SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT

When Business Becomes Politics

A Study of Consumers' Perceptions and Responses to Brand Activism

By

Cecilie Broberg & Ifigenia Doshoris

May 2020

Master's Programme in International Marketing and Brand Management

Supervisor: Veronika Tarnovskaya
Examiner: Javier Cenamor

Abstract

Title: When Business Becomes Politics: A Study of Consumers' Perceptions and Responses to Brand Activism

Date of the Seminar: 4th June 2020

Course: BUSN39 Degree Project in Global Marketing

Authors: Cecilie Broberg & Ifigenia Doshoris

Supervisor: Veronika Tarnovskaya

Key Words: Brand Activism, Consumer Activism, Brand Meaning, KLM, SAS

Thesis purpose: The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of consumers' perceptions of the phenomenon of brand activism, and how they respond to it.

Theoretical perspective: For the theoretical foundation we drew upon the literature streams within brand activism, consumer activism and brand meaning. Based on these three literature streams we identified relevant key concepts and constructed a framework.

Methodology/empirical data: This study was conducted with a foundation of a relativism and social constructionism worldview. The research design for this study is qualitative, and adopts an abductive approach. This study begins in the existing knowledge, but further adapts by inducing the newly generated knowledge to a new conceptual framework from consumers' perspective. We conducted eleven semi-structured interviews aided by two advertisements conveying brand activism, in order to stimulate perceptions and responses.

Findings/conclusion: Findings in this study imply brands are not expected to engage in brand activism. However, when brands do engage in brand activism, respondents perceive it as something positive. The respondents provided inconclusive responses in relation to why it was seen as positive, thus highlighting the complexity of the phenomenon. The findings support five key concepts that affect how respondents formed perceptions: (1) self-identity, (2) brand-cause fit, (3) responsibility, (4) authenticity and (5) emotions. All key concepts should be considered as an interactive process, as they complement and enhance each other. In order for these concepts to stimulate responses among respondents, brands need to prove themselves concrete and consistent over time.

Practical implication: This study confirmed that, when brand activism is conducted in the right way, it will positively influence consumers' perception. Thereby, this provides insight for marketing practitioners and managers who want to enhance their understanding of what to consider in order to implement successful environmental and social brand activism.

Acknowledgements

This thesis was written during the spring semester of 2020 as the final degree project of the Master of Science in International Marketing and Brand Management at the Lund University School of Economics and Management. We want to use this opportunity to express appreciation and gratitude to those in the program whom we came to share a special time in life with, that sadly was cut way too short due to the outbreak of Covid-19. We further want to thank all those who supported us throughout the process of this master's thesis, providing us with valuable guidance, motivation, feedback and advice.

We would especially like to thank our supervisor Veronika Tarnovskaya for her thorough feedback and advice. She contributed with many great perspectives that were particularly relevant to our study, given her background as a researcher.

Additionally, we would like to thank all who participated in the research for this study. Without these valuable inputs for our qualitative research, we would not have been able to make the contributions we hand in today. Lastly, we want to thank our families and friends for being there under a very demanding and challenging process. With this project marking the end at Lund University, we look forward to the next chapter in life.

Lund, Sweden, May 29th 2020

Cecilie Broberg

Ifigenia Doshoris

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

1 Introduction

The first chapter provides background information on both brand activism and the airline industry, establishing context for this study. Afterwards, the problematisation, research gap, and research aims are argued. Lastly, the thesis outline provides an overview of the structure of this thesis.

1.1 Background

Traditionally, brands have conducted marketing by communicating and displaying their performance as a means to position themselves among the consumers. As a consequence of the competitive marketing environment, consumers are having difficulties differentiating between brands, meaning positioning is simply no longer enough (Sarkar & Kottler, 2018). Furthermore, today's consumers live in a world facing severe problems - climate change, overpopulation, financial crises (Jackson, 2018). Hence, the driving force behind consumers have become more value driven. Consumers demand companies to not only conduct business as usual, but also give back to the community they serve (Sarkar & Kottler, 2018).

Consequently, companies have begun to engage in brand activism to show their concern for the planet's and society's well-being to differentiate themselves from their competitors, while subsequently attracting more value-driven consumers. Brand activism is about reinforcing business efforts to promote, obstruct or direct social, political, economic and environmental reforms by taking a stance (Sarkar & Kottler, 2018). Companies are now able to express their standpoint on certain issues, to attract consumers holding similar values. This takes place when a company or brand makes a public statement, lobbies for a cause, donates money to a specific cause, or conducts a cause-related statement through their marketing communications (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019).

Given that brand activism is value-driven and thus appeals to the increasingly more value-driven consumers, one generation stands out: the millennials. This generation is born between 1981 and 2000 (Deloitte, 2018). Millennials represent the most significant buying power, and it is also claimed they influence their parent's consumption habits (Fromm & Garton, 2013, cited in Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019), indicating that their opinions are highly influential in today's society. Besides, millennials are the generation that will soon dominate the working forces, indicating their spending power is predicted to grow throughout the upcoming years (Deloitte, 2018). Millennials all tend to have one common characteristic, which is; highly valuing ethically driven corporations, and therefore choose brands which they can align with their social values (BCG, 2012; Deloitte, 2018; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019).

According to Sarkar and Kottler (2018) and Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) millennials feel morally obligated to make the world a better place and require brands to give back to the society they are harming. Therefore, millennials expect companies to go beyond their financial interest (Sarkar & Kottler, 2018). Besides, millennials have higher expectations and value honesty, transparency and sincerity in marketing and communications, as they tend to be more sceptical than previous generations (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). However, despite their sceptical characteristics, BCD (2012) writes in their report that millennials also tend to be optimistic and believe that brands can bring a global change and bring justice to this world. Which arguably can be why many of the millennials expect brands to engage in brand activism and advocating an issue the company stands for.

Moreover, because millennials are value driven, they do not hesitate to express their means of thorough consumption (BCG, 2012). Consequently, millennials tend to back their shopping habit based on brands that are aligned with their core values, and avoid those that do not (BCG, 2012), indicating that millennials are active participants in political consumerism. In other words, millennials are inclined to buycott brands they feel reflect their own values and beliefs, and oppositely boycott brands that go against their values and beliefs (Neilson, 2010).

1.1.1 Boarding Brand Activism

Airlines have been very traditional in their marketing in the past, but given they have had to adjust to the modern world of technology, they slowly turned away from marketing luxurious on-board experiences, to instead capture fast and cheap to accommodate consumers (Altexsoft, 2020). Thus, marketing became about promoting prices more than fulfilling the brand promise, and creating meaningful experiences for the consumer (Deloitte, 2016). As a result, it is less surprising that consumers have a hard time separating airlines from each other, and most of them do not consider themselves loyal to any specific airlines, but instead choose airlines primarily based on price (Jeng, 2016; Chamberlain, 2020). Furthermore, a relatively recent study by Brandigo has highlighted that only a very small minority of consumers feels as valued customers by airlines (Hartman, 2017). Similarly, Deloitte (2016) reports despite airlines making great strides to improve the passenger experience, consumers are left looking for more. Simultaneously, within recent years airlines have begun to make new efforts into appealing to consumers, by advocating their values in the hopes of establishing a connection and attracting consumers; will brand activism redefine how the industry conducts marketing?

In 2018 global tourism set a record with 1.4 billion international tourist arrivals, according to the UNWTO (Blackhall, 2019). Tourism is playing an increasingly important role in the global economy and accounted for two percent of the total global GDP in 2018. The airline industry is still one of the most popular modes of transportation, and thus remains one of the most important and necessary industries (Blackhall, 2019). However, the airline industry is complex, given its competitive environment and subjectivity to changes (Stone, 2019) as the industry is highly influenced by the social, economic and political landscape. Meanwhile, consumers are becoming more aware of their own influence through consumption, which has led them to make more ethical and sustainable purchases.

Mayday

In 2018 the term "flight shaming" rooted itself, with suspected correlation to climate activist Greta Thunberg, who was receiving world-wide media attention (The Guardian, 2020). The term quickly spread throughout Europe, and although the reasons were deemed inconclusive, a recent survey in Germany, France and the UK found that 21 percent of the respondents had cut back on their travels with airplanes (The Guardian, 2020). As a result of the many challenges, the airline industry is facing an uncertain future. Firstly, the fierce competition for low-price tickets combined with increasing oil prices, has already sent many airlines to the grave. In 2019 five major airlines went bankrupt in Europe, including WOW air, Aigle Azur, Adria Air and famously Thomas Cook Airlines (Beresnevicius, 2019). Secondly, the airline industry has grown steadily about five percent globally each year but slowed down to four percent in 2019 – the lowest ever since the financial crisis (Martin, 2020). It is widely postulated having to do with the trend of living more sustainable, and consumers thereby making more sustainable choices, thus, choosing other modes of transportation for smaller journeys. Thirdly, the airline industry is currently facing its biggest challenge yet, in the face of the global pandemic covid-19. The impacts of the pandemic are expected to extend beyond this crisis, and The International Air Transport Association (Iata) has urged for economic support by governments. However, some are arguing for this to be the chance to redefine the airline industry; environmental campaigners have argued that airlines should only be helped through this crisis, if they have realistic intentions to tackle the climate emergency (Jolly, 2020).

Even in darkness there is light

While it has been established the airline, industry is facing many severe challenges, it has likewise been established to be a sizable market that will not stop being relevant in the future. It is most likely going to be redefined given the current circumstances, and only the strongest will survive - but who will that be? The airline industry holds a particular interest for this study, given the challenges they are facing may be able to be partially turned around with brand activism. Brand activism appeals to the more value-driven consumers (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore & Hill, 2006; Sarkar & Kottler, 2018; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019), thus making it interesting to find out if consumers will perceive airline brands differently if airlines engage in taking stances, and how consumers respond to it.

1.2 Problematisation

The phenomenon of brand activism has gained attention both in academia and in the marketing environment. According to several authors, engaging in brand activism has become of greater importance to accommodate consumers expectations due to how contemporary society is constructed (Wienzimmer & Esken, 2016; Mandfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Sarkar & Kottler, 2018). However, the research on the topic is limited, and most studies in the field have mainly been conducted from a brand management perspective, and primarily concerns the importance of companies engaging in brand activism (Sarkar & Kottler, 2018).

Research within brand activism has indicated that when done successfully, it can be a very profitable and secure long-term competitive advantage (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore & Hill, 2006). Therefore, brand activism is appealing to many companies and brands, seeking to withhold and attract consumers. The literature has emphasised consumers expect brands to engage in societal issues and staying neutral is not an option in the eyes of the consumers (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt 2019; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). However, a brand or company should carefully consider whether or not to engage in brand activism, as research has indicated that taking a stance solely for profitable purposes might be perceived as insincere, and thus lead to a profound backlash on the company and harm its reputation (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore & Hill, 2006; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). As a result, some authors like Sobande (2019) argue brand activism is merely a marketing tool to deceive consumers by woke- or greenwashing them, and therefore postulates that brands should not take part in it.

As highlighted above, brand activism has mostly been conducted from a brand management perspective, meaning that less emphasis has been placed on the consumer perspective. In fact, to our knowledge, only one study concerning how consumers perceive brand activism has been identified. The findings of this study conducted by Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) stresses that consumers prefer to support brands that aid a good cause or purpose and oppose brands if they have behaved unethically. However, this study was conducted quantitatively, meaning that a deeper understanding of what shapes consumers perceptions of brand activism is lacking.

When it comes to research from consumers' perspective within the context of consumer activism, especially the anti-branding movements and political consumerism has been extensively researched, as a result of brands growing, and consumers becoming more aware of the power of their consumption. Studies on anti-branding movements have revolved around consumers' responses when brands violate consumers' norms or behave in an unethical manner, manifesting in brand hate (Romani et al., 2015) and resistance towards the contemporary market forces (Holt, 2002; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Given aforementioned, extensive research has been conducted on political consumerism concerning consumers' motives for boycotting and buycotting (Klein, Smith, John, 2004; Neilson, 2010; Baek 2010). Taking aforementioned into consideration, while there is research on consumer movements, there is a lack of knowledge and understanding concerning both perception and consumer movements within brand activism. As a result, there is no academic knowledge on what makes consumers perceive and respond both positively and negatively to brand activism.

1.3 Research Purpose

In continuation of above mentioned, the aim of this study is to find out how consumers perceive the phenomenon of brand activism, and how they respond to it. We seek to gain a deeper understanding of how these perceptions are formed, and ultimately how they affect how consumers respond to brand activism, thus leading to the following research question:

How do consumers perceive brand activism and how do they respond to it?

In order to find out how consumers perceive and respond to brand activism, we seek to uncover how consumers perceive brands taking on institutional roles, and thus become more active in shaping society, by actively taking stances on societal issues. We further aim to establish what elements shape a positive or negative perception of brand activism, to determine how that interacts with their responses, and thus, what makes brand activism successful, and what makes it a failure. In order to reach these aims and objectives, we are going to stimulate perceptions and responses through two advertisements displaying different types of brand activism, a social and environmental stance, to provide context. We are going to combine the stimulation with a theoretical foundation in existing literature streams within; cause-related marketing, corporate social responsibility and brand activism, consumer activism, as well as brand meaning. By combining the research with stimulation and literature, we are going to be able to identify what existing knowledge is applicable to our study, while at the same time creating new knowledge and contributions through conceptual frameworks.

Drawing upon the aforementioned research background, we argue this study to be relevant for both brands, consumers and society. As market forces are shifting in accordance with contemporary society, and thus being driven by value, consumers have changed behaviour, forcing brands to adapt and overcome. Hence, it is imperative for brands to understand what creates value for consumers, for them to be able to adapt to their values and needs. If brands have no insights and understanding of aforementioned, they risk being opposed by consumers. Contrarily, if they have access to these insights and understanding, they may be able to attract and attain consumers. Furthermore, as the existing literature indicates, consumers have become more sustainable and ethically aware, this has begun being reflected in how they choose to consume. Therefore, if brand activism creates value aligned with the consumers set of values, consumers would get more value knowing their consumption supported what they consider to be a good cause. Finally, society is argued to benefit, as brand activism ultimately is about making a contribution to an issue by taking a stance, meaning that consumers' overall understanding of societal issues would be enhanced and made more tangible.

1.4 Outline of the Thesis

This study is divided into six main chapters. In this first introductory chapter, we present an overview of the background to enable the reader to understand the phenomenon and its context. Furthermore, the relevance of the study, along with the research aim and objectives, are further outlined. Further elaborations of our literature review will be presented in the next chapter. The second chapter is finalised by presenting a summary of the literature review and outlining the key concepts. In the third chapter we present the methodological choices of this study. The chapter begins by introducing the research philosophy and research approach, which will guide the reader throughout the study. This will be followed by research design, data collection method, trustworthiness and finally an outline of the ethical considerations. In the fourth chapter, the empirical findings of the data collections are highlighted. Hereafter chapter five will consist of findings in the empirical material, and are then discussed and compared to the theories and concepts presented in the second chapter. Finally, in the sixth chapter a concluding summary with our main findings are presented, followed by an outline of theoretical contributions and managerial implications. The sixth chapter and the whole study is wrapped by a presentation of the study limitation and suggestion for further research.

2 Literature Review

In the following chapter a presentation of the existing literature within the three following literature streams will be presented, brand activism, consumer activism and brand meaning. Aforementioned streams will make out the theoretical foundation for this paper which will be further presented in the empirical section. Finally, a summary of the literature review will be presented, consisting of the main concepts from each literature stream.

2.1 The rise of brand activism

This study aims to explain how brand activism is perceived by the consumer. In order to do this, one has to understand what brand activism is and how it became a fundamental part of brand communication. According to Sarkar and Kottler (2018) brand activism emerged from such marketing and corporate- driven initiatives as cause-related marketing and corporate social responsibility. Therefore, one has to be familiar with cause-related marketing and corporate social responsibility in order to comprehend the foundation of brand activism. In the following section, these two concepts will be presented. After that, brand activism is covered.

2.1.1 Cause-Related Marketing

The first face towards brand activism is cause-related marketing (Sarkar & Kottler, 2018). A widely cited and used definition of cause-related marketing is established by Varadarjan and Menon. They define it as:

> *[...] "the process of formulating and implementing marketing activities that are characterized by an offer from the firm to contribute a specified amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-producing exchanges that satisfy organizational and individual objectives" (Varadarjan and Menon 1988, p. 60).*

In other words, cause-related marketing occurs when a company collaborates with a non-profit organisation (NGO) or a social cause and donates money to the cause every time consumers makes a purchase (Chang & Chu, 2019). An example of a cause-related marketing campaign has been executed between Pampers and UNICEF. This collaboration between the company and NGO was called 'one package = one vaccine', meaning every time a consumer purchased one package of diapers, Pampers provided one vaccine to a child in need (UNICEF, 2014). Such a campaign is an example of cause-related marketing, which created shared value for the company and cause. However, cause-related marketing can additionally create value for the consumer, as s(he) could potentially feel that it added value to their purchase, therefore creating a win-win-win scenario.

Consequently, the marketing environment has become more competitive, companies need to position themselves among competitors as a means of differentiation. Engaging in cause-related marketing has therefore become an element of differentiation, especially across categories where price and quality are similar (Robert & Fill, 2012). Being perceived as a credible and responsible corporation and being able to present a wider social engagement, and not simply generating profit, has therefore enabled many organisations obtain better market position (Robert & Fill, 2012). Consumers have a tendency to reward firms that give back to society by paying more for their products (Baek et al., 2017). This especially seems to be the case among millennials, empirical evidence has indicated that up to 50 percent of them are willing to pay more for a product or service if it supports a good cause (Baek et al., 2017).

Not only are consumers willing to pay more, existing literature has proven that when a cause-related marketing collaboration is well implemented, has it resulted in an increase of; brand perception (Robert & Fill, 2012) positive attitude (Robinson, Irmak & Jayachandran, 2012), brand image (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006), and purchase intentions (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006; Robinson, Irmak & Jayachandran, 2012; Robert & Fill, 2012; Baek et al., 2017; Das, McNeil, Pouder, Daly, 2020). Because cause-related marketing has in many cases proven to have a positive impact on a company's performance, is this according to Robinson, Irmak and Jayachandran (2012) a strong motivational factor to partake in cause-related marketing initiatives. However, in order for a cause-related marketing initiative to be successful and have a positive impact on a company's performance, has previous research suggested that it is essential that the brand-cause fit is aligned (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006).

2.1.1.1. Brand-cause fit

Brand-cause fit refers to the extent of which the congruence between the brand and the cause fits (Das et al., 2020). When the brand and cause are congruent, the fit tends to be high, although when the fit is low, the brand and the cause is said to be incongruent. Previous research has indicated when the brand-cause fit is high it leads to positive attitudes towards the cause-related marketing initiative, whereas when low, it can convey unfavourable attitudes towards the initiative and brand (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006; Robinson, Irmak & Jayachandran, 2012). Moreover, has empirical evidence shown when the cause-related marketing is congruent with the cause, a close brand-cause fit affects purchase intention, and establishes more favourable perceptions towards the brand (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). Together these studies have indicated that the brand-cause fit plays an important role because the cause-related marketing is dependent on the brand-cause fit congruence.

