

their social media feed and consuming content shared by their connections, rather than actively searching for information related to a specific brand or product (Hildebrand & Schlager, 2019, p. 292). In the eWOM evaluation stage consumers, also referred to as eWOM receivers, utilize eWOM to make informed decisions (Babić Rosario et al., 2020, p. 439). The eWOM creation phase builds the focus of this study.

Electronic word-of-mouth as anti-brand behavior

Generally, it can be said that positive eWOM as well as positive offline WOM is caused by consumer satisfaction with a product, a service, or a firm. Negative eWOM, on the other hand, is driven by consumer dissatisfaction. Both areas can be seen as a type of consumer response (Barreto, 2014, p. 642; Grappi et al., 2013, p. 3). Hence, negative eWOM can be defined as an anti-brand behavior, which is a type of consumer behavior that derives from consumer's dissatisfaction with a company due to a functional problem or after a wider evaluation of a company's ethics (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022, pp. 264–265). Grappi et al. (2013) define negative WOM as *“the promulgation of distaste, disapproval, or disparagement concerning irresponsible actions by corporations”* (Grappi et al., 2013, p. 3).

Among the key negative emotions that drive anti-brand actions are hate, fear, anxiety, guilt, distress, disappointment and regret, rejection, and anger, whereas brand hate appears to be the most popular research stream out of the mentioned ones (Khatoon & Rehman, 2021, pp. 6–9). That is most likely due to the fact that brand hate can cause consumers to engage in behaviors that can significantly harm brands, including avoiding the brand or spreading negative WOM (Hegner et al., 2017, pp. 16-17). Brand hate and brand dislike are both types of negative brand relationships, with brand hate representing the strongest form of negative brand relationship (Fetscherin et al., 2019, p. 134). Bryson et al. (2013) describe

brand hate as a feeling of dissatisfaction after using a product or as a result of an extremely negative experience associated with that brand (Bryson et al., 2013, p. 395). Brand dislike as the weaker form of negative brand relationships refers to negative brand evaluations of consumers and/or their decision of not purchasing from that brand (Dalli et al., 2006, p. 1; Fetscherin, 2019, p. 134).

Negative brand relationships can lead to negative behavior both at the individual level as well as at the collective level (Fetscherin et al., 2019, p. 134). Several studies shed light on the behavioral outcomes of negative brand relationships, suggesting that negative brand relationships can lead to an increase of negative WOM (Fetscherin, 2019, p. 124; Grappi et al., 2013, p. 3; Romani et al., 2012, p. 123; Zarantonello et al., 2016, p. 29), foster anti-brand communities (Dessart et al., 2020, p. 1762; Popp et al., 2016, p. 351), result in brand sabotage (Romani et al., 2012, p. 56), motivate protest behaviors (Zarantonello et al., 2016, p. 29) and brand boycotts (Klein et al., 2004, p. 92). Consumers can manifest this dissatisfaction or negativity towards brands through individual actions that directly target a particular brand, or through collaborative efforts in which individuals contribute to a group's efforts (Dessart et al., 2020, p. 1764). The collaborative perspective includes groups of consumers that share their negative emotions towards a brand with other likeminded people, which is also referred to as anti-brand communities (Dessart et al., 2020, p. 1762; Popp et al., 2016, p. 351). Social media offers an excellent environment for such anti-brand actions due to the ease of information sharing and the formation of online communities with likeminded individuals, which as a result can lead to highly polarized debates on social media (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023, p. 4).

Negativity often takes on a collaborative approach in which consumers integrate others by spreading negative WOM or engaging in protest behaviors, such as boycotts (Grappi et al.,

2013, p. 3). As part of this discussion is the rise of political consumerism, which refers to the decision of consumers to either abstain from (boycott) or actively consume certain products (buycott) based on political or ethical beliefs (Copeland & Boulianne, 2020, p. 2; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013, p. 39). In regard to brand activism this means that when a brand's position on socio-political issues leads consumers to engage in boycott or buycott, consumers participate in the form of political consumerism (Kam & Deichert, 2020, pp. 3–4). For example, when *Nike* aimed to express its stand against racism by showcasing Colin Kaepernick within a campaign, consumer reactions were split. While some supported the brand's political stand, others criticized it and published videos burning their Nike gear (Hydock et al., 2020, p. 1), resulting in boycott behavior (Copeland & Boulianne, 2020, p. 2; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013, p. 39).

While the importance of WOM in influencing consumer behavior has been widely recognized, scant research has been conducted that addresses the sender's view, meaning what drives consumers to express their opinion through WOM (Fu et al., 2015, p. 617). So far little research has been conducted in regard to negative brand relationships (Romani et al., 2012, p. 56), which is surprisingly given the fact that consumers tend to talk more about negative experiences than positive ones (Baumeister et al., 2001, p. 323). From a managerial perspective, negative brand relationships represent a major risk for brands, especially in the online context, where consumers can spread their negative emotions in seconds using the Internet or social media (Fu et al., 2015, p. 616). Thus, it becomes of utmost importance for brands to understand what triggers those negative feelings and as a result being able to control negative WOM (Fetscherin, 2019, p. 125; Zarantonello et al., 2016, p. 12).

Consumer motives for engaging in electronic word-of-mouth

Researchers argue that users who engage in eWOM think about the outcome of the behavior before deciding to participate or not. Hence eWOM communication can be seen as a planned behavior. Thus, drawing from the theory of planned behavior (TPB) the underlying intention describes the motivational reason for participating in eWOM (Cheng et al., 2006, p. 100; Fu et al., 2015, p. 620).

While some authors argue that based on the similarity of eWOM and traditional WOM communications, consumer motives for engaging in WOM seem to be also applicable for eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 40), others argue that with the advancement of technology and social changes, the motivations of eWOM senders have evolved over time (Babić Rosario et al., 2020, p. 430). The growth of social media enables a new setting that allows consumers to spread the brand actions with unlimited other users easily and fast. As a result, the nature of WOM changes (Hansen et al., 2018, p. 3). Despite the different arguments, the author of this study takes fundamental findings from the WOM literature as a base to subsequently identify negative eWOM intentions, as summarized in Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3.

Motives for positive and negative (e)WOM communication

Dichter's (1966) study is considered fundamental in terms of motives and triggers for WOM. In his study, he suggests four main drivers for positive WOM: product-involvement, self-involvement, other-involvement and message-involvement (Dichter, 1966, pp. 147–148). However, because Dichter's (1966) study only examined motives for positive WOM, Engel et al. (1993) expanded these four main categories to include the motive of dissonance reduction. For the author, cognitive dissonance, that is, a relationship of contradiction between two cognitive elements, such as thoughts, attitudes, or opinions, represents the main reason for

the articulation of purely negative WOM (Engel et al., 1993). Sundaram et al. (1998) propose eight motives why consumers engage in WOM communication, some of which are consistent with the categories initially proposed by Dichter (1966) and Engel et al. (1993). Product involvement, helping the company and self-enhancement are seen as drivers for positive WOM while vengeance, anxiety reduction and advice seeking are suggested to motivate negative expressions. Altruism can drive negative as well as positive WOM (Sundaram et al., 1998).

Berger (2014) suggests five key drivers for WOM creation and suggests that consumers engage in this behavior primarily for self-interest reasons, such as enhancing their reputation or status, which aligns with the self-enhancement determinant proposed by Sundaram et al. (1998). First, consumers care about the impressions others have of them, resulting in so called impression management. Self-enhancement and identity signaling supports impression management by trying to present oneself in ways that foster such wanted impressions and through individuals that share content about themselves to communicate a certain identity (Berger, 2014, pp. 5–8). Information acquisition as another driver of WOM refers to consumers looking for details about a certain good or service and thereby seek advice or help resolving problems. Social bonding helps consumers to connect with others, strengthen shared beliefs and overcome loneliness and social isolation. While emotional regulation helps consumers express their emotions and serves as another function of WOM persuasion refers to the underlying motivation to convince others to take the same stand (Berger, 2014, pp. 15, 20, 24, 28).

Alexandrov et al. (2013) explore social- and self-motives as the underlying motives to engage in WOM. The findings reveal that negative WOM is driven by the need for self-affirmation, meaning the motivation to protect one's self-image and the goal of sharing social

information and helping others, whereas the desire for self-enhancement and social bonding leads to positive WOM. Additionally, the study implies that the need for social comparison is pertinent to both, positive and negative WOM (Alexandrov et al., 2013, p. 542).

The study of Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) is among the first to investigate WOM in an online environment (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39; Whiting et al., 2019, p. 138). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) suggest the following four key motives for generating eWOM: need for social interaction, wish for economic incentives, concern about other consumers and potential to increase one's self-esteem (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). This means consumers participate in eWOM to belong to online communities and earn economic rewards from platform providers. Additionally, positive recognition from others, also known as self-enhancement, and helping others make informed purchasing decisions are drivers for eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, pp. 42-43).

So far little research has been conducted that investigates drivers for eWOM focusing on social media (Whiting et al., 2019, p. 138; Wolny & Mueller, 2013, p. 563). Whiting et al. (2019) investigate motivations for posting eWOM on social media and suggest that many previously identified WOM motives are still applicable in a social media context (altruism, seeking for resolution, expressing negative emotions, vengeance, company help, product involvement and self-enhancement). As additional new determinants they propose that consumers post negative eWOM in order to be heard by brands or help companies make changes through providing feedback (Whiting et al., 2019, pp. 150–151). Wolny and Mueller (2013) analyze motives for eWOM engagement through social media with a focus on the fashion industry and suggest high brand commitment, fashion involvement, product involvement and need for social interactions as drivers for eWOM on social media, while not distinguishing between positive and negative motives (Wolny & Mueller, 2013, p. 562). Table

1-3 summarizes the above-mentioned motives for WOM communication identified in the literature.

Table 1 - Motives for (e)WOM communication (I)

Author(s)	Motive	Description
Dichter (1966)	Product involvement	Personal product interest
	Self-involvement	Expression of emotional needs based on the product
	Other-involvement	Desire to give something to the recipient
	Message-involvement	Discussion sparked by advertisement
Engel et al. (1993)	Involvement	Level of topic interest
	Self-enhancement	Earn status through recommendations
	Concern for others	Help others with their buying decision
	Message intrigue	Conversation that arises based on the advertisement
Sundaram et al. (1998)	Dissonance reduction	Reduction of doubts after a major buying decision
	Altruism	Help others (positive WOM) and prevent others to not experience the same (negative WOM)
	Product involvement	Personal product interest
	Self-enhancement	Improve image among others by portraying oneself as a smart buyer
	Helping the company	Wish to help the company
	Anxiety reduction	Reduce fear and anxiety
	Vengeance	Seek revenge against the company responsible for a bad purchasing decision
Advice seeking	Obtain guidance on problem-solving	

Note. This table summarizes selected motives for WOM communication identified in the literature.

