Brand Activism
A qualitative study on consumer perception

Master Thesis

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Zusammenfassung

Markenaktivismus - Eine qualitative Studie zur Verbraucherwahrnehmung

Rebecca, DEL VACCHIO

In der heutigen Welt haben Kapitalismus, globale Erwärmung, Pandemien und politische Ungleichheit ihren Weg in die Gesellschaft gefunden. Dies hat Marken wie *Ben & Jerry's*, *Patagonia* und *Benetton* dazu veranlasst, soziale und ökologische Themen positiv zu beeinflussen, indem sie Stellung beziehen und verschiedene Punkte in diesem Ökosystem beeinflussen. Diese Aktionen lassen sich als Markenaktivismus zusammenfassen. Da dies ein relativ junges Gebiet ist, untersucht diese Masterarbeit mit einer qualitativen Forschungsmethodik die Einflussfaktoren auf die Wahrnehmung von Marken, die sich an gesellschaftspolitischen Fragestellungen beteiligen. Der Autor führte semi-strukturierte Interviews mit 21 Konsument*innen und Marketingexpert*innen durch. Die Ergebnisse umfassen vier Hauptfaktoren, die die Wahrnehmung der Verbraucher*innen beeinflussen, nämlich (1) Relevanz, (2) Markenreputation, (3) Bekanntheit und (4) Verhalten, was zur Schlussfolgerung führt, dass Marken, die mit den Werten und Überzeugungen der Verbraucher*innen übereinstimmen und als authentisch und relevant wahrgenommen werden, positiv bewertet werden. Die Studie liefert wertvolle Erkenntnisse für Führungskräfte, die sich effektiv mit gesellschaftspolitischen Themen auseinandersetzen wollen. Die Ergebnisse bieten eine Grundlage für zukünftige Forschungsarbeiten und unterstreicht die Bedeutung von Markenaktivismus und bietet Führungskräften Hilfestellung, um durchdachte und zielgerichtete Reaktionen auf die Bedürfnisse der Verbraucher zu entwickeln.

Schlüsselwörter: *Markenaktivismus, Verbraucherwahrnehmung, Markenreputation, Bekanntheit, Relevanz, Konsumentenverhalten*

Abstract

Brand Activism - A qualitative study on consumer perception

Rebecca, DEL VACCHIO

In today's world, capitalism, global warming, pandemic, and political inequality have found their ways in society's midst and have fuelled each other into an "ecosystem of wicked problems". This has led brands like *Ben & Jerry's, Patagonia*, and *Benetton* to make it their mission to impact social and environmental issues positively through taking a stand and influencing different points in that ecosystem. These actions can be summarized as brand activism. As Brand Activism is a relatively young field of study, this master thesis aims to investigate the factors influencing consumer perception towards brands participating in socio-political issues using a qualitative research methodology. The author conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 consumers and marketing experts in Austria. The findings include four main factors influencing consumer perception, which are (1) relevance, (2) brand reputation, (3) awareness, and (4) consumer behaviour, leading to the conclusion, that brands that align with consumers' values and beliefs, and are perceived as authentic, consistent, impactful, and relevant, are viewed positively. This study contributes valuable insights for managers seeking to engage in social and political issues effectively. The findings offer a basis for future research and the development of a propositions. The thesis highlights the importance of Brand Activism and provides guidance for managers to create more thoughtful and targeted responses to consumer needs.

Keywords: brand activism, consumer perception, brand reputation, awareness, relevance, consumer behaviour

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In today's world, capitalism, global warming, pandemic, and political inequality have found their ways in society's midst and have fuelled each other into an "ecosystem of wicked problems" as Sarkar and Kotler (2020) describe it and is visible in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 - The Ecosystem of Wicked Problems

THE ECOSYSTEM *of* WICKED PROBLEMS

© Christian Sarkar and Philip Kotler 2019
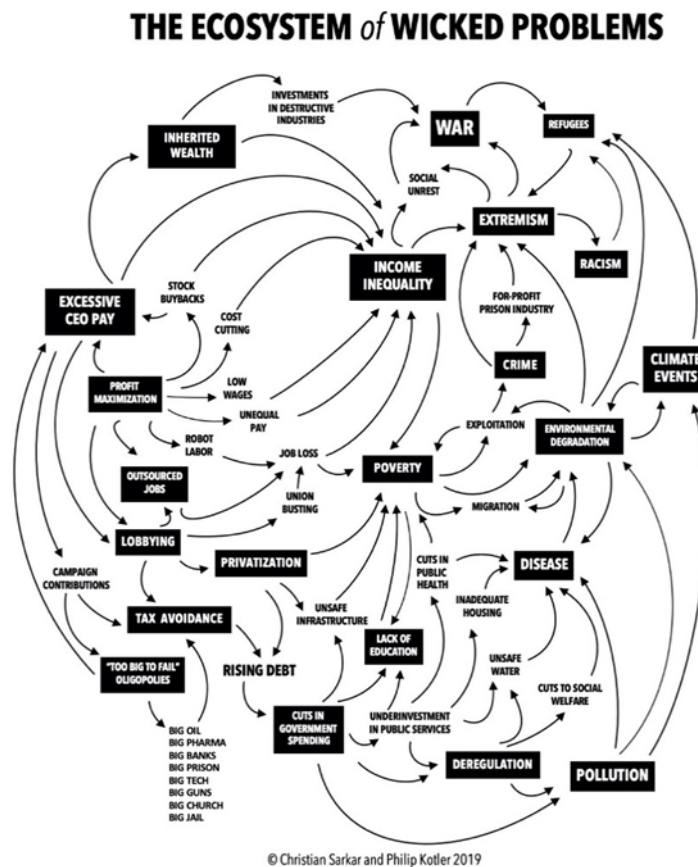
Note. This figure shows how existential challenges, such as social upheaval, disparity, ecological breakdown, loss of biodiversity, disease outbreaks, economic conflicts, and military confrontation. These challenges collectively form a complex and interdependent "ecosystem of wicked powers" that confronts modern society. Figure adopted from Guest (2019), published on the Global Peter Drucker Forum BLOG - The Ecosystem of Wicked Problems by Christian Sarkar.

This has led brands such as *Ben & Jerry's, Patagonia*, and *Benetton* to make it their mission to impact social and environmental issues positively through taking a stand and influencing different points in that ecosystem. These actions can be summarized as Brand Activism (Environmental Activism - Patagonia, n.d.; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020; Social Impacts | Benetton Group, n.d.; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 1).

Research on Brand Activism is relatively new and has become more relevant in the last few years due to social movements such as Black Lives Matter, Covid-19 pandemic protests, #MeToo and more (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 2). So far, theory is being drawn from different marketing areas including corporate social responsibility (CSR), branding and advertising as well as social studies such as ethics, building the base for the so-called "authentic brand activism" (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 13). Here, various areas in literature can be identified. Relevant are on the one hand, studies focusing on insights for business leaders and the relevance of participating in socio-political causes (Korschun, 2021; Moorman, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020), and on the other hand, studies focusing on consumer reactions or consumer resistance behaviours such as boycotting or buycotting, meaning either consumers refuse to buy a product or take part in activities to share their disapproval, or actively buy a specific product (Eyada, 2020; Home: Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Neilson, 2010; Shetty et al., 2019; Warren, 2021). However, there is little research on general consumer perception of brands that participate in such activities. Perception meaning a combination of people linking a brand with certain value as well as clusters of attributes that can be measured with perceptual maps and the role of the attributes a consumer associates with a brand. These perception factors derive from marketing, psychology as well as memory literature and can influence buying behaviour (Romaniuk & Sharp, 2003).

The CSR study of Öberseder et al. (2011) contributed to explaining the attitude-behaviour-gap of consumers (Eyada, 2020, Shetty et al., 2019; Öberseder et al., 2011), but based on the current status quo of research on brand activism, as well as Bhagwat et al. (2020) input on limitations in their study, it seems like there still is uncertainty about how Brand Activism actually affects customers' attitudes, relationships with the brand, and purchase decisions (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 17) as a result of their perception. Moreover, in their work, Klostermann et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of investigating the impact of CPA on brand attitudes using authentic consumer response data from the market (Klostermann et al., 2022).

This leads to the research question this thesis will focus on: *What factors influence consumer perception towards brands who participate in socio-political issues?*

Given this, the key objective for this study is to define propositions or factors that influence consumers' perception as well as to explore these factors and ideally create a framework, while enhancing current ones from similar areas with consumer perceptions of the firm's motive to engage in socio-political issues (Vlachos et al., 2009, p. 171), consumer-brand relationship (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 17) and consumer interests (Öberseder et al., 2013, p. 1841) to build funded theory upon, with a qualitative research approach.

Doing more research on the topic of Brand Activism and consumer perception could bring more clarity on the relation and dynamics of these two aspects as a theoretical implication, as well as add importance to "brand authenticity" and how it affects consumer behaviour (Moorman, 2020, p. 389). For "the real world of marketing" this research could shed light on benefits or disadvantages firms face when including Brand Activism in their marketing mix, while generating a better understanding of the consumers' point of view (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 17).

Chapter 1: Literature Review

For the initial background research, the keywords that were focused on to filter first relevant academic papers, include: (Authentic) Brand Activism, Corporate Socio-political Activism (CSA), Consumer Perception, Consumer Behaviour as well as Branded Activism.

These lead to several articles that so far had examined brand activism, or in other words CSA, starting with stakeholder expectations, or specifically consumer expectations. On the one hand, while CSA can be a risky strategy from an investor's point of view, it can be rewarded by other stakeholders (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 16). Hydock et al. (2020) for example, suggest, that while consumers nearly demand brand activism, it is unlikely to enlarge a firm's current customer base, on the contrary, it might affect the current customer base's attitude towards the brand negatively (Hydock et al., 2020, p. 1). On the other hand, Korschun (2021) agrees, that stakeholders expect firms to be activists, and for him this aspect will become a fundamental part of a brand's marketing strategy (Korschun, 2021, pp. 16-17). Moorman (2020) defined six views, so called "brand political activism lenses" used by firms in their decision-making process, which include roles and responsibilities as well as a forecast on the disadvantages they might suffer. This is not a validated study, but it is a beginning on testing possible consumer reactions. Especially the cultural authority view, brands as educators view and employee engagement view could increase Brand Activism in his opinion (Moorman, 2020, p. 389).

Besides papers on stakeholder expectations, paper on consumer perspective where the next source of interest. Eyada's (2020) study on *Nike* advertising and the relation and impact on consumer perception, as well as Shetty et al. (2019) research on millennials' perception towards Brand Activism align with the above-mentioned views. Eyada (2020) ends with the conclusion, that brands need to show responsibility on social issues and align their vision and

mission accordingly, which then might also influence consumer buying behaviour eventually. The statement is, that *"(...) consumers are no longer passive receivers of information provided advertising, they have become more interactive and share their values and beliefs that every brand must consider."* (Eyada, 2020, p. 20). Shetty et al. (2019) found out that millennials prefer socially conscious brands regardless of their gender or income. They are not price sensitive in this regard and punish brands that take a stance on too little issues (Shetty et al., 2019, p. 172). On the contrary, Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) write, that there is no significant impact on the current customer base's attitude or behaviour towards a firm that does address socio-political topics for consumers that agree with the actions (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

To summarize, there is no consensus in literature yet on neither the perception by consumers nor their reaction. To understand Brand Activism better, this chapter will offer definitions for the most used termini and phenomena in relation to brand activism, as well to what it means in practice.

Definitions of (Authentic) Brand Activism, CSA, CPA, and CSR

Brand Activism or corporate socio-political activism (CSA) is an evolution from corporate social responsibility (CSR) and can be defined as a company's positioning on a socio-political issue publicly (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1). Moorman (2020) defines it *"(...) as public speech or actions focused on partisan issues made by or on behalf of a company using its corporate or individual brand name."* (Moorman, 2020, pp. 1–2). CSA actions impact stakeholders all around a brand, which can be risky for several reasons, but ultimately seeks to proactively induce change politically and as a result socially, which makes Brand Activism different from former CSR activities (Korschun, 2021, p. 11). Corporate political advocacy (CPA) also refers

to brands taking a stand publicly on issues, that might harm a firm's image form a customer point of view, who oppose the CPA (Hydock et al., 2020, p. 1), so fairly similar to CSA.

As mentioned, since CSA may deviate from the personal values of key stakeholders, response to socio-political issues, it can be deemed as problematic for a company (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 2). The main differences between Brand Activism and CSR are, 1) CSR's emphasis is on actions beyond law requirements, and the effect it has on a company's social value such as long-term loyalty ("do well by doing good") and 2) the fact that CSR actions are seen as favourable to society (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 2), and is communicated via a cause-related marketing concept. Cause-related marketing is a communication tool and is used in corporation-non-profit collaborations to promote sales (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001, p. 207).

Brand Activism on the other hand does not aim for overall consensus, since socio-political issues are not seen in a unified way by society, or as a problem in the first place, like police brutality on coloured US citizens (#Black Lives Matter) (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 3). It is driven by fundamental urgency and concern about the issues society is facing, the wicked problems (see Figure 1), and ultimately makes a company value/society driven (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020, p. 25). Figure 2 shows the evolution of Brand Activism from the marketing driven approach, so cause-related marketing communication, as in a partnerships between corporations and non-profit organizations to promote both sales and social causes (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001, p. 207), to corporate philanthropy, which involves private firms donating funds or assets for public causes (Gautier & Pache, 2015), and ultimately to Brand Activism, a social-driven approach to marketing (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020, p. 25).

Figure 2 - Drivers for firms' social activities

MARKETING DRIVEN

Cause Promotion
Cause-Related Marketing
Corporate Social Marketing

CORPORATE DRIVEN

Corporate Philantropy
Workforce Volunteering
Socially Responsible Business Practices

SOCIETY DRIVEN

BRAND ACTIVISM

Note. Figure adapted from Sarkar and Kotler (2020), p. 25.

In general, Korschun (2021) explains, that the most important feature and therefore difference of Brand Activism from other activities such as public relations (PR), CSR or even government affairs lie in being a public act where brands fulfil their social responsibility in regard to society and *"seeks to proactively change public opinion and the way citizens interact with political leaders."* (Korschun, 2021, p. 11) as Figure 3 shows. This makes Brand Activism a purpose- and values-driven strategy where firms' aim to create social change as well as marketing success (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 3).

Figure 3 - Brand Activism vs. other ways of addressing socio-political issues.

Note. This figure shows the difference of addressing socio-political issues between PR, brand activism, CSR, and government affairs in corelation to advocacy and public stand. Figure adopted from Korschun (2021), p.11.