Nevertheless, this interpretation contradicts with Das et al. (2020) study, which suggests that the cause-related fit is insignificant towards the cause-related marketing. Whereas, Robinson, Irmak and Jayachandran (2012) findings indicate when the perceived fit is low, providing a choice to the consumer on which cause to support improves the perception and generates more favourable responsiveness. Yet, their study additionally showed when the company chose the cause when there was established a high cause-brand fit, and consumer responses were more positively received. Moreover, Baek et al. (2017) findings highlighted that consumers are more inclined to perceive cause-related marketing more positively when the cause is relevant to their own life experiences and when consumers had prior knowledge about the cause. This means the success of the campaign was greater when consumers felt it reflected their own personal values and beliefs.

The literature indicates that for cause-related marketing to be considered successful, the relationship between brand and cause has to be aligned, thus resulting in a high brand-cause fit. Similarly, within the literature of brand activism, Shetty Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) has found that in order for the stancetaking to be successful, companies likewise need to align their stancetaking with their core values. Therefore, the brand-cause fit has also proven to be highly relevant when pursuing brand activism. This is also supported by Zdravakovic, Magnusson and Stanley (2010) findings indicating when taking a stance on a social or political issue, there must be a good fit between issue and brand, for the alliances to trigger positive attitudes which will in return lead to increased brand loyalty. Ultimately, meaning it is essential the brand-cause fit is high when concerning stancetaking on social and environmental issues in order to gain positive responses from consumers.

2.1.2 Corporate Social Responsibility

According to Sarkar and Kottler (2018) the next face towards brand activism is corporate social responsibility. This takes place when a company strategically implements initiatives to become more responsible in its business practices (Bhattacharya & Shen, 2004). The European Commission (n.d.) defines corporate social responsibility as "integrating social, environmental, ethical, consumer, and human rights concerns into their business strategy and operations". Becoming more socially responsible is increasingly more important due to the impacts companies have on society (European Commission, n.d.). As a result, many companies are integrating corporate social responsibility into their business practices in order to obtain sustainable competitive advantage (Marin & Ruiz, 2007; Ramesh, Saha, Goswami, Sekar & Dahiya, 2018).

However, according to Martin and Ruiz (2007) if a company's main reason for engaging in corporate social responsibility is solely for the purpose to maintain public relations, these activities might lose their effect as marketing tools, as consumers might perceive it as an attempt to deceive them. In order to avoid the aforementioned, companies need to consider "broader societal demands and expectations when formulating policies and making decisions" (Vallentin, 2002, cited in Martin & Ruiz, 2007, p. 256). When companies manage to do so, the corporate social responsibility initiatives are more likely to be perceived as sincere, and consumers are less likely to feel misled (Martin & Ruiz, 2007). Similarly, Weinzimmer and

Esken (2016) and Mandfredi-Sánchez (2019) and Zdravkovic, Magnusson and Stanley (2010) all suggest that in order to establish credibility and trust among consumers, corporate social responsibility should be a part of the company's core strategy.

Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) emphasise in their study that several surveys have indicated that there is a positive relationship between a company's corporate social responsibility initiatives and consumers' responses to a company's product. Nevertheless, their findings indicate that incorporating these corporate social responsibility initiatives do not correspond well with purchase behaviour. Ramesh et al. (2018) findings also support Bhattacharya and Sen study results indicating similar results. Their study found that implementing corporate social responsibility initiatives do not directly influence consumer purchase intentions rather it influences a consumer's evoked set and initiates positive attitudes towards the company, consequently initiating long-term impact on the consumer's mind. Similarly, Martin and Ruiz (2007) studies proved that corporate social responsibility establishes positive attitudes among consumers, supported by Das et al. (2020) whose findings further indicated that corporate social responsibility evokes company attractiveness. Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) suggest a reason why the corporate social responsibility initiatives might lack efficiency, is due to the low degree of awareness of firms conducting these practices. Consequently, they suggest companies need to increase their awareness level. Nevertheless, raising the awareness extensively might be a risk as consumers might perceive their attempt as selling corporate social responsibility, rather than the product or service, which might backfire the company (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004).

2.1.3 The Phenomenon of Brand Activism

The presented literature has established a long evolution of brands attempting to position themselves among consumers. Firstly, they have made efforts to create shared value through cause-related marketing, and secondly by integrating initiatives into its business practices, to trigger positive perceptions towards the brand or company, cause-related marketing has been used as a mediator in connecting the brand and consumer through a cause (Varadarjan and Menon, 1988; Chang & Chu, 2019; Robert & Fill, 2012; Bake et al., 2017). Whereas, corporate social responsibility takes it one step further and acquires a more deeply integrated strategic implementation, meaning merely supporting a cause is not sufficient, socially responsible business practices have to be incorporated with the core values of the company (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004; Zdravkovic, Magnusson and Stanley, 2010; Weinzimmer and Esken, 2016; Mandfredi-Sánchez, 2019). With this said, it is apparent that the concepts highlight market- and corporate driven initiatives (Sarkar & Kottler, 2018). Nevertheless, more recently, a trend towards becoming more social-driven has risen among companies, which is also known as brand activism (Sarkar & Kottler, 2018).

Mandfredi-Sánchez (2019, p 343) defines brand activism as communications strategy “that seeks to influence citizen-consumers by means of campaigns created and sustained by political values”. In other words, by raising a concern in a political issue, companies strive to influence and attract consumers holding similar values. Companies tend to borrow these campaigns from social movements by “copying their aesthetics of authenticity” (Mandfredi-Sánchez, 2019, p. 348). Similarly, to when consumers engage in social movements, companies partake in these initiatives and use their corporate voice to support social causes. Brand activism takes place when companies use messages, slogans and content based on common interest or industry related issues (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019).

When discussing brand activism, one separates between regressive and progressive brand activism (Sarkar & Kottler, 2018). The former one, refers to disobeying of the common good, while the latter one supports the common good. Furthermore, Sarkar and Kottler (2018) has divided brand activism into six categories: political activism, economic activism, workplace activism, environmental activism, legal activism and social activism. For the purpose of this study environmental and social activism will be elaborated. Environmental activism covers conservation, land-use, air, water pollution laws and policies. Social activism is the most common one and covers a wider spectrum, equality (gender, LGBT, race, age etc.), societal and community issues revolving around education and health care (Sarkar & Kottler, 2018).

Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) and Becker-Olsen, Cudmore and Hill (2006); Zdravkovic, Magnusson and Stanley (2010) argue the shift in market forces is the result of the way our current society is constructed, calling for activist brands. Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) highlight the importance of activist brands, as staying neutral is not an option in the eyes of the consumer. However, it is essential for brands to gain knowledge about consumer behaviour towards brand activism before they jump into the movement of brand activism. According to Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019), because when engaging in brand activism and doing it wrong is even more harmful than staying neutral. This also goes for cherry-picking issues or causes, as it has been proven to lead to profound backlash on companies (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore & Hill, 2006; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). However, several studies have indicated that when brand activism is done successfully it will result in consumers rewarding the brands by securing long-term competitive advantage (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore & Hill, 2006; Weinzimmer & Esken, 2016; Mandfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Sarkar & Kottler, 2018).

Nevertheless, some authors, like Sobande (2019) are more critical towards the use of brand activism and believe that because of the potentially profitable aspect, companies are using brand activism solely for the purpose of their own profit and are drawn on as a part of the current marketing trend. In other words, the author indicates that companies are ‘woke-washing’ consumers, meaning companies are deceiving consumers to support their brand by appearing to support social issues. She, furthermore, addresses how:

> *“[...]brands make use of such issues in the content of marketing that predominantly upholds the neoliberal idea that achievement, social change and overcoming inequality requires individual ambition and consumption, rather than structural shifts and resistance” (Sobande, 2019, p. n.p.).*

Consumers do not have the power to make society more equal by supporting a stancetaking with their consumption decision, rather companies need to address these issues in-house and labour practices, production methods, and sources and user profits. Mandfredi-Sánchez (2019) agrees with Sobande and indicates that it is indeed possible that activist brands borrow ideas or trends from social movements and not for changing society, yet with the aim to boost their sales. In other words, he also suggests that companies are pursuing “woke-washing” and use this as a strategic tool to gain profit, and not for the common good. Ultimately, in order to avoid being perceived as employing brand activism as a marketing tool to deceive the consumer, similarly to cause-related marketing and corporate social responsibility, it is important to have a congruent brand-cause fit and integrate social responsibility into their business practices.

The literature within brand activism highlights many similarities with cause-related marketing and corporate social responsibility. However, Sarkar and Kottler (2018) argue that times have changed, and cause-related marketing and corporate social responsibility have not been impactful enough. Around the world, consumers, especially the younger generation, are calling for more value-driven brands. Consumers expect brands to solve more significant societal issues and give back the society they are harming (Sarkar & Kottler, 2018). Overall, the majority of studies within brand activism point toward the same thing, the need for activist brands in today's society (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore & Hill, 2006; Weinzimmer & Esken, 2016; Sarkar & Kottler, 2018 Mandfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Consumers do not consider neutral an option and want brands to help them fight all kinds of injustice (Sarkar & Kottler, 2018). If done successfully, brand activism can create shared value while being potentially profitable and can improve market positions. However, according to Kottler and Sarkar (2018) as brand activism goes beyond marketing, it faces the danger of being perceived inauthentic if taking a stance on an issue which does not have a sufficient brand-cause fit or not integrated into the company's core values. This danger emerges when brands are for justice on one issue, but practices injustice on another, and thereby cherry-picks issues. The latter will lead to a backlash on the company and harm its reputation.

2.2 Consumer activism

In the following section the phenomenon of consumer activism will be elaborated, as the construction of these movements change accordingly to how contemporary society is reflected. First, the anti-branding movement and its possible implications on consumers' perceptions of brands conducting brand activism will be presented and argued. Second, political consumerism with emphasis on boycotting and buycotting and how these concepts relate to consumers' responses to brand activism, will likewise be demonstrated.

2.2.1 Anti-branding movement

To understand how consumers, perceive brand activism and how they respond to it, it is imperative to understand the possible implications of the anti-branding movement, and how it may impact the consumers' perception on brands communicating the phenomenon. In order to gain insights into the consumer's perception, it is necessary to understand how the anti-branding movement has evolved, and how it derives from social movements. Understanding these phenomenon will provide a foundation for why some consumers oppose brands and explain possible reasons for why consumers expect brands to engage in brand activism.

The anti-branding movement has occurred as a response to contemporary society and how it has evolved (Holt, 2002; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). The individual consumer has more opportunities and has a broader knowledge than before. One factor that has contributed to the aforementioned is the digitalising, which has provided consumers with more knowledge and power. This has occurred correspondingly due to the accessibility of information via communication channels such as social media, as well as a more transparent awareness surrounding a company's actions and activities (Hollenbecker & Zinkhan, 2010; Sarkar & Kottler, 2018). Consumers are therefore now able to take an activist standpoint by themselves and from the comfort of their homes, e.g. express their opinions online, compared to collectively protesting the streets. Additionally, consumers can oppose brands and companies through their consumptions by actively picking or opposing products or brands entirely. This enables the consumers to attain a greater individual power for reaching one's own goals, rather than relying on the collective goals.

Kozinets and Handelman (2004) define consumer movements as specific kinds of social movements that focus on transforming different elements of the social order concerning both marketing and consumption. They argue that consumption to a higher degree is playing a central role in contemporary society, and that consumers' movements have risen to challenge and transform aspects of consumption. Holt (2002) similarly postulates that counterculture has formed around the idea that efforts to brand the companies has initiated a destructive consumption culture towards society and has led the anti-branding movement to become dominant in contemporary society. He therefore argues the anti-branding movement is a response to this consumption culture created by companies to brand themselves, and thereby gain profits, thus causing harm on society. Romani, Grappi, Zarantonello and Bagozzi (2015) add that active resistance develops around the individual's disapproval of brands, which then will lead to potentially symbolise negative perceptions that are associated with corporations. A famous citation from Kalle Lasn (2000, p. 16, cited in Holt, 2002, p 70) well signifies the contemporary common enemy of all mankind:

> *"The old political battles that have consumed humankind during most of the twentieth century—black versus white, Left versus Right, male versus female—will fade into the background. The only battle worth fighting and winning, the only one that can set us free, is The People versus The Corporate Cool Machine".*

The quote above testifies to the foundation of the growing anti-branding movement; to unite the people against a common enemy. Previously social movements primarily revolved around changing principles, practices and policies (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Hence, given how the current society is constructed and the power and wealth brands are now in possession of, some consumers disapprove, and feel the brands' impact on society has grown too big (Holt, 2002; Roper & Fill, 2012), thereby causing an unhealthy distribution of power in society. Therefore, some consumers feel brands should not hold power greater than the government, and they should contribute more positively to the society they impact, given they profit from it.

Moreover, consumers partake in anti-branding activities when they feel that the brand or company has acted in an unfair manner taking form in violation of norms or unethical behaviour (Romani et al., 2015). Additionally, consumers want to signal their hate towards the brand by punishing them in order to prevent them from harming others or giving them what they deserve. Therefore, Romani et al. (2015) suggest that feelings of hate are a significant indicator of making consumers partake in anti-branding actions. The feeling of hate tends to be expressed as disgust, anger, fear or contempt. To which extent the individual feels hate is, according to Romani et al. (2015) regulated by the individual's degree of empathy. According to them, empathic individuals tend to feel a higher degree of hate than less empathic individuals.

The literature within consumer activism defines consumer movements as social movements with the purpose of changing elements of the social order, and this is also where the anti-branding movement derives from (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). The nature of these movements have changed in accordance to how contemporary society has evolved (Holt, 2002; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Consumers are likewise able to take stances through their consumption behaviour, meaning they do not need to walk the streets with signs; they can actively resist companies if they feel brands have acted unethically or violated norms (Romani et al., 2015). Moreover, the anti-branding movement has risen as some consumers feel corporations' impact in society grown too big in the hunt for profit, resulting in an unhealthy power distribution (Holt, 2002; Roper & Fill, 2012).

2.2.2 Political consumerism

The way in which the contemporary society is constructed makes it impossible to avoid consuming (Baek, 2010). Given that consumers are declared to have more power than previously experienced in society, some are willing to use it and aim to make a difference in the marketplace (Wright, Shaw, Newholm & Dickinson, 2006). It is claimed that consumers use their consumption as a mean of voting, by supporting products that are aligned with their values, whereas opposing brands that go against their own personal belief (Wright et al., 2006).

In other words, consumers can engage in political consumerism by punishing (i.e. boycotting) or rewarding (i.e. buycotting) companies (Baek, 2010; Neilson, 2010). The former one emphasises consumers punishing companies or brands for behaviour they dislike, while the latter one stresses consumers rewarding companies or brands for behaviour they approve of (Baek 2010). The aforementioned has also become apparent when concerning brand activism. According to Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019) when brands advocate an issue, and consumer perceives the statement as fake or insincere, it can lead to a backlash. Consumers will punish companies or brands by not engaging or buying their products or services. However, when successfully advocating a controversial issue, it may foster the value and ethics driven to a company's core base. Consumers are even willing to pay a higher price when a brand supports a cause that reflects the consumer's values and beliefs (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Additionally, when the consumer can connect the brand's cause with their values, this can lead to the consumer's support for the brand, increasing their purchase intention toward the company's product or service (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019).

Neilson (2010) and Baek (2010) both highlight that although one can engage in both boycotting and buycotting, previous studies have indicated that there are several characteristics that distinct a boycotter from a buycotter. Moreover, their motives for partaking in these activities can vary. Therefore, it is suggested to study them separately as consumers that buycott are not necessarily inclined to boycott, and vice versa. According to Neilson (2010) buycotters are inclined to be more altruistic than boycotters. This can be explained by the fact that in order to consume in a way that supports desirable business, one might have to compromise more with a cost of lost convenience, higher prices and less alternatives (Neilson, 2010). However, engaging in boycotting also acquires sacrifices, but their goal is to punish a designated brand which is a punishing act, whereas buycotting is for the common good. Nevertheless Klein, Smith and John (2004) found that boycotters also suffer from constrained consumption, and thus evaluate if the cost of boycotting is worth it. They further address that the less a boycotter has to constrain their consumption, the more one is motivated to engage in the behaviour. Arguably, this aligns with Neilson (2010) indicating that boycotters are not always ready to give up as much as buycotters.

Moreover, buycotters tend to be more optimistic by nature and hold a higher level of trust in brands, companies and institutions than boycotters (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Neilson's (2010) study suggests that specifically women and individuals attaining a higher level of trust in general tend to belong to this group. An explanation for why buycotters might hold this viewpoint might be because they are more optimistic, and they therefore believe that others generally have good intentions and want the best for the common good. Neilson (2010) sees them as a motivational factor for engaging in boycotting. Another motivational factor to engage in the behaviour among buycotters, is that their higher levels of trust towards brands and institutions makes them more inclined to believe their actions will in fact benefit the common good (Neilson, 2010).

Contrarily, individuals who do not trust brands and institutions rather rely on their own actions. Therefore, they find support from other consumers holding similar viewpoints, which is a common characteristic among boycotters. Therefore, boycotting is seen as a more collectivistic act, as they tend to strongly desire the feeling of being part of something bigger (Neilson, 2010). Klein, Smith and John (2004) similarly explains that boycotting is a normative behaviour and is highly dependent on the efficacy. Meaning when an individual sees that they can make a difference, they are more likely to undergo the behaviour, which is more greatly achieved when done collectively. Therefore, self-efficacy is seen as a motivational factor for engaging in boycotting. Klein, Smith and John (2004) additionally identified that the perceived disgracefulness of a company's or brand's action was a huge impact of boycott participation. The more disgraceful consumer perceived the company's or brand's behaviour the more likely were consumers to participate in the boycotts.

To conclude, buycotting and boycotting has become a way for consumers to express their personal values and beliefs through their consumption. Consumers who boycott tend to be more sceptical and have less trust towards brands, while buycotters attain a higher level of trust, and thus believe their actions will have a positive impact on the common good. However, according to the literature what makes a consumer a buycotter or a boycotter depends on their subjective characterises and their subjective motivations for engaging in these activities. (Klein, Smith and John 2004; Neilson, 2010; Baek, 2010).

2.3 Brand meaning

In order to comprehend how consumers, perceive brand activism and how they respond to the phenomenon, it is necessary to understand how brands create meaning to consumers. By gaining this understanding it will be possible to establish how brand activism creates meaning to consumers, and thus how they respond to it. Brand meaning to consumers represents their associations, perceptions and expectations they have created in their minds of the brand (Batey, 2008). Wilson, Bengtsson and Curran (2013) adds that existing brand knowledge that has been developed over time further plays an important role when creating brand meaning. Each experience and encounter with the brand gradually lead to multiple associations that eventually form the perception consumers hold of the brand (Batey, 2008). Therefore, the consumer's perception depends on the individual consumer, given they will have their own associations to the brand and form their own meanings of it.