Table 2 - Motives for (e)WOM communication (II)

Author(s)	Motive	Description
Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004)	Desire for social interaction	Participating in and belonging to online communities
	Wish for economic incentives	Economic rewards from platform providers
	Concern about other consumers	Desire to help others with their buying decision
	Potential to increase one's self-esteem	Positive recognition from others
Berger (2014)	Impression- management	Form impression others have of oneself
	Emotion regulation	Help express emotions
	Information acquisition	Advice seeking and problem solving
	Social bonding	Connect with others and reinforce shared views
	Persuasion	Convince others to take the same stand
Alexandrov et al. (2013)	Self-affirmation	Keep the integrity of one's self-image
	Altruism	Help others to not experience the same
	Self-enhancement	Positive recognition from others
	Social comparison	Comparison of opinions with peers
	Social bonding	Connect with others and reinforce shared views

Note. This table summarizes selected motives for WOM communication identified in the literature.

Table 3 - Motives for (e)WOM communication (III)

Author(s)	Motive	Description
Whiting et al. (2019)	Altruism	Prevent others to not experience the same problems
	Resolution seeking	Wish to get a resolution
	Express negative feelings	Release negative emotions
	Vengeance	Revenge against the company
	Want to be heard by the organization	Wish towards the organization to listen
	Product involvement	Personal product interest
Wolny and Mueller (2013)	Self-enhancement	Positive recognition from others
	Help company make changes	Provide support through feedback
	Brand commitment	Commitment to a company beyond product satisfaction
	Fashion involvement	Personal fashion interest
	Product involvement	Personal product interest
	Need for social interactions	Participation in and belonging to online communities

Note. This table summarizes selected motives for WOM communication identified in the literature.

To sum up, the most dominant factors influencing WOM intentions seem to be self-enhancement as well as altruism (as almost all the mentioned authors have found these as dominant WOM drivers). Self-enhancement can be seen as a prime driver of WOM communication, meaning that consumers use WOM as a means of enhancing their own image (Alexandrov et al., 2013, p. 542; Berger, 2014, p. 4; Engel et al., 1993; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39; Sundaram et al., 1998). Another significant motivator for WOM communication

is altruism that can drive individuals to share information and recommendations for the benefit of others, either to inform or warn them about brands and related experiences (Alexandrov et al., 2013, p. 542; Engel et al., 1993; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39; Sundaram et al., 1998).

Motives for negative (e)WOM communication

While research about general WOM intentions goes decades back (Dichter, 1966; Engel et al., 1993; Sundaram et al., 1998), studies with a focus on negative WOM intentions, especially in an online context, seem to be scarce (Grappi et al., 2013, p. 3). Due to the focus of this study on negative eWOM intentions, the author aims to summarize existing findings about negative eWOM, as shown in Table 4.

Drawing upon previous research about determinants of negative eWOM, several observations can be made. Previous authors suggest that consumers are likely to participate in negative eWOM to influence others and gain revenge or vengeance by using their power (Grégoire et al., 2010, p. 748; Ward & Ostrom, 2006, p. 224; Whiting et al., 2019, pp. 150-151). These findings align with the study of Sharma et al. (2022) that sheds light on the power of social media as direct predictor of negative eWOM as well as indirectly through brand hate (Sharma et al., 2022, pp. 665–666). Power in this context can be defined as the ability to control people or valuable resources in online social relationships (Labrecque et al., 2013, pp. 258–259). Another driver of negative eWOM can be seen in altruism, which refers to the concern of others well-being, for example through warning others (Fu et al., 2015, pp. 627-628; Sparks & Browning, 2010, p. 807; Whiting et al., 2019, pp. 150-151). Additionally, negative emotions have shown to motivate negative eWOM (Verhagen et al., 2013, pp. 1436–1437; Whiting et al., 2019, pp. 150–151). This is consistent with a recent stream of research that suggests brand hate as a driver of eWOM (Fetscherin, 2019, p. 124; Grappi et al., 2013,

p. 3; Romani et al., 2012, p. 123; Zarantonello et al., 2016, p. 29). Fu et al. (2015) find in their study that social approval and pressure can be a driver for participating in negative eWOM, meaning that consumers weigh the impact and consequences of it before sharing their opinion (Fu et al., 2015, pp. 627–628). Additionally, Whiting et al. (2019) argue that consumers participate in negative eWOM in order to be heard by brands and seek for resolutions (Whiting et al., 2019, pp. 150–151).

Table 4 - Motives for negative eWOM communication

Author(s)	Motive	Description
Grégoire et al. (2010)	Influence others	Seek revenge against the company responsible for a bad purchasing decision
Ward and Ostrom (2006)	Gain revenge	
Whiting et al. (2019)	Vengeance	
Fu et al. (2015) Sparks and Browning (2010) Whiting et al. (2019)	Altruism	Prevent others to not experience the same problems
Verhagen et al. (2013) Whiting et al. (2019)	Negative emotions	Release negative emotions
Fetscherin, (2019) Romani et al. (2012) Zarantonello et al. (2018).	Brand hate	Engage in behaviors that harm brands
Sharma et al. (2022)	Social media power	Power due to social media reach, engagement, and persuasiveness
Fu et. al (2015)	Social pressure	Influence of others on individual behavior
Whiting et al. (2019)	Resolution seeking	Wish to get a resolution
Whiting et al. (2019)	Want to be heard by organization	Wish towards the organization to listen

Note. This table summarizes selected motives for negative eWOM communication identified in the literature.

To sum up, findings of the negative eWOM literature seem to largely align with factors of the WOM literature, such as vengeance (Sundaram et al., 1998) or altruism (Alexandrov et al., 2013, p. 542; Engel et al., 1993; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39; Sundaram et al., 1998).

This is consistent with the suggestion of Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) and Whiting et al. (2019) that consumer eWOM motives are similar to motives of traditional WOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 40; Whiting et al., 2019, p. 150). However, especially the social media context highlights new determinants, such as social pressure (Fu et al., 2015, pp. 627–628) and social media power (Sharma et al., 2022, pp. 665–666). Additionally, the expression of negative emotions (Verhagen et al., 2013, pp. 1436–1437) and negative brand relationships such as brand hate (Fetscherin, 2019, p. 124; Grappi et al., 2013, p. 3; Romani et al., 2012, p. 123; Zarantonello et al., 2016, p. 29) appear to be especially relevant as a negative driver within an online environment.

Motives for engaging in (e)WOM towards socio-political issues

A growing body of CSR literature sheds light on the intentions to engage in eWOM due to CSR activities (Aguirre et al., 2023; Chu & Chen, 2019; Chu et al., 2020; Fatma et al., 2020; Mar García-de los Salmones et al., 2021; Martínez et al., 2020), while to the author's best knowledge no research that evaluates the eWOM intentions of brand activism has been conducted. Thus, consistent with existing brand activism research that takes findings from the CSR literature as a base for research (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 2; Vredenburg et al., 2020, pp. 445–446), this study draws on CSR literature regarding WOM intentions as its foundation, as shown in Table 5.

Mar García-de los Salmones et al. (2021) investigate the intention to engage in negative CSR news through Facebook and suggest social and environmental consciousness as key intentions. Socially conscious individuals care about the society they live in and are observant of information that affects it. Hence any news that might negatively influence the society of social conscious people will catch their attention and increase the likelihood of engaging with it. The study also suggests that social consciousness results in increased environmental

consciousness. Additionally, social, and environmental consciousness appear to impact information usefulness and attitude towards engaging in CSR issues and hence impact eWOM intentions. The corporate image, on the other hand, might prevent users to comment and share irresponsible CSR news, at least in earlier phases (Mar García-de los Salmones et al., 2021, pp. 591–592).

Additionally, Martínez et al. (2020) investigate in their study the main factors that impact eWOM intentions about negative CSR issues via Facebook and suggest that information value, social media platform trust and self-disclosure positively impact eWOM intentions (Martínez et al., 2020, pp. 1–2). Trust can be described as *“a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence”* (Moorman et al., 1992, p. 82), while self-disclosure can be seen as *“any message about the self that a person communicates to another”* (Wheless & Grotz, 1976, p. 47). Due to the high volume of information that individuals are exposed to on social media, they might be more likely to engage with information that they find useful (Almgren & Olsson, 2016, p. 70; Erkan & Evans, 2016, p. 50).

Chu et al. (2020) analyze in their research cross-cultural differences in terms of eWOM intentions and consumers’ engagement in CSR communication via social media. The findings suggest that individuals engage in CSR on social media mainly to influence peers and thereby act as opinion leaders and to communicate with others. While peer communication and opinion leadership traits have been found to directly impact eWOM engagement, attitudes related to CSR concerns have been found to have only an indirectly effect on eWOM intentions. Additionally, the results propose that attitudes toward CSR in social media have more impact for Chinese consumers compared to American consumers and peer communication and opinion leadership traits affect Chinese consumers’ engagement stronger compared to American consumers (Chu et al., 2020, pp. 266–268).

Aguirre et al. (2023) investigate consumer motivations to share CSR information through eWOM on social media through the antecedents: self-enhancement, identity signaling and social bonding. Results indicate that social bonding and need for self-enhancement are key drivers for eWOM engagement. This means that users are motivated to share CSR information to improve their self-image and build connections with other users (Aguirre et al., 2023, pp. 12–14).

Fatma et al. (2020) examine the influence of CSR engagement on consumers' eWOM on Facebook. The results indicate that companies' CSR communication on social media platforms not only engages consumers but also fosters brand identification, ultimately leading to increased eWOM intentions through an identification of consumers with the brand (Fatma et al., 2020, p. 941).

Chu and Chen (2019) explore the correlations among consumers' CSR-related activities in social media, brand identification, and three consumer behavior results: eWOM intention, brand attitude, and purchase intention. The findings indicate that consumers' CSR-related activities in social media have a notable influence on eWOM intention and purchase intention by elevating brand identification and fostering a favorable brand attitude. The findings indicate that users are more inclined to identify with a company the more they engage with CSR content on social media. This implies that CSR engagement improves brand identification. Consequently, increased CSR participation on social media and higher brand identification leads to increased positive eWOM (Chu & Chen, 2019, pp. 457–458).

Table 5 - Motives for eWOM communication towards CSR

Author(s)	Motive	Description
Mar García-de los Salmones et al. (2021)	Social consciousness	Concern for the well-being of society
	Environmental consciousness	Concern for the well-being of the environment
	Information usefulness	Importance of the CSR message
	Corporate image	Image about the company that prevents users to share negative news
	Attitude towards engaging in CSR issues	Attitude towards commenting and sharing CSR news
Martínez et al. (2020)	Information value	Useful information
	Social media platform trust	Trust towards the used social media platform
	Self-disclosure	Communication about oneself that is shared with others
Chu et al. (2020)	Peer communication about CSR activities	Exchange with other users
	Opinion leadership characteristics	Influence others
Aguirre et al. (2023)	Self-enhancement	Improve self-image
	Social bonding	Connect with peers
Fatma et al. (2020)	Brand identification	Identification with the brand through CSR activities
Chu and Chen (2019)		

Note. This table summarizes selected motives for WOM communication towards CSR identified in the literature.

To conclude, research on WOM intentions in relation to socio-political issues is still scarce. While most WOM determinants have been noted by multiple authors, findings on WOM intentions in the CSR literature are either new suggestions or replications of existing WOM literature (e.g. Aguirre et al., 2023). However, compared to general WOM literature that provides so far little findings in a social media context (Whiting et al., 2019, p. 138; Wolny & Mueller, 2013, p. 563), CSR studies seem to put a focus on social media. Additionally, the existing WOM literature on CSR does not seem to address the distinction between positive and negative expressions (Aguirre et al., 2023; Chu & Chen, 2019; Chu et al., 2020; Fatma et al., 2020; Mar García-de los Salmones et al., 2021; Martínez et al., 2020).