Sarkar and Kotler (2020) identify two types of brand activism: regressive and progressive. Regressive Brand Activism has negative impacts on the common good, while progressive Brand Activism seeks to create awareness and help promote socio-political issues for the common good. Depending on the type of Brand Activism pursued, it attracts different types of customers, with progressive Brand Activism having a positive impact on brand equity (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). Figure 4 explains the match between the type of activism and attracted customers.

Figure 4 - Matrix of progressive and regressive Brand Activism

PROGRESSIVE

PROGRESSIVE CUSTOMERS	PROGRESSIVE CUSTOMERS
REGRESSIVE COMPANY	PROGRESSIVE COMPANY
REGRESSIVE CUSTOMERS	REGRESSIVE CUSTOMERS
REGRESSIVE COMPANY	PROGRESSIVE COMPANY

CUSTOMERS

COMPANY

REGRESSIVE   PROGRESSIVE
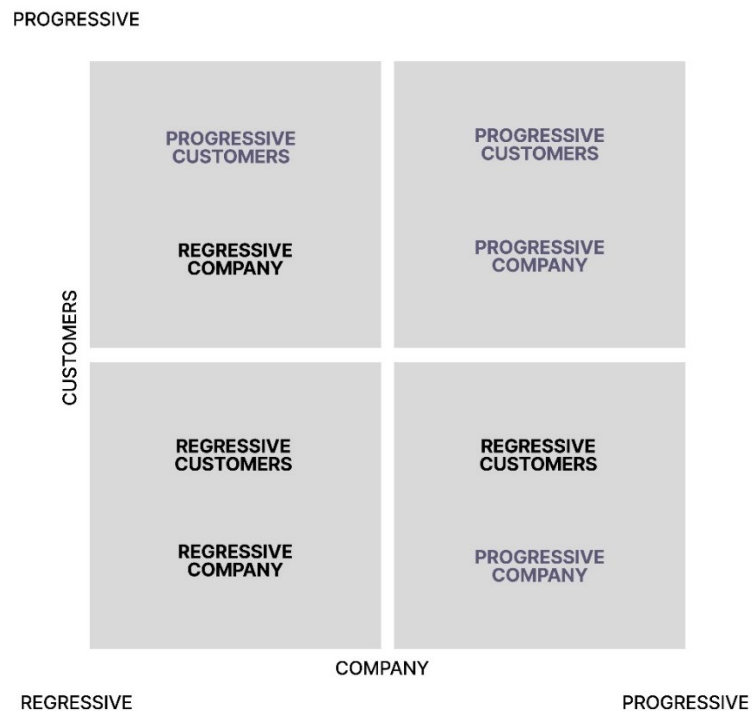
Note. Figure based on the example by Sarkar and Kotler (2020), p. 37.

Brand Activism in practice

To understand what the above-mentioned definition of Brand Activism means in practice, this chapter will provide examples for clarification from a few brands and campaigns on socio-political issues such as racial issues, as well as climate change and politics related issues.

According to Warren (2021) examples of corporate socio-political activism (CSA) include:

• #takepride campaign to celebrate national LGBTQ+ pride month promoted by *Target*

• Special Black Lives Matter emoji launched by *Twitter*

• *JC Penney's* 2012 Mother's Day advertisement featuring two lesbian mothers

• *Kroger's* statement in support of their policy for carrying firearms in-store (Warren, 2021, p. 35).

Additionally, in 2018, *Nike* launched the campaign Dream Crazy with the slogan *"Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything"* with NFL player Colin Kaepernick, who had protested racial inequality during NFL games, which ultimately lead to his exclusion from the San Francisco 49ers. This campaign triggered different opinions in *Nike's* customer base, leading to actions ranging from customers burning their *Nike* shoes to positive feedback online (Schmidt et al., 2022, p. 40). The advertisement, which can be seen in Figure 5, conveyed a powerful message on various socio-political issues such as race equality, gender equality, religion, and physical appearance, went viral and made a lasting impact (Yuniarto et al., 2020, p. 689).

Figure 5 - *Nike*'s "Dream Crazy" ad starring Colin Kaepernick

Note. Campaign picture adopted from The Guardian (Sport, 2020).

Two years later, during the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, *Nike* launched the *"For once, Don't Do It"* campaign to address systematic racism in the US (Schmidt et al., 2022, p. 40), depicted in Figure 6.

Figure 6 - *Nike*'s *"For once, don't do it"* Campaign

Note. Campaign picture adopted from PR Week (Hickman, 2020).

Besides *Nike*, other brands are also becoming more active. During the time in office of former US president Tump, *Patagonia* launched a campaign as a respond to the decision to reduce the size of two national monuments in Utah by half. Their message was "*The President Stole Your Land and You Were Lied To.*", as depicted in Figure 7, explaining the issue also on their blog, asking for help and finishing with the polarizing sentence: *"This land is our land."* (*Trump's National Monument Reduction Was Always About Oil, Coal, Gas and Uranium - Patagonia*, 2018).

Figure 7 - *Patagonia'*s campaign against former president Trump

Note. Campaign picture adopted from Patagonia's Twitter [@patagonia] (2017)**.**

Other brands also create awareness for socio-political issues such as *Unilever* with their sustainable living brands with the goal to decrease their environmental footprint, *Tony's Chocolonely* and their focus on a transparent value chain in cocoa production as well as fair wages (*Tony's Chocolonely Mission*, n.d.) or *Gillette*'s stance against toxic masculinity and charities to support men's mental health (The Best A Man Can Be, n.d.). *Ben & Jerry's is* known to be active in multiple causes, including Climate Justice, Fairtrade, LGBTQ+ Equality and more (*Issues We Care About*, n.d.). Other progressive activist brands are *Levi Strauss, EY, Seventh Generation* or *The Body Shop* (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020, pp. 31-32).

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Ethical and socially conscious behaviour has been expected from companies more over the last 50 years, which lead to the emergence of corporate social responsibility as part of a firm's marketing activities, an intangible concept for companies' position in society's welfare. A variety of definitions are provided by academia from authors such as Lantos (2001), Carroll (1991), Jamali (2008) or Garriga and Mele (2004) and can be seen as the forefather of Brand Activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020, p. 25), as mentioned in a previous chapter.

Lantos (2001) differentiates between three types of CSR: 1) ethical, 2) altruistic and 3) strategic. In his paper, he says that ethical CSR was an obligation for firms, since the goal here is to *"avoid societal harm"*, while altruistic CSR was illegitimate because *"doing good works at possible expense to stakeholders"* and strategic CSR, "*good works that are also good for the company"* should be focused on (Lantos, 2001).

Based on Carroll (1991), there are four stages of CSR: 1) Economic responsibility, as the basis, with the goal to *"be profitable";* 2) Legal responsibility, meaning acting within law's requirements, since they reflect society's understanding of right and wrong; 3) Ethical

responsibility, as mentioned above, the principle to avoid harm and be *"right, just and fair"*; 4) Philanthropic responsibility, meaning a firm should be a *"good corporate citizen",* as tip of the pyramid and make improvements to society (Carroll, 1991, p. 41).

In the paper *A Stakeholder Approach to Corporate Social Responsibility* by Jamali (2008), the tip *"Philanthropic Responsibility"* is revised and extended to *"Discretionary Responsibility"* and *"Total Responsibility",* making it more robust to modern social issues (Jamali, 2008, p. 215) as Figure 8 shows.

Figure 8 - A hierarchy of CSR
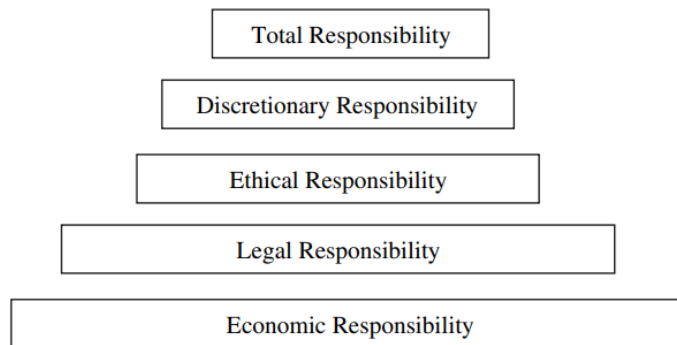
Note. Figure adopted from Jamali (2008), p. 215.

Garriga and Mele (2004) summarize CSR definitions into four main groups: instrumental, political, ethical and integrative (Garriga & Mele, 2004).

Summing up, as Costa and Menichini (2013) put it, corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a concept that refers to the responsibility of businesses to consider the social and environmental impacts of their operations and to take actions that benefit society and the environment. entails a dedication to conducting business operations in a manner that is sustainable from an economic, social, and environmental standpoint (ISO, 2002). This leads to the triple bottom line or triple Ps framework, which is a way of measuring the performance

of a company based on three dimensions: profit, people, and planet (Elkington, 1997). This framework suggests that companies should not only focus on financial performance, but also consider the impacts of their operations on people and the environment. By measuring and addressing these impacts, companies can become more socially and environmentally responsible organizations (Costa & Menichini, 2013, p. 150).

Despite the growing importance of CSR in the business world, there is still a lack of consensus on what exactly constitutes CSR, and how it should be practised in the business context and measured. This has led to a situation where researchers often have different interpretations and operationalizations of CSR, which can make it difficult to compare and combine the results of different studies. Additionally, some researchers have argued that the concept of CSR has been misconstrued in some cases, with some companies using it as a form of cause-related marketing rather than a genuine commitment to corporate responsibility (Öberseder et al., 2013, p. 1840).

The Relevance of CSR

As stated above, the practice of CSR has gained importance as consumers and investors increasingly expect companies to consider the social and environmental impacts of their actions. Many businesses have come to understand that CSR is not just a matter of doing the right thing, but also makes good business sense. By showing a commitment to social and environmental responsibility, companies can improve their reputation, attract and retain top talent, and build customer loyalty (Costa & Menichini, 2013; Godfrey & Hatch, 2007; Klostermann et al., 2022; Mohr et al., 2001). There are several organizations that promote and support the practice of CSR, including the United Nations, the World Resources Institute (WRI), and the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), as well as the International Standards

Organization (ISO 14000). These organizations provide guidance and tools for companies to measure and report on their social and environmental performance (Godfrey & Hatch, 2007, p. 87).

As Carroll (1991) explains, there are assorted reasons as to why CSR is important in academia as well as in practice. On the one hand, (economic) CSR is relevant to keep a strong competitive position, while having a high operating efficiency and being profitable. On the other hand, it is important to stay connected with evolving social norms and expectations in a moral and ethical way and prove integrity beyond being compliant with law and regulation (ethical and legal CSR). Finally, it is important to create and a community and promote it (Carroll, 1991, pp. 40-41).

Besides the impact on stakeholder wishes and responsibility towards society, CSR also has an impact on consumer buying behaviour. Mohr et al. (2001) found, that consumers also feel the pressure of being more socially conscious, which leads to more informed purchasing decisions in order to reduce the perceived risk that consumers experience in buying and using products (Mohr et al., 2001, pp. 67-68; Stanaland et al., 2011, p. 46). More details on consumer behaviours will follow in a later chapter.

Perception of CSR activities

"Interestingly, consumers cannot process the concept of CSR, as it is too broad and complex." (Öberseder et al., 2013, p. 1846)*,* nevertheless, consumers' perception and attitudes toward a company's involvement in CSR can be heavily influenced by their perception of the company's motives. According to Yuniarto et al. (2020) and Vlachos et al. (2009), consumers have a tendency to assign both values-driven and strategic motives to corporate CSR initiatives, and they tend to perceive companies more favourably when they

attribute CSR-related efforts to a combination of these factors. Consumer trust is positively influenced by values-driven attributions, which reflect a company's sense of moral obligation to engage in CSR initiatives. Conversely, stakeholder-driven, egoistically driven, and strategy-driven attributions, which suggest that a company's CSR efforts are driven by self-interest or strategic considerations, can diminish the authenticity of these initiatives in the eyes of consumers and have a negative or negligible impact (Vlachos et al., 2009; Yuniarto et al., 2020; Öberseder et al., 2011). The perception of a company's CSR and reputation can be significantly affected by corporate hypocrisy and consumer scepticism. Additionally, a consumer's perception of CSR plays a role in mediating the relationship between scepticism and corporate reputation, serving as a causal mechanism, so a pathway by which a cause (consumer perception) influences an effect (scepticism) (Arli et al., 2019, p. 706).

However, because of positively perceived CSR, corporate reputation and trust can be ensured. These factors are important and can significantly impact a company's success. A good reputation can help a company attract and retain customers, as well as attract top talent and secure partnerships with other businesses. Trust, on the other hand, is essential for building strong and lasting relationships with customers, as it helps to establish a sense of confidence and reliability. When customers trust a company, they are more likely to continue doing business with that company, even if there are issues or problems that arise (Stanaland et al., 2011, p. 53).

Stakeholder orientation hold a relevant importance in CSR as it *"[…] offers guidelines in understanding CSR behaviours, recognizing the influence of stakeholder perception in CSR assessment"* (Costa & Menichini, 2013, p. 158). Additionally, this orientation leading to corporate reputation and trust, which can help a company during challenging times, such as a crisis or negative media attention. Customers who have an elevated level of trust in a

company are more likely to give them the benefit of the doubt and continue to support them, while a company with a poor reputation may struggle to recover from negative events (Stanaland et al., 2011, p. 53). A study by Ross et al. (1992) investigated the relation between gender and the perception or organizations that engage in CSR. They found for example that men felt more likely that the cause of brands engaging in CSR were not altruistic or authentic compared to women (Ross et al., 1992). In this context, stakeholders' perceptions seems to be impactful based on research, yet no specific approaches or methods can be used to assess, measure or understand it in depth (Costa & Menichini, 2013, p. 158).

Consumer Reaction to CSR activities

Research shows, that CSR impact various consumer related factors such as *"[…] consumers' attitudes, purchase intentions, consumer–company identification, loyalty, and satisfaction."* (Öberseder et al., 2013, p. 1840). Meaning, consumers do consider a company's dedication to CSR when assessing the company and its products, perceiving such commitment as an indication of its ethical behaviour and trustworthiness. As a result, this can have a beneficial impact on their assessment of both the company and its products. On the other hand, a company's lack of commitment to CSR or negative associations with CSR can have a detrimental effect on consumer evaluations (Biehal & Sheinin, 2007; Dacin et al., 1997; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2006). Nonetheless, not all consumers utilize CSR as a factor in their purchasing criteria. In reality, studies have demonstrated that only a minor portion of consumers actively take CSR into account when making purchasing choices (Mohr et al., 2001). This may be due to a lack of awareness about CSR activities, as many consumers may not be aware of the CSR initiatives that companies engage in. Nonetheless, effective communication about CSR activities can help raise awareness and improve consumers' attitudes and behavioural

intentions towards companies that engage in CSR (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Öberseder et al., 2013).