Previous research has emphasised consumers are more drawn to brands that in addition to functional needs, provides meaning to the individual consumer (Batra, 2019; Belk, 1988; Bhat & Reddy, 1998; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Hammerl, Dorner, Foscht & Brandstätter, 2016), which aids the individual in constructing their self-identity (Bhat & Reddy, 1998; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Hammerl, et al. 2016). Belk (1988) further suggests that possessions, (i.e. brands), become a part of ones extended self. This refers to the fact that consumers see brands as a part of themselves. It is therefore emphasised that consumers actively pick brands that contribute to the image they have of themselves, enabling them to signal their identity to their surroundings. A more traditional way of viewing brand meaning suggests that brand managers manage the meaning of the brand (Berthon, Pitt & Campbell, 2009). This viewpoint represents top-down communication from brand managers to the consumer. Ligas and Cotte

(1999) highlight that previous research suggests that managers induce a symbolic meaning for a product and transfer this meaning to the consumers. Thereafter, consumers accept this transferred meaning and choose products and brands that suit their self-identity.

However, a more postmodern view suggests that consumers are active in the co-creation of a brand meaning (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Ligas and Cotte (1999) suggest that co-creation occurs when consumers interpret and establish their personal meanings of a brand, depending on individual's current life goals and history to make sense of the brand. This is why consumers decode the meaning set by the company or brand differently, as all consumers have a personal history with a brand. Moreover, Ligas and Cotte (1999) postulate that consumers' have multiple selves, and how the brand meaning is appraised by the individual consumers dependent on which self is activated. The part of the self that is activated will depend on the social group consumers are interacting with. Therefore, the meaning of the brand can also differ for the individual consumer correspondingly, resulting in consumers' perception being subjected to change given a situation and whom they are with or depending on what they are doing at the moment.

When placing brand activism in the context of brand meaning creation, brands take a stance on issues and display their values, in order to connect with consumers holding similar values. Brands are in charge of the stance they take and convey and apply their symbolic meaning to these messages. Consumers, on the other hand, pick brands that enable them to signal their identities to others (Batra, 2019; Belk, 1988; Hammerl, et al. 2016). However, as empirical research has established, these activist messages constructed by brands are not always well-received by consumers, which can be a result of a misalignment between marketers' and consumers' interpretation of the message. This illustrates that brands are not in charge of how the symbolic meaning of the activist messages are interpreted by the consumers. How the one interprets the meaning of the message depends on the individual consumer, given they will have their own associations to the activist messages and form their own meaning of the messages. Furthermore, their previous knowledge, experiences, and encounters with the brand will most likely determine how the activist message creates meaning to the consumers. Therefore, when brands engage in brand activism, they must gain an understanding of what creates value for consumers, and not merely attempt to impose their own set of values.

2.4 Summary of literature review

According to Sarkar & Kottler (2018) brand activism derives from cause-related marketing and corporate social responsibility. The literature within cause-related marketing and corporate social responsibility suggest their purpose is to connect with consumers, and thereby affect the perception consumers hold of companies and brands, resulting in increased profits (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore and Hill, 2006; Zdravkovic, Magnusson and Stanley, 2010). For the cause-related marketing the brand-cause fit was imperative to the success of the initiative, whereas for the corporate social responsibility, the alignment between the company and their core values was evidently the most important aspect. Despite it is argued that given the change in society brand activism has outdated cause-related marketing and corporate social responsibility (Sarkar & Kottler, 2018), the brand-cause fit and core integration is crucial for the success of brand activism.

Consumers are expecting brands to engage in brand activism as a result of the brands' increased influence and impact on contemporary society (Sarkar & Kottler, 2018). This increasing demand from the consumer side and companies' urge to stand out in the minds of the consumers have led to many companies engaged in brand activism and by advocating an issue. Moreover, Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand (2019) postulate that brands can no longer stay neutral, as consumers expect brands to use their voice to give back to society. However, when companies make too hasty decisions and jump on the activist wave, there remains a possibility that the brand might go too far with their activist approach (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Consequently, the company might not be able to connect with their intended target group, as some consumers see this merely as a marketing trick to deceive them. However, when brand activism is done successfully, it will result in consumers rewarding the brands by securing long-term competitive advantage (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore & Hill, 2006; Wienzimmer & Esken, 2016; Mandfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Sarkar & Kottler, 2018).

To gain an understanding of how consumers' perception of brand activism is formed, it is necessary to understand consumer movements and how they have evolved, in order to understand why some consumers oppose or support brands. According to Kozinets and Handelman (2004), anti-branding movements derive from consumer movements that are defined as movements to transform elements of the social order. The anti-branding movement has risen as some consumers feel companies and brands impact society too much in their own selfish interest for profit, which has manifested in an unhealthy power distribution (Holt, 2002; Roper & Fill, 2012).When consumers perceive that brands have acted in an unethical manner or violated their norms, consumers can partake in anti-branding behaviour (Romani et al., 2015). On the contrary, when consumers feel that the brand has behaved ethically, consumers might reward the brand. Thus consumers express their political power through their consumption, either by boycotting or buycotting brands (Baek, 2010; Neilson 2010). The former one emphasises consumers punishing companies or brands for behaviour they dislike, by not consuming the brands' products or services. In contrast, the latter stresses that consumers are rewarding the company or brand by supporting them through their consumption (Neilson, 2010; Baek, 2010).

Finally, in order to understand how consumers perceive brand activism and how they respond to it, it is imperative to consider how a brand creates meaning for the consumer. According to the literature, companies and brands apply their symbolic meaning to the message and expect consumers to interpret the message as they intend (Ligas & Cotte, 1999). However, this has proven not always to be the case as the consumers have their own associations to brands. These associations are formed based on the consumers' previous experiences in life, encounters and existing knowledge about the brand. Consumers moreover actively pick brands they can reflect themselves in, and thus choose brands that signal their identity and values to the outside world (Belk, 1988).

2.4.1 Conceptual framework and key words

The conceptual framework for this study is presented in figure 2.1. This framework consists of key concepts within the literature stream of brand activism, consumer activism and brand meaning, and will guide us throughout the research and aid us in answering our research question: *how do consumers perceive brand activism, and how do they respond to it.* The key concepts that have been selected as most prevalent are; brand-cause fit, alignment of core values, stancetaking, power of brands, boycott, boycott and brand meaning creation.

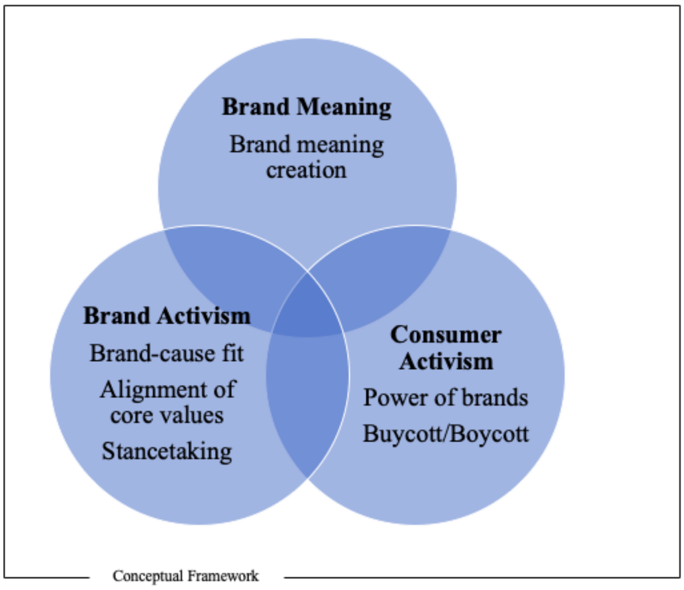

Figure 2.1 Conceptual Framework (Own figure, 2020)

The literature within brand activism has close roots in cause-related marketing and corporate social responsibility, suggesting both the brand-cause fit and alignment of core values are present within brand activism. The congruence between brand and advocated cause plays an important role in how consumers judge brand activism. Similarly, the literature emphasises an alignment between brands and core values is imperative. Furthermore, an important element to consider is how consumers in general feel about brands taking stance and the issue they advocate will play a role in how the brand activism is perceived and responded to. Whereas, the literature within brand meaning tends to play an importance in how perceptions are formulated. Here the literature highlights that consumers' associations, expectations and previous knowledge of the brand will determine how the perception is formed. Moreover, consumers are inclined to actively support brands they can mirror themselves in, as they pick brands that signal their identity and values to the outside world.

Finally, the literature stream from consumer activism mainly highlights how consumers might respond to brand activism. The key concepts regarding the literature of political consumers are boycott and buycott, as this also has appeared to be evident when brands conduct activism. When the stance is successful consumers are more inclined to buycott the brand, whereas when less successful there is a risk that consumers might buycott the brand. Finally, the literature within anti-branding indicates that how consumers perceive the power of brands can determine how consumers respond to brand activism.

3 Methodology

In this chapter the methodological approach for this study is presented in order to outline how the objectives of this study are reached. Firstly, we provide a thorough explanation of the research philosophy, research approach and research design. Followed by a presentation of the data collection and data analysis of this study is introduced. Lastly, the chapter is rounded off by assessing the trustworthiness and ethical considerations of this study.

3.1 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy explains the development and nature of knowledge (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). When establishing methodologies for the research within social sciences it is commonly drawn from ontological and epistemological assumptions (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson & Jaspersen, 2018). Ontology explains the nature of the study, and the researcher's way of seeing the nature of reality, whereas epistemology describes the nature of knowledge and how this knowledge is acquired into the nature of the world (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

Ontology reflects whether social entities should be studied as objective, meaning that “social entities exist in reality external to and independent of social actors”, or as subjective which stresses that a “social phenomenon is shaped from the perceptions of social actors” (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012, p. 131-132). The ontological standpoints can be put on a scale, where realism and internal realism is related to the former and relativism and nominalism is associated to the latter (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). The relativism viewpoint stands for that there are many truths, while nominalism claims that there is no truth (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Our aim with this research was to understand how consumers perceive the phenomenon of brand activism, hence we applied a relativism ontological position, as we believe that there are many truths, rather than no truths. The relativism position views that reality is being socially constructed and that consumers might perceive situations differently depending on their view of the world (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). When studying consumers' perception of brand activism we also assume that there will not be a single answer. The individual consumers' answer depends on how she or he views the world and how confronts with the brand have shaped their perception, and hereafter determines their responses.

The epistemology concerns what is regarded as acceptable knowledge. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) there exist two opposing interpretations when viewing epistemology, which are positivism and social constructionism. They further express, the former regards reality as objective and a social world exists externally and should be measured by using these methods. The latter stresses that reality is socially constructed and people give meaning to it by interacting with others (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). In line with the ontological relativism position, this study adopts a social constructions standpoint. By doing so, an emphasis is placed on understanding how different experiences with a brand can for example explain certain behaviours with it. More precisely, this study seeks to capture how brand activism is perceived by the consumers and how their responses are towards brands pursuing it. To capture this, we need to gain an understanding of how the individual consumer thinks, feels about when a brand engages in brand activism, and how the consumers' previous experiences and interactions with the brand will determine the responses. With that said, in order to answer research questions the best, this study applies a subjective constructions standpoint.

3.2 Research Approach

According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012) the research approach emphasises how theory will be used and applied in the research project and depends on which reasoning the study adopts. This usually is implemented either by using an inductive or deductive approach. The deductive reasoning is a quantitative approach, which aims to develop propositions from existing theory and thereafter test them, whereas an inductive application is to develop theory from the data (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In addition to this there is also a third reasoning that is common when pursuing research, namely abductive. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012, p 147) stress that when conducting an abductive approach, the aim with the data collection is to "explore a phenomenon and explain patterns to generate a new or modify an existing theory". Similarly, Dubois and Gadde (2002) characterises an abductive approach as going back and forth between framework, data and analysis. Furthermore, Dubois and Gadde (2002) stress that an abductive reasoning has the potential to yield more data than by inducing it. This is because the data should not be forced to produce a certain theory, rather a better outcome will be reached when matching data and analysis back and forth (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

Our approach for this research was to use the existing literature and derive key concepts that together will form a framework. The key words that were derived from the literature review was brand-cause fit, alignment of core values, stancetaking, anti-branding movement, buycott and boycott, and brand meaning creation. The framework was tested in the data collection, as the questions the respondents will be asked are going to be based on the key concepts that are derived from the literature review. After the empirical material has been collected and analysed, we revised the framework and supplemented it with key concepts that arose from the collected data. The aim with the framework is going to capture how consumers' perceptions are formed of brand activism, and how they in return respond to it. Hence, by doing so our aim is to develop and combine existing findings in the field of brand and consumer activism.

3.3 Research Design

According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012) the research design will turn the research question into an actual research project. Easterby-Smith, et al. (2018) argue the essence of the research design is about making choices of what will be observed, and how. In other words, the research design organises activity, including the data collection, in ways that are most likely to fulfil the research aims.

Easterby-Smith, et al. (2018) states qualitative data is defined by their non-numeric form, and by the interactive and interpretive way they are created. This type of data is not merely collected, it is developed. Given the nature of the research question concerning consumer perception and response, in particular surrounding the phenomenon of brand activism, it is necessary to collect data accounting for the consumers' personal view of the world, to understand how they form their perceptions and responses. Therefore, more in-depth explanations were required, and thus, makes a qualitative methodology the most appropriate. Besides, one of the gaps identified in the literature is the lack of qualitative studies that have been conducted on brand activism, which enables this study to contribute to a relatively new area.

In correspondence with the purpose of this research, the nature of this research design is explorative. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012) explorative studies is a valuable method to ask open questions to gain insights about a particular topic of interest, and if the exact nature of the problem is unknown. In line with aforementioned, the aim with this study is to gain new insight to consumers' perception of the phenomenon of brand activism, and specifically how they perceive companies within the airline industry communicating the phenomenon, and how it attests their responses. As evident in the literature review, the phenomenon of brand activism is relatively newly adopted, and therefore limited academic research exists. Furthermore, it has primarily been done from a brand management perspective, and primarily quantitatively. In particular, the research of brand activism in the airline industry is, to the authors knowledge, non-existing. Consequently, there is a lack of research explaining how consumers perceive the phenomenon of brand activism, resulting in a lack of understanding for how they respond to brand activism. In addition, given that most existing research has been conducted in America or Asia, it questions how applicable the current limited knowledge is in Scandinavia.

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012) further argue that given the exploratory nature, the data collection is likely to be unstructured, and therefore depends on the quality of the contributions from the respondents. As a result, the need to change direction upon new data and insights might be deemed necessary. Exploratory research is furthermore likely to start off with a broad focus, but will narrow as the research progress begins. For this research, we start off by asking the respondents more general questions about themselves and their consumption behaviour, before eventually exposing them to stimuli in the form of two advertisements, in order to gain insights to their specific thoughts and opinions of those. By starting off broad and narrowing it in as such, we will be able to generate more accurate research, as we can determine if their perceptions hold when exposed to the stimuli. Given aforementioned, it should be taken into consideration that the quality of this study may depend on the subjective contributions from the respondents, as the key concepts and framework will be derived from their personal encounters, thoughts and opinions.

3.4 Marketing Stimuli

In order to capture consumers' perceptions of brand activism, how their opinions are formed and how they respond to it, a visual methodology was applied. Visual methodologies are used to gain an understanding of and interpreting images, and include photography, film, video, painting, drawing, collage, sculpture, artwork, graffiti, cartoons and advertisements (Glaw, Inder, Kable & Hazelton, (2017). For this study, we applied the latter, by creating stimuli through two advertisements from two different airlines that displayed brand activism. According to Glaw et al., (2017) the advantages of applying a visual methodology are that they add value to already existing methods by bringing in more dimensions, by capturing richer multidimensional data, as well as valuable insights into the world of the participants.

The two brands behind the advertisements used to create stimuli are SAS and KLM. Both advertisements were specifically chosen because of their high degree of awareness in Scandinavia given the study concerns Scandinavians, and different stances, meaning they advocate different issues. As the KLM advertisements is considered successful, and SAS advertisement the opposite, it provides an interesting contrast enabling this study to determine what makes brand activism successful and not from a consumers perspective, as well as establishing if some stances are considered more appropriate than others and why. A more in-depth explanation of these advertisements can be found in the below section.

3.4.1 Advertisements

In this section a more in-depth explanation of both SAS and KLM as companies and the two advertisements will appear. Firstly, a company background will be presented, as it is imperative for the overall understanding of the stance and how it was perceived by consumers, to have background information that provides insight into the identity and core values of the airlines, as the literature has stated that has to be aligned (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Sarkar & Kottler, 2018). Secondly, the advertisements will be explained and supported with images, to explain and demonstrate how they portrayed brand activism. Thirdly, an explanation of the advertisements and how they were received by the general public will be presented to create context, as mentioned earlier, they were perceived quite differently.

3.4.1.1. SAS

Background information

SAS has a long brand heritage in Scandinavia, and defines themselves as “Scandinavian by name and nature”. The core of their business model is to offer the most destinations and departures within Scandinavia than any other airline (SAS, 2020a). In many ways SAS has been ‘Scandinavia's airline’, emphasised by the previous ownership being primarily owned by the Danish, Swedish and Norwegian governments. However, Norway has since sold their shares (Olsen, 2018). Aside from being known as Scandinavia's airline, SAS has struggled with several scandals throughout the years. A theme that has come back to haunt them on a continuous basis within recent years, is union conflicts, that has led to several strikes. According to a survey conducted by YouGov in 2015, SAS fell 13 points from 29,6 to 16,7 index points on the total image score (Keldsen, 2015). Therefore, they have battled image crises on and off throughout the years.

SAS's values are to make life easier for people who travel frequently to, from, and within Scandinavia by offering smooth flights for business and leisure travel (SAS, 2020b). They further strive to take continuous steps towards reducing the negative environmental impact their operations cause through innovation and investments in new technology, and thereby create value and growth (SAS, 2020a). SAS does not have a long history of conducting brand activism, in fact, to the authors knowledge this has only been done once.

Advertisement: ‘What is truly Scandinavian?’

‘What is truly Scandinavian?’ is the name of an advertisement released by SAS in early 2020. The advertisement conveyed brand activism by challenging the many Scandinavian stereotypes by claiming nothing is truly Scandinavian, as Scandinavian culture derives from other cultures gathered when traveling, dating back to the Vikings (Deichgræber, 2020). The activist message that was conveyed intended to break down stereotypes and unify people, while encouraging and inspiring them to travel more, and thus bring back new enriching cultures (Nikel, 2020). SAS therefore took an activist stand on a social issue that was perceived to go directly against their own core values. Although the advertisement intended to unify people by suggesting Scandinavians shares history and culture with multiple cultures, it was instead perceived anti-nationalistic (Nikel, 2020). The message could be considered controversial in Scandinavia given the level of nationalism amongst the Nordic countries, placing Denmark, Norway and Sweden amongst the 15 most patriotic countries (Colson, 2016).