Electronic word-of-mouth on social media

The rise of social media and the evolution of the Internet has changed the dynamics of (negative) eWOM behavior (Sharma et al., 2022, p. 654). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as *“a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content”* (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61).

Social media offers different eWOM sources, ranging from blogs, chat rooms, forums, to social networking sites and content communities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, pp. 62–64; Mangold & Faulds, 2009, p. 358). In an attempt to facilitate communication and interaction, social networking sites, such as *Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, or LinkedIn*, allow users to set up user profiles and connect with peers online. Thereby social networking sites transform people into a virtual community that enables real-time interaction and connectivity (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 63; Sundararaj & Rejeesh, 2021, pp. 1–2). Similar characteristics can be seen within content communities, that are online platforms, like *YouTube or Flickr*, where

users discuss media content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 63). Content communities can be further split into different perspectives, such as photo sharing sites like *Flickr* or video sharing sites like *YouTube* (Mangold & Faulds, 2009, p. 358). Compared to social networking sites, where users need to have a profile, content communities do not require one, hence making the platforms more anonymous (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 63). However, an active participation like commenting requires a registration including a username. On *YouTube* though, usernames often differ from individual real names and include symbols and numbers, which might again lead to a more anonymized participation (Khan, 2017, p. 239).

Consumer participation in electronic word-of-mouth on social media

Today, companies deal with so-called "prosumers", which refers to consumers who actively produce content themselves and share it with vast amounts of people on social media (Fine et al., 2017, p. 1). This type of consumers can be categorized as active users, who participate in online discussions through commenting, liking, disliking, and sharing content. Compared to that, passive users consume the content on social media, but do not actively participate in it through commenting or similar behavior (Khan, 2017, p. 237).

As part of this discussion is the rise of user generated content, which refers to any type of content (e.g. comments) that is created by end-users and not by a brand and is publicly accessible for example through a website or to a selected group of people through a social networking site (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media enables eWOM by allowing users to share or search for informal product recommendations using the platform's distinct features. By becoming fans, users can engage with brands and voluntarily expose themselves to brand information, resulting in an authentic and interactive eWOM environment. Furthermore, social media differs from other eWOM media because users have easy access to their social networks, making recommendations from social media contacts more

trustworthy and credible than from strangers (Chu & Kim, 2011, p. 50). Through social media users can share positive as well as negative opinions about brands and thereby easily engage in eWOM (Hutter et al., 2013, p. 345; Mar García-de los Salmones et al., 2021, p. 2). At the same time, from a consumer perspective the main reason to use social media is to communicate with peers, which includes negative and positive WOM (Hutter et al., 2013, p. 345). This might be explained by the users' desire to build and sustain social relationships, which can be done by sharing product or brand-related content on social media and thereby supporting others with their buying decisions (Chu & Kim, 2011, p. 51).

The dimensions of eWOM on social media include opinion seeking, opinion giving and opinion passing (Chu & Kim, 2011, p. 50). Individuals with high characteristics of opinion seeking often turn to others to seek advice before making buying decisions. Conversely, individuals with high levels of opinion giving, also known as opinion leaders, can significantly influence the attitudes and actions of others (Flynn et al., 1996, p. 138). Compared to offline WOM, eWOM allows for interactive and engaging communication, enabling one individual to play the numerous roles of opinion provider, seeker, and transmitter. Social media platforms can serve as reliable information sources for buying decisions, as opinion seekers tend to view recommendations from friends as credible. In addition, a social environment can offer opinion leaders more chances to express their product- and brand-related thoughts with peers. Another essential component of eWOM on social media platforms is opinion-sharing behavior, which refers to users transferring information to others (Chu & Kim, 2011, pp. 50-51).

Social Media Firestorms

As part of negative eWOM research on social media is the phenomenon of social media firestorms. The concept of firestorms was first mentioned in academic research by Pfeffer et

al. (2013) who define firestorms as *“the sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative WOM [word of mouth] and complaint behavior against a person, company, or group in social media networks”* (Pfeffer et al., 2013, p. 118). Social Media firestorms can be categorized as a type of digital brand crisis (Hansen et al., 2018, p. 2) and can lead to strong negative impact for brands, such as harming the brand’s image or reputation, resulting in monetary losses (Pfeffer et al., 2013, p. 118). In this regard, Kähr et al. (2016) discuss the individual-level motivation of consumers and thereby suggest the concept of *“consumer sabotage”*, which can be defined as *“a deliberate form of hostile aggressive behavior on the part of the consumer designed to harm the brand”* (Kähr et al., 2016, p. 2). Rauschnabel et al. (2016) investigate a similar concept, named as *“collaborative brand attacks”*, which refers to a planned behavior of customers and non-customers who attempt to harm a brand by damaging the brand-related associations of other consumers (Rauschnabel et al., 2016, p. 4). Another construct worth mentioning in regard to negative behaviors is customer retaliation, which describes actions taken by customers with the intention of restoring equity after having felt that a brand has acted inappropriately (Kähr et al., 2016, p. 6). The concept of social media firestorms shares similarities with consumer sabotage, brand attacks and customer retaliation. However, social media firestorms also include unintentional social media expressions (Hansen et al., 2018, p. 2; Kähr et al., 2016, p. 6). Additionally, a social media firestorm refers to a situation where negative WOM is intentionally insulting towards a brand and lacks substance or logical argument, even though it is based on genuine customer criticism in its early stages (Pfeffer et al., 2013, p. 118).

Chapter 3: Research question

As mentioned in chapter 1, although there has been a growing demand from consumers for brands to take a stand on socio-political issues and an increase of brands following these, academic literature in this area is sparse. This is especially true when it comes to the understanding of consumer responses (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 14; Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019, p. 7; Klostermann et al., 2021, p. 11; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 456).

While existing CSR literature sheds light on the intentions to engage in eWOM due to CSR activities (Chu & Chen, 2019; Chu et al., 2020; Fatma et al., 2020; Mar García-de los Salmones et al., 2021), to the author's best knowledge no research has been conducted that evaluates the eWOM intentions of brand activism. However, brand activism seems to be associated with bigger risks as well as rewards compared to CSR activities due to its partisan character (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 2; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 2). Therefore, the aim of this study is to fill this gap and identify: Which factors influence negative eWOM intentions towards brand activism campaigns on social media?

The key objective of this study is to analyze the intentions behind a consumer's decision to participate in negative eWOM about brand activism, as suggested also by Klostermann et al. (2021) and Romani et al. (2015) as a further research area (Klostermann et al., 2021, p. 12; Romani et al., 2015, p. 670). Thereby, the study follows the suggestion from Ahmad et al. (2022) to study the negative effects of brand activism (Ahmad et al., 2022, p. 620), while adding to the scant research about negative brand relationships (Fetscherin, 2019, p. 125; Zarantonello et al., 2016, p. 12). Additionally, it supports the suggestion from Gambetti and Biraghi (2023) to investigate the drivers of brand activism (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023, p. 2), while extending the so far limited consumer research towards brand activism (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 17; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 14). Finally, the study aims to expand the existing

eWOM intention research to the context of brand activism and thereby joins one of the most popular research streams (Donthu et al., 2021, pp. 767–768).

Chapter 4: Methods

The methods section will give an overview about the empirical research methods that will be applied within this study, including the study design and instrument, sampling, data collection and analysis method.

Study Design and Survey Instrument

Since this study aims to understand the meaning of consumers' reactions towards brands taking a stand on controversial topics a qualitative study appears to be appropriate. The exploratory nature of this research and the little available information about the subject of investigation underline the need for a qualitative study (Magerhans, 2016, p. 167).

The study design is based on grounded theory. Qualitative, inductive methodologies that are grounded in theory fit for research that seeks to develop novel frameworks and conceptualizations (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 32). The establishment of a theory and the gathering of data relating to that theory are interdependent steps in the complex, dynamic, and iterative process known as grounded theory. The research starts with generic questions that are meant to direct the research but not be fixed or limiting. As the researcher begins to collect data, key theoretical concepts are identified (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 10–11; Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 36; Trochim et al., 2016, p. 62).

Building theory through inductive methods, such as unobtrusive content analysis is well-suited for the purpose of this study. Unobtrusive measures are data collection methods without impacting the lives of the participants. Moreover, unobtrusive measures are likely to

reduce the bias created by the intrusion of the researcher or the measurement instrument (Trochim et al., 2016, p. 65).

Inspired by Pöyry and Laaksonen's (2022) qualitative content analysis about triggers and strategies of consumer's anti-brand actions, the given study aims to identify the triggers of eWOM on social media in response to brand activism, similar to the method that Pöyry and Laaksonen (2022) adapted. That is a qualitative content analysis on social media that looks for the triggers in what users offered as explanations for their stance within social media posts and comments (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022, pp. 265–267). Qualitative content analysis aims to identify patterns in text, which makes it suitable for the given study that tries to identify patterns in consumer reactions towards brand activism (Trochim et al., 2016, p. 66). This also aligns with the suggestion from Vredenburg et al. (2020) to analyze consumer behavior in online communication to gain insights about the effect of brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 456). Social media offers the possibility of examining users' eWOM and understanding the associated consumer behavior based on a big amount of available data of user opinions about brands (Okazaki et al., 2014, pp. 467–468). Hence it seems to be an appropriate channel also for this study.

More concretely, the empirical study is conducted via the social media platform *YouTube*. *YouTube* serves as a unique source of data to study topics such as eWOM (Khan, 2017, p. 237). First, *YouTube* has shown to be a good data source for prior social media studies (Feng et al., 2019; Khan, 2017; Lee & Yoon, 2020; Muda & Hamzah, 2021). Second, *YouTube* allows users to express their opinions through commenting, liking and disliking, hence making it an interesting social media platform for research purposes (Khan, 2017, p. p.237; Smith et al., 2012, p. 104). Third, *YouTube* as the world's most popular online video platform with its

extensive user base in combination with its commenting and liking features make it a valuable platform to study eWOM behavior (Muda & Hamzah, 2021, p. 443).

To better understand the discourse around brand activism on social media and the public communication of consumer responses, the study is done by analyzing user comments posted on *YouTube* as a response to selected brand activism campaigns. For instance, after *Gillette* launched the advertisement “We Believe” in 2019, the video received over 15 million views within the first 5 days after the launch and users commented their own divergent opinions about the advertisement. Thus comments offer researchers an excellent source of information (Bogen, Williams, et al., 2021, p. 3; Guardian News, 2019).

Sample

By selecting specific brand activism campaigns, the given study follows the logic of purposive sampling, which can be classified as a nonprobability sampling method. In purposive sampling the researcher has an intent related to the type of participants he or she is looking for (Trochim et al., 2016, p. 87). Purposive sampling includes analysis of all text units that contribute to answering the given research question. The resulting units of text are not supposed to be representative of a population of texts, instead they represent the population of relevant texts, while eliminating the units of text that do not contain relevant insights (Krippendorff, 2004, pp. 118–119).