Effective communication strategies can include both proactive and reactive approaches. Proactive communication strategies involve companies taking the initiative to communicate their CSR activities to consumers, for example through advertising or public relations efforts. Reactive communication strategies involve companies responding to consumer inquiries or concerns about their CSR activities. Research has shown that reactive communication strategies are generally more effective at influencing consumer behaviour, as they are perceived as more authentic and less hypocritical than proactive strategies (Wagner et al., 2009).

Chapter 2: Theory construction

The emergence of the term Brand Activism goes back only to the last decade, making it is a young research field, which is why this author will use theory and models from similar marketing phenomena such as CSR, branding, consumer behaviour and more to provide a theoretical basis to answer the research question of this thesis.

As mentioned, CSR has become the basis for understanding Brand Activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020, p. 25), which refers to a company's support for social or political causes. In order to understand consumer perception of brand activism, it is crucial to examine what it is and what it looks like (Moorman, 2020, pp. 388-389). Brand Activism can take many forms, from public statements to donations, and can have a significant impact on consumer attitudes and behaviours. However, there is still much uncertainty around how Brand Activism actually affects customers' perceptions, attitudes, relationships with the brand, and purchase decisions (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 17).

To introduce this chapter, the definition of Brand Activism needs to be highlighted. It refers to the actions that a company takes in support of a social or political cause. This can include making public statements, participating in protests or demonstrations, or making donations to organizations that support the cause. The increased attention on social and political issues in recent years has led to a greater focus on brand activism, as companies seek to align themselves with causes that align with their values or that they believe will be popular among their customers (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020).

There is a growing body of research on Brand Activism and how it impacts consumer perceptions and behaviours. Some studies have focused on the outcomes of not participating in socio-political causes for business leaders, while others have examined consumer reactions to brand activism. There is still no consensus and therefore as mentioned uncertainty about how Brand Activism actually affects customers' perception along with attitudes, relationships with the brand, and purchase decisions, creating a need for further research to address this gap in the literature (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Eyada, 2020; Shetty et al., 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Brand Activism: Importance and Social Meaning

Sarkar and Kotler (2020) ask: What happens when businesses and customers or employees do not share the same value anymore? They explain that firms have no choice but to fill the value gap to stay competitive, which ultimately results in creating a social purpose, which is the essence of Brand Activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) defines Brand Activism as a strategy to influence consumers driven by political views (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019, p. 343), while Key et al. (2021) see it as relevant to strengthen consumer relationships with the brand (Key et al., 2021, p. 1).

In western countries, where democracies tend to be the norm, businesses still hold an influence on political decisions and benefit from those to some degree, losing touch with society's views for the future (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020, p. 21). As a result, the public may engage in protests and other forms of activism, as consumers in today's economy anticipate that brands will adopt a position on socio-political issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 1), respecting the triple bottom line (TBL). The transition to sustainable capitalism, will be one of the most challenging for humanity to navigate as society is facing a global cultural revolution according to Henriques and Richardson (2004) and businesses will play a significant role in driving this change (Henriques & Richardson, 2004, p. 26).

Brands focus on building long-term relationships with customers by delivering consistent, meaningful content across various channels, striving to become iconic. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a "cultural icon" is defined as *"a widely recognized symbol or person that represents a particular culture, era, or community."* (Home: Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). In the past, this meant staying neutral on controversial issues to avoid alienating any segment of the market. Nevertheless, a newer development in brand strategy involves brands taking a public stance on socio-political issues, such as *Lyft's* stance on immigration or *Dove's* support for redefining beauty and gender norms (Key et al., 2021, p. 1). This approach can come with risks as it may lead to losing a portion of the existing customer base (Vredenburg et al., 2020). As such, the brand's goals shift from traditional business objectives, such as increasing market share and profits, to what Sarkar and Kotler (2020) describe as brand activism. There is an increasing amount of literature that analyses the potential benefits and drawbacks of this strategy and the risks that it may entail (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

Yet, Holt et al. (2004) argues that the key to creating an iconic brand is to develop what he calls "cultural branding." (Holt et al., 2004, pp. 22-23). It can help brands use socio-political issues as opportunities for brand innovation and help iconic global brands like *Coca Cola* and *Starbucks* compete in markets to stay successful. The co-creation of meaning between consumers, brand managers, and culture gives rise to iconic brands. Brands have the ability to evaluate the socio-political challenges confronting their target audience and construct a brand that resonates with consumers, reducing their concerns and providing a more inventive cultural resource for consumer identity (Koch, 2020, p. 595). Cultural branding will be explained in more detail in the following chapter.

Branding and Positioning

Branding and positioning are related but distinct concepts in marketing. Branding refers to the overall process of creating and maintaining a brand, a brand identity and personality, and building brand awareness. The goal of branding is to create a lasting and recognizable image in the minds of consumers that differentiates company's products or services from those of its competitors (Aaker, 2012; Kotler et al., 2020, p. 240). Positioning, on the other hand, refers to the process of creating an image or perception of a brand in the minds of consumers in relation to its competitors. The goal of positioning is to differentiate a brand from its competitors by emphasizing its unique characteristics and benefits, and making it stand out in the minds of consumers. It is more about how the brand is communicated, its features and its benefits to the target market (Herrmann & Huber, 2000, p. 95; Ries & Trout, 1992). To summarize, branding is about creating an identity for a product or company, while positioning is about how that product or company is perceived in the marketplace.

Companies today face intense competition in markets that are filled with many related products or services. Even well-established brands struggle to stand out and gain a significant advantage over their rivals (Clancy & Trout, 2002). Marketing and advertising professionals employ brand positioning to counter this problem by generating positive associations in the minds of consumers and distinguishing their brand from competitors. This approach is known as brand positioning. Brands play a vital role in the business world. They act as a symbol or identifier for a company's products and services (Keller & Lehmann, 2006, p. 740).

In recent years, Brand Activism has become a popular trend in brand positioning, publicly taking stances on divisive socio-political issues, even if it has no direct connection to the brand's operations. More brands are choosing to take a position on issues ranging from Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ rights, gun regulations or COVID-19 policies. This trend is driven by the idea that aligning financial performance with societal objectives can be reached by being in the middle of political controversy (Korschun, 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

This can lead to cultural branding, a phenomenon of iconic brands, or brands that have achieved enduring cultural significance and become part of the popular consciousness, according to Holt et al. (2004). This involves creating a brand that is not just a product, but a symbol that embodies a larger cultural meaning or identity. Cultural branding requires understanding the cultural context in which the brand operates, and developing a narrative or story that resonates with consumers and connects the brand to deeper cultural values and beliefs (Holt et al., 2004). For example, Koch (2020) conducted a case study on the vegan milk producer *Oatly*, suggesting that in the current age, a new principle of branding has emerged, referred to as "citizen activist", which can be seen as part of cultural branding. This principle goes beyond the traditional focus on self-expression and personal identity, and instead places

emphasis on promoting systemic changes in production and consumption to address environmental issues (Koch, 2020, p. 593), connecting to the phenomenon of brand activism.

For consumers, brands can make purchasing decisions easier. They assure a certain standard of quality, minimize risk, and inspire trust. Brands are formed through a combination of the product itself, its promotion, and the perceptions of customers. Brands encapsulate the overall experience customers have with a product. Additionally, brands play a crucial role in the success of marketing strategies (Keller & Lehmann, 2006, p. 740). Living in a digital world, new (online) touchpoints have emerged where consumer connect with brands, that are sometimes outside of a firm's control. Consumers rely more on digital interactions, evaluate a broader range of options and remain through social media, making online channels highly relevant within a firm's branding strategy (Edelman, 2010).

There is growing focus on how consumers perceive a brand's place in the market, and how it compares to competitors. Brand positioning should be evaluated by measuring consumers' perceptions and preferences for the brand compared to its competitors (Herrmann & Huber, 2000, p. 96f.). Finally, as Ries and Trout (1992) put it, positioning is not something that is done to the product, but rather it is something that is done to the consumer's mind, meaning, positioning is the process of placing the product in the consumer's mind (Ries & Trout, 1992).

The Triple Bottom Line: The phenomena of Woke Washing and Greenwashing

To summarize the findings so far: Brand Activism is a progressive representation of issues within the triple bottom line (TBL). The TBL is a framework that assesses a company's performance in three areas: social, environmental, and financial. The three pillars of the TBL are often referred to as the "3 Ps": People, Planet, and Profit (Henriques & Richardson, 2004,

p. 14). Research shows that most consumers prefer buying products that are produced within the pillars of the TBL (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020, p. 1). Since many companies do not produce within these standards, they resort to image polishing measures, such as woke washing and greenwashing, misleading consumers about their environmental performance (Delmas & Burbano, 2011, p. 64).

Woke washing is a phenomenon in which companies and brands adopt or promote progressive or socially conscious positions or messaging, but do not align those positions with their actual practices or values. Essentially, it is a form of inauthentic or superficial activism that aims to improve the brand's image rather than making meaningful change. This can lead to mistrust and scepticism from consumers, as well as damage to the brand's reputation and integrity (Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 1). Overall, consumers may have elevated expectations for brands to express their stance on certain issues, but they may not trust their agenda (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 1).

The term "woke" is based on a global consumer culture that is affected by the social capital attached to people and institutions appearing to be socially conscious, particularly those who challenge structural injustices faced by marginalized groups, particularly people of colour of African descent. "Wokeness" refers to acts of resistance and solidarity against systemic racism, capitalism, and oppression, and is often associated with courage. The term "woke bravery" reflects how societal understanding of "wokeness" is linked to discussions and challenges concerning courage (Sobande, 2019, p. 2; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 2).

Besides racial aspects within woke washing, also gender specific waves have emerged, like femvertising. The term "Femvertising" refers to a form of advertising that emphasizes the abilities of women, promotes pro-female ideals, and aims to challenge gender stereotypes. It combines the terms "feminism" and "advertising" and can be defined as advertising that

utilizes empowering female talent, messages, and imagery to support and inspire women and girls (Sterbenk et al., 2022, p. 493; Varghese & Kumar, 2022, p. 441). Brands around the world are increasingly using femvertising to appeal to consumers. Including campaigns such as *Unilever's "Dove* – Real Beauty" campaign (*Announcing the Dove Real Beauty Pledge*, 2017), seen in Figure 9.

Figure 9 - *Dove's* Real Beauty Campaign

Note. Picture adopted from All You Need is Dove: Celebrating nearly two decades of brand activism (2022)

Femvertising can generally also fall into the category of greenwashing, as Sterbenk et al. (2022) explain in their study. Greenwashing can be defined as misleading claims about the environmental benefits of a product or service with the goal to appeal to environmentally conscious consumers and gain a competitive advantage (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020, p. 2; Delmas & Burbano, 2011, p. 65; Furlow, n.d., p. 1; Laufer, n.d., p. 253). Greenwashing in advertising has become widespread in recent decades. As a result, there is increasing scepticism about claims of environmental friendliness, which can make it difficult for customers to distinguish genuine "green" marketing initiatives from those that are falsely or misleadingly labelled as such (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020, p. 2).

According to Delmas and Burbano (2011), greenwashing has various drivers, as can be seen in Figure 10. They found that external market factors and internal characteristics of firms play a significant role in driving greenwashing. This includes factors such as the company's incentives, ethical climate, communication within the company, and resistance to change. Additionally, individual level psychological and cognitive factors also impact managers' decision making, which in turn affects how firms react to external drivers. Regulations indirectly affect greenwashing by affecting the availability and accuracy of information about a company's environmental performance and creating uncertainty around the consequences of greenwashing (Delmas & Burbano, 2011, p. 69)**.**

Figure 10 - Drivers of Greenwashing
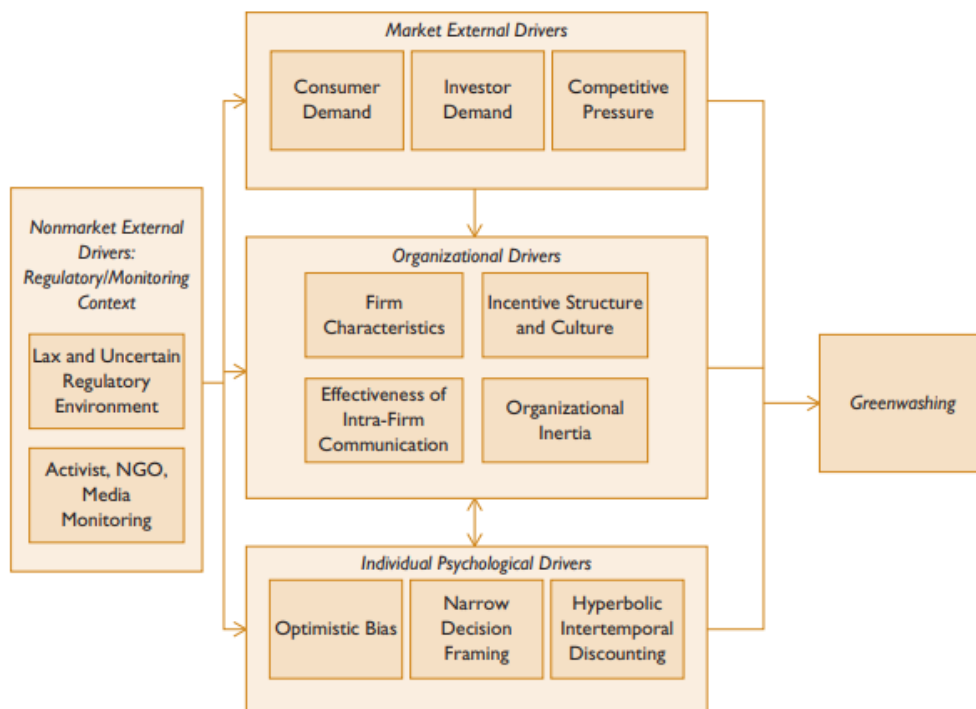
Note. Institutional theory based framework, highlighting the role that regulations, norms, and understanding play in determining a company's choice of organizational practices. Figure adopted from Delmas & Burbano (2011), p. 68.

Understanding these drivers of greenwashing is essential when it comes to brand perception and supports customers in identifying false or misleading environmental claims made by companies and making informed purchasing decisions based on accurate information.