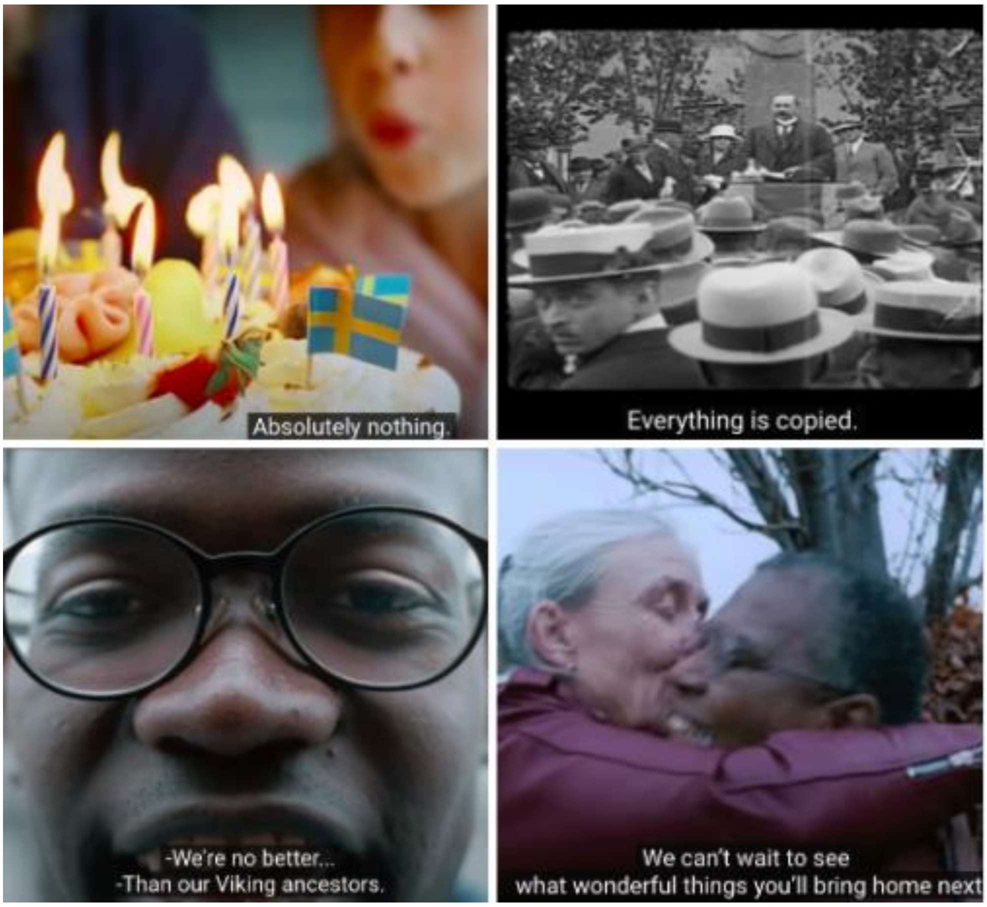

Figure 3.1 SAS - 'What is Truly Scandinavian?' (YouTube)

Aftermath

The advertisement was heavily critiqued, and was pulled back after only one day (Deichgræber, 2020). Although the purpose was to encourage people to travel more by emphasising Scandinavian culture is many cultures, it instead came off as offensive and anti-nationalistic to many people. Therefore, the attempt to attract value-driven consumers by taking a stance on a social issue, instead can be argued to have backlashed. On the incident itself SAS sent out a press release supporting the message in the campaign stating: "We in SAS are proud of our Scandinavian heritage and values that influence our open, equal and democratic society" (SAS, 2020b). They further argue the reasoning behind the initial removal was a "reasonable suspicion" they were exposed to a cyber-attack by nationalists. However, only a few days after it was pulled back, the advertisement re-appeared in a shorter, more edited version, emphasising the more positive aspects of Scandinavia. According to Deichgræber (2020) some argue this was done intentionally by SAS. It could be an attempt to change their current image amongst consumers, given their scandalous past of flight shaming and strikes. This argument could be supported by the fact that SAS eventually relaunched it. This advertisement is interesting because it arguably was an unsuccessful attempt to conduct brand activism, and some even claim it was greenwashing (Leer, 2020). The purpose of including this advertisement is to find out why it failed by investigating how consumers perceive it, and gain deeper insights as to why they hold this perception, and how they respond or oppose SAS as a result of this advertisement.

3.4.1.2. KLM

Background information

KLM was founded in 1919 by some of the most prominent business men in the Netherlands (KLM, 2020a). It was designated “royal” immediately upon opening by the Queen at the time. KLM claims to be the oldest continually operating airline in the world operating under the same name (KLM, 2020a), meaning they have a long brand heritage. KLM state people are at the core of their DNA, being key to their brand. They strive to make a difference by consistently offering their customers more memorable experiences, and becoming their first choice (KLM, 2020a). KLM has an overall positive image, and was awarded the 4th most liked airline in Europe in 2019 (World Airline Awards, 2019).

Taking on a leading role and setting an example for the industry is part of KLM's strong values. They have been “all about sustainable travel” for years, and are actively working towards reducing Co2 emissions, keeping it central to their core values. Being one of the bigger players, they believe they should take on more responsibility (KLM, 2020b). As a result of this ambition they started a Carbon Reduction Roadmap to become more ambitious about their carbon reduction by reducing the Co2 per passenger with 20 percent by 2020, and had already reached 17 percent in 2018 (KLM, 2020b). Uniquely to KLM, they introduced CO2ZERO, an initiative enabling passengers to compensate for their Co2 emission connected to their travels by making a small contribution, that in turn promotes local sustainable development. KLM has a history of conducting brand activism, and have previously constructed campaigns openly supporting LGBTQ and gender equality.

‘Fly Responsibly’

In 2019 KLM had their 100th anniversary, and used the momentum to launch a new advertisement ‘Fly Responsibly’. The advertisement conveyed brand activism by paradoxically asking people to fly less in favour of the environment, thus taking a stance on an environmental issue. In the ad they emphasise “a hundred years of aviation comes with great responsibility”, and asks the viewer directly “because you want our children to get to know this beautiful world too, right?”. The ad then continues by encouraging people to meet less face-to-face, and consider other means of transportation before deciding to fly. At the end of the ad KLM invites the aviation industry and passengers to join forces to help make the world aware of its shared responsibility. The campaign is controversial in the sense that encouraging people to fly less is paradoxical, given that is the foundation for KLM as an airline company. However, it is a dangerous topic to get involved with, as the climate has been heavily debated within recent years. Especially considering how the aviation industry has become the face of a climate sinner, and has been highly criticised due to their massive impact on the climate.

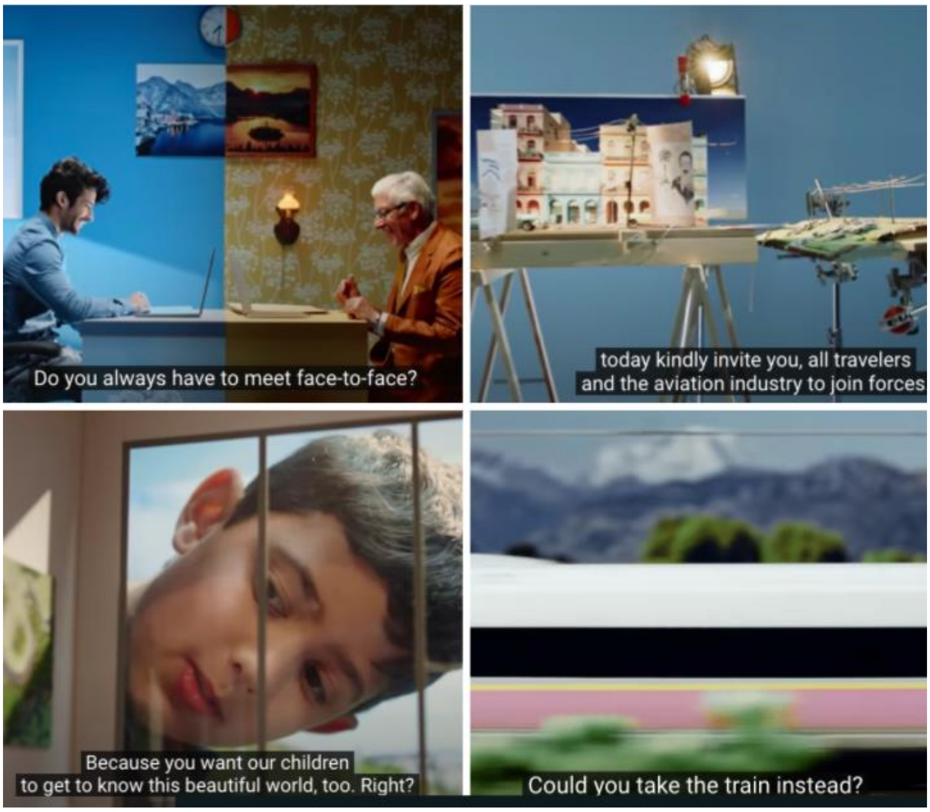

Figure 3.2 KLM 'Fly Responsibly' (YouTube)

Aftermath

The advertisement drew headlines world-wide, because of the controversial aspect of a major airline admitting the industry has pollution problems, and the paradoxicality of them encouraging people to fly less (Slotnick, 2019). The media attention has been overall positive, and most comments by consumers also generally supports the message and stance on environmental issues. By releasing this advertisement, KLM has also been able to position themselves very high on the moral ladder, in an attempt to attract the value-driven consumers (Slotnick, 2019). This in particular has, however, also raised the question if this is in fact the case of greenwashing (Banis, 2019), and thereby not a sincere stance. Earlier in 2019 the Dutch government hosted a global ministerial conference to debate increasing taxes on the aviation industry, and discuss the possible benefits of tax on jet fuel. By releasing the 'Fly Responsibly' KLM is shying away from this discussion (Banis 2019). It could also be further argued that during the advertisement, KLM is highlighting a service of their own; the CO2ZERO initiative, meaning that it could be seen as a way to make people buy tickets at KLM given the possibility to Co2 compensate, thus making it woke-washing and not brand activism. The purpose of including this advertisement is to find out why it succeeded by investigating how consumers perceive it, and gain deeper insights as to why they hold this perception, and how they respond or oppose KLM as a result of this advertisement.

3.5 Data Collection Method

According to Bryman and Bell (2011), interviews are probably the most widely conducted method in qualitative research. An interview is a conversation between two or more people and allows the researcher to gain an understanding of the interviews, views, opinions, and experiences (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). Interviews allow the researcher to gain an understanding of why the interviewee holds a particular viewpoint and makes it possible to capture the meaning and interpretation of a phenomenon (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). In addition, interviews are the preferred data collection method when the aim is to collect contextual data and insight (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In line with this, we chose interviews as our data collection method as we wanted to gain an understanding of the respondents view, and how their thoughts, feelings and responses are towards brands pursuing brand activism. To capture this, we need to gain an understanding of how the individual consumer thinks, feels about when a brand engages in brand activism, and how the consumers' previous experiences and interactions with the brand will determine their responses. Therefore, the most suitable way to apprehend answers to these questions was to personally interact with the interviewees by engaging in a conversation with them.

Both focus group interviews and individual interviews can be used when the aim is to gain insight into consumers' perceptions and behaviours (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). Either of these data collection methods, could have been used to provide answers to our purpose of the study. Focus group allows the respondents to interact with each other and empowers more significant discussion (Carson, Gilmore, Perry & Gronhaug, 2001), which could contribute with information that could have been outseen when applying individual interviews. However, Carson et al. (2001) stress that when conducting focus groups, there is a chance that respondents might be affected by other respondents' answers. Further, some respondents might be more enthusiastic than others in sharing opinions, which might contribute to imbalance, meaning that some views may be suppressed.

In contrast, Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2012) highlight that by conducting individual interviews, it allows the respondents to analyse and respond to the questions without other respondents' opinions, which is believed to reduce possible barriers. Furthermore, they emphasise this being a valuable feature of conducting personal interviews, as the respondents is not dependent on others' opinions and can stimulate more inconsistency in opinions and answers. Ultimately, after evaluating the nature of each data collection method thoroughly, we conclude by conducting personal interviews. We consider achieving more valuable information by digging deeper into the world of the respondents and not let their answers get influenced by other respondents' opinions. We perceive it was more insightful to gain an understanding of the respondents' views and opinions and how their previous experiences determine their answers concerning our research question, which could be neglected by conducting focus groups.

Semi-structured interviews

According to Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2012) when the nature of the research concerns understanding reasons behind decision making or why respondents hold a specific attitude and opinion, one should either conduct semi-structured or unstructured interviews. Since our aim with the study was to find out how consumers think and feel about when brands emancipate activist messages in their communication, and how they respond to it, semi-structured interviews were considered to be the most suitable option. Semi-structured interviews are more flexible and allow the researcher to ask more tailored questions to the specific interviewee, allowing the conversation to be more personal (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). When conducting a semi-structured interview, the main idea is to follow themes and topics and ask them in random order rather than having a structured approach. Besides, by applying the semi-structured approach, it allows probing the respondents' answers, meaning that the respondents can explain and build on their responses (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). Because we want to gain an understanding of how they perceive companies that engage in brand activism, we need to ask follow up questions like how, what, or why, in order to capture the underlying reasons for their thoughts and behaviours. However, consequently to the unstructured nature of the semi-structured interview, the standardisations of the study results become less frequent (Easterby-Smith, et al 2018).

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in the spring of 2020 during the outbreak of the pandemic Covid-19. Consequently, the pandemic had an impact on our data collection process. Due to the circumstances, the semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely as e-interviews, either via the online platform Skype or Zoom. According to Salmon (2014), conducting e-interviews is the method that is most closely related to face-to-face interviews. E-interviews allow both the interviewee and the researcher to share real visual artefacts, images, or the environment. Nevertheless, when conducting a face-to-face interview both the interviewee and researcher are present in the same place, and it is easier to follow the interviewee's body language and facial expressions (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018) Whereas, when conducting the e-interviews the visual sight is limited to only interpret the facial expressions. One main advantage by conducting personal interviews is not merely limited to the verbal interaction, also interoperating the body language of the interviewee (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018), which loses some effect when conducting e-interviews.

However, our aim with conducting the semi-structured interviews was to capture the respondents' views, opinions, and experiences concerning when companies conduct brand activism. Hence, we identified that this was equally manageable by conducting e-interviews because we had the chance to prompt and ask follow-up questions to gain the underlying reasons for why they attain the viewpoints they do. Nevertheless, because video interviews are asynchronous forms of conducting online interviews and technology can be unpredictable, some viewpoints that the interviewee expresses might be neglected. Therefore, the researcher must be more explicit and precise when asking questions as misunderstandings tend to be higher (Salomon, 2014). To avoid the matters mentioned earlier, we had to be extra observant when asking questions, and this required us to be repetitive in our actions, so all the information we communicated to the interviewees could be captured.

3.5.1 Sampling

In order to fulfil the aim of the study, and thereby gain a deeper understanding of consumers' perception of brand activism, a non-probability sampling design was selected. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) this particular sampling design is used when it is not possible to generalise the population being sampled. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012) emphasise this sampling design is beneficial when including subjective judgements. This attest to the research philosophy, as social sciences does not seek to stereotype a reality, but rather explain them. Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) states an advantage of this sampling design allows it to go straighter to the point. Nevertheless, it is argued this sampling design can make it hard to argue generalisability, as the claims made from this sampling most likely would not be applicable to larger groups (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). However, as the purpose with this study is not to generalise, but explain the phenomenon of brand activism, it was assessed this sampling design would not implicate the results.

According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012) there are no rules when determining the sample size of a non-probability sampling design. Rather than fixating on a specific number, it is instead suggested the sample size ought to depend on the purpose of the study, research question, and what is necessary to uncover. They argue this is especially important when conducting a semi or unstructured interview. Furthermore, they stress the validity and quality of data collection has more to do with the researchers' data collection skills, rather than the actual number. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012) does however suggest instead to continue to collect the qualitative data, in this case being interviews, until data saturation is reached. Data saturation will be reached when additional data collection provides little to no new information. Therefore, the authors of this study did not pre-decide a particular number of respondents, but instead held interviews until it was assessed data saturation had been reached. For this study the number was eleven.

Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) proclaims purposive sampling means the researcher has a clear idea of what sample units are needed. As this study concerns the perception of Scandinavians, the purposive sampling technique was deemed the most appropriate one. It requires the researchers to use their own judgement to ensure the sample meets the objectives of the research. The disadvantage of this particular sampling technique is that it is not possible to consider the results statistically representative of the total population (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). This could be an implication for this study, as in order to create themes and determine the perception of the respondents, it could be argued it to some extent would be necessary to find representative factors. However, the authors are aware it is not possible to generalise the results of this study to all Scandinavians solely based on this study.

This study is limited to millennials (1981-1996), due to the fact that the literature has indicated they would be the most perceptive to the phenomenon of brand activism (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019), as well as their ability to travel on own terms and personal values and beliefs. Furthermore, as evident from the literature review, not much academic literature exists on consumers' perceptions in the airline industry within Europe, much less Scandinavia. Working from the assumption every market is not the same, this study has been limited to Scandinavia, and the respondents chosen for this research are therefore Scandinavian.

Following the specific consumer base, Scandinavians, it was otherwise attempted to reach maximum variation sampling within this base. In line with Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012) this was done by the authors purposely choosing participants with diverse characteristics to provide maximum variation. The principle behind maximum variation sampling is to look at a phenomenon from all available angles, to achieve a greater understanding (Etikan, Abubakar, & Alkassim, 2015). As the phenomenon to our knowledge has not been studied in Scandinavia before, thus we wanted to yield as much knowledge as possible, which will be more greatly achieved by maximum variation. To achieve maximum variation, the respondents were purposely mixed based on gender, age, nationality and occupation. As a result, the respondents represent both Danish and Swedish nationalities, both genders and have an age span of 24-34 years. Moreover, to avoid collecting the same world-views, participants were also selected based on their occupations so that both workers and students were included. The workers represent people employed within both the public and private sector, as well as working within marketing, IT, management and healthcare. The students represent people studying marketing, and medicine. However, our sampling also has traits of homogeneity. According to Etikan, Abubakar and Alkassim (2015), a homogeneous sampling is one which focuses on candidates that share similar traits or specific characteristics. Some similarities among our sampling is that all of our respondents belong to the same generation; millennials, and moreover all respondents borne in Scandinavian. According to Thrane (2001), Denmark, Norway and Sweden are fairly similar regarding their historical background, climate condition and contemporary lifestyles. Moreover, he declares that all of the countries are highly industrialised countries and share a similar welfare system. Tabel 3.1 gives an overview of the respondents of this study.

Table 3.1 Respondents

Name	***Nationality***	***Gender***	***Age***	***Occupation***
Respondent 1	*Swedish*	*Male*	*25*	*Student, Medicine*
Respondent 2	*Swedish*	*Male*	*26*	*Student, Medicine*
Respondent 3	*Swedish*	*Male*	*28*	*Employed, Sports management*
Respondent 4	*Swedish*	*Male*	*26*	*Student, Marketing*
Respondent 5	*Swedish*	*Female*	*24*	*Student, Marketing*
Respondent 6	*Swedish*	*Female*	*25*	*Employed, Digital marketing*
Respondent 7	*Danish*	*Female*	*27*	*Employed, IT development*
Respondent 8	*Danish*	*Female*	*25*	*Student, Marketing*
Respondent 9	*Danish*	*Female*	*25*	*Employed, Media assistant*
Respondent 10	*Danish*	*Female*	*32*	*Employed, Nurse*
Respondent 11	*Danish*	*Male*	*34*	*Employed, Human resources*

As noted in the table, we only interviewed Swedish and Danish consumers, given the circumstances, there was not a possibility to recruit any Norwegian respondents. As the authors of the paper are living in Sweden and Denmark, therefore Swedish and Danish respondents were more accessible. However, as mentioned above, Scandinavians share similar characteristics specifically regarding their contemporary lifestyles and their welfare-wares state model (Thrane, 2001), thus we are positive that our results would have been similar if we included Norwegian respondents. Yet, we acknowledge that there are differences between the cultures in these countries, which ultimately might have impacted the results.