The selected campaigns, as shown in Table 6, are expected to produce comprehensive insights on consumers’ eWOM. First, they address topics that are controversial in nature, which is likely to provoke reactions and opinions from consumers. Second, these brands have a large online presence and therefore their campaigns reach a wide audience, as can be seen by the number of views and comments in Table 6. Videos with a large number of comments

indicate that the content has led to a polarized discussion while also providing enough data for analysis (Feng et al., 2019, p. 5). Hence this allows for more detailed analysis of consumer responses to brand activism communication. Third, all the selected campaigns address different socio-political issues. While *Gillette* tackles toxic masculinity in support of the MeToo Movement, *Nike* focuses on the Black Lives Matter Movement in response to George Floyd’s death and *Airbnb* aims to drive a positive change towards diversity and inclusion in response to the Trump travel ban. Hence the author aims to create a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence negative eWOM intentions towards brand activism campaigns on *YouTube*. To sum up, the campaigns were selected based on 1) controversial stand 2) number of comments (over 1000) 3) different socio-political issues involved.

Table 6 - Selected campaigns

Campaign	Views	Comments	Topic
Gillette – We believe: The Best Men Can Be	4,3 million	24,591	Toxic masculinity, MeToo Movement
Nike – For Once Don’t Do it	1,4 million	1,225	Black Lives Matter Movement, death of George Floyd
Airbnb – We accept	5,2 million	1,108	Diversity and inclusion, Trump travel ban

Note. This table gives an overview of the selected campaigns for the empirical study. The numbers of views and comments were derived from *YouTube* on March 30, 2023 (Airbnb, 2017; Guardian News, 2019; Nike, 2020).

Gillette – The Best Men Can Be

In 2019, *Gillette*, the razor brand owned by *Procter & Gamble*, addressed the issue of toxic masculinity through a viral video campaign (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 444). As part of the MeToo movement, a social movement against sexual abuse and harassment, *Gillette's* "We believe: the Best Men Can Be" campaign encourages the audience to challenge issues such as toxic masculinity (Mirzaei et al., 2022, p. 2). The advertisement generated significant buzz on social media, with over 15 million views within the first five days of its release and users sharing a range of divisive opinions about it (Bogen, Williams, et al., 2021, p. 3). The video was posted on *Gillette's YouTube* channel on January 14, 2019 and received until end of March 2023 38 million views, however the comments are turned off (Gillette, 2019). One day after the official campaign start date, the *Guardian News* shared the video on their *YouTube* channel, and received until end of March 2023 over 4,3 million views alongside 24,591 comments (Guardian News, 2019).

Nike – For Once Don't Do It

In 2020, *Nike* started the "For Once, Don't Do It" campaign in response to the death of George Floyd and in support of the Black Lives Matter movement (Schmidt et al., 2021, p. 40). The Black Lives Matter movement aims to eliminate white supremacy and support racial justice (Mirzaei et al., 2022, p. 2). The video includes a message that urges individuals to acknowledge the issue of racism in America and encourages them to speak out against it. It aims to inspire people to support social justice and the protests against police brutality towards black people happening across the US (Eyada, 2020, p. 38). The campaign was launched on May 30 2020 and received until end of March 2023 over 1,4 million views and

1,225 comments on *YouTube*, resulting in divergent consumer responses (Nike, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2021, p. 40).

Airbnb – We accept

On Feb 6, 2017, *Airbnb* launched the “We accept” campaign, addressing the topic of discrimination as a response to Donald Trump’s announcement of the travel ban on seven muslim-majority nations, making the campaign politically charged (Gamble, 2019). Overall, the travel ban caused widespread resistance and outrage from a range of individuals and organizations who saw it as a discriminatory and unjust policy (Rim et al., 2020, p. 3). The campaign promotes greater diversity and inclusion with the aim to create a world where everyone can belong anywhere. The video gained a lot of attention on social media, for example on *YouTube* the video received until the end of March 2023 over 5,2 million views and 1,108 comments (Airbnb, 2017). During the campaign *Airbnb* also announced that they will take action on supporting the International Rescue Committee and provide free housing for people affected by the travel ban (Gamble, 2019; Rim et al., 2020, p. 3).

Data collection

First, the selected campaigns were located on the official *YouTube* accounts of the companies. An exception builds the *Gillette* video, where the content was taken from the *Guardian News* due to the disablement of the comments on the official *Gillette* account (Airbnb, 2017; Guardian News, 2019; Nike, 2020). Consequently, data collection was done using the software *MAXQDA*, which enables to import up to 10,000 comments resulting from a selected *YouTube* video into a *MAXQDA* project based on publicly available data (YouTube Data, n.d.). In total, a sample of 12,333 comments was gathered. While the videos of *Nike* and

Airbnb allowed all comments to be imported, the *Gillette* campaign was limited to 10,000 comments per video due to *MAXQDA*'s restriction.

Consistent with the existing literature on social media analysis, the data was limited for a period while the discourse is still popular on *YouTube*. This means that data was collected in a period where the discourse on social media is at a peak, which is supposed to be shortly after the launch of a social media campaign (Bogen, Bleiweiss, et al., 2021, p. 8263; Bogen, Williams, et al., 2021, p. 3; McCauley et al., 2018, p. 2). Hence the data for the analysis of this study was limited to 7 days after each video was posted on *YouTube*. This means, the selected timeframe for the *Nike* campaign is May 30-June 6, 2020, for the *Airbnb* campaign February 6-February 12, 2017, and for the *Gillette* campaign January 15-January 22, 2019.

Similar to previous qualitative content analysis on *YouTube*, the author of this study excluded replies, non-English comments, and comments in unrecognizable characters (Feng et al., 2019, p. 5, 2021, p. 535). Analyzing user comments is especially relevant given the fact that *YouTube* viewers are more likely to post comments about a video compared to responding to other comments or clicking on "view replies", hence making the content of comments more impactful than replies (Feng et al., 2019, p. 4).

Additionally, a sentiment analysis was done by means of the software *MAXQDA* to filter out positive and negative sentiments and being able to focus only on the negative ones. In addition, the author checked the comments manually to confirm the categorization of positive and negative as a computer program cannot always gauge what a person meant by a phrase (Trochim et al., 2016, p. 67). Furthermore, comments posted by the brands themselves were excluded, as the given study concentrates on negative consumer eWOM intentions as a response to brand activism campaigns.

Consequently, the sample size resulted in 831 comments for the *Nike* campaign, 1,027 comments for the *Airbnb* campaign and 7,691 comments for the *Gillette* campaign. Due to the big amount of data still resulting from the *Gillette* campaign, a random sample of 10 % of the data was used for the analysis as also used in prior qualitative social media analysis (Bogen, Bleiweiss, et al., 2021, p. 8264; McCauley et al., 2018, p. 2; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022, p. 267) while also making the amount of comments analyzed per campaign better comparable. Thus, resulting in 769 comments for the *Gillette* campaign. Consequently, the final data set contains of 2,627 comments across all three selected campaigns.

Data analysis

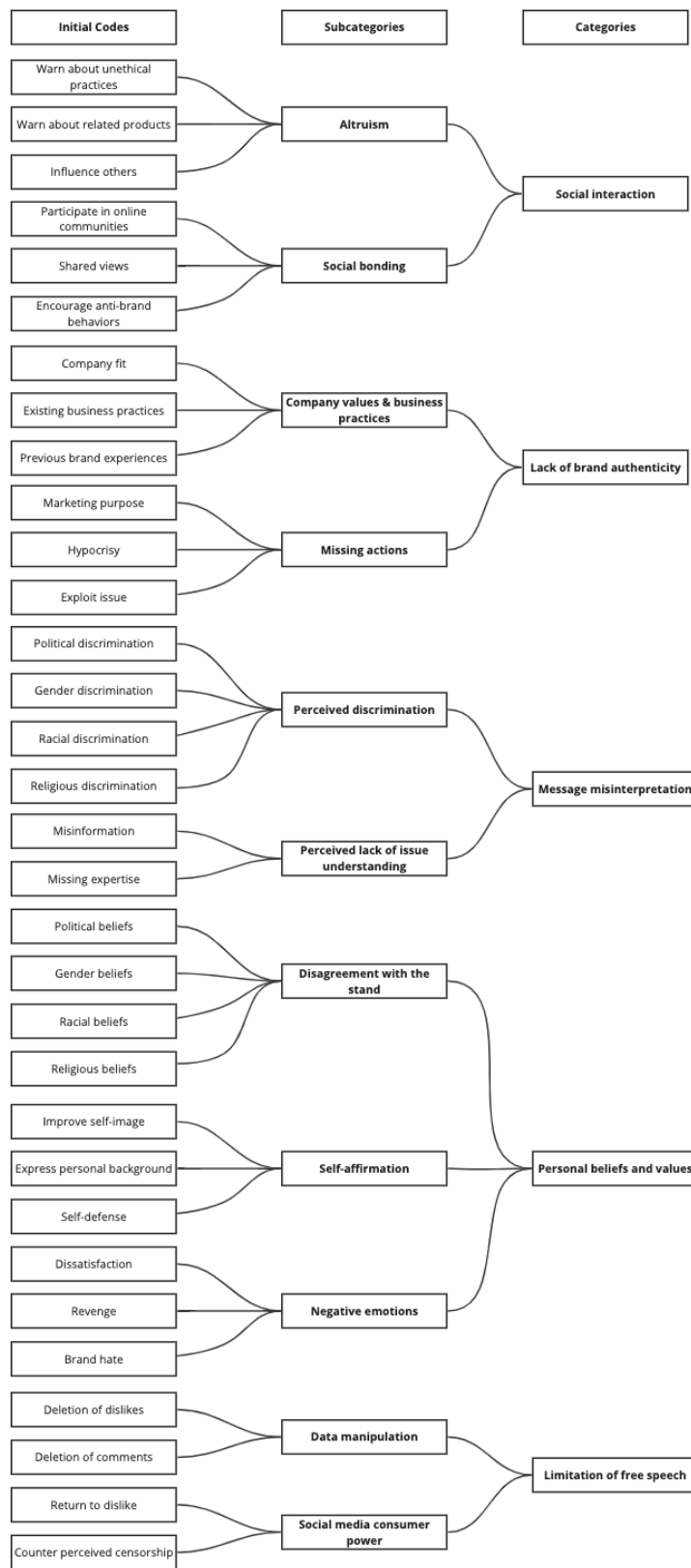
The analysis was done using qualitative content analysis, a method used for classifying oral or written information into categories with similar meanings (Schreier, 2012, pp. 8–9). Content analysis aims to identify patterns in text, which makes it suitable for the given study that tries to identify patterns in consumer responses towards brand activism (Trochim et al., 2016, p. 66). An inductive approach was used for the analysis, which refers to exploring the data first before developing theoretical categories (Kuckartz & McWhertor, 2014, p. 58). To analyze and interpret the collected data, it has to be coded. In grounded theory research three types of coding exist: open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 12). The coding process starts with open coding (Kuckartz & McWhertor, 2014, p. 23; Schreier, 2012, p. 111). Axial and selective coding are likely to be used in later phases of a study (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, pp. 13–14).