Brand Activism and Stakeholders

"Stakeholders are increasingly using Brand Activism to understand a brand's values and how it will treat them in the future." (Korschun, 2021, p. 10)*.*

In this context, the need arises to understand customer relationship management (CRM). It refers to the idea that companies, as part of society, must consider the consequences of their actions on the greater good and strive to promote social cohesion. This is according to the views of Peter Drucker (1954), company's management must take a mindful approach in making decisions. While CSR initiatives have the potential to enhance relationships between companies and their stakeholders (Drucker, 1954; Peloza & Shang, 2011, p. 117), Brand Activism can also have a significant impact on stakeholders, including consumers, companies, and society as a whole. For consumers, Brand Activism can influence purchasing decisions and shape consumer attitudes towards certain brands and issues (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). For companies, taking a stand on political or social issues can either attract or alienate customers, and can have a positive or negative impact on brand reputation and financial performance (Hydock et al., 2020). For society, Brand Activism can raise awareness and drive action on important social and political issues, and can push for systemic change through collective action (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 5).

Brands must consider the views of all stakeholders when engaging in political activism, as it can impact their perception of the company in areas such as product quality, employee

satisfaction, and shareholder value. Marketers need to consider the potential effects of their actions on these relationships (Korschun, 2021, p. 15). Stakeholders expect more than a superficial display to see a company's genuine concern. Engaging in activism involves risks, which can be reduced by aligning values with stakeholders and initiatives. Market share plays a role, as activism can be more precarious for prominent brands that hold a substantial share of the market. Brands can gauge the consequences by analysing how it influences customer acquisition and retention (Hydock et al., 2020; Korschun, 2021).

Channels for Brand Activism

"People want brands to take a stand on important issues, and social media is the place for it. […] more than half (58%) are open to this happening on social media – the top channel for consumer receptivity." (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020, p. 71). This findings align with Kozinets' (2014) study on social brand engagement in social media, which refers to the meaningful interaction, creation, and communication between consumers and brands, facilitated by interaction between one consumer and one or more other consumers (Kozinets, 2014, p. 10).

Research shows that many campaigns that can be seen within Brand Activism went viral thanks to social media. For the "Dream Crazy" campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick in 2019, *Nike* saw a significant increase in value, reaching $30 billion largely due to a Twitter advertisement (Yuniarto et al., 2020, p. 689). Also, *Ben & Jerry's* actively uses Twitter (*Ben & Jerry's (@benandjerrys) / Twitter*, 2022) for activistic measures, as can be seen in the example in Figure 11.

Figure 11 - *Ben & Jerry's* statement on abortion rights

Note. Picture adopted from *Ben & Jerry's* Twitter account (*Ben & Jerry's (@benandjerrys) /*

Twitter, 2022).

Besides Twitter, another popular social media channel for activist brands seems to

be Instagram. For example, *Patagonia* (see Figure 12) and *Tony's Chocolonely* (see Figure

13) use this channel to distribute their messages (*Patagonia (@patagonia) • Instagram*

Photos and Videos, n.d.; *Tony's Chocolonely (@tonyschocolonely) • Instagram Photos and*

Videos, n.d.).

Figure 12 - *Patagonia's* statement on Women's Equality Day
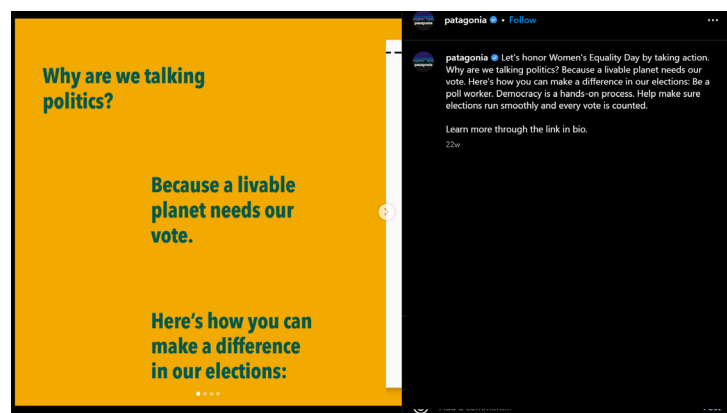
Note. Picture adopted from *Patagonia*'s Instagram account (*Patagonia (@patagonia) •*

Instagram Photos and Videos, n.d.)

Figure 13 - *Tony's Chocolonely* statement on child labour

Note. Picture adopted from *Tony's Chocolonely* Instagram account (*Tony's Chocolonely*

(@tonyschocolonely) • Instagram Photos and Videos, n.d.)

Statistics show that social media is one of the popular channels for consumers. Nearly

a third (26%) of internet users aged 16 - 64 globally turn to social media to find products to

purchase, while over a quarter (27%) use social media to find inspiration for things to buy.

Additionally, social networks have overtaken search engines as the top channel for brand

research among 16 - 24 year old internet users (*Essential Trends in Online Search*, 2021).

Kozinets (2014) defines two streams of strategies for social brand engagement: brand

endorsement and consumer creativity. The level of endorsement can vary from negative

critique to high appreciation, while the creativity of consumers can vary from just a "like" to

creating videos or campaigns. There are two main types of social brand engagement: apathy,

where consumers are not endorsing or creating content around the brand, and evangelism,

where consumers are willing to endorse the brand but not actively creating content.

Evangelism is a minimal form of engagement and may not be perceived as genuine (Kozinets,

2014, p. 10). Edelman (2010) argued that social media platforms have made the distribution of information and expression of opinions more democratic, and have emerged as the primary forum for consumers to engage in discussions on social matters (Edelman, 2010).

Social Media seems not to be the only channel used, as some brands additionally rely on an offline approach, that can be seen within the definition of Guerrilla marketing. Guerrilla marketing is an unconventional marketing strategy that generates attention through creative and non-traditional methods (Levinson, 1984). It can involve supplementing or modifying traditional marketing efforts and may use shock tactics or emphasize unconventional methods to create interesting messages (Yuniarto et al., 2020, p. 690). The Swedish milk alternative brand *Oatly,* uses their packaging as a relevant channel, using the space *"for conversational and humorous messages"* for the consumers (Koch, 2020, p. 599), as well as their global media coverage in journals such as The Guardian (Levitt, 2017). Another example can be seen in Figure 14 - *Ben & Jerry's* closing a London shop in order to join the climate protests, with a clear statement on their shop window (*Facebook*, n.d.).

Figure 14 - *Ben & Jerry's* London store statement

Note. Picture adopted from The Guardian (Hilaire, 2021).

Summing up, channels for brand activism seem to be those that allow for reach and engagement with target audiences. These can include:

- Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram. Possibly Influencer marketing, partnering with influencers to spread messages (Booth & Matic, 2011).

- Collaborations and partnerships with advocacy organizations and social movements (Holt et al., 2004).

- Live events and activations, such as demonstrations, rallies, and brand-sponsored initiatives (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020, p. 156).

Consumer Perception and Behaviour

"Marketing's first law, "Don't sell what you happen to make; make what the consumer wants to buy," is implemented through the identification of consumer wants and the formulation of brand positionings to respond to these wants." (Fennell, 1978, p. 38). Current research suggests that that consumers have increasing expectations that brands will engage in CPA (Korschun, 2021; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020) and that they respond to these actions based on whether it aligns with their own values (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hydock et al., 2020). Despite its potential benefits, CPA or Brand Activism may have an adverse impact on brand perception because certain consumers may object to any type of activism, and they may react more unfavourably to actions that they oppose compared to actions they endorse. Additionally, various moderating factors can influence the impact of CPA, such as the brand's market share, the type of socio-political issue involved, the manner in which it is executed, the presence of a coalition, and its authenticity and compatibility with the brand (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Klostermann et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Summarizing these authors findings, consumer attitudes towards a brand can be influenced by their political beliefs (Hydock et al., 2020), as well as a variety of other factors such as personal values (Bhagwat et al., 2020), experiences, and cultural background. For example, if a company takes a stance on a controversial political issue that aligns with the consumer's beliefs, it may lead to a positive attitude (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 17) towards the brand. On the other hand, if a company takes a stance that is opposed to the consumer's beliefs, it may lead to a negative attitude towards the brand. It is important for companies to be aware of the potential impact of their activism caused on consumer attitudes and to carefully consider their involvement in political issues. In some cases, it may be more beneficial for a company to remain neutral on certain issues in order to avoid alienating certain consumer groups (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021, p. 47).

Consumer behaviour is also ambiguous. While research suggests a significant gap between consumers' expressed interest in CSR and their actual purchasing behaviour, referred to as the "attitude-behaviour gap" (Öberseder et al., 2011, p. 449), this phenomenon may also apply to Brand Activism initiatives. On the other hand, current fundamental societal problematics such as summarized in the Ecosystem of Wicked Problems by Christian Sarkar (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020, p. 8) as depicted in Figure 1 have created the basis for *"political consumers",* that deliberately select whether to buy and being more aware of their consumption (Zorell, 2019, p. 2). Consumers who are politically aware or responsible consumers acknowledge that although multinational corporations hold relevant influence, they still have the ability to impact a just and ethical market (Neilson, 2010, p. 214). De Zúñiga et al. (2014) have found a connection between political consumerism and social media usage (de Zúñiga et al., 2014).

Regarding the importance of social media in relation to CSA, Edelman (2010) explained that it has enabled the free flow of information and expression of opinions, thus becoming the primary platform for individuals to engage in discussions on social matters, promoting democratic exchange (Edelman, 2010; Mirzaei et al., 2022, p. 3).

In this context, Klostermann et al. (2022) offer a model, regarding the impact of CPA on brand perception in relation to online protests (Klostermann et al., 2022, pp. 5-6), visible in Figure 15. As CPA is closely related to Brand Activism in its nature, as explained in chapter 1, this model provides relevant insights for brand activism.

Figure 15 - Conceptional framework
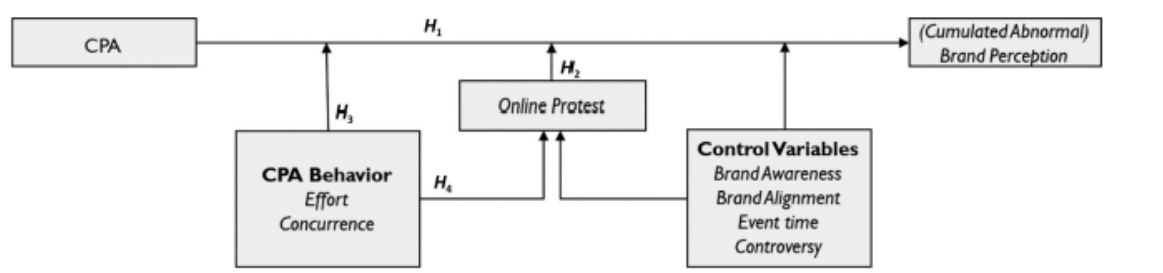
Note. H1 refers to negative effects of corporate political advocacy, H2 to online protests (*"The negative effect of CPA on brand perception is amplified by the strength of online protests that immediately follow the CPA"*), H3 is based on effort and H4 is regarding concurrence(Klostermann et al., 2022, pp. 3-4). Figure adopted from Klostermann et al. (2022), p. 3.

In this study, they found a higher likelihood of a negative brand perception among consumers than for non-customers in correlation to CPA activities (Klostermann et al., 2022, p. 10), already providing first insights that will be relevant in the methodology section of this study.

Definition of Consumer Brand Perception

It is widely accepted that brand image can have a considerable influence on consumer behaviour. Consumers often use a brand's image as a shortcut to help them make purchasing decisions, especially when they are faced with a large number of options or when they lack the time or expertise to evaluate each option fully (Romaniuk & Sharp, 2003). A strong brand image can serve as a signal of quality and value, making it more likely that consumers will choose the brand. At the same time, it is important to recognize that brand image is not the only factor that influences consumer behaviour. Other factors, such as price, product features, and personal preferences, can also play a role in the purchasing decision. Additionally, brand image is not a fixed entity; it can change over time based on a variety of factors, including changes in consumer perceptions and the marketing efforts of the company (Aaker, 1991; Barwise & Ehrenberg, 1985; Joyce, 1963). Essentially, everything a consumer perceives about a brand and any information they learn can become associated with a brand, thus creating the brand image for a consumer (Keller, 1993).

As mentioned in the introduction, brand perception is a combination of three factors: 1) single attribute positioning (people linking brands with a certain attribute), 2) multi-attribute positioning (the positioning is based on clusters of attributes, which may be centred on a single theme and can be measured with techniques such as perceptual maps), and 3) brand salience/share of mind (the role of the number of attributes associated with a brand) (Romaniuk & Sharp, 2003). This is the basis to create brand familiarity. Literature shows that brand awareness/familiarity, and brand choice are highly correlated (Haley & Case, 1979), which again leads consumers to form an evoked set to make their purchasing decisions less complex (Brisoux & Laroche, 1981). This definition will be applied throughout this thesis, when referring to (brand or consumer) perception.

Consumer Resistance Behaviours

The current era is marked by numerous politically charged issues and, often using the internet, especially social media, to virally spread their views. Consumers now not only participate in these discussions but also expect brands to take a stance on such issues. Brands such as *Nike* with for example rainbow-colored logos for Pride Month show support for social causes, while others like *Chick-fil-A* take a more conservative stance. However, this can lead to both positive and negative reactions from customers. Brands must carefully consider their involvement in activism as it can have critical consequences for the company (Albrecht et al., 2013; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020; Warren, 2021). There are different possible outputs for political consumerism, so called consumer resistance behaviours, that can be expressed (Albrecht et al., 2013, p. 180). It can be challenging to anticipate the response of key stakeholders to activism. Some satisfied customers may reward the company, while others who are dissatisfied may take steps to penalize it (Warren, 2021) in ways such as boycotting or boycotting, meaning a consumer's decision to abstain from or actively purchasing a product or participating in activities as a means of expressing their dissatisfaction or disapproval (Copeland, 2014; Warren, 2021).

According to Copeland (2014), boycotting is a collective and group-based activity, but it can also have an individualistic aspect. Consumers who participate in boycotting and buycotting have distinct demographic and personality characteristics. Specifically, those who participate in buycotting tend to be more optimistic and have more trust in business compared to those who participate in boycotting (Albrecht et al., 2013, p. 180; Copeland, 2014). Research shows, that more than a third of consumers worldwide have boycotted at least one brand (Poll, 2005) making political consumerism surpassed numerous, if not the majority, of methods of political involvement (Kam & Deichert, 2020, p. 2). The sustained and

routine action of political consumption allows participants to express their ethical and political beliefs through their purchasing power. This form of consumption is seen as a prioritizing globalized justice, equality, and fairness is perceived as a shift towards post-material values, which is especially prevalent among young consumers (Nonomura, 2017, pp. 3-4). An example is the well-known consumer response to *Nike*'s Colin Kaepernick campaign, where consumers burned their *Nike* gear and posted videos of this on Twitter with #BoycottNike (Cosentino, 2019).