3.5.2 Interview guide

Bryman and Bell (2011) suggest that before conducting semi-structured interviews, it is beneficial to create an interview guide. The interview guide consists of fundamental topics, and under each topic there are questions regarding the given topic, that the researcher wants to cover during the interviews. Because of the nature of being a semi-structured interview, these themes and questions can be addressed in an order depending on the flow of the interview (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012; Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). However, Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) and Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012) suggest to begin the interviews with more general questions and after that, to go more deep into specific topic related questions and finally presenting closing questions. Another critical point to consider when creating the interview guide, it is essential to consider that the interview questions should be clear and easy to understand, and it is advised to avoid theoretical concepts (Easterby -Smith et al., 2018). Consequently, we designed the interview guide in accordance to the aforementioned recommendation.

When creating the topic guide, we began by creating more general opening questions, as we wanted to establish how respondents viewed themselves and how it was connected to how they form their perceptions. After that, we structured the interview guide per key concepts. The key concepts represented; political consumerism, anti-branding movement, brand activism were main themes in themselves. Additionally, brand meaning creation, core-value integrations and brand cause fit were more integrated throughout the interview, in correspondence to how the discussion went along. Besides, taking the abductive approach into consideration, we also wanted to contribute through new findings, and therefore did not want to be limited by solely asking questions from the key concepts that derive from the existing literature. As a result, especially the questions related to the actual advertisements were not solidly attached to the key concepts (see Appendix A).

Moreover, before the actual data collection for this study, a pilot study was executed to test the interview guide, which aligns with Bryman and Bell (2011) recommendations. By doing so, it aids the researcher in testing the appropriateness of the questions and whether there are questions or concepts which are difficult to comprehend. After the pilot study was conducted, some questions were removed or added, whereas others were reframed. In addition to making the interview more comprehendible, by reframing the topic guide, it enabled us to ensure that the questions asked would better aid us in answering the aim of our study.

3.5.3 Conducting the interviews

In total, eleven interviews were conducted via Skype or Zoom. All these interviews were held between 29th of April and 4th of May. Before each interview, the respondents were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix B). The form was sent to the respondents one day before each interview, in order for the respondents to have time read thoroughly through the question and the aim of our research. However, we intentionally left out that this was explicitly about brand activism. Despite the recommendations of including the aim in the consent form, since it will increase the validity of the study, (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012), we decide to leave this out. We did this to avoid the interviewees becoming biased to the subject of brand activism, and answering the questions accordingly to the aim of the study.

Moreover, we decided only to have one of us present during the interviews. Although Bryman and Bell (2011) suggest that it can be an advantage to have two interviewers as it might loosen up the atmosphere and foster a better discussion. However, they further acknowledge that some respondents might find it intimidating to talk to two persons. Furthermore, to successfully conduct the interviews with two interviewers, both need to be sensitive to each other and able to read each other's conversation (Bryman & Bell, 2011), which we found that could be difficult as the interviews are conducted remotely due to the Covid-19. Besides, there remains a more significant risk that there will be obstacles with the software platforms when there are three participants involved rather than two, thus we decided to carry the interviews by only either for us to interview. However, in order to capture every meaning, all of these interviews were audio-recorded, which enabled us to be present and interact with the respondent during the interviews.

When conducting the interviews, we began by calling the responded either via Skype or Zoom, followed by a short general discussion, which took place in order to develop a positive and relaxed relationship. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012) suggestions, it demonstrates friendliness and credibility. Furthermore, they suggest reminding the respondents about the interview being confidential and anonymous, as it will enable the respondents to be more relaxed during the interview. Additionally, it is said to stimulate a higher degree of confidence in the interviewer's trustworthiness. Therefore, we decided to keep the respondents' names anonymous as we wanted to yield as much information as possible.

The interview began by presenting opening questions which were connected to our first key concept brand meaning creation. Hereafter, we moved to discuss questions concerning the key concepts of political consumerism, anti-branding movement and taking a stance. After these themes were discussed, we presented the first advertisement ‘What is Truly Scandinavian', by SAS. Hereafter a discussion surrounding the advertisement was seized, and after finishing the discussion, the next advertisement ‘Fly Responsibly’ by KLM was introduced. Here, we keep the same structure as with SAS to create similar discussion and thus maximise objectivity. Afterwards, a discussion of both brands took place. By asking these questions, we aimed to find out if these advertisements triggered any response towards brand activism among the respondents. Finally, we rounded off the interviews by asking a closing question giving respondents an opportunity to make final comments not related to any predetermined themes.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data can be framed and looked at in several ways, and how this is done will shape the analysis and the understanding of the empirical data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). How this in return is implemented, depends on how the data has been collected and framed, as well as on the nature of the research question (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). However, before the data analysis can begin, the data needs to be organised to ease the analysis process. In total, we conducted eleven interviews each lasting between 33 to 48 minutes. After each interview the audio recordings were directly transcribed into written text, as we still then had the conversation freshly in mind, which is said to ease the transcription. In total we had 66 pages of written text, indicating that the collected data from the interviews were extensive. In order to sort the vast amount of data, several methods have been developed to ease the complex process of qualitative analysis.

The data analysis process should be aligned with the research approach and methodology (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). This study applies an abductive approach, which is about moving back and forth between theory and empirical material to generate new knowledge (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2012). Therefore, we used the identified key concepts; brand-cause fit, alignment of core values, stancetaking, power of brands, brand meaning creation, and boycott and boycott, from the literature review as the main inspiration when building the interview guide. However, because there is a lack of research regarding the consumer's perspective of brand activism, and we do not want to limit our results to follow the theory merely, we applied a grounded analysis when establishing the data from the results. By using a grounded analysis, it enables one to develop a new theory, rather than composing data in accordance to the existing structures (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

After the interviews were transcribed, we began to read thoroughly through the empirical material over, and over again. Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) and Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) calls this process familiarising with the data and claims it to be the first step when engaging with the material. This was done to grasp and understand what has been said in each interview. Hereafter, we summarised each interview consisting of key findings and concepts, which subsequently enabled us to eliminate information that we did not consider as crucial for this study. The processes continued by open coding, which was done to create links between different categories (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Furthermore, we coloured the concepts and quotes within the same categories with the same colour, in order to district one category or possible key concepts for another. Henceforth, we compared colour coding from each interview in order to identify commonalities and differences between the respondents' quotations, Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) call this process conceptualisation. Hereafter, we structured the document colour wise so that we could make sure that each colour concerning the concept and quote fitted under the same colour code. After that, we began to identify patterns and thus created our themes and sub-themes. In total, we subsequently came up with our three main themes for the analysis, namely, when business as usual becomes political, how to introduce brand activism, actions speak louder than words. Furthermore, we identified eight sub-themes. Some of these sub-themes were inspired form the literature review, whereas others were themes that arose from the interview discussions. These themes will be further presented and elaborated in the next chapter.

3.7 Quality of the Research

Given the qualitative nature of the research, when assessing the data it is done in accordance to Guba and Lincoln's evaluative criteria which emphasises on trustworthiness and authenticity (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Trustworthiness consists of four criteria; credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Therefore, the total of five aforementioned criteriums will make out the quality of the research in this study.

Credibility refers to multiple accounts of social reality. As social reality is subjective, it is attempted to reach several possible accounts of social reality, to establish feasibility or credibility (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Therefore, to increase the credibility of this paper, we summarised each interview and provided the option to send this summary to each respondent for them to confirm our findings. Besides, another major reason for doing this was to avoid misinterpretation and ensure that the captured subjective view was truthful.

Transferability accounts for the possibility for the research to be applied in another context at another time (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To increase the transferability researchers are encouraged to produce thick descriptions, being rich in details of the culture (Bryman & Bell, 2011), therefore we incorporated precise and rich quotes in the analysis. However, because this study stimulates data surrounding two advertisements from SAS and KLM, and thus concerns the airline industry and as the data has been collected only from Scandinavians. Hence, this study's transferability is somewhat limited, as the results might not be applicable in another continent, or other countries within Scandinavia.

Dependability refers to if other researchers would reach the same results as this study, if it was conducted under the same circumstances and conditions and a way to increase the dependability is to keep a record of everything (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Throughout the method part we have tried to be as detailed as possible in describing the chosen method and explain our process step by step and the reasons for doing so. Furthermore, to increase the dependability by saving the recordings and transcription, though keeping them strictly to ourselves.

Confirmability refers to the good faith of the researchers (Bryman & Bell, 2011). While it is recognised that complete objectivity is not possible, it should be apparent that the researchers did not allow for their social realities and bias to affect the research conduct (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To increase the confirmability, we ensured to not participate more than necessary during the interviews. We further only interfered with clarifying questions or asking participants to elaborate further, to reduce bias from ourselves. As we decided only to be one interviewer per interview, in order to reduce the bias, we sent the copy of the audio-tape so the other research could listen to the conversations. After that, we discussed the interviews, and as we were two researchers when writing the analysis of the data collection, it further made it possible to reduce the bias. Finally, in the analysis, we included comprehensive quotes from the transcriptions to increase the confirmability.

Lastly, authenticity refers to the researcher's ability and the degree to which they can express the participant's feelings and emotions in a faithful manner (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In similar ways to the aforementioned, we used quotes from the interviews to emphasise our interpretations, increasing the authenticity of this study.

3.8 Ethical considerations

According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012, p. 226) ethical considerations can be defined as “the standards of behaviour that guide your conduct in the rights of those who become the subject of your work, or are affected by it”. Due to the nature of the study concerning social sciences, the participants were asked to share personal thoughts and opinions, making the importance of ethical considerations especially important.

First, a consent form (see Appendix B) was sent to the respondents before the interview together with the aim of the research, to increase the transparency of the process. Second, the participants were informed about the opportunity to withdraw at any stage before or during the interview. Third, given the nature of the interviews, the respondents were informed via consent about the interviews being recorded and transcribed. Fourth, during the interviews, the respondents were not forced to answer any questions, and were informed of their rights to refuse any questions without consequence. Finally, a great emphasis was put on anonymity throughout the study, and only the authors are aware of their identities. To further protect the respondents' anonymity, their names were excluded throughout and instead disguised as respondent 1-11.

4 Empirical Findings

In this chapter, the empirical data from the semi-structured interview are presented and analysed. The empirical findings will be categorised into three main themes covering the respondents subjective opinions, perceptions, feelings and attitudes. Together these themes will answer the research question concerning how consumers perceive the phenomenon of brand activism and how they respond to it. The themes that emerged from the interviews are; when business as usual becomes political, how to introduce brand activism and actions speak louder than words.

4.1 When business as usual becomes political

The first theme concerns the respondents opinions on whether or not a brand should engage in brand activism, and what consumers perceive to be the most adequate approach. This theme ends with explaining how the aforementioned seem to be evident for KLM and SAS to determine if consumers' perceptions are the same in the airline industry.

4.1.1 When brands become politicians

The gathered empirical material on whether or not respondents felt brands should take stances, and if it was their responsibility to do so or not, was inconclusive. A commonality among the respondents' perception about whether or not a brand should engage in brand activism was that none were firmly in favour for or against. In other words, the majority of the respondents never conclusively answered yes or no with certainty, but instead felt if they should, depended on multiple factors. What impacted their opinion was highly affected by what role they perceived brands had in society, and if they felt it was the brands responsibility to engage in such matters, or if it should be up to institutions.

Overall, the vast majority of the respondents did not expect brands to engage in brand activism, and many stated brands should not be obligated to engage. However, what is noteworthy to mention is that everyone felt positive about brands engaging in it. Below quote provides insights to why one of the respondents felt positively towards brands taking stances:

> *"Yes, I feel they should do so if they take a stance on an issue that I think is important, for example, related to the environment. Because then I might feel that the brand is in line with what I think myself."* - respondent 3

The respondent states that if a stance is one he can relate to, he is more inclined to identify with the brand and approve the stancetaking. This quote also highlights an important aspect, as the respondent did not only declare that brands should take stances. He also felt that in order for him to accept the stancetaking, they have to align with his viewpoint of the issue in question, indicating that his personal perspective played impacted his opinion.

A few respondents also reasoned that taking a poor stance was not necessarily worse than not taking one, as brands would still raise awareness of critical societal debates. Thereby, it was felt that they were still making a positive contribution, as below quotes states:

> *"I think it is good if they do take a stance, but I do not expect it from all brands. Some brands are using their power to raise a necessary debate. I think that brands and their opinions and actions add to a more dynamic society and influence people and we should talk about it. Even though some companies make bad stances, at least they raise the issue, and make people think - they contribute to a debate."- respondent 5*

This quote emphasises that even raising a debate is perceived positively, as the respondent believes it will contribute positively to society and people's behaviour, thus increasing the feeling of being able to contribute with one's actions. This respondent also shared that she, to some extent, sees brands as people, and thus finds it natural they express their opinions and therefore believes it should be up to the brands themselves to decide. Moreover, she has a high level of trust in the government and brands, but adds that her trust in brands is more limited, as she believes their good intentions go to the extent of their business practices. This finding could potentially indicate that perception will vary depending on how a brand's role in society in general is viewed, and the level of trust in governments.

Another perception was that stances were considered positive on the condition they were perceived as authentic, and not merely a public relations stunt. While all answers differed, to some extent, many of the responses shared commonalities in the need to perceive the stance as authentic. Here this is highlighted by a respondent:

> *"I do not think they have to, but it is very positive if they actually do it, and it does not just seem like another media stunt that is not real." – respondent 8*

The statement by this respondent demonstrates that she felt it should be up to the brand whether they want to take a stance or not. She further implied that if brands do take a stance, she would perceive it very positively if it is authentic, and not merely for public relations to get attention or deceive consumers. When asked what she meant by it, she explained that in order for the stance to be authentic, she expected a brand to follow up, meaning that solely taking a stance was not enough. This was a very representative commonality among the respondents, especially among respondents with similar views on brands involvement in society.

Another respondent put a similar emphasis on his view of taking a stance. He recognised that it is positive for brands to engage in taking stances, but he does not believe brands should be obligated to do so. However, when asked to elaborate on his answer, he explained that companies' should not be held responsible for actions that governments should be performing. However, if brands decide to do so, he would consider it as something positive. He stated the following:

> *"I think it is good if they engage. But I don't think they should or need to. Because it's not the it's not their responsibility I would say. They are a company in the end, it is about making money for the company to pay salaries and everything. So yeah, no, I would not say it is their obligation in any way."- respondent 3*

He emphasised the fact that it is not a brands' responsibility to take a stance, as it is not their primary function; that is to gain profit and pay employees their salaries. This opinion was shared by more respondents, who similarly felt it was not a brand's obligation. Despite holding this viewpoint these respondents also felt that it was something positive if they did engage. As one respondent put it:

> *"No, I do not think they should have to, because I do not believe they do it for the common good. They do it for their own economic gain. If I knew they were actually doing something for that cause, and my purchase would contribute to whatever they were taking a stance on, then yes I could think of it as a good thing. I would need actual proof, otherwise it feels like it is simply greenwashing. Change should be made through laws." – respondent 1*

The respondents additionally believed that the brand holds too much power in society and that governments have allowed them to grow too big. In order for justice to occur, he believed that governments should actively regulate the markets. He was highly sceptical towards brands engaging in brand activism. Nevertheless, the brands could convince him by showing concrete evidence of how they contribute to the cause. Overall, it was very apparent among the respondents answers they in general were very sceptical towards brands engaging in brand activism, even though a majority perceived it to be something positive. However, as postulated above, in order for the respondent to perceive the stance as authentic, they wanted more transparency and concrete actions from brands.

4.1.2 Match made in heaven

During the interviews, when discussing the brand's role in society it became apparent that respondents' views of whether or not a brand should become more involved in the society, varied greatly. However, the vast majority felt overall positively towards brands engaging in brand activism, if the right conditions were met. One of the most recurrent commonalities was the importance of an alignment between the brand and the cause the company advocates. The respondent's reactions to the advertisements were generally displayed with scepticism; however, this could be regulated by how they perceived the brand-cause fit. If respondents were unable to see the fit, they were more inclined to perceive the advertisement negatively. Contrarily, when the brand-cause fit was perceived as high, respondents were more inclined to perceive the stance positively. When positive associations were formed, it was usually connected to the brands' product or services, or consistent with the image respondents held of the brand.

Moreover, the empirical material suggested respondents were more prone to identify themselves with the brand, when they could acknowledge that the brand carried similar values to their own, thus emphasising familiarity. Therefore, reliable indicators point to the importance of a high brand-cause fit between the respondents' and brands' values. Below quote exemplifies how one of the respondents identifies herself with a brand of her preference.

> *"Like Patagonia, I would also feel like this is me [Patagonia] their actions and stand about creating a better environment is more meaningful. When the action is directly related to the product."- respondent 5*

This respondent further identified herself as a conscious consumer, and expresses herself through the brands she chooses to buy from and therefore considers her brands more carefully. The statement further underlines how a high brand-cause fit creates meaning for the respondents, thereby adding value, as it leads to a higher degree of identification with the brand, resulting in an more positve perception of the brand. However, the brand-cause fit can be perceived high, without a direct link to the company or brand's product, as long as it manifests in their culture or history. Below quote elaborates:

> *"If the product is aligned with the core values, the working environment or maybe the culture of the companies - even the history. Let us say they are known for being diverse, or openly support the LGTB communities, then I think they can include it in their communications, but if they are not, then it is basically social justice washing." - respondent 6*

The respondent further postulated that in order for brands to avoid being perceived as inauthentic when advocating a cause, there has to be congruence with the stance they take and the company's core values. That means it would have been perceived as inauthentic if a company raised concerns for LGBT rights, without having an actual connection or reason for advocating LGBT rights.

What is also emphasised in the previous quote was how respondents perceived a low brand-cause fit to be inauthentic, thus making the alignment between the company and cause especially relevant. Respondents wanted the brand activism to be authentic, and thus contributing to a good cause, rather than purposely being deceived by brands using brand activism as a marketing tool. As the previous quote and the one below highlights, the company's core values play an essential role in how the brand-cause fit is perceived:

> *"For me, the consumer, to perceive the actions as genuine, it is very important that they incorporate their core values. It would be weird if H&M would talk about worker values, when they at the same time have sweatshops in Asia. I think that it is important that companies are consistent, and engage in actions."- respondent 5*

This quote holds the core values of the company central to the perceived sincerity of the alignment between brand and cause. An example is given of H&M, as they have been faced with many labour force scandals throughout the years, thus having damaged the consumers' perception of their stances. Therefore, consumers would not perceive their advocacy on that matter as genuine, meaning conducting brand activism by engaging on such issues would lead to a negative perception rather than an positive one because the fit would be deemed low. Another critical aspect to highlight from this quote is the latter part, where consistency and action are emphasised. There is a unanimous agreement that the brand-cause fit needs to be consistent, meaning, the perception of the fit will not be perceived truly high before consumers feel it is a genuine action, and this requires consistency over a longer period.