The data analysis followed a multi-step approach, whereby the emerging theory is built iteratively by continually moving between data and analysis. The research process is

documented in research logs, including reflection, conceptualization, theorizing, and development of concepts, categories, and themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 106).

Initial codes were formed in the early phases of the research process by investigating the open coding of the *YouTube* data. These were mainly in-vivo interpretations of comments, which is a method that focuses on the actual spoken words of participants and thus can help interpreting the underlying meaning (Manning, 2017, p. 1). Thereby, the researcher begins to explore, compare, conceptualize, and categorize data. Throughout the analysis first concepts and their dimensions are built, as shown in Figure 4. This allows to directly assess participants' opinions without being constrained by developed theories (Kuckartz & McWhertor, 2014, p. 23; Schreier, 2012, p. 111). As a next step, **subcategories** were built, based on axial coding which uses related data to form codes, categories, and subcategories that link the data. Consequently, **categories** were derived based on selective coding which involves standardizing all categories around a core category and expanding categories which need further explanation with descriptive details (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, pp. 13–14).

Figure 4 - Code system



Note. This figure demonstrates the code system that emerged as part of the empirical study of this research. The figure is an own illustration.

Chapter 5: Empirical study

The following chapter aims to provide detailed insights about the findings of the empirical study and shed light on the identified factors influencing negative eWOM intentions towards brand activism campaigns on social media. The study thereby suggests social interaction, lack of brand authenticity, misinterpretation of the message, personal beliefs, and values as well as perceived limitation of free speech as factors influencing negative eWOM intentions towards brand activism on social media, as can be seen within the categories in Figure 4. Each category contains subcategories that will be explained accordingly in the following chapter. Additionally, the appendix provides exemplary comments per identified category (see A-3).

Social interaction

The findings suggest that users are, on the one hand, motivated to engage in negative eWOM to warn others and inform them about harmful practices of a brand and, on the other hand, to connect with other like-minded people in online communities, suggesting social interaction as a factor influencing negative eWOM intentions towards brand activism campaigns.

Altruism

The findings suggest that users are motivated to engage in negative eWOM to warn others and inform them about the unethical or harmful practices of a brand, resulting in altruism as a factor that influences negative eWOM intentions towards brand activism. In other words, a sense of responsibility to raise awareness of these issues and discourage others from supporting a company can be observed across all campaigns, as can be seen in comments like *“NIKE only uses you for your money... NIKE is part of the problem. [...]”*

(Anchovy Toothpaste, 2020) or *“Don’t be racist and buy our shoes that are literally made in sweatshops”* (Cap, 2020).

Furthermore, the results suggest that people engage in negative eWOM to influence and pressure others to stop supporting the brand. For instance, comments as *“[...] only idiots still wearing their sweatshop products are the morons vandalizing their stores”* (Itsneight, 2020) and *“No true American will buy Gillette anymore”* (Maximillian Morcom, 2019) provide examples of the use of persuasive language to prevent people from buying products of the brand. By suggesting that only "idiots" or "unpatriotic" individuals would support these brands, users seem to create a sense of shame or guilt for those who continue to purchase from them.

The *Gillette* campaign additionally triggered negative comments, indicating that users want to warn others about related products of the brand and encourage them to stop supporting the whole company *“Don't buy anything from Gillette (Procter and Gamble) unless you support this nonsense!!!”* (A Girl Called Stevie, 2019). While such comments indicate, on the one hand, certain characteristics of altruism by warning others, on the other hand, it could be also seen as blaming others for their behavior and helping to maintain a good self-image in the eyes of other consumers, leading to the conclusion of self-affirmation as a driver for negative eWOM (see chapter self-affirmation).

To sum up, the findings suggest altruism through warning others as a driver for negative eWOM towards brand activism campaigns. Thereby, the findings add to the existing WOM literature, which highlights altruism as an important driver for engaging in WOM (Alexandrov et al., 2013, p. 542; Engel et al., 1993; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39; Sundaram et al., 1998).

Social bonding

The results reveal that individuals seek to participate in and feel a sense of community in online spaces as well as shared views when engaging in negative eWOM, as reflected in comments such as *"I have read some of the comments and they all pretty much cover what i had in mind to say, but i will say this, not ever will a Gillette product enter a shopping bag belonging to me"* (Paul John, 2019) or *"Just CAME TO DISLIKE"* (NunyaFB443, 2019).

Thereby, users seem to express their negative sentiment while also indicating their participation in the online community and the feeling of shared views. These findings align with comments that indicate that users participate in negative eWOM to encourage others to also express their negative feelings towards the brand while showing characteristics of social bonding as a driver for negative eWOM *"Comment while you can! I'm sure it'll get shut off. Thumbs down the video if you merely want businesses to stop being political or preachy"* (No,Isaidposse, 2017).

As part of this discussion are findings that imply the interpretation that users take part in negative eWOM to express their planned or already executed boycott behavior, encourage others to follow and thereby create a sense of shared views. For instance, some users share videos showing protesters looting *Nike's* store, while others share a list of alternatives to *Gillette* and *Nike* products and announce their boycott behavior as a response to the commercial. The expression of boycott behavior often comes together with a prompt for others to follow, which leads the author to the conclusion that consumers want to influence others in their behavior while at the same time taking revenge as a community against the company, as expressed in comments such as *"Anyone who actually has conviction and wants to show their distaste at this [...] Boycott all Gillette products, hell even if it's just for a few months, if everyone did this they would lose millions"* (mrawesome669, 2019).

Summing up, the findings propose social bonding as a driver for negative eWOM towards brand activism on social media, adding to the existing eWOM literature that suggests social bonding as a driver of participation in eWOM, meaning that users engage in a discourse to connect with others, strengthen shared views and decrease social exclusion (Aguirre et al., 2023, pp. 12–13; Berger, 2014, pp. 24–25).

Lack of brand authenticity

The findings indicate that a perceived lack of brand authenticity fuels negative eWOM. This means, when the company's values and existing business practices do not align with the message of a brand activism campaign, consumers seem more likely to voice their dissatisfaction online. Additionally, negative eWOM appears to be fueled when users perceive that a company is using a socio-political issue solely for marketing purposes, without backing up their statements with tangible actions towards the issue.

Misalignment with company values and existing business practices

The data implies that when users seem to miss a fit between the company values, brand history or existing business practices and the issue taken a stand on, they are driven to engage in negative eWOM. For instance, comments of the *Gillette* campaign reveal that users think that it is not the place of a razor company to address social issues and would prefer the company to stick to promoting its products, as shown in comments like “[...] *what does that have to do with razors?*” (reviewthis18, 2019).

Similar sentiments are expressed towards *Nike and Airbnb*, with users suggesting that the company should not exploit social issues to sell its products “*Shut up and sell shoes*” (Linkthelegend Majora, 2020) or “*Couldn't you people just stick to advertising your product?*” (allords1, 2017).

Additionally, the data suggests a potential conflict between a stand taken and the company's actual business practices as drivers for negative eWOM. Consequently, when a brand's messaging does not match with the current business practices, consumers seem to question that as part of their negative eWOM. For instance, a company that promotes diversity and inclusion may face negative feedback if it is found to have a discriminatory workplace practice. As an example, *Nike's* business practices, including its use of sweatshop labor and unfair working conditions, appear to be among the main factors driving users to participate in negative eWOM as a response to the campaign. These criticisms include allegations of worker exploitation in countries such as China and Vietnam, whereby workers are paid low wages, subjected to unsafe working conditions, and other labor abuses. Comments criticizing companies' business practices include statements such as *"A company where actual slaves make their products. Are gonna run an ad on racism. Nike is pathetic"* (krusher027, 2020) or *"Says the biggest employer of child forced labor..."* (MIKE AMERICA, 2020).

Similar patterns can be observed within the *Airbnb* and *Gillette* campaign, blaming the companies for their unethical business practices as a response to the campaign within comments such as *"No matter who you are, and where you live, we accept your money without paying any tax after it"* (Lajta Viktor, 2017) or *"Child labour, deforestation, price fixing is this the best a company can get?"* (Silver, 2019).

Another factor related to business practices that is motivating individuals to engage in negative eWOM as response to the *Nike* campaign seems to be based on the lack of diversity in its leadership team as well as a lack of alignment with equality practices inside the organization, as shown in comments like *"The Nike executive board has 15 people on it - all of whom are white"* (Marc Jackson, 2017).

The findings further reveal the interpretation that consumers' previous brand experiences impact negative eWOM intentions. That means users that previously experienced that the brand has misbehaved in relation to the issue, tend to express their negativity, as can be seen within comments like *"Okay, sure Airbnb. You accept. But when I needed an airbnb and found one that matched all my needs, I was turned down because of my age. And when I reported that person, you apologized, but his listing is still up. So where is the acceptance?"* (Sara Dalla Guarda, 2017) or *"[...] You've exploited our community for way too long and we're sick of this bullshit!"* (Keisha, 2020). Especially, the Gillette campaign showed a strong misalignment between the brand's previous history and the current stand taken, leading to negative comments.

Consequently, it can be concluded that the misalignment of business practices, company values, brand history and the message promoted by the campaign motivate users to spread negative eWOM towards brand activism campaigns.

Missing actions towards the issue

The findings reveal that when a brand fails to take action towards the issues they address, users are inclined to share negative eWOM. Thus, the author concludes that missing actions towards the socio-political issues might lead users to perceive the brand's stand as pure marketing efforts hence leading to negative eWOM. These findings are also reflected in comments such as *"can you please stop your disgusting hypocritical marketing?"* (rolf neumann, 2017) or *"An example of the hypocrisy of the big companies. Nike changes their slogan to 'Don't do it', to combat racism"* (Lars vdB, 2020).

Such comments show missing actions towards the issue as driver of negative eWOM, while also supporting the factors of misalignment with existing business practices (see chapter company values and existing business practices).

The data indicates that users demand tangible actions from companies that take a stand before showing support on social media. If this is not the case, individuals express negative feedback for not “walking the talk”. For example, *Nike* was criticized for a lack of actions towards systemic racism and inequality and users demand more concrete actions before promoting any support on social media “[...] *Don’t talk about it! Be about it! Or like you always say, “Just Do It!”* (Keisha, 2020) or *“PLEASE NIKE PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH, DON’T ACT THAT THEIR’S NO PROBLEM WITH YOU DISCRIMINATING EITHER, YOUR PART OF THE PROBLEM”* (Patty Blake, 2020). Similar patterns can be observed among the comments towards the *Airbnb* campaign, where users blame the brand for taking a stand on diversity, while not standing behind it themselves as a company *“I’d bet my life savings that the if you were to investigate the neighborhood of the CEO of this company the only dark skinned folks you’d see would be his landscaping crew and possibly house cleaning service. Fucking hypocrites”* (hispls, 2017).

The data further suggests that when the audience perceives that the brand activism efforts are driven solely by commercial interests or for marketing purposes, it may foster negative eWOM intentions. This means, at the same time, that when users feel that a brand is exploiting a social issue, they will be likely to spread negative eWOM about the brand. When users view the brand’s actions as disingenuous, and not genuinely motivated by a desire to make a positive impact towards the issue, they seem to engage in negative eWOM, as shown in comments like *“[...] Check where and how they produce their products and think twice, whether they are part of the problem, or just trying to get more customers”* (isthisarice, 2020)

or “If Nike (or any other corporate entity) really wants to create positive change----and not just talk----they need to put their money where their mouth is” (A Toaster, 2020).