A study by Paek and Nelson (2009) identified consumer characteristics that relate to buycotting and boycotting as two forms of socially responsible consumer behaviour. These included on the one hand altruism as a strong predictor, on the other hand opinion leadership and the need for self-actualization. Also attitudes toward big business and brand values in correlation to the education level of consumers seem to be impactful (Paek & Nelson, 2009, pp. 81-82). According to data from the European Social Survey (European Social Survey | European Social Survey (ESS), o. D.), critical consumers tend to come from higher socio-economic backgrounds and are often older, highly educated, and predominantly female (Yates, 2011, p. 191). Political consumerism researchers suggest that young people are engaging in "*life-politics*" rather than traditional electoral and parliamentary politics. According to some researchers, it is essential to shift the focus towards the non-traditional and non-formal forms of civic participation, such as political resistance, that are exercised by young people (Nonomura, 2017, pp. 3-4).

Consumer Values across Generations

As mentioned, in the last years, consumers have become more interested in firms' CSR and CSA activities (Öberseder et al., 2011, p. 449). In fact, *"Two-thirds of consumers (66%) say*

it's important for brands to take a public stand on social and political issues, […]." (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020, p. 71)*.* This aligns with young adults' values and concerns. A study by the Institute for Youth Cultural Research and Cultural Mediation from November 2022 conducted in the DACH area with young adults between the age of 16 and 29 found that the three issues that are of greatest concern to them, and which they would also improve for themselves, are the 1) environment, nature, and climate protection, 2) animal welfare and 3) human rights. Inflation and equality follow closely. Additionally, young people are much more pessimistic about the future of society than their personal future (josefglavanovits, 2023).

To summarize, each generation is faced with different issues as well as behaviours, values and attitudes (josefglavanovits, 2023), making Brand Activism more or less relevant depending on when the consumer was born. Since Brand Activism or CSA is a phenomenon that is mostly fuelled online (Klostermann et al., 2022, pp. 3–4), digital native and digital immigrant generation might be more relevant target groups.

Many authors offer different timespans for each generation's cohort, but for the purpose of this study this author chose to define the age range of Generation X, Y and Z based on the same sources.

Generation X (Gen X)

Born between 1966-1980 (Gen Z, Millennials und Generation X – Ein Überblick, n.d.; Krahn & Galambos, 2014, p. 93; Tyson et al., 2021, p. 6), generation X experienced the Chernobyl nuclear accident and the first computer disk being sold (Oblinger, 2003, p. 38) and is known for their technological proficiency and desire to personalize and humanize their experiences through technology. They played a significant role in bringing the Internet into the mainstream. This generation strongly prefers using the web and email for (business) communication (Reisenwitz & Iyer, 2009, p. 93). Furthermore, this generation is described as

independent, resourceful, lifelong learners and ambitious (Bova & Kroth, 2001, p. 58; Jorgensen, 2003, p. 42). Studies suggest that Generation X is less loyal than the generation before them and therefore more likely to experiment with multiple brands (Mitchell et al., 2005).

Gen X is a highly sophisticated generation when it comes to buying behaviour, relying on traditional search and decision-making methods, and wanting detailed product information. They prefer customer convenience, community relations, and branding. Gen X is known to be disloyal to brands and influenced by the opinions of others. They tend to ignore advertising aimed at them and shop at value-oriented retailers, and research extensively while shopping online (Lissitsa & Kol, 2016, p. 306; Reisenwitz & Iyer, 2009).

Generation Y (The Millennials)

Generation Y, also referred to as Millennials, was born between 1981-1995 (Gen Z, Millennials und Generation X – Ein Überblick, n.d.; Krahn & Galambos, 2014, p. 93; Tyson et al., 2021, p. 6) and grew up with using computers (Jorgensen, 2003, p. 43). These „digital natives" (Bolton et al., 2013, p. 245) are the first generation to grow up using email, instant messaging, and cell phones, is highly comfortable with technology and able to solve problems quickly using collaboration tools. They are known for being a multitasking generation with a preference for internet consumption over television (Reisenwitz & Iyer, 2009, p. 93). As they have been heavily exposed to technology from an early age, this has had both positive and negative impacts on their cognitive, emotional, and social development. They have experienced economic prosperity and rapid advances in communication and globalization but are now facing economic uncertainty. These external events have influenced their social media use and buying behaviour (Bolton et al., 2013, p. 247).

Millennials are a valuable customer base due to their high spending power and their influence on the purchasing decisions of their parents. They have higher expectations for socially responsible brands and cause marketing is an effective way to reach them. They feel responsible for making the world a better place and prefer companies that promote social responsibility rather than just focusing on profit (Shetty et al., 2019, p. 164). Millennials often choose new brands based on peer recommendations, either directly or through social media. They use brands as a form of self-expression and to communicate their values and beliefs. Millennials also prefer environmentally friendly brands in response to concerns about climate change and pollution (Gurău, 2012, p. 105). There is agreement among researchers that Gen Y frequently uses social media, but there is disagreement on the types of activities they engage in on these platforms. Some studies suggest that they actively contribute content and prefer to participate (Bissola & Imperatori, 2014, p. 74), while others suggest that they spend a lot of time-consuming content like other generations. Gen Y uses social media for various purposes, including getting information, leisure, socializing, staying in touch with friends, and experiencing a sense of community (Bolton et al., 2013, p. 249).

A study by Ayesha Lian Bevan-Dye (2020) showed that perceived information, entertainment, credibility, and value were all predictors of Generation Y's usage frequency of online consumer reviews (Bevan-Dye, 2020, p. 206), This highlights the Millennials need for peer approval as well as how status and prestige influence consumption behaviours among Generation Y individuals. Gen Y consumers seek to use status-seeking consumption to display their wealth and purchasing power, and how this is related to status consumption, which is the process of striving to improve social standing through the consumption of products that symbolize status (Kim et al., 2002, p. 39).

Generation Z (GenZ)

GenZ is born between 1996-2009 (Gen Z, Millennials und Generation X – Ein Überblick, n.d.; Tyson et al., 2021, p. 6) and a digital-native and ethnically diverse generation with a strong affinity for technology and social networking. They communicate informally and value Do-It-Yourself practices, with a higher tendency towards entrepreneurship and social responsibility. However, they appear to have lower rates of community engagement and political participation compared to previous generations (Singh & Dangmei, 2016). Although Generation Y and Generation Z are sometimes grouped together, it is expected that there are notable differences in consumer behaviour between the two generations due to the timing of economic recessions during their formative years (Wood, n.d., p. 1). Gen Z is more influenced by social media and seeks input from friends and family when making purchasing decisions. They are less brand loyal and prioritize customer reviews and product comparisons when shopping online. As a result, the shopping habits of this generation should reflect the societal changes and cultural values that shape their preferences (Thangavel et al., 2022).

A study suggests that social media advertising is more effective in improving brand perception, loyalty, customer interaction, and purchase intention among Gen Z when compared to traditional advertising methods. Social media marketing also has a significant influence on purchase intention through its impact on brand awareness, perception, and loyalty (Ninan et al., 2020, p. 1700).

Generations Conclusion Generation

Besides the clear relevance of Generation Y and Z, based on their behaviours and beliefs as mentioned above for the perception and need for brand activism, a study conducted by Tyson et al. (2021) on how Americans view climate, energy, and environmental issues, surveying 13,749 U.S. adults in spring 2021. They found that Millennials and GenZ feel for

example that climate change needed to be prioritized more strongly in order to secure a future for coming generations, while also actively engaging offline and via social media on this topic (Tyson et al., 2021), making these two age groups especially relevant for this study.

Attitude-Behaviour Gap and Hypocrisy

Another relevant phenomenon in regard to consumer behaviour, which was already mentioned in one of the previous chapters is the attitude-behaviour gap. It which refers to the discrepancy between what people say they will do and what they actually do, has been widely documented in social psychology and ethical consumption (Shaw et al., 2016). To an extended level, this behaviour gap might also be seen as moral hypocrisy, which is the ability to hold beliefs while acting in discord with them (Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007, p. 689).

While consumers are becoming more concerned about the role of companies in society, ethical behaviour does not currently take precedence as the primary factor influencing their purchasing decisions. Price, quality, and convenience remain the most significant considerations. While consumers express willingness to make ethical purchases, the reality is that responsible corporate behaviour is not the dominant factor. Consumers are interested in corporate reputation but relatively uninformed about responsible corporate behaviour. Only a small percentage can name socially responsible or least socially responsible companies. Reputation management efforts may have a greater impact on other groups, such as government regulators, activists, city financiers, industry press, and employees, than on consumers (Boulstridge & Carrigan, 2000, pp. 359-361; Roberts, 1996; Simon, 1995).

Moraes et al. (2012) suggest that these discrepancies in behaviour are not limited to environmentally conscious consumers but are also present among mainstream consumers. The passage acknowledges previous research limitations in understanding this phenomenon,

including a narrow focus on individual consumers as rational decision-makers and a lack of consideration for wider sociocultural processes (Moraes et al., 2012, pp. 105–106).

According to Öberseder et al. (2011), there are two key factors that influence consumers' consideration of a company's CSR as a purchase criterion: the availability of information and personal concern. Information about a company's CSR position is the most important and complex factor. Consumers need information to consider ethical product features in their consumption decisions. Information has two dimensions: the level of information and the type of information. CSR is unlikely to be a factor that consumers consider when making purchasing decisions unless they have adequate information about a company's socially responsible behaviour. Consumers may also have comprehensive knowledge of a company's CSR behaviour, which can be either favourable or unfavourable. When consumers have access to sufficient information about a particular company's CSR behaviour, they will assess whether the behaviour aligns with their personal concerns about CSR-related issues. This core factor is very subjective in nature and cannot be influenced by companies (Öberseder et al., 2011, pp. 453–454).

Chapter 3: Research question and Study Design

As mentioned in the beginning this thesis will focus on the research question: *What factors influence consumer perception towards brands who participate in socio-political issues?* Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to identify and examine factors that impact consumers' perception. Additionally, it seeks to find propositions that can be used to construct a framework including consumer views on the firm's involvement in socio-political matters (Vlachos et al., 2009, p. 171), the relationship between consumers and the brand (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 17), and consumer interests (Öberseder et al., 2013, p. 1841). To

accomplish this, a qualitative research approach will be utilized to establish a well-funded theory, as research on consumer behaviour, related to Brand Activism is relatively young, specifically consumers' perceptions represent a complex area.

Advantages of a qualitative study approach are that the research process is dynamic, this makes it possible to continuously collect and analyse data. Also, it is possible to interpret meanings within different contexts (Sinkovics et al., 2005), which leads to the ability to explore perceptions. Furthermore, sampling in qualitative approaches is theoretical sampling/purposive sampling, meaning that specific concepts, properties, dimensions, and variations are carefully planned (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 8). Theoretical sampling achieves representativeness and consistency by focusing on representing concepts rather than people. It aims to develop a theoretical explanation of phenomena by specifying conditions, actions, consequences, and variations, without the goal of generalizing findings for the mainstream population (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 9). Theoretical sampling will also be employed for this study, meaning two pools for in-depth interviews will be deliberately selected.

One sample pool should be brand managers or topic experts from companies with various levels of Brand Activism engagement and strategies to understand the brands' opinions on influencing factors for consumer perception. The selection will start with a deliberate selection including a convenience sample, followed by the snowball principle to contact branding experts, via manual outreach via LinkedIn or e-mail contact for the selected experts.

The other sample pool should be consumers with varying levels of interest and different attitudes towards socio-political/brand activism-related issues, such as Black Lives Matter, climate change etc. This pool will be selected via a convenience sample, followed by snowballing, based on current demographic data in order to represent the mainstream opinion on the example of Austria. Furthermore, demographic criteria such as age, starting

form current adulthood with age 18, and gender (see Table 1), occupation, and education

(see Table 2) should be selected from Generation X, Y and Z.

Table 1- Population in Austria by age and sex (Generation X to Y)

Age Groups	Man	Woman
Generation X (43 – 57)	952.984	964.354
Generation Y (28 – 42)	955.459	925.167
Generation Z (18 – 27)	534.079	499.072

Note. Data adopted for the age groups from 18 to 57 from Statista (Bevölkerung Österreich

Alter Geschlecht 2023, n.d.).

The last two seem to be especially engaging in socio-political issues, especially climate

change, as also found by Tyson et al. (2021), therefore here more interview partners will be

invited.

Table 2 - Educational attainment of the population in Austria

Year	Compulsory general education	Apprenticeship	Vocational secondary school	Academy	Higher education
2015	18,50 %	34,70 %	14,90 %	2,50 %	14,20 %
2016	18,30 %	34,40 %	14,80 %	2,40 %	14,70 %
2017	18 %	34,10 %	14,70 %	2,30 %	15,20 %
2018	17,90 %	33,70 %	14,50 %	2,30 %	15,80 %
2019	17,60 %	33,40 %	14,40 %	2,20 %	16,50 %
2020	17,50 %	33 %	14,20 %	2,10 %	17 %

Note. Data adopted from Statista (Österreich - Bildungsstand 2020, n.d.).

Summing up, semi-structured in-depth interviews will be conducted for this research, and purposive sampling will be employed to find adequate interview partners within the area of brand/marketing managers and consumers similar to Öberseder et al., (2013). The interviews were held in the time from February to March 2023 and with these two main sources the outcome of the study should be more robust and therefore also more reliable. Finally, the number of interviews depends on the time when theoretical saturation will be reached.

Chapter 4: Method

The personal interview is the most traditional approach in market and opinion research and has three specific advantages: First, the order of the questions can be precisely determined by the interviewer's instructions, which makes it possible to ask control and follow-up questions. Second, the presence of an interviewer makes it possible to determine exactly who responded to the questions, without having any drop-offs. Finally, the oral interview provides spontaneous answers, if desired, meaning, the person does not have time to think long about their answers (Raab et al., 2018, pp. 114-115). Qualitative research is done, when the question at hand is of explorative nature and there is little information. The focus during data collection and analysis is not necessarily the adherence to standardized method as in quantitative research, but rather openness to new insights findings (Steffen & Doppler, 2019, p. 3).