4.1.3 Aligning the stance with the brand

After the respondents were exposed to the marketing stimuli, the KLM and SAS advertisements, the brand-cause fit seemed to be a strong indicator of how well the advertisement was perceived among the respondents. Generally, the majority found SAS's stance to be misplaced because many of the respondents did not see a connection, nor did they find it natural for SAS to take a stance on a social issue. However, the few respondents who perceived there to be a good brand-cause fit between the SAS and the advocated cause, also found the advertisement intriguing. The KLMs advertisement was better perceived by the vast majority, given respondents felt that it made more sense for KLM as an airline company, to raise a concern in an environmental issue. In the following sections how respondents perceived the brand-cause fit will be further elaborated and explained in the upcoming section, starting with KLM.

4.1.3.1. KLM

As mentioned above, the KLM advertisement was generally better perceived among the respondents. One crucial reason for this was because the message was perceived to fit the issue KLM addressed. The quote below testifies to how the respondents justified their perceived high brand-cause fit for the KLM advertisement:

> *"My initial thoughts of the KLM advertisement are that it is very in sync with the airline and the time that we live in, as well as the discussions that are taking place in the world right now. I would say the connection between all the elements works very good." - respondent 8*

This respondent's immediate thought was the advertisement is aligned with the existing perception she holds of the airline, and in return, the respondent perceives the brand-cause fit to be high and thus increases the perception of KLM. The elements in the advertisement that lead to the high perceived brand-cause fit were both the alignment between cause and brand, as well as the overall alignment between the brand-cause fit and societal issues.

However, what was interesting with respondents views concerning the KLM advertisement and the brand-cause fit was that even though respondents perceived the brand-cause fit to be sufficient and thus liked the advertisement, another reason for liking the advertisement was because it went against their essence of their business practices, when KLM encouraged people to ‘fly less’. Below one respondent explained what she liked about the KLM advertisement.

> *“I think they wanted to make people aware of their environmental stance because it's very trendy to be sustainable, hoping people would maybe fly with them. To be honest I quite liked it because it went against their own purpose somehow. It was very surprising and bold.” – respondent 8*

Similarly, one another respondent expressed that he was positively surprised with KLM showing bravery by telling people to fly less, despite going against their interest, he described it as such:

> *“I am very surprised. I was waiting for the catch because how can an airline tell you to fly less? I respect that very much.” – respondent 11*

The quotes above demonstrate that the respondents were positively surprised by an airline company telling people to fly less and consider their travelling patterns. Further, these quotes indicate that KLM earned the respondents respect by having the urge to take responsibility for their role and have the boldness to implicate themselves. Ultimately, the reason for why respondents liked the advertisements was highly paradoxical, as respondents felt the brand-cause fit to be sufficient, while simultaneously, felt that it went against the essence of KLM's business.

However, this message was not well-perceived by all respondents. A few were promptly against an airline taking a stance on an environmental issue and the reason for this was that they did not perceive the brand-cause fit to be high. One respondent explained that to be because flying is the worst one can do to the environment, it is wrong for an airline to engage in such an issue. Her response to when asked how she felt about the advertisement was the following:

> *“I think the commercial is very hypocritical because they are focusing so much on sustainability and everyone knows that flying is probably the worst thing you can do for the environment.” – respondent 7*

Another respondent likewise found the advertisement highly hypocritical. She acknowledged that it was not in KLM's interest to make consumers fly less, indicating that the advertisement went against the company's business essence. Therefore, it brought out a few negative responses as it was considered to be deception, as those respondents did not believe a company to encourage a practice going against their economic gain. Again, these perceptions were held by respondents with lower trust in companies, who also felt brands did not need to get more involved in society.

4.1.3.2. SAS

Moving on to the perception of the brand-cause fit concerning SAS and the issue they advocated. A vast majority of the consumers had more negative perceptions towards the SAS advertisement, and a major reason for this was because they felt the brand-cause fit was not being appropriate. The following quote emphasises how this was apparent to one of the respondents.

> *"To be honest I just do not think it makes sense that SAS took a stance on this issue. It made it very hard for me to capture and understand the message, because I found this issue to have nothing to do with SAS, and I am not really sure what to do or think of this. It feels empty." - respondent 9*

This first statement explains how a respondent did not feel the stancetaking made sense, given how she perceives SAS as a brand, making it harder for her to decode the message. Moreover, she added it felt empty to her, indicating she does not know what actions will come out supporting SAS, or how SAS will follow up on their stance. The importance of the brand-cause fit alignment was further emphasised by two respondents who explained their perceived mismatch between SAS and the brand activism they were conveying:

> *"Honestly I do not think it fits somehow. Like, SAS, doing such an advertisement? It is just not who they are, or at least how I see them. I would never have guessed it to be them if it did not appear in the advertisement." - respondent 8*

These statements imply that the respondents felt this fit was low between the brand-cause and SAS, as the respondent had a different perception of SAS image than what was being conveyed. As a result, the consumers' perception of the advertisement was affected and thereby perceived negatively. The respondents associated SAS with being quite an old-fashioned company with a strong Scandinavian heritage and the advertisement 'What is truly Scandinavian' portrayed the opposite. Thus, emphasising SAS did not align with their core values.

Nevertheless, a few respondents found the advertisement to be aligned with the company's core values, and therefore perceived the brand cause fit to be sufficient. These respondents understood that the message SAS wanted to convey was about unifying people and promoting that travelling enriches us with memories and experience. The quote below postulates how one respondent puts it:

> *"What I like about it [the advertisement] is that it is easy for companies to say good things and say that they like different things. Sort of like multiculturalism or whatever you want to call it, but here they also sort of combine it with what they are actually doing like you can see what can wait and see what you bring home next." – respondent 3*

The quote above indicates the respondent felt it was a good fit for an airline to promote multiculturalism and connecting people. Therefore, he felt the message was appropriate and aligned with the essence of their business, indicating a sufficient brand-cause fit. Similarly, two other respondents also interpreted the SAS advertisement in a positive light, as they similarly felt that it is an airline company's job is to connect people and promote the beauty of travelling. In other words, they felt the message very much aligned with the SAS core values.

4.2 Introducing brand activism

In addition to respondents perceiving the brand cause fit as being a crucial element for determining their perceptions towards the advertisement, we identified three dimensions that appeared to regulate respondents' perceptions towards taking a stance. These three dimensions are namely; authenticity, responsibility and emotions, and were explicitly identified in connection with KLM and SAS brand activism advertisement. In the following section, these three elements will be further presented and explained.

4.2.1 Make the stance authentic

A strong commonality that impacted how the respondents perceived the advertisement was the perceived level of authenticity. The more authentic the advertisement was perceived, the better it influenced the respondents' perceptions. Oppositely, if consumers perceived brands to take an inauthentic stance, their brand perception would become more negative. This was also apparent for both the KLM and SAS advertisement, as the majority of respondents perceived the former one to be more authentic, while the latter one inauthentic.

A reason for why most of the respondents perceived KLM's stance positively was because they felt it was very tangible. A strong indicator was that KLM encouraged them to fly less, which made the respondents perceive it to be more authentic, as they went against the essence of their own business.

> *"I like that they made it very concrete. They talk about something real and mention possible solutions, when encouraging you to fly less or consider Co2 compensating your flight. They actually offer you that possibility. To me as a consumer that is very valuable, it makes it more real and transparent". – respondent 6*

The respondent further explained that what made her think the advertisement was being less commercial, was because they did not vilify the consumer to become more environmentally friendly or support KLM as a brand. Instead, they provided the options to reflect upon one's own choice, which according to her, was perceived as a genuine attempt to contribute to the well-being of the planet. Moreover, the majority of the respondents similarly emphasised that the KLM advertisement was more original, thus making respondents perceive it to be more authentic. The primary reason for this was similarly because they offered people concrete solutions on what one can do to help to contribute to take the train, for example; rethink if one needs to travel, take the train instead or compensate for the Co2 emissions.

However, the respondents who did not like the KLM advertisement, argued it was because the advertisement did not feel authentic. The respondents emphasised that KLM only made this advertisement to best fit the consumers' values today and ride on the 'activist movement train'. What specifically made one of the respondents inclined to think that the advertisement was inauthentic was, paradoxically, because KLM suggested consumers take the train instead. She expressed herself:

> *"For me this advertisement was not authentic. There are a lot of other companies communicating that as well. For example, the train companies. They have the same message, why does an airline company also need to address this." – respondent 5*

When asked what would then have made the advertisement more authentic, she suggested that instead, they could have promoted that they are working on a greener fuel or that they are plastic-free, as to her that would have been the most tangible and fitting. She felt that because it is an airline company, it is not genuine to promote taking the train instead, because that is the train company's job. Additionally, she suggested that if KLM truly wants to promote that they are a greener airline, they need to provide facts on how they are working to reduce the emission or pollute less, thus being more transparent.

Concerning the SAS advertisement, two respondents thought that the advertisement was commercial. They felt it was too evident that SAS wanted to sell more tickets, as they could not see another connection between the brand and the cause they address, thus finding the advertising inauthentic. As mentioned earlier in the analysis, the primary reason why consumers did not like the advertisement was that they either felt that the brand cause fit was low, or they felt offended by the addressed issue. However, a few respondents contrarily argued they liked the advertisement because it did not try to persuade people to buy SAS flight tickets, thus making it authentic. Moreover, they acknowledged that SAS was deflecting from flying. What was liked about the SAS advertisement was that it emphasised the positive aspects of travelling, and how it enriches us with experiences, she explained:

> *"I think it is nice to see something fresh like this and that they point out all the good things that flying has enabled us to do and bring up the good experiences." – respondent 7*

What she found appealing in the advertisement was that SAS did not try to encourage people to fly with SAS, instead focus on the positive light of travelling. The respondent perceived that because of this, the advertisement was less commercialised and felt more original and authentic.

In general, the KLM advertisement was more preferred, only two respondents argued that they disliked the advertisement, as they felt that KLM only did it because they wanted to appeal to today's conscious consumers, and thus engaging for insincere reasons. These were the consumers who found the SAS advertisement to be more original and more suitable for an airline company to address. Only one respondent seemed to like both of the advertisements; likewise, one respondent seemed to dislike both of them. The reason for disliking both of them was because he felt that SAS only tried to play with consumers' emotions and thus sell more tickets, whereas KLM took a stance on an environmental issue because being environmentally conscious is very trendy today. He addresses his opinion in the following comment:

> *"I think that they both are good ideas, even though I did not really like any of the advertisements. They were both too commercial, especially KLM.*

However, the KLM commercial is way more in line with the opinion of the public than SAS." – respondent 2

The respondent who gave above testimony, did however, not believe brands necessarily should take stances, nor could they be expected to, and if they did, it would only revolve around profit. This means no matter how the brand activism was conducted, or how authentic the advertisement was, this respondent would still oppose the advertisement.

4.2.2 With great power comes great responsibility

As presented in the first section of the analysis, it became apparent that the respondents speculated on whether or not it is of a company's responsibility to engage in brand activism. The vast majority established that they do not think it is a company's responsibility to do so. Nevertheless, when the respondents were exposed to KLM's advertisement, many reacted positively towards KLMs initiative to raise a concern for climate change. Many of the respondents particularly highlighted they thought it was a responsible and brave move of KLM. The quotes below illustrate how a few respondents put it:

"It makes me see them as a responsible company because they have a huge impact on the climate, and implicates directly on themselves, I think it was a brave move from them to have a commercial like this." – respondent 8

The respondent quote above additionally found it to be a responsible move to take a stance on an environmental issue and telling people to fly less, and instead consider taking the train. What she found was especially responsible was that they acknowledged being a part of the problem, and thus raise awareness of it. Aligned with the quote mentioned above, respondents similarly found KLM to be brave and responsible for addressing the issue and implicating themselves as being a part of the problem.

Nevertheless, several respondents felt that it was somehow contradictory when an airline raised questions on the environmental issue. Despite their sceptic view, they similarly postulate it was better to raise awareness than to stay quiet and conduct business as usual. The quote below illustrates how one of the respondents thought they were, concerning the aforementioned.

"I guess, you always have a sort of sceptical view and that they do everything to earn more money but I still think that what they say is true and cool like they dare to talk about it, like that they are acknowledging it as they are a part of the problem." - respondent 4

It became evident from the interviews that despite many being sceptical of whether or not it is an airline industry's place to raise awareness in such an issue, they ultimately found if it is anyone's responsibility to do so, it is theirs. What the respondent specifically valued was that they raised an awareness of how damaging flying is and that they recognised that a change has to occur for the descendants to be able to live on this planet. Because KLM was the first airline to take a stance on such an issue, respondents considered KLM to be responsible, and thus formed positive perceptions towards the brand. One respondent further elaborated and explained why he thought it was a good and responsible initiative to raise an awareness, which is presented in the quote below:

> *I think this could spark up some discussion or competition between the few companies about who can actually prove that they are the most responsible for the environment, and maybe they could start working together to have a lesser impact or something. This is the first initiative I have seen." – respondent 1*

According to the respondent above, taking a stance on an environmental issue could potentially inspire other companies within the industry to consider taking steps toward a more sustainable future. The respondent further explains he believed this could create a competitive environment where sustainability is the main factor. Additionally, this could lead to companies beginning to co-operate on how to develop a more sustainable way of flying, thus having a positive impact on the climate.

However, not all respondents perceived taking stance on an environmental issue as a responsible act. A few respondents found it to be reckless to claim that they are doing something for the environment, without providing any concrete actions. As one respondent put it:

> *"[…] I feel like their [KLM] message came off as kind of shallow. It is very easy to just say yeah, fly responsible and take the train instead. I just felt more like KLM wanted to portray themselves as responsible rather than actually doing something to society." – respondent 5*

The respondent felt that because KLM wanted to position themselves high on the moral ladder in such an unrealistically way, the respondent found the message to be shallow. She further addressed that KLM did not provide enough information on how they were doing more for the sake of the environment than other companies. As a result, she found the advertisement to be insincere, as they did not take responsibility for their impact on the climate.

4.2.3 Stay true to yourself

Before the respondents were exposed to the marketing stimuli, they were asked what they identified SAS with. Almost everyone associated SAS with Scandinavia, and in general the majority of the respondents spoke highly about them. After the respondents were exposed to the marketing stimuli, the overall response was that respondents perceived less of SAS as a brand. A majority's initial reaction towards the advertisement was either confusion or anger. Respondents felt confused as they did not understand the message SAS wanted to convey, whereas others felt anger and offense towards SAS.

The respondents who perceived the advertisement negatively primarily did so as they felt SAS disparaged their Scandinavian heritage by claiming there is no Scandinavian culture, and thus no Scandinavian identity. To demonstrate this representative opinion, one respondent stated:

> *"I hated this advertisement. In the end I get what they mean but I do not agree and I feel it is offensive. They could send that message so much better. I did*

> *not feel unified, I felt unoriginal and like I had no history of being proud of. Of course rugbrød is Danish, I do not care what anybody says."* - respondent 11

The quote above testifies to the respondent not liking the advertisement, and the main reason for this was because he felt offended and attacked by the message SAS conveyed. Furthermore, he felt the need to defend his culture, and questioned how true their message was. This was shared by multiple respondents. In addition to this, a strong commonality among the respondents who disliked the advertisement, was because they found SAS disparaged their Scandinavian culture and identity. The following quote explains more profoundly why the respondent felt offended by the advertisement:

> *"The first part is offensive because it takes away the special feeling of being Scandinavian. Like I am not good enough, or my country is something less because we do not have exotic and colourful cultures. I kind of feel like they strip part of your identity, by attacking the Scandinavian element."* - respondent 8

Overall, respondents held negative perceptions about the advertisement. However, it was more strongly in the beginning when claiming that 'Nothing is Scandinavian and found the second part to be more positive. However, these respondents felt cynical about the whole advertisement as they felt it attacked them on a personal level, and the negative perception formed in the beginning was too strong to be altered towards the end. Although the respondent understood the message in the end, respondents agreed SAS could have conveyed the message in a much better way, while still respecting the Scandinavian culture and heritage.

4.3 Actions speak louder than words

Aside from gaining deeper insights to how consumers perceive brand activism, this study additionally aimed to uncover how they respond to it. Therefore, the third section in this empirical analysis aimed to capture responses to brand activism among the respondents. In this section respondent political consumption is explained, thus followed by how they connected to the stimuli in the form of 'What Is Truly Scandinavian?' and 'Fly Responsibly'.

4.3.1 The politically correct consumer

During the interviews, it became apparent that the respondents' way of responding to brand activism were closely linked with how inclined the respondents were to boycott or boycott a brand, hence becoming political. When consumers were asked whether they have partaken in boycotting or boycotting and the reason for doing so, many of the respondents claimed that they had engaged in the behaviour.

Overall, the respondents were more inclined to buycott. The main reason why the respondents tended to buycott a brand was they either wanted to support a local brand or one that held similar values to themselves. Among these respondents, a commonality was to support brands which were perceived as ethical and sustainable. Below the quotes highlights the likelihood to support a brad because it is locally produced or holds hood values according to the respondents:

> *"Generally I like to buy clothes made locally, or by small individuals who knits it themselves, especially from my children. It feels nice to support smaller and locally produced clothes, also because it feels more sustainable." – respondent 10*

> *"I would definitely support a brand if it holds good values, and does good things for society. For example I liked to by coffee from Starbucks, because I like that they put money in their local communities"- respondent 7*

Similarly, to buycotting, respondents explained they would boycott a brand if it went against their personal beliefs and values. Nevertheless, less than half of the respondents could provide a concrete example of when they partake in such an activity. The statement below clarifies why one of the respondents decided to boycott H&M.

> *"H&M is on my blacklist, because of all the scandals they have been in. For example, their bad habits concerning human rights and factories exploded and children worked there. Also, they are not even taking full responsibility for the whole concept they are representing, like fast fashion, which is not good for the environment" - respondent 1*

This respondent explained he has boycotted H&M, because they went against his personal values. The respondent identified himself as a conscious consumer and explained that he is against the whole concept of fast fashion, firstly because it is bad for the environment and secondly because of the labour scandals. Therefore, he does not want to support the brand, as he does not trust they have good intentions. Another respondent who also had boycotted states below he made a choice to boycott Barilla, because they went against his personal values. Moreover, he places emphasis on the fact that since it is pasta, it is an easy decision to boycott, as there are many substitutive brands:

> *"[…] for example when Barilla come out with the advertisement which was against homosexual couples, then I decided to blacklist them. When I go to buy pasta it is easier to blacklist them because there are many other pasta brands you can buy, and because they made the statement I thought that it was unnecessary to buy their products." - respondent 3*

The quote above was the only provided example of a respondent that had actively decided to boycott a brand, as a result of it engaging in brand activism. Ultimately, the respondents were more prone to buycott a brand for engaging in brand activism and taking a stance on an issue they could identify with. Moreover, it appeared that respondents had only boycotted low-involvement products with many substitutional options.

4.3.2 Words are just empty promises

As mentioned in the section above, a strong commonality among the respondents was their likeliness to boycott a brand if it went against their values. In similar matters, respondents were also inclined to buycott if the brand took a stance on an issue the respondents could identify with or held similar values. However, when respondents were exposed to KLM's and SAS's advertisements, it appeared the respondents were in fact not as inclined to buycott or boycott either of the brands, despite holding both positive and negative perceptions of them. This became evident when the respondents were asked if the advertisements made them prone to think or act differently in general or towards SAS or KLM.