While to the author’s best knowledge no research has been conducted that investigates into brand activism authenticity as an eWOM intention, previous research suggests factors for brand activism authenticity (Mirzaei et al., 2022, pp. 8–10; Vredenburg et al., 2020, pp. 449–451) and the danger of woke washing (Sobande, 2019, p. 2740; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 451; Warren, 2022, p. 170). Hence, these findings add to the growing literature about brand activism authenticity and woke washing, while also shedding light on it as a driver for negative eWOM towards brand activism on social media.

Misinterpretation of the message

The data reveals that a misinterpretation of the message or a subjective interpretation of the meaning underlying the content leads to negative eWOM. Thereby, it seems that users misinterpret the message that a brand wants to convey and perceive the message as discriminatory or feel that the brand does not understand the issue.

Perceived Discrimination

The findings suggest that a feeling of discrimination leads to negative eWOM intentions, resulting from users’ interpretation of the message conveyed. Depending on the stand taken, and the issue involved, different types of discrimination are included. While the *Gillette* campaign received comments mainly suggesting gender discrimination, the *Nike* and *Airbnb* campaign seem to foster negative comments mainly based on political/religious and racial discrimination.

For instance, some comments accuse *Gillette* of being hypocritical for charging women more for its pink razors compared to men, suggesting gender discrimination. Others seem to

perceive the post as an offense to masculinity, leading to a backlash from men who feel offended. The discussion seems to be often centered about masculinity beliefs, what makes a “real man” and what traits define masculinity. While the advertisement aimed to encourage men to be better role models and stand against toxic behavior, some users seem to interpret it as an attack on all men *“I am absolutely appalled that Gillette would generalize all men like this”* (Haro Master, 2019). It appears that especially individuals who strongly believe in traditional gender roles and masculinity seem to view the post as an offense to their beliefs and, as a result, express negative eWOM.

On the other hand, data of the *Nike* campaign suggests a sense of racial discrimination as a factor influencing negative eWOM intentions. Thereby, comments indicate that the company only speaks out on issues related to black individuals, while ignoring similar incidents involving white people, as demonstrated in comments such as *“Do they make these commercials when the cops kill a white guy [...] or do they only care when a black dies? How many times has a black guy killed a white or another black over a pair of their fucking beloved tennis shoes? It’s funny you never hear Nike making some bullshit commercial about that”* (Rich Fleming, 2020). A similar pattern can be observed within comments towards the *Airbnb* campaign *“As long as you aren't white they'll accept”* (Jetmeme Sam, 2017) or *“I like how there's no white men. That was a joke by the way.”* (Crazy Beavers, 2017).

Thereby, the findings point towards racial discrimination, meaning that individuals seem to perceive the campaign as an unfair treatment against their race or ethnicity. This also gets underlined in comments like *“[...] why use stereotypes. You would have had a stronger message by portraying that someone with religion can look like any race as you've shown, not limited to someone wearing a turben”* (Atiq R, 2017).

However, while the *Gillette* campaign points mainly in the direction of gender discrimination, some comments also reveal a direction of perceived racial discrimination, as can be seen in comments like *“As a person of color I’m more offended by the racism in this ad, if Gillette truly wants to make a statement about toxic masculinity then they should hold all men accountable”* (pablo pueblo, 2019) or perceived missing diversity in terms of religion shown in the campaign *“I’m curious why they didn’t include Muslims in this video and the way they treat women... what a lack of diversity!”* (Kevin 81, 2019).

Perceived lack of issue understanding from the company

The results indicate that negative eWOM intentions are driven by a feeling that the company does not understand the underlying issue or does not have enough expertise about the topic they are taking a stand on. This seems to lead to comments that are critical of the company’s message and question their sincerity, as shown in comments like *“Don't speak for a religion when you don't know shit [...]”* (Justin B, 2017).

Additionally, it seems that users tend to express their own background as a response or simply argue that the brand does not understand the problems society is facing, as shown in comments like *“If you could be in my shoes, you would understand, but you don't”* (Jose Carranza, 2017) or *“Has Airbnb realized that their message of unlimited acceptance is one that actually divides us, and therefore contradicts itself?”* (Derek Bartlow, 2017). Furthermore, the results lead to the interpretation that when users feel that a company is spreading misinformation or fake news around the issue it leads to negative eWOM *„There is 0 evidence that racism played any part in the murder of george floyd [...]”* (tim howard, 2020). Additionally, it supports the self-affirmation factors as driver of negative eWOM, as negative arguments are often packed up with facts, that seem to reinforce one’s own image.

Overall, the perceived lack of issue understanding from the company, seems to also align with findings from the misalignment with existing business practices and business values and their campaigns on social media. However, to the author's best knowledge no brand activism or eWOM intention research so far has examined the factor of perceived lack of issue understanding. Thus, this study suggests is as a new determinant of negative eWOM towards brand activism.

Personal beliefs and values

The findings reveal that personal beliefs and values of individuals play a central role in the emergence of negative eWOM. The data suggests that when a campaign's message contradicts with personal beliefs, negative eWOM is likely to arise. Moreover, users may use negative eWOM to reinforce their personal beliefs and values, as a means of self-enhancement, or to express their negative emotions.

Disagreement with the stand

The data suggests the interpretation that disagreement with the message conveyed in a campaign is a key driver for participating in negative eWOM. In other words, if a brand's stance contradicts with personal beliefs, users might feel an urge to express their disagreement or disappointment towards the brand. Furthermore, the findings indicate that when people have different opinions on social or political issues, they are likely to express their contradictory stand and show their own beliefs, as can be seen in comments like *"When did being a man become such a bad thing? I'm so tired of hearing about toxic masculinity. Men are not evil or the root of societies problems"* (Julie V, 2019).

The expression of a contradictory stand seems to be especially true when it comes to different political and religious ideologies. Especially the *Airbnb* campaign triggered strong

political and religious expressions, demonstrating how people express their personal beliefs through negative eWOM “No I don't accept the disgusting cult of Islam [...]” (Tyler Jackson, 2017) or “Fuck off with this, I don't accept a religion that's completely ass backwards” (Tristige, 2017). In these instances, some individuals expressed their disagreement with the inclusion of Muslims in the campaign, with some going as far as to express their dislike towards the religion itself. To sum up, the findings indicate that contradictory personal beliefs and opinions of users compared to the message conveyed in the brand activism campaign may fuel negative eWOM. Within the *Gillette* campaign, especially beliefs regarding masculinity penetrated the comment section and users seem to perceive the ad as an attack on their masculinity, leading the author to the finding of contradiction with gender beliefs.

These findings add to the existing brand activism literature that suggests that consumers reactions towards brand activism depend on the alignment with their own beliefs, meaning if a brand's message contradicts with one own beliefs the consumer reaction might be negatively influenced (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 1; Hydock et al., 2020, p. 2; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, pp. 13–14). While previous brand activism studies have not focused on the factor specifically as a driver for negative eWOM, this study suggests contradiction with one's own stand as a determinant of negative eWOM towards brand activism.

Expression of self-affirmation

The findings further indicate that users participate in negative eWOM in order to improve their self-image towards other users. Comments often demonstrate a person's awareness of the topic and level of expertise, portraying them as someone who is informed and knowledgeable, as shown in comments such as “For anyone unaware, the man wearing

a turban in this video is a Sikh, NOT Muslim. Sikhs have a long history of fighting against Islamic Opression” (M.A Flora, 2017).

The results also demonstrate that a perceived attack on one’s personality or way of life, can cause users to engage in negative eWOM as a form of self-defense or to protect their beliefs and values. Thereby, the results point to an expression of self-affirmation, which means that users tend to use negative eWOM as a way to affirm their own identity or signal their belonging to a particular group, as can be seen in comments like *“I’m a manly man. I hunt fish camp farm and raise livestock. My dad wasn’t a hound, he never talked about women vulgarly and neither do I. Gillette went about this commercial totally wrong way” (Nathan G, 2019).*

This seems to be especially relevant when users believe that this will gain them recognition or attention from their peers and help them improve their self-image. Thereby, the findings show that users tend to support their negative comments with personal background information that appears to make their arguments more credible, as in the following example *“im literally studyng politics and the political spectrum right now and you couldnt be more wrong” (Juicy Lettuce Cat, 2017).*

This leads the author to the conclusion that negative eWOM is driven by a disagreement with one’s personal beliefs, a perceived attack on one’s personality can further foster it and personal background information or expertise about the issue is used to express their self-identity and make arguments more trustworthy, resulting in self-affirmation as a factor influencing negative eWOM intentions.

These findings are consistent with existing WOM literature that suggests self-affirmation (in a negative perspective) or self-enhancement (in a positive perspective) as a primary motivator for WOM communication, implying that consumers use WOM as a way to

enhance their own image (Alexandrov et al., 2013, p. 542; Berger, 2014, p. 4; Engel et al., 1993; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39; Sundaram et al., 1998).

Expression of negative emotions

The findings suggest that socio-political stances can trigger strong emotional reactions in consumers that might be the driver of expressing negative eWOM. For instance comments such as *“This makes me want to punch someone, good job Gillette”* (rexb16, 2019) demonstrate the negative emotions towards the brand as a response to the social media campaign. The data points to a direction that users participate in negative eWOM in order to express their dissatisfaction, anger and frustration towards the brand. Furthermore, the findings lead to the interpretation that users engage in negative eWOM caused by negative brand relationships, such as brand hate, and users utilize comments to declare their negative feelings and anti-brand actions, such as boycott behavior, in public.

Additionally, if the brand’s message is perceived as harmful or misleading, users tend to express their disagreement and criticize the brand's stance. This behavior seems to often result in an expression of revenge or vengeance towards the brand, as implied in comments such as *“Just came back because Gillette lost 8 billion in value. The free market is a glorious thing”* (Defenstrator, 2019) or *“Companies like yours, that perpetuate the deception/racism/destabilization/inhumanity etc. and profit from human suffrage, deserve no success. [...] you should pay the price of bad karma”* (rolf neumann, 2017). Furthermore, statements like *“I hope Nike stores burn”* (acousticnirvana94, 2020) indicate a feeling of revenge from consumers towards the brand.

These findings align with existing literature about negative eWOM determinants (Verhagen et al., 2013, pp. 1436–1437), whereas especially brand hate is seen as a major

contributor to negative eWOM (Fetscherin, 2019, p. 124; Grappi et al., 2013, p. 3; Romani et al., 2012, p. 123; Zarantonello et al., 2016, p. 29). Additionally, it supports findings that suggest influencing others and gaining revenge as determinants of negative eWOM (Grégoire et al., 2010, p. 748; Ward & Ostrom, 2006, p. 224) and puts it into perspective towards brand activism campaigns.

Perceived limitation of free speech

The data reveals that users notice the deletion of unfavorable comments and dislikes across all campaigns, resulting in criticism and complaints about perceived censorship by the platform or the brand. Thereby, the data suggests when users recognize data manipulation, such as deleting comments and dislikes, it may encourage unfavorable eWOM, as demonstrated in comments like *"SUCH gaming! they are suppressing dislikes... no way a 2million view vid has only 1k thumbs down"* (Alec Wade, 2017a).