Fontana and Frey (2000) differentiate between structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews. The benefit of unstructured interviews is that a great breath of data can be collected as it is an open-minded approach that attempts to understand complex behaviour without imposing any kind of categorizations upfront (Fontana & Frey, 2000), making it a fitting explorative method when no explicit moderator or mediators can be found

in literature. Semi-structured interviews have a predetermined list of topics, but the interview is free to vary, making the focus different per participant. They are also flexible, and well suited to answer "why" questions (Miles & Gilbert, 2005, pp. 65-66), which makes them relevant to understand why the moderators and mediators are of importance in a specific context.

Thus, in-depth interviews will be conducted for the two pools with separate guidelines. First, semi-structured interviews will be held with branding experts to understand the brands managers' opinions on influencing factors for consumer perception. Should further questions arise between interviews, the interviewees will be contacted via e-mail to clarify these. These interviews will build the base for the ones with consumers. Secondly, semi-structured interviews with consumers will be conducted with questions based on the branding experts' interview analysis, since they allow an open, yet focused discussion. Should there be any further questions after the interviews, the interviewees will be contacted via e-mail or other types of messengers in this pool as well.

In order to analyse the collected data, the recorded and transcribed in-depth interviews will be coded (Sinkovics et al., 2005). For thematic content analysis, there are three ways of coding: open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 12). In open coding, a method called in-vivo coding can be used to analyze participants' actual spoken words. This coding method emphasizes the words used by participants and can be an initial step in developing more complex or nuanced categories than those developed through axial coding (Manning, 2017, p. 1).

"In vivo coding can be helpful to understand stories or ideas through the actual words of participants, and it has also been noted for its ability to help offer a sense of nuanced meaning that other forms of coding might not allow." (Manning, 2017, pp. 1-2).

On the other hand, in axial coding, related data reveals codes, categories and subcategories creating linkage between the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 13).

Thus, the unstructured in-depth interviews with the branding experts will be analysed though in-vivo coding and the semi-structured consumer in-depth interviews with axial coding. Finally, though axial coding dealing with the central phenomenon, all the categories will be developed (Öberseder et al., 2013, p. 1841) to find propositions than can ideally lead to creating a model.

Chapter 5: Empirical Study

The empirical study chapter will provide details on the study that has been conducted as part of this thesis. That is, the data collection, contents, analysis, and results in a transparent way, so that this study might be reproducible. The whole study procedures are consistent with the work of Öberseder et al. (2013).

Data collection

A total of twenty-one in-depth interviews were conducted with brand/marketing managers and consumers. The decision was made to conduct semi-structured interviews with broad questions to encourage open and focused discussions. The questions were designed to start with general topics and move towards more specific items. Both pools of participants were guaranteed anonymity and data protection rights, as evidenced in the transcripts. By granting anonymity, the author was able to reduce social desirability bias and posturing while increasing the pool of potential respondents (Drumwright & Murphy, 2004, pp. 9–10).

In Austria, a total of five expert and sixteen consumer interviews were conducted, each lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, the interview guidelines can be found within the appendix (see pages A-2 and A-4). Since the majority of Brand Activism research is based on

the United States (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Key et al., 2021 Korschun, 2021; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020), this study expands the research context by investigating non-American consumers' and managers' perception of brand activism. All interviews were recorded with the participants' permission and later transcribed.

Sample

The selection of the participants was done through theoretical sampling and snowballing, which involved specifically choosing managers and consumers who were able to provide valuable insights related to the research problem being addressed in this study (Creswell et al., 2007, pp. 251-252). The sampling strategy employed in this study was driven by theory rather than representativeness. The experts included in the sample were deliberately selected based on their expertise in marketing and branding regardless of the company size, Brand Activism strategy or representativeness. The sample consisted of multinational and local corporations from various industries such as fast-moving consumer goods, IT, mobility, and infrastructure, among others, as indicated in Table 3. These interviews were held in English or German.

Table 3 - Expert sample description

Interview	Industry	Job Title/Expertise	Length of interview	Number of transcript pages
1	Saas	Digital & Brand Specialist	43	10
2	Mobility & Infrastructure	Digital & Brand Specialist	39	7
3	Drinks & Packaging	Channel & Brand Activation Manager	33	9
4	Saas	Head of Growth	40	11
5	New Media and Film Company	Social Media & Marketing Manager	58	13

Note. Length of interview is calculated in minutes (own illustration).

In terms of the consumer respondents, the purposive sampling and convenience was based on consumers' attitudes towards brand activism. The objective of the research was to incorporate individuals with diverse degrees of involvement and distinct stances regarding socio-political concerns like climate change and gender inequality. Furthermore, consumers with different backgrounds were chosen based on demographic characteristics to cover the Austrian mainstream based on the data from Table 1 and Table 2, such as age (ranging from 19 to 56 years old), gender (evenly split), occupation and education (including education levels of 3 apprenticeships, 4 high school diplomas, 7 college-educated and 2 differently educated respondents). The characteristics of the consumer sample are detailed in Table 4. These interviews were all held in German.

Table 4 - Consumer sample description

Interview	Gender	Profession	Age	Education	Length of interview	Number of transcript pages
1	M	Bookkeeper	40	A-Levels	55	10
2	M	Shop Manager	30	Bachelor	52	18
3	M	Student/ Barista	19	A-Levels	42	9
4	F	Medical Assistant	51	Post A-Level Course	44	11
5	M	Controller	27	Bachelor	34	10
6	F	Baker	54	Apprentice-ship	52	11
7	F	Cosmetician	26	Apprentice-ship	32	7
8	F	Psychological Assistant/ Student	23	Bachelor	53	12
9	F	Cook	21	Apprentice-ship	53	10
10	M	Delivery Rider/Student	25	A-Levels	51	12
11	F	HR Manager	32	Master	45	9
12	F	Entrepreneur	39	Doctorate	43	8
13	M	Quality Manager	56	Master	60	11
14	F	Designer	24	Bachelor	50	8
15	M	Engineer	52	Diploma of Engineering	45	x
16	M	Police Officer	27	A-Levels	35	9

Note. Length of interview in calculated in minutes. The descriptions under gender mean M = Male and F = Female (own illustration).

Data analysis

Sinkovics et al. (2005) described a few fundamental steps involved in analysing qualitative data, including coding the data, grouping the codes into larger themes, and interpreting the findings, which will be used for this study. An inductive process of thematic content analysis is used to identify categories and themes (Holsti, 1969). The analysis starts by forming categories that relate to the phenomenon (open coding), then identifying the central phenomenon from the list of categories, and subsequently undertaking axial coding that deals with the central phenomenon (Manning, 2017, p. 1). Finally, a typology of perception factors of Brand Activism is developed based on all the categories.

Chapter 6: Findings and Concluding Remarks

The focus of this analysis was to find factors that influence consumer perception towards brands that participate in socio-political issues. The analysis and interpretation of the data reveal four main factors, each explained by a number of underlying first order categories and subcategories illustrated in Figure 16.

The main factor **relevance (1)** describes the importance of the cause to consumers as most relevant for their perception towards brands taking a stand. Consumers are more likely to pay attention to a brand that aligns with their own values and beliefs. Furthermore, the socio-political topic a brand picks needs to current and relevant for the consumers in the area and fit with consumer expectations towards Brand Activism. Therefore, if a brand engages in a socio-political issue that is not relevant to the consumer's situation, it may not be perceived positively by consumers or might not be perceived at all.

Secondly, **brand reputation (2)** plays a key role in shaping consumer perception towards a brand's involvement in socio-political issues, making the perceived authenticity as

well as the consumer's bias towards the brand crucial. A brand with a positive reputation from the consumer's point of view is more likely to be viewed favourably and trustworthy when engaging in such issues. On the other hand, a brand with a negative reputation or a brand the consumer does not know well, may be met with an elevated level of scepticism, or perceived as exploiting the issue for its own benefit.

Thirdly, **awareness (3)** of a brand's participation in socio-political issues is essential for consumers to form an opinion about it. This includes the media coverage on socio-political issues in combination with the consumer's social media usage, as well as timing to be relevant to create awareness. Furthermore, the consumer's own awareness level, the number of relevant brands taking a stand and consumer expectations towards brands in general seem to be influential as well. Brands must communicate their involvement on relevant channels and in a timely manner. Additionally, the way a brand communicates its participation in an issue can also affect consumer perception. A brand that uses its platform to raise awareness and educate consumers is more likely to be viewed positively if the perceived brand reputation is also positive.

Lastly, **consumer behaviour (4)** is a key factor that influences their perception towards brands that engage in socio-political issues. Consumer search and shopping behaviour have a relevant role on what matters to them and how they process information and can be impacted by the attitude-behaviour-gap in consumer behaviour.

In conclusion, brands that engage in socio-political issues must consider the relevance of the cause to consumers, their reputation in the market, the way they communicate their involvement, and the behaviour of their target audience. By doing so, they can create a positive impact on society while also gaining the support of their customers.

The quotes provided for each factor that follows have been translated to English, for the purpose of making them understandable to the reader, should they not be proficient in German.

Figure 16-Inductive data structure

SUBCATEGORIES   CATEGORIES   CODES/FACTORS

1.1.1) PERSONAL VALUES
1.1.2) DEMOGRAFIC FACTORS
1.1.3) SOCIAL BUBBLES
1.1.4) POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR
1.1) ALIGNMENT OF VALUES

1.2.1) SOCIAL ISSUES
1.2.2) ECONOMIC ISSUES
1.2.3) ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES
1.2) CURRENT SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES

1.3.1) SOLUTIONS FOR SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES — 1.3) CONSUMER EXPECTATIONS TOWARDS BRAND ACTIVISM

1) RELEVANCE

2.1.1) WALK THE TALK
2.1.2) TRANSPARENCY
2.1.3) HONESTY
2.1) AUTHENTICITY

2.2.1) PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE W/BRAND
2.2.2) PEER FEEDBACK
2.2) BIAS

2) BRAND REPUTATION

3.1.1) TRENDS
3.1.2) SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE
3.1.3) OPENNESS TOWARDS TOPICS
3.1) REPETITION/ MEDIA COVERAGE

3.3.1) AWARENESS PENETRATION — 3.3) AWARENESS LEVEL

3.2.1) REACTION TIME ON ISSUES
3.2.2) FIRST-MOVER/FOLLOWER
3.2) TIMING

3.4.1) IMPORTANCE OF BRAND ACTIVISM FOR COMPANY STRATEGY
3.4.2) ISSUES COMPANIES TAKE A STAND ON
3.4) BRANDS TAKING A STAND

3.5.1) EXPECTATIONS TOWARDS BRANDS — 3.5) EXPECTATIONS TOWARDS BRANDS

3) AWARENESS

4.1.1) ACTIVELY LOOKING UP BRANDS
4.1.2) INFORMATION AVAILABILITY
4.1.3) SEARCH BEHAVIOUR
4.1) SEARCH BEHAVIOUR

4.2.1) IMPORTANT THINGS WHEN SHOPPING
4.2.2) RELEVANT BRANDS FOR CONSUMERS
4.2) SHOPPING BEHAVIOUR

4.3.1) HIPOCRISY
4.3.2) HABITS
4.3) ATTITUDE-BEHAVIOUR GAP

4) CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

Note. Data structure based on interview analysis; details available in code system, made in MIRO (own illustration).

Relevance

Informants detail a variety of aspects that make **relevance (1)** a central factor that influences their perception towards brands that take a stand that were here summarized to three categories: **alignment of values (1.1)**, **current socio-political issues (1.2)**, and **consumer expectations towards Brand Activism (1.3)**. Meaning, *"[…] if these concerns are important to them [consumers], I think there will be a first impulse."* (Consumer #8, personal communication, March 13, 2023).

Alignment of Values

The alignment of values plays a relevant role in determining the relevance of a cause to consumers. It means that the relevance of an issue is coherent with the consumer's personal values, the current socio-political issues they are facing and, if the consumer expectations towards Brand Activism are met.

Personal values (1.1.1) are a primary factor that shapes the alignment of values between a brand and its customers. Consumers are more likely to support a brand that aligns with their personal values. For example, if a consumer values environmental sustainability, they are more likely to support a brand that engages in eco-friendly practices. The following statement illustrates this conclusion: *"[…] this has for me already very little importance, therefore very little remains in my memory […]"* (Consumer #14, personal communication, March 19, 2023).

Demographic factors (1.1.2) are another important aspect that influences the alignment of values. Different demographic groups may have different values and beliefs. For instance, younger consumers may be more interested in social justice issues, while older consumers may be more concerned with economic stability. Therefore, brands must consider the demographic factors of their target audience to determine the relevance of a cause to

them. The following statement illustrates an example on how one expert put it: *"[…] but if we take the whole climate topics it's all young people."* (Expert #4, personal communication, February 23, 2023), or how one consumer aged 56 said:

"The security of the future and the feeling in old age of still having everything and being healthy, because it is true that I have a good eleven years to retire, but there is no way of knowing how the pension system will develop." (Consumer #13, personal communication, March 19, 2023).

Social bubbles (1.1.3) are also a relevant factor in determining the alignment of values. Consumers' environments such as the workplace, friends and family can impact their beliefs and values. In this way, social bubbles can reinforce the importance of a cause to a consumer, making it more relevant to them. The following expert statement illustrates this:

"I think it [consumer perception] depends how you are as a person. Define yourself, your values and also to which group of society you belong." (Expert #1, personal communication, February 14, 2023).

Participants noted that there is a growing polarization among consumers based on their **political behaviour (1.1.4)**, which is leading to a sense of fatigue: *"But I do think that there is polarization happening due to also people getting tired of things not getting better."* (Expert #4, personal communication, February 23, 2023).

This seems to be especially true for younger generations who are more politically engaged: *"[…] I think right now generation that is much more active in all social, and political life"* (Expert #1, personal communication, February 14, 2023).

The relevance of a cause to consumers is a critical factor that influences their perception towards brands that take a stand. The alignment of values, including personal values, demographic factors, and social bubbles, plays a key role in determining the importance of a

cause to consumers. By understanding and aligning with these values, brands can create a positive impact on society while also gaining the support and loyalty of their consumers.

Current Socio-Political Issues

Besides the alignment of values, another important factor seems to be the current socio-political issues that consumers see as important. These issues can be broadly categorized into social, economic, and environmental issues - Triple Bottom Line (Henriques & Richardson, 2004, p. 14) - , and each category presents unique challenges and opportunities for brands.