Despite most respondents holding different views of the advertisements, these did not lead to any strong response towards the brand's themselves. However, a commonality among the respondents was that the majority liked the KLM advertisement, whereas the majority likewise disliked the SAS advertisement, thus leading to a change in their perceptions. However, the KLM advertisement did stimulate to intentions to respond amongst the respondents, indicating other types of responses were set in motion:

> *"[...] It [the advertisement] would make me consider taking the train even more than before if even the flight companies are telling me to do it. I mean, if they are telling me not to fly I probably should not."– respondent 1*

This respondent emphasised it made him reflect on his travelling behaviour, as he felt it must have been crucial to change it, since an airline promoted a message that goes directly against their business interest. Therefore, while he states the KLM advertisement makes him consider his role on the environmental stance, it will not necessarily manifest to KLM's advantage, as he says he would still not choose them over another brand. When further discussing with the same respondent, he explained KLM would need to send consistent messages over a longer period and provide solid evidence for him to actively choose them. This particular respondent in general had low levels of trust towards brands, which could indicate some consumers need to be persuaded through consistency. Similar thought patterns appeared among other respondents that postulated they would consider changing their travelling behaviours, below in the quotes these reactions are testified:

> *"I will think once more before deciding to fly, this makes me want to look for other possibilities." - respondent 4*

> *"It would not necessarily make me want to fly with KLM, but it made me consider to compensate for the Co2 emissions or make me look for an alternative." – respondent 8*

As the quotes postulate above, KLM questioned whether it is always necessary to fly and made some respondents inclined to compensate for their flying in the future. Therefore, even though the advertisement did not provide favourable actions towards KLM, it did lead to respondents increasing their perception of them more positively.

There was however, one respondent who stated he liked both advertisements, and would in fact consider to actively fly with either KLM or SAS in the future. Below quote attests to his views.

> *"[...]both of them are higher on the list of airline companies that I like and would more strongly consider them next time I fly." – respondent 3*

The same respondent acknowledged that for him to choose one of the airlines purposely, it is not enough to have only done one advertisement. He believes they have to be consistent in their communication and actions over a more extended period, for him to actively be more inclined to purchase tickets for KLM and SAS. When further discussing buycotting with the respondent, he explained that a brand would need to prove to him over a longer period they are sincere with their activism, for him to actually buy something from them. Therefore, for his actions to favour KLM and SAS, they would need to demonstrate consistency over time and show him that they are sincere and have good intentions. This was a common viewpoint held by many respondents, especially concerning the KLM advertisement. For the respondents to believe in their activist message and to make them prone to actively choose KLM, they have to provide concrete evidence of how consumers supporting their brand will contribute positively to the stance the brand advocated.

Moreover, an interesting finding in connection with the SAS advertisement was that even though half of the respondents felt offended by the advertisement, and some even expressed hate, they would not boycott SAS. Despite the majority of these respondents had claimed to be willing to boycott prior to the stimuli, especially if they felt it aroused anger in them. However, while many attested to a decreased perception of the brand, their actions remained indifferent. As one respondent puts it:

> *"My perception of the brand is slightly less to be honest, but I think my connection is so strong that I would be willing to get past it…this advertisement makes me indifferent. Would not keep it in the back of my mind when purchasing tickets." – respondent 9*

Ultimately, it was evident the majority of the respondent's perceptions of KLM were more positive, but it did not lead to any responses necessarily favourable to KLM, merely intentions. Instead, the majority of the respondents would consider changing their overall behaviour when travelling. Similarly, while the majority of the respondent's perceptions of SAS had decreased, and some even explained feeling anger and disappointment towards the brand, none of those respondents would actually choose to not fly with SAS despite their feelings. Overall, the primary response was either an increase or decrease in perception, while their responses remained indifferent.

5 Analysis and Discussion

This chapter analyses and discusses the findings presented in the previous chapter. Here we further connect empirical findings with the theory presented in the literature review, to give depth to these findings. As presented in the analysis, this has three major themes that emerge from the empirical findings, and we divided according to the outline in the analysis; however, we did make small adjustments. At the end of this chapter, we present a modified framework, consisting of the new key concepts inspired by the literature review but also new ones which emerged from the data collection. These new key concepts are presented with the purpose to answer our research question, how do consumers perceive brand activism, and how they respond to it.

5.1 When business becomes politics

The first theme has to do with taking a stance, and whether or not respondents felt this added value to them, or if it had the opposite effect. As this is central to brand activism, it was essential to uncover how respondents felt about brands taking on institutional roles. Unexpectedly, the respondents, unlike what previous literature has indicated, did not expect brands to take on institutional roles and get more involved in society. The majority of respondents felt confident their governments were capable of regulating such issues through laws, and thus did not believe brands were responsible for engaging in brand activism. However, respondents did make it clear they would overall perceive it positively if brands got more involved in society, if they did so for the right reasons. Therefore, in contrast to previous research, our study shows that it is not a black or white matter.

According to several authors, as a response to contemporary society, consumers expect brands to vocalise societal issues and give back to the society they are harming, thus calling for activist brands (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore & Hill, 2006; Wienzimmer & Esken, 2016; Mandfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Sarkar & Kottler, 2018; Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand, 2019). However, the findings in this study contradicts with the literature, as according to the respondents, brands should only engage out of their own free will. It was generally perceived that a brand's job was not to perform institutional laws, but instead to generate profit and provide the people with jobs. A possible explanation for why this study contradicts the existing literature could be because the respondents all had high levels of trust in their governments, which also contradicts Sarkar and Kottler (2018) and Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019), who states brand activism has emerged partially from decreasing levels of trust towards their governments. However, their studies primarily took place in America and Asia, whereas the respondents for this study were all Swedish and Danish. Therefore, it is very likely that given the vastly different markets and governments, the outcome differs accordingly.

Although respondents did not expect brands to engage in brand activism, they still viewed it as something positive, if brands did so for the common good. One reason for holding this viewpoint was since brands have the economic capacity and voice to establish awareness of the issue, and by doing so they contributed to the common good by educating consumers about the issue in question. These findings align with Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) and Becker-Olsen, Cudmore and Hill (2006) studies, who claim that consumers in general feel brands should utilise their power more. Besides, respondents felt that supporting a brand that has taken a stance added value to them in a purchase context. Similarly, Wright et al. (2006) claim that consumers use consumption as a means of voting by supporting products that are aligned with their values. This tended to be apparent among the respondents as they thought that stancetaking was perceived as something positive when they could see the self-efficacy in supporting the stancetaking. Furthermore, a parallel between stakeholder theory and brand activism can be drawn, as Roper and Fill (2012) explains stakeholder theory is shared value between brands and a stakeholder. If brand activism is put in that equation, it means consumers are investing in their stances. By supporting brands that are aligned with their values, they invest in the company's stance.

Nevertheless, a small minority felt unsettled with brands regulating institutional roles and felt that societal changes should only be made through laws. Thereby, they align with Holt (2002) and Roper and Fill (2012) postulating that some consumers feel brands' power in society has grown too big, which manifests in an unhealthy distribution of power. These consumers were highly sceptical of the motives for taking a stance.

5.2 How perceptions of brand activism are regulated

The empirical data suggested there are five main concepts that influence how respondents perceive brand activism. These five are: brand-cause fit, authenticity, responsibility, emotions and self-identification. These five subthemes represent the strongest commonalities of how the respondents perceived brand activism. Therefore, the following theme will consist of the aforementioned subthemes that all surrounds perceptions. While perceptions can be hard to grasp, the subthemes were all commonalities that affected the respondent's perceptions, indicating the concepts needed to be aligned, for respondents to form positive perceptions.

5.2.1 Perceived brand-cause fit

When investigating how respondents perceive brand activism, it became evident during the empirical findings their perceptions were influenced by how they perceived the brand-cause fit between the brand and the cause they advocated. The brand-cause fit tended to be one of the most important ground elements forming the respondent's perceptions of brand activism. This aligns with Zdravakovic, Magnusson and Stanley (2010) and Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019), who all claim a high brand-cause fit needs to be present for millennials to accept the brand activism. Furthermore, a high brand-cause fit generally led to a more positive perception of the brand, while a low fit led to a more negative perception, and in some cases, was perceived to be greenwashing.

Closely related to cause-related marketing when pursuing brand activism, the congruency in brand-cause fit between the company and the advocated cause plays a congruent part in determining the success of the initiative (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006; Robinson, Irmak & Jayachandran, 2012). The aforementioned has also proven to be the case concerning brand activism according to our empirical findings, as many respondents determined the success of the activist campaign, by how congruent the brand-cause fit was. Moreover, similarly to corporate social responsibility, the consumers are expecting the brand activism to be aligned with the company's core values. It became apparent in this study that an alignment of the brand's core values and the cause they advocated highly affected the perceived brand-cause fit. This affirms with Wienzimmer and Esken (2016) and Mandfredi-Sánchez (2019) and Zdravkovic, Magnusson and Stanley (2010) who all argue corporate social responsibility should be a part of the company's core strategy and thus aligned with their core values. However, this study unlike the previous studies, found that the brand-cause fit does not only apply to a direct link between brand and cause, but that it extends to the company's or brand's company culture or history.

The importance of the brand-cause fit was further emphasised when the respondents were exposed to the SAS and KLM advertisements. The majority of the respondents overall found the fit to be high for KLM, leading to a more positive perception of the brand. A vast majority found it to be relevant for an airline company to take a stand on behalf of the environment, as the industry in itself is one of the main contributors for the carbon dioxide emissions. Aligning with the literature indicating when the brand cause-fit is high the perceptions of the advocated issues likewise become more positive (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore and Hill, 2006; Zdravkovic, Magnusson and Stanley, 2010; Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand, 2019). Interestingly, a few respondents further found the KLM advertisement appealing because they went against their business essence when encouraging people to fly less. Thus, indicating that the reason for why the respondents preferred the advertisement was paradoxical. On one hand, the advertisement was liked because the brand-cause fit was perceived to be high, while on the other hand because KLM went against their business essence.

On the contrary, a few respondents perceived the brand cause-fit to be low, since the flight industry is responsible for a big part of the carbon dioxide emissions, and thus not their place to raise awareness of the environment they are polluting. Therefore, these respondents perceived the KLM advertisement as hypocritical, and an attempt to greenwash, leading to a more negative perception of the brand. This finding aligns with Becker-Olsen, Cudmore and Hill (2006), Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) who postulates cherry-picking will lead to profound backlash and consumer punishment. Nevertheless, in this case, it did not lead to a backlash, instead to a more negative perception.

The SAS advertisement was, however, perceived to have a low brand-cause fit, as the respondents did not identify SAS with the social issue they advocated. Here it is noteworthy to mention the fit was perceived vastly lower among the Danish respondents, where most of them recalled remembering SAS's many union scandals years back, which could have impacted their perceptions of the brand-cause fit. This aligns with Batey (2008) and Wilson, Bengtsson and Curran (2013) who postulate the existing brand associations and previous knowledge about the brand will affect the perceptions. Therefore, it is possible that some of the respondents' prior associations with SAS influenced how they formed their perceptions.

However, the few respondents who found the brand-cause fit to be sufficient, also addressed more favourable attitudes towards the advertisement. Ultimately, these empirical findings indicate the respondents felt scepticism when exposed to both advertisements, but this scepticism was regulated by the perceived brand-cause fit.

5.2.2 Perceived level of authenticity

The empirical findings suggest that the level of authenticity influenced respondents' perception of brand activism in the advertisements. The respondents tended to perceive brand activism more positively when they felt that the advertisement was authentic. Similarly, when respondents perceived the advertisement as inauthentic, they were more inclined to consider it as an attempt for woke- or greenwashing.

According to Sarkar and Kottler (2018), brands must become more authentic in order for consumers to believe that the stancetaking to be sincere, which aligns with the findings for this study. The respondents overall perceived the KLM advertisement to be more authentic because they found it to be less commercial. What increased the respondents' level of authenticity was that KLM provided tangible solutions to what could be done, e.g. taking the train, considering online-meetings rather than flying, or compensating for one's carbon dioxide emissions. This opinion about wanting concrete evidence or solutions was very much in line with what respondents felt about brands taking stances.

The biggest implication for the SAS advertisement was that many respondents did not understand the message they wanted to convey. Therefore, it made it impossible to judge whether or not the advertisement was authentic, while the lack of brand-cause alignment reduced the perceived authenticity. Respondents who did understand the message in the advertisement and liked it, perceived the message to be authentic, and was one that could be expected from an airline company as their interest is to connect people and enrich humans with new experiences.

However, it should be mentioned that the KLM advertisement to a small minority likewise was perceived inauthentic, as some respondents felt it was insincere for an airline company to encourage consumers to fly less, as it essentially goes against their own business practices.

These respondents felt KLM only did this to position themselves high on the moral ladder while profiting from jumping on the bandwagon by appealing to the value driven consumers. This finding corresponds with Sobanade (2019) who is highly critical towards brand activism and claims that the company solely engages in it for their own profit. Similarly, the SAS advertisement was also perceived as an attempt to deceive consumers by distracting them from their real purpose, to sell more tickets, and thus woke-wash consumers (Sobande, 2019).

5.2.3 Perceived level of responsibility

The empirical material highlighted that respondents' perceptions towards the brand became more positive when they perceived the stancetakings as a responsible act. However, when the stance taken was perceived as reckless, respondents were likewise more prone to form a decreased perception of the brand. Thereby, the perceived level of responsibility was established as a factor which influenced respondents' perceptions towards the advertisement. Responsibility mainly became apparent from the discussion arising from the KLM advertisement, which may be the result of being environmentally conscious has been normalised. However, when discussing the SAS advertisement and the social issue globalism, it did not arouse any incitements of responsibility. Consequently, this could be related to globalism not being perceived as an appealing stance, and thus respondents did not connect the stance with SAS showing responsibility.

A major commonality present among the majority of the respondents, was they perceived KLM to signal a responsible image of themselves, by acknowledging that the airline industry is a significant contributor to carbon dioxide emissions. Furthermore, by going against their economic interest and telling people to fly responsibly, and even less, was likewise found as a responsible act, resulting in respondents forming positive perceptions of the advertisement, and KLM as a brand. Similarly, to our findings, Bhattacharya and Shen (2004) and Ramesh et al. (2018) studies found that when a company manages to incorporate corporate social responsibility correctly it will provoke positive perceptions. Moreover, Martin (2007) explains in order for the implementation to be more successful it must acknowledge a broader societal need. KLM created awareness of flying's negative impact on the environment and advised people on how they can reduce their climate impact when travelling. Thus, KLM arguably made respondents inclined to perceive KLM acknowledged a broader societal need, as they put the interest of common good, before their own economic interest.

Contrarily, a small minority reasoned that KLM should not take responsibility to address such an issue. Their main argument for this was KLM being the major contributor to the carbon dioxide emissions, and thus perceived it hypocritical for them to take a stance on an environmental issue. These respondents' viewpoint aligns with Ruiz and Marin (2007) and Bhattacharya and Shen (2004) who claim when it becomes apparent that a company engages in corporate social responsibility initiatives solely for the purpose to maintain public relation, consumers tend to perceive it as an attempt to devise them. The aforementioned became apparent in these respondents' accumulations, as they perceived that KLM reasoning to do so was because being environmentally conscious is highly trendy these days and as the flight industry is as far as an industry gets from being environmentally friendly is not their place to raise this concern.

Together these findings indicated that the respondent evaluates to the extent to which they like the stancetaking, is based on how responsible they perceive it. When a respondent perceives the stance as being responsible, it arouses positive perception towards the brand. Oppositely, when the respondent views the stancetaking as being irresponsible, it arouses negative perceptions. However, with the KLM message, all the respondents acknowledge that it is an important message, and it must be conveyed. Yet, some perceive that KLM was the right company to advocate this issue due to that they are responsible for the toxic emission, whereas others perceive that because of this they should not address this issue, which ultimately regulated their perception of the level of responsibility.

5.2.4 Evoked emotions

Another significant component which regulated the respondents' perceptions of the advertisement was their emotions. The more negative emotions the advertisement aroused, the more they were inclined to perceive it negatively. The role of negative emotions specifically became apparent in the SAS advertisement, which arguably can be a consequence of the respondents' prior associations and experiences with SAS. Most respondents connected SAS to Scandinavia, thus the message of 'Nothing Is Truly Scandinavian' was particularly upsetting to respondents' identity. While the KLM advertisement was not considered emotional, it spoke to a general concern of most of the respondents: the climate crisis.

Although the SAS advertisement provoked some positive emotions among a few respondents, it overall triggered negative emotions, aligned with aforementioned. According to Batey (2008), when consumers form a perception of brands, their previous associations and expectations of the brand determine how they will perceive the brand. Moreover, Wilson, Bengtson and Currant (2013) address that the previous brand knowledge is also imperative. In this case, the respondents had associated SAS as a company with a strong Scandinavian heritage and felt they were previously conveying nationalistic tendencies in their advertising. Therefore, respondents were incapable of understanding why SAS sent a message which was as somewhat anti-nationalistic phrasing 'Nothing is Scandinavian', as they felt their identities as Scandinavian was disparaged.

Moreover, a few respondents expressed anger towards SAS, which, according to Romani et al. (2015), is a form of an anti-branding activity. Furthermore, according to them this occurs when a company acts in a prejudicial manner either by violating their norms or behaves in an unethical manner. The aforementioned aligns with how some of the respondents perceived the advertisement as the respondents perceived that SAS insulted their heritage and stripped a part of their identities, thus triggering anger. Furthermore, according to Brennan and Binney (2010) findings indicate that when an advertisement appeals to consumers' emotions as provoking fear, guilt or shame, they are more likely to invoke self-protection and inaction rather than an active response. Their findings align with this study, as respondents who expressed anger felt the need to defend themselves, thus using self-protections as a mechanism.

The empirical material highlights an essential difference to how respondents' emotions affected their perceptions. The majority of respondents explained they to some extent understood the message SAS was sending, while they did not agree with how it was conveyed by emphasising a rather negative perception of Scandinavia. KLM instead turned a negative topic into something more positive, by inspiring consumers and enabling them by providing options. Similarly, Hwang, Lee, Diddi and Karpova (2016) findings aligns with this study, as it is indicated that consumers were more inclined to form positive emotions towards the brand, when the brand emphasises the positive aspects of the purchase, rather than negative. Thus, it is suggested inducing positive emotions increase the perception of brand activism.

5.2.5 Level of self-identification

A recurrent element that was evident in many of the themes, was that respondents were more inclined to perceive the advertisements positively, if they could identify with the stance or message that was being conveyed. It was strongly apparent the respondents wanted to identify with the brand and cause, which corresponds to the majority stating they buy brands to signal themselves and their values to the outside world. Aforementioned therefore aligns with Batra (2019) and Belk (1988) that emphasises consumers are more drawn to brands that can create value to them, and aids them in constructing their self-identity. Consumers therefore tend to make the brand become a part of their extended-selves, and thus picks brands that contribute to the image they hold of themselves, and makes it possible for them to signal their identity to their surroundings (Belk, 1988).