Such actions appear to be viewed as limiting free speech and doubting the credibility and trust of the platform and the brand. Some users have attempted to counter this perceived censorship by returning to the comment section to express their negative opinions, asserting their power to do so, as demonstrated by comments such as *"I check this video periodically to see if they deleted my "dislike." Whenever they do, I always make sure to re-click it"* (the 3rd kind, 2019). This leads the author to the interpretation that users participate in negative eWOM in order to showcase their power gained from the capabilities of social media, as can be also seen in comments such as *"You may be able to remove dislikes but you can't stop us from speaking in public"* (De Facto, 2019).

Additionally, the data suggests that when companies delete negative comments and dislikes, it can lead to a reinforcing effect on those who hold negative opinions. That means,

that these individuals may see the deletion of their comments as proof that the brand has seen and acknowledged their feedback but is not willing to address it publicly. This can cause them to feel even more strongly that their negative opinions are valid and can result in more intense negative reactions towards the company. These actions can be perceived as an attempt to hide or manipulate public opinion, thus further supporting a potential limitation of free speech.

To sum up, consumers seem to feel frustrated and alienated when their voices are silenced through comment and dislike deletion and want to show their power gained from social media to express their opinion. This leads to the conclusion, that a perceived limitation of free speech serves as a factor influencing negative eWOM intentions towards brand activism on social media.

To the author's best knowledge, the factor limitation of free speech has not been studied neither in the eWOM nor in the brand activism literature. Thus, this study suggests it as a new factor influencing negative eWOM intentions towards brand activism. However, it is worth mentioning that the findings partially support the suggestion from Sharma's et al. (2022) study that proposes social media power as a driver of negative eWOM (Sharma et al., 2022, pp. 665–666).

Chapter 6: Concluding remarks

Due to an increasingly polarized society and controversial socio-political issues such as racial equality, public health, LGBTIQ+ rights, or immigration brands are more frequently taking a stand on these matters (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 445). While companies are incorporating their socio-political stances into their social media campaigns (Livas, 2021, p. 1), doing so can elicit divergent reactions from consumers, and companies are facing growing

consumer scepticism (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 2). Consequently, discussions on social media are often highly polarized (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023, p. 4) resulting in reactions such as negative WOM (Romani et al., 2015, p. 123). However, to the author's best knowledge no research so far has been conducted that evaluates the eWOM intentions towards brand activism.

Thus, drawing from the literature of brand activism and eWOM intentions, this study sheds light on the factors influencing negative eWOM intentions towards brand activism campaigns on social media. The study analyzes the motivations behind a consumer's decision to engage in negative eWOM towards brand activism and identifies dominant themes underlying the consumer comments towards brand activism campaigns that indicate the intention to engage in negative eWOM. Based on a qualitative content analysis of *YouTube* comments towards three brand activism campaigns, the study suggests social interaction (altruism, social bonding), lack of brand authenticity (misalignment with company values and existing business practices, missing actions towards the issue), misinterpretation of the message (perceived discrimination, perceived lack of issue understanding from the company), personal beliefs and values (disagreement with the stand, expression of self-affirmation and negative emotions) and perceived limitation of free speech (data manipulation, social media consumer power) as factors influencing negative eWOM intentions towards brand activism on social media.

First, this study extends previous knowledge that identifies social interaction as a motive for engaging in WOM to the context of brand activism (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). Thereby, the findings add to the existing WOM literature that highlights altruism as an important driver for engaging in WOM through warning others about brands and related experiences (Alexandrov et al., 2013, p. 542; Engel et al., 1993; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p.

39; Sundaram et al., 1998) and expands it to the context of brand activism. Additionally, the findings suggest social bonding as a negative eWOM driver towards brand activism, consistent with previous WOM research, that proposes social bonding as a WOM motivator through connections with others, reinforcement of shared views and decrease of social exclusion (Aguirre et al., 2023, pp. 12–13; Berger, 2014, pp. 24–25).

While to the author's best knowledge no research has been conducted that investigates brand activism authenticity as an eWOM intention, previous brand activism research suggests factors for brand activism authenticity (Mirzaei et al., 2022, pp. 8–10; Vredenburg et al., 2020, pp. 449–451) and woke washing (Sobande, 2019, p. 2740; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 451; Warren, 2022, p. 170). Hence this study adds to the growing literature about brand activism authenticity and woke washing, while also shedding light on it as a driver for negative eWOM. Moreover, existing WOM literature suggests self-enhancement/self-affirmation as a key driver for WOM communication, indicating that consumers use WOM as a way to improve their own image (Alexandrov et al., 2013, p. 542; Berger, 2014, p. 4; Engel et al., 1993; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39; Sundaram et al., 1998), which has also shown to motivate negative eWOM intentions towards brand activism as part of this study. In addition, the given research shows that negative eWOM about brand activism on social media seems to be driven by negative emotions and a way of expressing those emotions, which is consistent with existing literature about negative eWOM determinants (Verhagen et al., 2013, pp. 1436–1437), whereas especially brand hate is seen as a key driver of negative eWOM (Fetscherin, 2019, p. 124; Grappi et al., 2013, p. 3; Romani et al., 2012, p. 123; Zarantonello et al., 2016, p. 29). Additionally, it supports findings that suggest influencing others and gaining revenge as determinants of negative eWOM (Grégoire et al., 2010, p. 748; Ward & Ostrom, 2006, p. 224) and puts it into perspective towards brand activism campaigns.

This study also extends previous brand activism knowledge that suggests that consumer reactions towards brand activism depend on the alignment with one's personal beliefs and values (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 1; Hydock et al., 2020, p. 2; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, pp. 13–14). While previous brand activism studies have not focused on the factor specifically as a driver for negative eWOM, this study suggests contradiction with one's own stands as a determinant of negative eWOM towards brand activism.

While taking several factors of the WOM literature as a base and enhancing those to the context of brand activism, the study sheds also light on so far undiscovered factors influencing negative eWOM intentions. To the author's best knowledge, no research has investigated into the message misinterpretation of a campaign or the perceived limitation of free speech, neither in the brand activism research nor in the WOM intentions research. Hence this study suggests message misinterpretation and perceived limitation of free speech as new determinants of negative eWOM.

Theoretical implications

This research study makes two important contributions to the WOM and brand activism literature.

First, the study contributes to a better understanding of negative eWOM intentions, which is crucial given the acknowledged influence of WOM on consumer behavior but the limited research on what drives consumers to express their opinions (Fu et al., 2015, p. 617). Especially the negative side has received little attention so far (Romani et al., 2012, p. 56). This research extends the existing WOM literature by investigating the determinants of negative eWOM towards brand activism on social media, thereby contributing to the growing literature on eWOM determinants (Donthu et al., 2021, pp. 767–768).

Second, the study adds to the so far limited literature of brand activism research from a consumer perspective. Thereby the study follows the suggestions from Bhagwat et al. (2020) and Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) who emphasized the need to analyze the impact of brand activism on consumer behavior (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 17; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 14). More specifically, the study sheds light on the intentions to engage in eWOM as a response to brand activism, following the suggestion from Klostermann et al. (2021) and Romani et al. (2015) as further research area (Klostermann et al., 2021, p. 12; Romani et al., 2015, p. 670). Furthermore, this study's focus on negative eWOM intentions aligns with Ahmad et al.'s (2022) suggestion to investigate the adverse effects of brand activism (Ahmad et al., 2022, p. 620) and Gambetti and Biraghi's (2023) suggestion to investigate the drivers of brand activism (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023, p. 2).

Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, the findings of this study help improve the understanding of what motivates individuals to leave negative comments on brand activism campaigns, which is crucial for controlling eWOM and helping reduce the negative impact of such comments. Negative brand relationships represent a major risk for brands, especially in the online context, where consumers can spread their negative emotions in seconds using the Internet or Social Media (Fu et al., 2015, p. 616). Thus, it becomes of utmost importance for brands to understand what triggers those negative feelings and as a result being able to control negative WOM (Fetscherin, 2019, p. 125; Zarantonello et al., 2016, p. 12). Thus, the findings of this study can provide valuable insights for managers seeking to develop and implement effective brand activism campaigns and avoid negative reactions.

Chapter 7: Limitations and future research

This research is one of the first investigations of negative eWOM intentions towards brand activism on social media, and thus, numerous future research opportunities remain.

First, this study investigated three campaigns that address different socio-political issues. Further research can study various other forms of social issues or extend the work to include environmental, workplace, economic or legal causes.

Second, this study focused on negative eWOM intentions toward brand activism campaigns. Another interesting field for research could be analyzing the intentions underlying positive comments or comparing both areas.

Third, *MAXQDA* and *YouTube* do not allow researchers to collect and analyze demographic information, like race or gender. Given the nature of the selected campaigns that address racial injustice, toxic masculinity and diversity and inclusion, it would have been interesting to analyze emergent themes with the knowledge of the users' identity. The need to conduct such research gets further underlined with the findings pointing in a direction that personal values play a role in the emergence of eWOM. Hence, future research might seek to collaborate with data analysis companies that have access to demographic information or use another social media platform to investigate the correlations between eWOM intentions and demographic data. Additionally, while *YouTube* provided an excellent source of data for the given study, it is worth mentioning that other social media platforms such as *Twitter* would also be valuable sources of data to study topics such as eWOM (Bogen, Bleiweiss, et al., 2021; Bogen, Williams, et al., 2021; Jansen et al., 2009; Lachmar et al., 2017). First, *Twitter* offers researchers with a controllable and comparable data set due to the character limitation of 140- to 280-character per post (Bogen, Bleiweiss, et al., 2021). Second, *Twitter* has shown to be a good data source for prior social media studies (Berestova et al., 2022; Bogen, Bleiweiss,

et al., 2021; Bogen, Williams, et al., 2021; Lachmar et al., 2017). Third, on *Twitter*, almost one out of five posts mentions a specific brand name, and one in five of these posts expresses positive or negative sentiments about that brand (Jansen et al., 2009, p. 2177). However, during the research process the author noticed several limitations of *Twitter* as a data source. Especially *Twitter's* decision to switch their API access from a free service to a paid one as of February 9, 2023, resulted in researchers experiencing challenges to collect data (Weatherbed, 2023). While the author still tried several other options to collect *Twitter* data, such as applying for the academic research API access, using a python program to extract data, purchasing tweets through a third party-tool (*Vicinitas*) or accessing data through a Chrome Plugin (*Data Miner*), none of the options provided the desired data results. However, over time it might get again easier to access *Twitter* data and thus provide a valuable data source for future studies.

Finally, the brief data collection period (7 consecutive weekdays) limited the researcher's ability to investigate whether intentions develop by time as the *YouTube* discourse evolves.