Social Issues (1.2.1) were rather board for the Austrian based sample. Informants draw attention to issues such as inequality, corruption, starvation, war (especially in Ukraine), and polarization are affecting them. Gender inequality and racism are relevant problems, and there is too little emphasis on creating a better society for everyone, resulting in social gaps and unfair distribution of resources. Data security is another concern, and the pandemic has exacerbated existing issues such as mass consumption and egocentrism. The lack of skilled workers has become a significant problem, and social and medical services are struggling to keep up with demand. Finally, the lack of trust in politicians was also voiced. These problems require a joint effort from individuals, organizations, and governments to address them effectively. The following statement illustrates this: *"In general, it seems to me that people look more and more at themselves and no longer care about others."* (Consumer #10, personal communication, March 14, 2023).

Economic Issues (1.2.2) are also prevalent, with dependence on other countries, inflation, and capitalism being important concerns. Dependence on other countries for resources and products, especially the dependence on Russian gas seems to be relevant. Capitalism can also lead to income inequality and exploitation of workers affecting

consumers' perception. Inflation is the most relevant issue in the sample, with rising prices and a decrease in the value of money affecting purchasing power. The following statement illustrates how for example the inflation affects consumers' lives: *"[…] I don't want to worry about how I pay my heating bills or how I pay my electricity or how I pay my rent."* (Consumer #2, personal communication, March 9, 2023).

Environmental Issues (1.2.3) are a crucial concern for almost all informants. Resource exploitation, leading to issues such as water scarcity, energy and climate change are key areas of focus that impact consumers' life and prospects for the future: *"Of course, climate policy, climate crisis. It is also an issue that will come more to us in the coming years, that we will become more aware of."* (Consumer #3, personal communication, March 9, 2023).

By understanding the current socio-political landscape and how it affects consumers' lives and perception, brands can effectively engage in Brand Activism and create meaningful change while also meeting their business objectives.

Consumer Expectations towards Brand Activism

This study found that consumers expect brands to use their reach and influence to educate people on current socio-political issues and to use their profits to help society. This trend highlights the increasing importance of engaging with social issues beyond their products or services, from both expert and consumer point of view:

"Certainly, the industries that have a lot of money and thus make huge profits should, in general, be a little more socially engaged and improve conditions for those who cannot afford it. Maybe that should be the goal of a lot of companies that, of course, make billions with X products, and they should then invest, or use some of the profit to improve social life. Because it is also crucial that when I improve social life, I also improve people's living

conditions, and by improving people's living conditions, people are more enthusiastic and have better opportunities to buy." (Consumer #13, personal communication, March 19, 2023).

The informants also provided **solutions for socio-political issues (1.3.1)** that they deem as necessary. Known people, such as athletes and influencers, should be encouraged to engage more in social issues to use their influence for the greater good. Private individuals can contribute by saving water, reusing plastic bags, educating their children, coming together as a community, and buying second-hand items, for examples. Companies have a vital role to play, as they have a visible presence and a responsibility to lead by example. They can promote sustainable practices, establish a positive company culture, and partner with social initiatives. Politicians also have a crucial role to play in addressing social issues, and there is a need for greater effort and investment in this area. Overall, it will require a collective effort from individuals, organizations, and governments to tackle socio-political issues effectively. The following statement illustrates this conclusion: *"Yes, so private individuals, but also politicians, in my opinion [should do more]. Just everyone should understand that when you make your decision, that it doesn't affects only one, but all actually."* (Consumer #9, personal communication, March 14, 2023).

Brand Reputation

Brand reputation is an important factor that influences how consumers perceive a brand's involvement in socio-political issues. The perceived authenticity and the consumer's bias towards the brand are crucial in shaping consumer perception. The following statement is an example from one of the consumer participants after watching *Nike's Dream Crazy* Campaign: *"[…] Nike, which I don't like as a brand. They don't stand a chance with me. […].*

You [Nike] can't transport anything that I'd like, because I'm just rejecting the brand per se."

(Consumer #1, personal communication, March 8, 2023).

Authenticity

As Moorman (2020) already said, *"brand authenticity"* is relevant for consumer behaviour (Moorman, 2020, p. 389) and thus most likely also for consumer perception, as found in this study. The following statement from an expert participant illustrates this conclusion: *"[…] the credibility to deal with and engage with the issue and to play a real active part in it. In this way only, you seem authentic to the whole customer base."* (Expert #3, personal communication, February 21, 2023).

The concept of **walk the talk (2.1.1)** is essential for brands to build authenticity from the consumer's perspective. Brands that act on their promises and demonstrate a genuine commitment to socio-political issues are more likely to be perceived as authentic and trustworthy. This is because consumers can easily detect when a brand is merely paying lip service to an issue without actually taking meaningful action. For instance, a brand that promotes sustainability but continues to engage in environmentally harmful practices is unlikely to be viewed favourably. On the other hand, a brand that demonstrates its commitment to the issue by implementing eco-friendly policies and practices will be viewed as more authentic and trustworthy. Ultimately, brands that "walk the talk" and act besides preaching are more likely to build a strong connection with their consumers and establish a positive reputation in the marketplace: *"They just have to live it really consistently. It's just important that it remains credible […]."* (Consumer #4, personal communication, March 10, 2023).

Transparency (2.1.2) also plays a crucial role in building brand authenticity, as emphasized by the interview partners. Company-related factors such as brand values,

credibility, size, and budget are essential in establishing trust and authenticity. Companies that are transparent in their business practices and openly communicate their values and beliefs are more likely to be viewed as authentic by consumers. This is because consumers demand transparency and honesty from the brands they support. Ultimately, brands that prioritize transparency and openly communicate their values and actions are more likely to be viewed as authentic and trustworthy, building stronger connections with their consumers in the process. The following statement is an example to illustrate this finding: *"If I search online and find too little, it's suspicious, usually I wouldn't buy."* (Consumer #14, personal communication, March 19, 2023).

Finally, **honesty (2.1.3)** was also mentioned to be relevant in building brand authenticity. Brands that are honest with their consumers about their business practices, products, and services are more likely to be viewed as authentic and trustworthy. Honesty can also help brands establish a deeper connection with their consumers by demonstrating a genuine commitment to their values and beliefs. Conversely, brands that are perceived as dishonest or insincere are likely to lose consumer trust and, ultimately, their loyalty. Therefore, it is essential for brands to prioritize honesty in their communication and business practices to build and maintain a strong sense of authenticity with their consumers:

"[…], if you have the feeling that this is a brand that maybe is selling something completely different now, to find a kind of honest approach and if they do it well and do it with enough care, that you have the feeling that time and interest have really been put into it and also research, then I think it's fine." (Consumer #4, personal communication, March 10, 2023).

Bias

Another factor affecting brand reputation was consumer bias. Mainly this is impacted by what experiences consumers have with brands and what they hear from their peers.

In detail, **previous experience with the brand (2.2.1)** and its history can influence consumer perceptions and biases towards a brand, if, for instance, a consumer has had a negative experience with a brand in the past, they may be more inclined to view the brand negatively and be sceptical about its involvement in socio-political issues. Brand connotations can also impact consumer bias towards a brand, and those with no connotation or a negative connotation are more likely to be met with scepticism or even rejection when engaging in such issues. Therefore, brands need to be mindful of these biases and work towards building a positive brand reputation and association with their values and beliefs. This can be achieved by establishing and communicating a clear set of brand values and acting in line with them consistently. The following statement illustrates this conclusion: *"[…], when I'm not very familiar with brands, and I see that they do something like this, I'm never sure how much you can trust them […]"* (Consumer #8, personal communication, March 13, 2023).

Furthermore, **peer feedback (2.2.2)** also seems to be a key factor impacting consumer bias towards a brand. If a consumer hears positive feedback from, it can reduce their bias towards the brand and create a more favourable perception. On the other hand, negative feedback can increase bias and lead to negative attitudes towards the brand. It is important for brands to be aware of the impact of peer feedback and to actively seek out positive feedback from satisfied customers, as well as address negative feedback to prevent it from spreading. In summary, peer feedback can either reduce or increase consumer bias towards a brand, and it is crucial for brands to be aware of the impact of peer feedback and actively

work to cultivate positive relationships with their customers and influencers. The following statement is an example to highlight this, after watching *Patagonia's Blue Heart* video:

"I can't help but think, that this has to do with the fact that I've already heard positive things about the brand, I was much less suspicious when watching this video and now I would spontaneously classify it as honest." (Consumer #8, personal communication, March 13, 2023).

Awareness

The third factor that affects consumer perception towards a brand's involvement in socio-political issues is awareness. Consumers need to be aware of a brand's participation in such issues to form an opinion about it. This is influenced by media coverage of the issue and the consumer's social media usage. The timing of the brand's participation is also important to create awareness. The consumer's level of awareness, the number of relevant brands taking a stand, and consumer expectations towards brands also play a role.

Repetition/Media Coverage

Repetition, in terms of media coverage and messaging, plays a crucial role in raising awareness about a brand's participation in socio-political issues. How often consumers are faced with the topic, as it might be trending and how they consume social media seem to be influencing their awareness based on this study's sample.

Trends (3.1.1) or the popularity of socio-political issues, according to the interview partners, can be influenced by a brand's or competing brand's involvement in such issues and ultimately affect awareness. The more often consumers hear about a certain issue, the more they engage with it. Trendy topics that are intensively discussed in the media can also contribute to the repetition of a brand's involvement and increase its visibility among

consumers: *"[…], I would say this is a good strategy, if companies yeah, pick up on some topic together in time because that's you can target much more people in terms of awareness."* (Expert #1, personal communication, February 14, 2023).

The interview partners highlighted that their or their consumers' **social media usage (3.1.2)** plays a relevant role in the repetition of topics and ultimately awareness of brands' involvement in socio-political issues. Different channels, such as Out-of-home advertising, packaging, point-of-sale, and social media, can be utilized for brand activism, so the main touchpoints they have anyway with their consumers. The interviewees stated that they utilize a range of social media platforms such as *TikTok, Instagram, YouTube*, and *LinkedIn*. The way they use those channels differs, and it can be for communication, entertainment, or habit. Moreover, it seems like it is less popular to follow brands than be in touch with friends and colleagues. Overall, social media usage is a core factor in creating repetition and awareness for brands that take a stand on socio-political issues.

This study also found that the **openness towards topics (3.1.3)** plays a key role in impacting repetition and ultimately awareness. They noted that many topics are now being questioned more intensely, and people are simply talking more about various issues. This increase in conversation and openness towards different topics has led to more media coverage and repetition, which in turn has increased awareness among consumers. The following statement illustrates this conclusion: *"I believe that there has already been a change of mind, as with me in recent years, but thank God many things are now really being questioned more and that is really a positive change in my opinion."* (Consumer #11, personal communication, March 15, 2023).

Timing

In addition to repetition/media coverage, timing is another important factor that can impact a brand's involvement in socio-political issues. Timing refers to when a brand takes a stand on an issue, and it can play a relevant role in determining the success or failure of their efforts. Being a first mover and acting before competitors can provide a brand with a competitive advantage, as they can be seen as a leader and trendsetter and showing that they care about the issue for real. However, timing can also be a double-edged sword, as taking a stand too early or too late can lead to negative consumer perceptions.

The **reaction time on issues (3.2.1)** is crucial in terms of timing and ultimately awareness. The stage of the issue at hand plays a role, as brands need to be aware of the problem early on in order to react in a timely manner. This is important because consumers are more likely to form opinions and take notice of a brand's actions when they are relevant and timely: *"I think it is very important to do your action in time because maybe one week later society will pick it up."* (Expert #1, personal communication, February 14, 2023).

At the same time, being a **first-mover or follower (3.2.2)**, so in relation to the competitors, can also impact consumer perception. Brands that act too late or do not take action at all risk being perceived as insincere or opportunistic. Therefore, it is important for brands to do their research and be proactive in addressing issues that are important to their target audience. The following statement highlights this: *"And I would rather go for a company that takes the first step in taking action or kind of being first mover. I think that that can also make a difference in how it is perceived."* (Expert #2, personal communication, February 15, 2023).

Awareness Level

The awareness level and specifically the **awareness penetration (3.3.1)** has a central role in consumer perception as consumers seem to be very selective with what information they remember. This sample was aware of a few socio-political actions taken by brands, that can be defined within CSR, and even less within Brand Activism: *"So I think then your awareness level is also different. It depends on your own stand."* (Expert #2, personal communication, February 15, 2023).

Brands Taking a Stand

In order to be made aware of socio-political issues and campaigns, brands need to take a stand. From the interviews it was made rather clear that such campaigns are less spread, which lead to the fact that in this sample, a few examples of actual activist brands were known, but not as many as this author would have expected. For instance, *Tony's, Patagonia, BrewDog, Airbnb* and *Benetton* were known, mostly by the experts.

Currently it would seem that the **importance of Brand Activism for the company strategy (3.4.1)** is not yet as relevant as it might be in the future, the experts say: *"[…] it is just not a common thing right now, but as I said, I think that in maybe, I don't know five to 10 years it's gonna be just completely normal to have that [Brand Activism]."* (Expert #1, personal communication, February 14, 2023).

On the other hand, **the issues companies take a stand on (3.4.2)** already meet the above-mentioned socio-political issued consumers face but are not as widely communicated in Austria it would seem.

Expectations towards Brands

Consumers' **expectations towards brands (3.5.1)** have changed over time and have a notable impact on awareness. The interviewees noted that consumers care more about what

a brand stands for and its involvement in socio-political issues, and this has become more relevant in recent times. The general expectation among consumers is that brands should be socially responsible, and this expectation is increasing. As a result, brands must be aware of these changing expectations and communicate their involvement in relevant issues to create awareness among consumers. The following statement illustrates this conclusion:

"[…] but I think consumers want that [socio-political behaviour by brands], and they are demanding for that, and you slowly receive the change." (Expert #5, personal communication, February 23, 2023).

To be effective, brands must communicate their involvement on relevant channels in a timely manner. How a brand communicates its participation can also affect consumer perception. A brand that uses its platform to raise awareness and educate consumers is viewed more positively if the perceived brand reputation is positive.

Consumer Behaviour

Finally, the attitude and behaviour of consumers play a key role in shaping their perception of brands that participate in socio-political issues. Consumer search and shopping behaviour is crucial in determining what is important to them and how they process information. This can also be affected by the attitude-behaviour gap in consumer behaviour, where the actual behaviour of consumers does not align with their attitude towards a particular issue or brand.

Search Behaviour

In today's digital age, consumers have access to an abundance of information about products and brands. This has led to changes in consumer search behaviour, clearly shown within this sample, making it an important factor in how they perceive brands. This chapter

will explore how actively looking up brands, information availability, and search behaviour impact consumer behaviour and ultimately consumer perception towards brands that engage in socio-political issues.