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Exemplary comments per category

Table 1 - Exemplary comments of the category social interaction (I)

Subcategory	Exemplary comments
Altruism	<i>“Don’t be racist and buy our shoes that are literally made in sweatshops”</i> (Cap, 2020)
	<i>“No true American will buy Gillette anymore”</i> (Maximillian Morcom, 2019)
	<i>“Don't buy anything from Gillette (Procter and Gamble) unless you support this nonsense!!!”</i> (A Girl Called Stevie, 2019)
	<i>“[...] Nike make their products in Uyghur working camps... Why tf would u support them”</i> (Tim-Noel Grevers, 2020)
	<i>“Let me remind you of all the poor and homeless here in the USA who will not have anywhere to sleep tonight or food to eat. Feel better??”</i> (SnowFlaked, 2017)
<i>“Wake up people all they care about is money, we are all seen as nothing but wallets and I think many wallets will not be enriching Gillette”</i> (roy mcroy, 2019b)	

Note. The table illustrates exemplary comments of the category social interaction from the selected campaigns of this study. Based on Airbnb (2017), Nike (2020), Guardian News (2019).

Table 2 - Exemplary comments of the category social interaction (II)

Subcategory	Exemplary comments
Social bonding	<p><i>"I have read some of the comments and they all pretty much cover what i had in mind to say, but i will say this, not ever will a Gillette product enter a shopping bag belonging to me"</i> (Paul John, 2019)</p>
	<p><i>"Comment while you can! I'm sure it'll get shut off. Thumbs down the video if you merely want businesses to stop being political or preachy"</i> (No,Isaidposse, 2017)</p>
	<p><i>"Just CAME TO DISLIKE"</i> (NunyaFB443, 2019)</p>
	<p><i>"Anyone who actually has conviction and wants to show their distaste at this [...] Boycott all Gillette products, hell even if it's just for a few months, if everyone did this they would lose millions"</i> (mrawesome669, 2019)</p>
	<p><i>"Who else came here after a nike store was looted?"</i> (Serkan Devel, 2020)</p> <p><i>"if you want to know what we Americans really think about this just look at most of these comments! we have to voice our options just a little louder than this somehow! get it out there don't stop talking that's what they want!"</i> (Ryan Goulet, 2017)</p>

Note. The table illustrates exemplary comments of the category social interaction from the selected campaigns of this study. Based on Airbnb (2017), Nike (2020), Guardian News (2019).

Table 3 - Exemplary comments of the category lack of brand authenticity (I)

Subcategory	Exemplary comments
Company values and business practices	<i>“[...] what does that have to do with razors?” (reviewthis18, 2019)</i>
	<i>“Incredible marketing from a company that pays low wages to people in impoverished countries to make their products that they sell at a huge profit. How noble” (nahimgood, 2020)</i>
	<i>“wait what does this have to do with renting out your house??? why the fuck does every company think they have to talk about politics</i>
	<i>Jesus Christ” (Spacejam, 2017)</i>
	<i>“A company where actual slaves make their products. Are gonna run an ad on racism. Nike is pathetic” (krusher027, 2020)</i>
<i>“Child labour, deforestation, price fixing is this the best a company can get?” (Silver, 2019)</i>	
<i>“No matter who you are, and where you live, we accept your money without paying any tax after it” (Lajta Viktor, 2017)</i>	

Note. The table illustrates exemplary comments of the category lack of brand authenticity from the selected campaigns of this study. Based on Airbnb (2017), Nike (2020), Guardian News (2019).

Table 4 - Exemplary comments of the category lack of brand authenticity (II)

Subcategory	Exemplary comments
Missing actions	<p><i>“An example of the hypocrisy of the big companies. Nike changes their slogan to 'Don't do it', to combat racism” (Lars vdB, 2020)</i></p>
	<p><i>“I'd bet my life savings that the if you were to investigate the neighborhood of the CEO of this company the only dark skinned folks you'd see would be his landscaping crew and possibly house cleaning service. Fucking hypocrites.” (hispls, 2017)</i></p>
	<p><i>“[...] Don't talk about it! Be about it! Or like you always say, “Just Do It!” (Keisha, 2020)</i></p>
	<p><i>“can you please stop your disgusting hypocritical marketing? (rolf neumann, 2017)</i></p> <p><i>„Gillette hopefully took away their sponsorship and logo off the Fox Borough Patriots stadium that they are sponsoring. [...] Because isn't any kind of football toxic masculinity?!?! I guess that advertising department didn't think that far ahead..... Welcome to short sighted Corporate thinking to push the Liberal agenda” (Scott Harrifeld, 2019)</i></p>

Note. The table illustrates exemplary comments of the category lack of brand authenticity from the selected campaigns of this study. Based on Airbnb (2017), Nike (2020), Guardian News (2019).

Table 5 - Exemplary comments of the category message misinterpretation (I)

Subcategory	Exemplary comments
Perceived discrimination	<p><i>"I am absolutely appalled that Gillette would generalize all men like this"</i> (Haro Master, 2019)</p>
	<p><i>"Do they make these commercials when the cops kill a white guy [...] How many times has a black guy killed a white or another black over a pair of their fucking beloved tennis shoes? It's funny you never hear Nike making some bullshit commercial about that"</i> (Rich Fleming, 2020)</p>
	<p><i>"As long as you aren't white they'll accept"</i> (Jetmeme Sam, 2017)</p>
	<p><i>"I'm a woman and I find this advert outrageously offensive towards men! It depicts men as evil and toxic and women as angels"</i> (Lady Muck, 2019)</p>
	<p><i>"[...] why use stereotypes. You would have had a stronger message by portraying that someone with religion can look like any race as you've shown, not limited to someone wearing a turben"</i> (Atiq R, 2017)</p>
	<p><i>"I like how there's no white men. That was a joke by the way."</i> (Crazy Beavers, 2017)</p>
<p><i>"I'm curious why they didn't include Muslims in this video and the way they treat women... what a lack of diversity"</i> (Kevin 81, 2019)</p>	

Note. The table illustrates exemplary comments of the category message misinterpretation from the selected campaigns of this study. Based on Airbnb (2017), Nike (2020), Guardian News (2019).

Table 6 - Exemplary comments of the category message misinterpretation (II)

Subcategory	Exemplary comments
Missing issue understanding from the company	<i>“Has Airbnb realized that their message of unlimited acceptance is one that actually divides us, and therefore contradicts itself?” (Derek Bartlow, 2017)</i>
	<i>„There is 0 evidence that racism played any part in the murder of george floyd [...]” (tim howard, 2020)</i>
	<i>“If you could be in my shoes, you would understand, but you don’t” (Jose Carranza, 2017)</i>
	<i>“What we’re really suffering from is toxic Political Correctness [...]” (Chris Neilson, 2019)</i>
	<i>“Don’t speak for a religion when you don’t know shit [...]” (Justin B, 2017)</i> <i>“This company believes they are so enlightened, so intelligent, so morally superior, they can teach us the right path” (Shane Whitefeather, 2019)</i>

Note. The table illustrates exemplary comments of the category message misinterpretation from the selected campaigns of this study. Based on Airbnb (2017), Nike (2020), Guardian News (2019).

Table 7 - Exemplary comments of the category personal beliefs and values (I)

Subcategory	Exemplary comments
Disagreement with the stand	<p><i>“When did being a man become such a bad thing? I'm so tired of hearing about toxic masculinity. Men are not evil or the root of societies problems” (Julie V, 2019)</i></p>
	<p><i>“No I don't accept the disgusting cult of Islam [...]” (Tyler Jackson, 2017)</i></p>
	<p><i>“Fuck off with this, I don't accept a religion that's completely ass backwards” (Tristige, 2017)</i></p>
	<p><i>“[...] Goodbye Gillette . . . really liked your products . . . pity you felt the need to jump on the extreme lefts regressive train. . .now I'm gonna boycott your products” (MrRABC1, 2019)</i></p>
	<p><i>“[...] Not all of us are the monsters that were sometimes portrayed as by the media. [...] I disagree, both men and women should hold either gender accountable for their actions [...] (GisGos, 2019)</i></p>
	<p><i>“Because you support a moron like kaperdick that hates this country I'll never buy your products again [...]” (idgy baby, 2020)</i></p>

Note. The table illustrates exemplary comments of the category personal beliefs and values from the selected campaigns of this study. Based on Airbnb (2017), Nike (2020), Guardian News (2019).

Table 8 - Exemplary comments of the category personal beliefs and values (II)

Subcategory	Exemplary comments
Self-affirmation	<p><i>“im literally studyng politics and the political spectrum right now and you couldnt be more wrong” (Juicy Lettuce Cat, 2017)</i></p>
	<p><i>“I’m a manly man. I hunt fish camp farm and raise livestock. My dad wasn’t a hound, he never talked about women vulgarly and neither do I. Gillette went about this commercial totally wrong way” (Nathan G, 2019)</i></p>
	<p><i>“You don't have to tell me anything that I already know or anyone else does [...]” (Sirius787, 2017)</i></p>
	<p><i>“For anyone unaware, the man wearing a turban in this video is a Sikh, NOT Muslim. Sikhs have a long history of fighting against Islamic Opression” (M.A Flora, 2017)</i></p>
	<p><i>“As a man and proud of it,,yes it is ok to be male I think these companies are so used to their adverts working for them they don’t give it a second thought they won’t” (roy mcroy, 2019a)</i></p>
	<p><i>“For once, don't tell people what to do. You are a multi-national company with a very poor track record with regards to human rights”(André Pinto, 2020)</i></p>

Note. The table illustrates exemplary comments of the category personal beliefs and values from the selected campaigns of this study. Based on Airbnb (2017), Nike (2020), Guardian News (2019).

Table 9 - Exemplary comments of the category personal beliefs and values (III)

Subcategory	Exemplary comments
Negative emotions	<i>"This makes me want to punch someone, good job Gillette"</i> (rexbe, 2019)
	<i>"Companies like yours, that perpetuate the deception/racism/destabilization/inhumanity etc. and profit from human suffrage, deserve no success. [...] you should pay the price of bad karma"</i> (rolf neumann, 2017)
	<i>"Just came back because Gillette lost 8 billion in value. The free market is a glorious thing"</i> (Defenstrator, 2019)
	<i>"I hope Nike stores burn"</i> (acousticnirvana94, 2020)
	<i>"8 billion write down in brand value. The market has spoken."</i> (Nacho Chitiu, 2019)
	<i>"Watching this after criminals looted their store lol"</i> (Matija Cubelic, 2020)

Note. The table illustrates exemplary comments of the category personal beliefs and values from the selected campaigns of this study. Based on Airbnb (2017), Nike (2020), Guardian News (2019).

Table 10 - Exemplary comments of the category limitation of free speech

Subcategory	Exemplary comments
	<i>"They keep deleting comments and dislikes" (anu meu, 2019)</i>
Data manipulation	<i>"SUCH gaming! they are suppressing dislikes... no way a 2million view vid has only 1k thumbs down" (Alec Wade, 2017a)</i> <i>"[...] nike deleted the comments, when they had thousands of likes"(Le Broc, 2020)</i>
	<i>"You may be able to remove dislikes but you can't stop us from speaking in public" (De Facto, 2019)</i>
Social media consumer power	<i>"I check this video periodically to see if they deleted my "dislike." Whenever they do, I always make sure to re-click it" (the 3rd kind, 2019)</i> <i>"[...] stop suppressing likes and dislikes please. let we the people speak freely" (Alec Wade, 2017b)</i>

Note. The table illustrates exemplary comments of the category limitation of free speech from the selected campaigns of this study. Based on Airbnb (2017), Nike (2020), Guardian News (2019).