The way consumers **actively looking up brands (4.1.1)** online can have an impact on their search behaviour. The experts discussed how people are becoming more conscious about their choices and are starting to research brands more carefully. However, in the consumer sample provided, it appeared that only a small number of people were actively looking into brands, and rather receive the information passively via the media.

The **availability of information (4.1.2)** can also greatly impact a consumer's search behaviour when looking for brands. With easy access to various channels and sources, consumers are becoming more informed about different topics, including brands. However, the extent to which they actively investigate brands may differ among different generations. The following statement illustrates this:

"[…] in my view, that they have more access to the different channels. So, as we said before, sometimes through social media, sometimes through all the media, what you notice on the street, but generally speaking also more about it [brands and politics]." (Expert #3, personal communication, February 21, 2023).

Finally, the **search behaviour (4.1.3)** as a standalone factor also has relevancy. It is influenced by various factors, such as the consumer's intent and the background information they want to know about a product or brand before making a purchase: *"They [consumers] don't just buy any products without knowing the background of most things. There are impulse purchases, of course. But they are much more concerned with the market and with the companies, […]."* (Expert #3, personal communication, February 21, 2023).

Shopping Behaviour

Shopping behaviour is a crucial factor that impacts consumer perception and decision-making. Two key elements that influence shopping behaviour are the important things that consumers consider when shopping and the relevant brands that appeal to them. Understanding how these factors shape shopping behaviour is essential for brands to meet the changing needs and preferences of consumers.

Several factors impact the shopping behaviour, including the **things that are important when shopping (4.2.1)** to consumers including price, convenience, sustainability (such as organic products), quality, design, and special offers. These factors can influence consumers' purchasing decisions and may vary in importance depending on the individual and the product they are shopping for. An example statement to highlight this was:

"[…], the price is the biggest factor. […]. And I also look at the packaging. So, the packaging has to be somehow appealing, something that is not so nicely packaged, I don't notice it at all […]. For example, with certain products, I look at the Fair-Trade sign, because I've read certain things, with the cocoa farmers or where coffee is made, that's critical." (Consumer #5, personal communication, March 10, 2023).

The **relevant brands for consumers (4.2.1)** during shopping is an important factor for consumers. Some brands, like *Under Armour, New Balance, Demeter, Boden*, and *Freitag*, are perceived positively by consumers due to their good value for money and appealing designs. On the other hand, brands like *Unilever, CocaCola, Hollister, Fashion Nova, Shein*, and *Primark* are seen negatively by some consumers, who associate them with poor quality, and either too high or too low prices, and negative corporate practices. For some consumers, the brand's reputation and values play a crucial role in their decision-making process when shopping. The following statement shows what one consumer stated they did not like about a brand: *"[…]*

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very quickly the corresponding places of production, the associated journey, the workers have to work under really absolutely intolerable, undignified conditions." (Consumer #11, personal communication, March 15, 2023).

Attitude-Behaviour-Gap

The attitude-behaviour gap refers to the difference between what people say they will do and what they actually do. This gap can be influenced by a variety of factors, including hypocrisy and habits. Hypocrisy occurs when there is a disconnect between what people believe and how they behave. Habits, on the other hand, can be difficult to change even if people have good intentions. Both of these factors can impact how people act in relation to their attitudes and values.

The interview partners showed the existence of **hypocrisy (4.3.1)** in their behaviour, where they know certain actions or choices are not aligned with their values or beliefs but still engage in them due to convenience, price, or personal preference. This attitude-behaviour gap can impact their shopping choices and brand loyalty, as they may choose brands that do not align with their values due to factors such as price or design:

"Best example of meatloaf made out of finely-ground liver and other meat (Leberkäse). I like to eat meatloaf and I know it's just not good that it's not the right thing, but that it's pretty good in terms of price and that it tastes so good to me." (Consumer #5, personal communication, March 10, 2023).

In this regard, **habits (4.3.2)** play an important role in the attitude-behaviour gap. People tend to be creatures of habit, and it can be challenging to break away from familiar routines. However, the experts noted that consumers are becoming more selective in their habits, making a conscious effort to prioritize sustainability and other values when making purchasing decisions, which was also visible in some consumers during the interviews.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the very beginning of this study, the key objective for is to define propositions or factors that influence consumers' perception, while enhancing current models ones from similar areas with consumer perceptions of the firm's motive to engage in socio-political issues (Vlachos et al., 2009, p. 171), consumer-brand relationship (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 17) and consumer interests (Öberseder et al., 2013, p. 1841), which aligns with the findings that follow:

In conclusion, consumers' perception is influenced by their personal values, demographic factors, social bubbles, and political behaviour, as well as their search and shopping behaviour.

The relevance of the issue is the main factor to influence consumer perception, also found by Öberseder et al. (2011) in relation to CSR (Öberseder et al., 2011, p. 453). This means the importance of the issue and the personal concern have a relevant impact on how consumers perceive the Brand Activism action a brand takes.

Brand reputation is another key factor, and authenticity, transparency, and honesty are crucial in building and maintaining a positive image. Similar to the perception of a company's CSR and reputation, this is also true for consumer perception in relation to Brand Activism, that corporate hypocrisy can deeply affect consumer scepticism (Arli et al., 2019, p. 706).

Awareness is also important, and timing, repetition, and media coverage are essential in raising awareness, along with a brand's willingness to take a stand on relevant issues. However, a brand's authority to participate in certain issues needs to be earned, in order for consumers to perceive their statements as relevant. Interestingly, as Moorman (2020) also highlights, the brand authority to participate in some issues, needs to be earned (Moorman, 2020, p. 390) in order for consumers to perceive their statements as relevant.

Although consumers show a growing interest in contemporary socio-political matters and the involvement of companies in them, their top priorities when making purchasing decisions still revolve around price, quality, and convenience. While consumers express willingness to make ethical purchases, the reality is that responsible corporate behaviour is not the dominant factor, which makes consumer behaviour another important factor.

Brands need to be aware of these factors and offer solutions that align with consumer expectations towards Brand Activism in order to stay competitive.

Chapter 7: Limitations and Future Research

In order to address the limitations of the present study, future research can be conducted in this field. One limitation is the small sample size and narrow geographical focus as the present study was conducted in Austria specifically in Graz only, the study could have already different findings, were it conducted in Vienna. A similar study can be conducted in a US setting, where Brand Activism is seen more frequent, to compare the results and give companies in Europe further input for their own business strategies. Especially, since the popularity of social media channels (e.g., Twitter) and some socio-political issues and movements (e.g., Black Lives Matter) are different between these two western societies. The same approach is valid for eastern societies or mor graphically southern ones.

Furthermore, the major concern with qualitative data is its limited generalizability. To confirm the identified factors of consumer perception towards brands engaged in brand activism, a large-scale qualitative study is necessary on both corporate and consumer levels. Developing a measurement tool is also crucial to empirically test these factors. Additionally, it would be worthwhile to explore other stakeholders' perception of brand activism, such as employees, and compare their findings with those of the corporate and consumer

perspectives. Cross-cultural research, particularly a comparison between the US and Europe where Brand Activism may be perceived differently, could be a promising avenue for further investigation.

Finally, researchers can use the corporate typology and consumer perceptions from this study to track the development of Brand Activism over time. The study highlights that Brand Activism is viewed as a significant marketing strategy by brand and marketing managers, and the variations in perception can advance the field and promote more targeted and thoughtful responses to stakeholder needs.

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Back matter

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Expert Interview Guideline

1. Introductive Question

   a. Can you tell me about you (your position) and the company/organization you work for? e.g. what does your company do and what are the values?

2. Can you describe your understanding of Brand Activism and the reasons why companies might engage or not engage in it?

   a. How do you personally connect to Brand Activism?

3. What do you think are currently relevant socio-political issues in general?

   a. What do you think are currently relevant socio-political issues that companies do engage in?

   b. How come, that these are currently relevant from your perspective?

   c. Any reasons why these are (being made) more relevant by consumers or firms?

4. In your opinion, does Brand Activism play a role in a firms' overall strategy?

   a. How so?

   b. What factors influence the authenticity of such actions?

Depending on the answer, follow up:

   i. Does the topic brands pick up need to be related to their business?

   ii. How can it feel authentic, if not related to business?

   iii. What factors, do you think, influence consumers' perceptions of motives for engaging in socio-political issues?

   c. How does it impact consumers after having perceived the action?

5. Do you believe consumers perceive brands that participate in socio-political issues (at all)? (Awareness level)

   a. How do they perceive such brands?

6. What factors do you think influence consumer perception towards brands involved in socio-political activism?

    a. Do you have any ideas why?

Depending on the answer, follow up:

        i. Is there any difference between customers and non-customers?

        ii. What kind of actions do you think consumer perceive more?

        iii. Are there any factors or situations when consumers perceive actions after they happened stronger?

        iv. How "big" does and action need to be in order to be perceived positively/authentic by consumers? Is a posting enough, or do brands need to go as far as protesting on the streets?

        v. Do you think it is relevant, that multiple brands act on the same issue in order for consumers to perceive it as relevant? → Black Lives Matter example

        vi. How do perceived financial performance and perceived quality of ethics statements, influence perceived CSA?

    b. Do you believe that consumers' political polarization might have increased in recent years? And why so?

7. Do you think consumer expectations towards brands have changed?

Depending on the answer, follow up:

    a. Do think it is relevant for consumers that brands engage in socio-political issues?

    b. Do you think consumers actively look up companies' actions and stay informed about a brand's activism activities and initiatives?

      c. In your experience, are companies under pressure to take a stand on socio-political issues?

      d. How have they responded?

      e. What are the reasons behind the response besides the pressure from consumers?

8. Can you discuss any examples of successful or unsuccessful Brand Activism campaigns that you are aware of? Any that you did?

      a. Do you see any trends in the channels that are used?

      b. Do you have any ideas why?

9. Do you think there is any missing question on the topic?

      a. What else is relevant in this regard?

      b. What else comes to your mind on Brand Activism and consumer perception?

10. Can you recommend me any other Brand Expert or Expert on the topic I should talk to?

Consumer Interview Guidelines

Vielen Dank, dass Sie mir dieses Interview geben, ich freue mich auf das Gespräch, das etwa 45 Minuten dauern wird. (Info zu Recording und Transkript)

Ich schreibe meine Masterarbeit zum Thema Marken und Wahrnehmung von Verbraucher*innen. Mehr würde ich gar nicht zu dem Thema sagen, damit wir ein möglichst unbeeinflusstes Gespräch führen können, wichtig ist nur, dass Sie so ehrlich wie möglich die Fragen beantworten, außer mir wird keiner wissen, dass das Ihre Meinung ist.

0) Screening Details

- Wie alt sind Sie?

- Was ist Ihr höchster Bildungsgrad?

- Was machen Sie beruflich?

- Verwenden Sie soziale Medien?

  - Wenn nein, warum nicht?

  - Wenn ja, welche? Zu welchem Zweck?

  - Folgen Sie auch Marken auf sozialen Medien?

I) Marken & Faktoren zur Präferenzbildung

- Können Sie mir Marken nenne, die Sie persönlich gerne verwenden. Vielleicht haben Sie ja sogar Lieblingsmarken…?

  - Warum diese?

- Welche Marken mögen Sie nicht gerne?

  - Warum?

- Worauf schauen Sie beim Einkaufen bzw. was ist Ihnen beim Kauf eines Produktes besonderes wichtig? Sie können gerne mit Bsp. wie etwa Kleidung oder Lebensmitteln das im Detail beantworten.

II) Werte, Sozialpolitische Probleme

- Was ist Ihnen im Leben wichtig? (zB. Gesundheit, Wohlstand, Klima)

- Was läuft zurzeit schief auf dieser Welt und in unserer Gesellschaft? Bzw. was sind aus Ihrer Sicht gerade relevante sozialpolitische Probleme? (zB. Klima, Gleichberechtigung, Krieg, Hunger etc.)

- Wofür sollte man sich mehr engagieren?

  - Wer sollte sich engagieren? (zB. Politik, Unternehmen, Privatpersonen, Organisationen)

  - Wie sollte man sich mehr engagieren?

III) Markenaktivitäten Wahrnehmung

- Gibt es Unternehmen, die sich hier (genannte Probleme) einsetzen?

    o Wenn ja, welche und wofür genau?

    o Wie setzen sich diese ein?

    o Woher wissen Sie das?

- Kennen Sie die Marke Nike?

- Kennen Sie diese Kampagne? (Beispiel: NIKE - Dream Crazy Video)

- Wie finden Sie diese Kampagne?

- Kennen Sie andere ähnliche Kampagnen von Nike?

- Was denken Sie darüber, dass Nike sich für sich gegen soziale Ungerechtigkeiten, wie hier etwa Rassismus, ausspricht?

    o Finden Sie es ehrlich?

    o Passt das zu Nike? Warum ja/nein?

- Kennen Sie die Marke Patagonia?

- Kennen Sie diese Kampagne? (Beispiel: PATAGONIA - Blue Heart Video)

- Kennen Sie andere ähnliche Kampagnen von Patagonia?

- Was denken Sie darüber, dass Patagonia sich für sich gegen für Umweltschutz, wie hier etwa für die Gefährdung wild lebender Flüsse im Balkan, ausspricht?

    o Finden Sie es ehrlich?

    o Passt das zu Patagonia? Warum ja/nein?

- Kennen Sie die Marke Gillette?

- Kennen Sie diese Kampagne? (Beispiel: GILLETTE - The best a man can be Video)

- Wie finden Sie diese Kampagne?

- Kennen Sie andere ähnliche Kampagnen von Gillette?

- Was denken Sie darüber, dass Gillette sich für sich gegen Sexismus, ausspricht?

  - Finden Sie es ehrlich?

  - Passt das zu Gillette? Warum ja/nein?

- Denken Sie, dass Konsument*innen sich beim Kauf nun eher für Gillette/Nike/Patagonia entscheiden?

  - Wenn ja, warum?

  - Wenn nein, warum nicht?

- Wie finden Sie es, wenn Marken sich zu solchen Themen generell äußern?

  - Sollten sie es überhaupt?

- Passt das Thema, zu dem sich ein Unternehmen ausspricht, zu ihren Produkten/ zur Branche? (z.B. Patagonia als Outdoor Marke setzt sich für Umweltschutz ein)

  - Sollte es das, um authentisch zu sein für Sie?

- Kennen Sie andere Marken, die sich für etwas einsetzen?

  - Wie sieht es bei Ihren Lieblingsmarken vom Anfang unseres Gespräches aus? Sind Ihnen da Aktionen aufgefallen?

- Gibt es sonst noch etwas, dass Sie zu Markenaktivismus sagen möchten?

Danke für Ihre Zeit!