Moreover, the empirical findings highlighted that consumers were more inclined to perceive the brand-cause fit to be high if they could identify with the cause, thus aligning with their own personal values and beliefs. This affirms with Baek et. al (2017) whose study found that consumers were likewise more inclined to perceive the initiative positively, when they found the cause to be relevant to their own lives and experiences. This became evident in the empirical material as several respondents highlighted, they liked KLM took a stance on an environmental issue, as most of them identified themselves as conscious consumers with care for sustainability. Contrarily, most respondents could not identify with the message SAS was sending, and thus could not identify with the stancetaking nor the brand. Additionally, most respondents answered they connected SAS to something Scandinavian, which therefore aligns with their negative perception of the advertisements they perceived as anti-nationalistic, thus meaning they were unable to reflect themselves in any of the parts.

5.3 Intentions to respond to brand activism

The last theme to be presented concerns how the respondents' intentions were influenced by their perceptions of the conveyed brand activism. While the purpose was to uncover how respondents responded to brand activism, the empirical findings does not show any responses, but instead a change in the intentions among respondents. However, while the majority of respondents stated they would buycott and boycott if they felt it added value to them, and further compromise on price, this was not evident in the empirical findings. Instead, the findings suggest perceptions influenced the respondents' intentions, but for them to have a more physical response they needed brands to prove themselves consistent over time.

Continuing from aforementioned, Baek (2010) and Neilsson (2010) both postulate that consumers can engage in political consumerism by either punishing or rewarding brands. By doing so consumers actively choose to buy or not buy from a brand, depending on how they perceive their values and behaviour. This was also affirmed in this study, as all respondents postulated they were inclined to both reward and punish a brand. Further, Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) found consumers more willing to pay a higher price when a brand supports a cause that corresponds to the consumer's personal values and beliefs, which respondents in this study acknowledged too. Similarly, to Neilsson (2010) the empirical findings indicate a connection between buycotting and levels of trust, as most of the respondents in our study who were the most inclined to buycott, generally trusted brands with institutional roles. The study also highlights a connection between those who buycutt, and the respondents who describe themselves as conscious consumers. Contrarily, the respondents that were the most inclined to boycott, were also the ones with the least trust in brand, and felt brands should not become more involved in societal issues, making them more likely to oppose a brand, aligning with Klein, Smith and John (2004) and Neilson (2010). Thus, respondents' levels of trust in brands and institutions affected their intentions to respond to brand activism.

A paradoxicality became apparent during the empirical findings, as respondents claimed they would compromise on price to support a stance that aligned with their values, thus buycotting, while this was not evident. In fact, despite the majority of the respondents stated their perceptions became more positive of KLM and more negative of SAS, it did not change their intentions towards either brand. Respondents further added price would still be the most important factor, for when deciding who to purchase flight tickets from, thus highlighting a potential attitude-behaviour gap. Simultaneously, respondents who were able to recall examples of brands they had boycotted, all named low-involvement purchases such as Barilla and H&M. Thus, this makes an interesting context, as the level of product-involvement may influence the respondent's intentions.

Ultimately, the empirical findings suggest respondents would not support KLM despite holding more positive perception and thus stimulating intentions. This finding goes against the literature stating that doing brand activism successfully will result in consumers rewarding the brands, and thus secure long-term competitive advantage (Wienzimmer & Esken, 2016; Sarkar &

Kottler, 2018; Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand, 2019). Instead, respondents emphasised they would reflect more on their consumption and their traveling behaviour in general, for instance taking the train or Co2 compensating their flight. Nevertheless, these behaviours would not necessarily favour KLM initially. Similarly, while the SAS advertisement was disliked by the majority of respondents, resulting in a more negative perception, their intentions to boycott SAS remained indifferent. Thus, this further contradicts the literature (Wienzimmer & Esken, 2016; Sarkar & Kottler, 2018; Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand, 2019), stating that consumers will punish brands if they behave in an unfavourable manner.

Overall, the empirical findings questions wheatear brand activism adds any real value to the respondents, as their perceptions merely led to intentions, but no responses. Furthermore, the findings suggest a possible attitude-behaviour gap, which might be due to respondents want to portray a responsible and caring picture of themselves by aligning their personal values with a good cause. Yet, in this study, when it comes to the actual behaviour, the respondents do not seem to behave correspondently. Additionally, this might also be the result of respondents' high level of trust in institutions, and thus do not perceive it necessary to make their consumption political.

5.4 Model of perception formation

To conclude the discussion, we present five key concepts deriving from the collected empirical material, based on literature within: brand activism, consumer activism and brand meaning. These five key concepts were found to form and regulate the respondent's perception of brand activism, and ultimately how they responded to it. Figure 5.1 illustrates the modified conceptual framework.

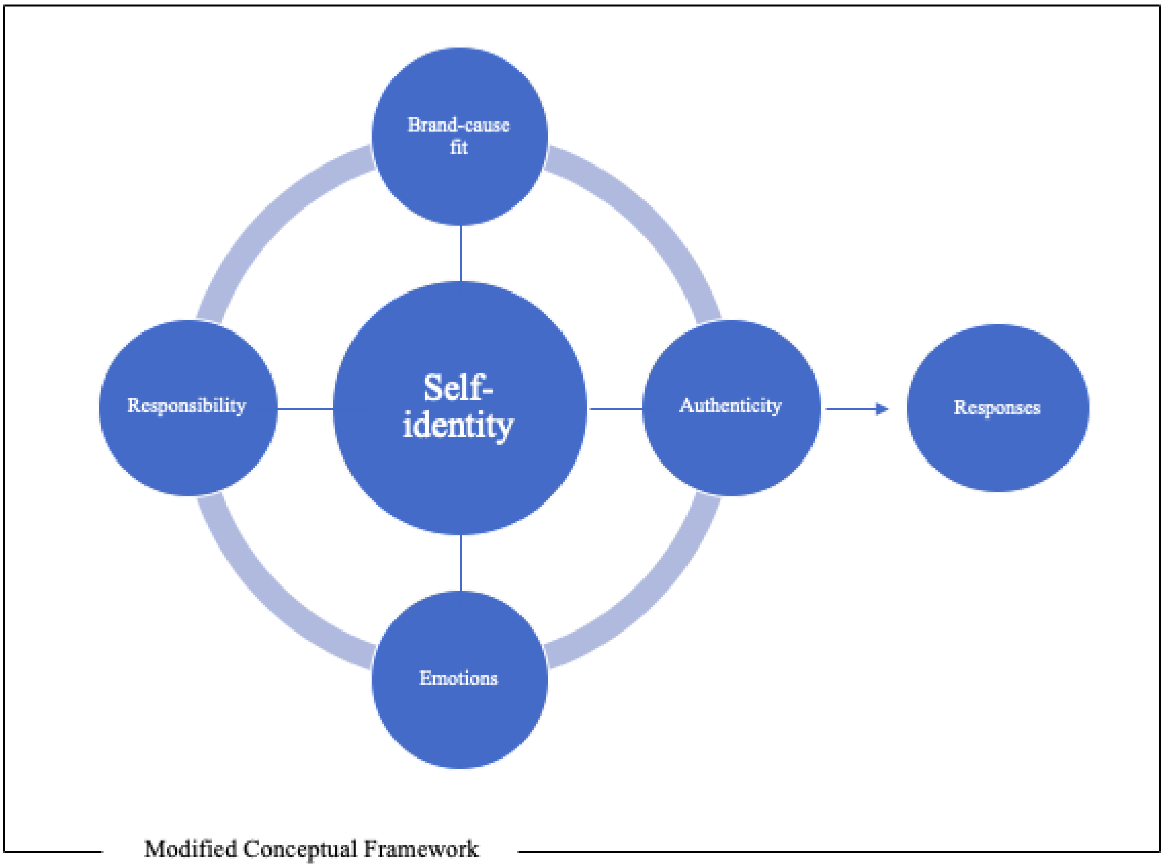

Figure 5.1 Modified conceptual framework, key concepts (Own figure, 2020)

This study places the five concepts of; brand-cause fit, authenticity, responsibility, emotions and self-identification, on the consumer's side of brand activism. In the existing literature these concepts have generally been placed from a brand management perspective, given research within brand activism to the author's knowledge, has not been conducted qualitatively from the consumers' perspective. Therefore, the aim with establishing this framework is to provide deeper insights and understandings of the respondents' thoughts, feelings, and opinions of how they form perceptions of brand activism, and thus how they respond to it. Respondents are generally indecisive and find it difficult to explain what overall makes them perceive brand activism positively or negatively. However, throughout the study it became apparent that the concepts regulated the respondent's perceptions. As a result, a modified conceptual framework has been created displaying how the key concepts interact from a consumers' perspective.

The self-identity is central to how perceptions are formed, as the respondent's own realities and experiences are fundamental to forming their perceptions. Realities cover thoughts, feelings, opinions, values and beliefs. The self-identity was apparent in all the key concepts, and it became evident respondents all had nuances to their responses that to some degree was based on their subjective realities. Thus, how respondents view themselves and the world establishes the foundation for forming their perceptions of brand activism. While self-identity is central and affects all the key concepts, the remaining four key concepts all interact. Hence, all key concepts should be considered as an interactive process, as they complement and enhance each other. The better interaction between the key concepts, the more they increase their impact, and the higher probability that the brand activism will encourage positive perceptions. Ultimately, the framework conceptualises how respondents' perceptions were formed, and as a result how they responded to it.

6 Conclusion

This chapter outlines our research aim and main findings, followed by a presentation of our theoretical contributions and managerial implications. Finally, we end this chapter presenting our research limitations and suggestions for further research.

6.1 Research aim and main findings

This thesis aimed to gain an understanding of how consumers perceive brand activism and how they respond to it. To achieve our study's aim, we presented a comprehensive literature review to identify relevant key concepts, which we used as a foundation for our empirical data collection. The empirical material was collected by conducting eleven semi-structured interviews, where respondents' perceptions and responses were stimulated through advertisements that conveyed brand activism. Through these interviews we were able to gain a deeper understanding of how respondents' perceived the phenomenon of brand activism and how they felt about brands taking on the roles of institutions. Additionally, these interviews enabled us to explore which stance was more favourable among the respondents and the reason behind this. Together these findings resulted in a modified conceptual framework, establishing an understanding of how respondents perceive brand activism and thus how they respond to it.

Previous findings suggest, in a rather black and white manner, that taking a stance is inevitable for brands in today's society. Our study, however, shows that it is not a black or white matter. The findings of this study implied that engaging in brand activism is not expected nor required of brands. However, when brands do engage in brand activism, respondents perceive it as something positive. Respondents felt that brand activism added value to them in a purchase context. They also felt that by raising awareness, brands contributed to the common good by educating consumers about the issue in question.

Respondents saw it as more suitable for an airline company to take stance on the question of climate change, rather than on the question of globalism. This was mainly because the airline industry is seen as a contributor to climate change. The respondents also perceived KLM as a responsible actor when they raised the issue about the environment. SAS, on the other hand, who took a stance on globalism was not perceived as responsible. By proposing concrete actions KLM was seen as authentic. SAS on the contrary, who did not propose any concrete solutions was seen as commercial, rather than authentic.

By providing concrete actions on how consumers can contribute to the cause, KLM managed to establish intentions among the respondents. If the brand acts consistently, these intentions can in the future lead to actions in form of a changed purchase behaviour. Contrary to earlier studies, our study does not imply that badly conducted brand activism will lead to any sort of bigger backlash for the brand. However, when brand activism is conducted in a good manner, it does lead to a better perception of the brand.

6.2 Theoretical contributions

In the following section our theoretical contributions will be explained by positioning our findings in context to the existing literature, by either supporting or confuting it. This study contributes to particularly three literature streams: brand activism, consumer activism and brand meaning, enhancing both the depth and complexity.

Given the nature of this study surrounding consumers' perception of brand activism, a considerable contribution was made to consumers' perspective on the stream of brand activism. Respondents provided newer insights and understandings of the phenomenon, as they both supported and disputed the existing knowledge. Most of the literature within brand activism has primarily been derived from studies conducted in America and Asia and have all been done quantitatively. The most significant literature related to this study are by Sarkar and Kottler (2018) and Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) who, to the authors knowledge, have contributed with the most recent insights on the phenomenon, while aforementioned dimensions were also present in these studies. Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) conducted a similar study in India, yet quantitatively, thus making this study's contributions of a qualitative study consumers' perception of brand activism in Scandinavia, to the authors' best knowledge, the first of its kind.

Both Sarkar and Kottler (2018) and Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) argue brand activism has risen as a reflection of a more value-driven society and consumers, combined with a decreased level of trust towards institutions, while trust in brands have increased. As a result, they state consumers are expecting brands to take a stance, while the consumers indirectly can support the advocated cause. This study, however, suggests respondents do not expect brands to become politicians, as they believed this decision lies solely with the brand, given it is not their primary job. However, all respondents emphasised they would like brands to take stances but provided different explanations as to when they would find it appropriate. A clear distinguish between our research and aforementioned authors are that all respondents held high levels of trust toward institutions and remained somewhat sceptical of brands. We believe this finding is central to respondents' perception of brand activism, and argue it is related to respondents living in Scandinavia.

This study supports Sarkar and Kottler (2018) and Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) suggesting the brand-cause fit plays a vital role in how respondents perceived the brand activism. The higher the fit, the more positive associations were formed. Respondents found the fit to be high when there was a direct link between cause and brand, or history and culture and brand. If respondents found the fit to be low, the brand activism became inauthentic, and was thus perceived as woke- or greenwashing. This further supports Sarkar and Kottler (2018) who claim the greatest threat of brand activism is being perceived as inauthentic, as brand activism is about trust. Respondents explained less-commercial advertisements and tangible messages increased the authenticity of the brand activism. Furthermore, this study supports Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) who argue the brand-cause fit and the core values have to be aligned. Consequently, this study highlights a paradoxicality, as respondents perceived the KLM advertisement very positively, despite the essence of KLM's business goes against the stance they took. However, respondents justified their perceptions as they felt since KLM was an airline, the fit was perceived as high. Moreover, respondents felt the self-implication made the stance brave.

While the study aligned with dimensions within brand activism, it likewise refuted central elements, especially within the stream of consumer activism. The literature emphasised consumer movements, similarly, to brand activism, reflect contemporary society and how it has evolved. The most apparent being the anti-branding movement and political consumerism. They are argued to have become dominant as brands' power has grown too big, and consumerism has become the greatest threat to society (Holt, 2002; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). As a result, consumers have enforced their new consumption to either support or oppose brands (Baek, 2010; Neilson, 2010). Almost all respondents claimed to be political consumers, as they were all buycotters, and most also recalled having boycotted. According to Baek (2010) and Neilson (2010) consumers are more inclined to boycott if they find the stance to be insincere, which this study also found to be relevant within brand activism. An interesting finding was that all respondents claimed they would compromise on price to buycott a brand with similar values to one's own, as concluded by Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Ananad (2019). However, this study highlights a possible gap, as these perceptions did not hold when exposed to the marketing stimuli. Most of the respondents claimed to have a more positive perception towards KLM, as well as a decreased perception towards SAS, but evidently also stated they would not take this into consideration next time when purchasing flight tickets. Thus, this study indicates a potential attitude-behaviour gap. Moreover, this study, while it intended to, did not find any actual responses to brand activism. Respondents' perceptions either became more positive or negative towards the brands, thus arguably qualifying them more as intentions to respond. However, it is notable that most respondents emphasised they would engage in more tangible responses if brands proved consistent, transparent and sincere over a longer period, thus regulating respondents' scepticism and aligning with Sarkar and Kottler (2018) and Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019).

This study further contributes to the literature within the stream of brand meaning. Brand meaning was central to how respondents formed their perceptions, as it became apparent respondents were drawn to brands that created value and meaning to them, thus aligning with the existing literature (Batra, 2019; Belk, 1988; Bhat & Reddy, 1998; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Hammerl, Dorner, Foscht & Brandstätter, 2016). In other words, respondents' perceptions were influenced by how much they were able to identify with the brand activism. The authors moreover claim consumers choose brands that become a part of their extended self, enabling consumers to signal their identity to the outside world. This study contributes with similar findings for respondents' perceptions of brand activism, as they stated they actively picked brands with similar values and beliefs as themselves, meaning they were more inclined to form positive perceptions if self-identification was present. Therefore, this study further contributes by refuting the literature within brand meaning that postulates brands can manage the meaning of brands, as according to Berthon, Pitt and Campbell (2009). Instead, this study aligns with Firat and Venkatesh (1995) and Ligas and Cotte (1999) suggesting consumers as co-creators of brand meaning. It was apparent that respondents' perceptions grounded in their own self-identity and values. This study adds a newer perspective to the consumers aspect, while suggesting brand meaning is in fact central to respondent's perception of brand activism.

6.3 Managerial implications

Besides the theoretical contribution presented above, this study also provides insights for marketing practitioners and managers who want to enhance their understanding of what to consider in order to implement successful environmental and social brand activism. This study has specifically focused on how consumers perceive and respond to brand activism, and confirmed that when brand activism is conducted right, it will positively influence the respondents' perception. Because our study indicated that how our respondents in this study formed perceptions about brand activism in contrast to other studies, is not a black and white matter, it is imperative to know one's target audience. Nevertheless, our study contributes with knowledge and insights marketers and marketing practitioners can take into consideration if they want to postulate positive perception, notably in the airline industry.

First, a vital component to consider is the congruence of the brand-cause fit. Managers must reflect whether the stance they take is aligned with what service or product the company provides. A vital implication to consider is whether the stancetaking fits in an industry. Second, when engaging in brand activism, consumers will consider whether or not it is the company's responsibility to do so, which is why it must become evident why the brand is the right actor to raise awareness of the issues in question. When the message is perceived right, the brand will be perceived as a responsible actor. In contrast, when the opposite occurs, consumers tend to perceive it as a somewhat hypocritical attempt to contribute to the common good. Third, an authentic stance is valued by consumers, and it is imperative to provide tangible and concrete solutions on how one's purchase of the product or service can contribute to the common good. In other words, it seems to be valued when a brand guides its consumers on how to do it. Therefore, it is essential to send the message in the right way. Besides, it is imperative to contemplate in which way the activist message is conveyed to the consumers. It is crucial not to or tell them to provide them with concrete options rather than telling them what the consumer should not do or what the consumer is not.

Finally, a noteworthy implication is that whether the stancetakings generates positive or negative associations among the consumers, for them to buycott or boycott the brand actively, there has to be consistency in actions. In other words, despite consumers perceiving the stance as an attempt to deceive them, doing it once does not make consumers inclined to boycott the brand. Hence, the action must be more radical or evoke more strong feelings. Similarly, for consumers to buycott, the company must be consistent and transparent in their communication over a more extended period. Ultimately, signifying that gaining consumers trust is a long-term process, it also indicates that engaging in brand activism is not as risky as previous literature has indicated. However, in order to stimulate more positive perceptions, the point above mentioned should be considered by managers and marketing practitioners.

6.4 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The study aimed to provide insight into how consumers perceive the phenomenon of brand activism and how they respond to it. To our best knowledge, this is the first paper in Scandinavia investigating brand activism from a consumer's perspective in the airline industry, indicating that our findings presented above have provided valuable insight notably to the fields of consumer activism and brand activism. However, we do acknowledge that there are limitations to this study that needs to be considered.

Given that respondents of this study were exposed to the stimulus from two advertisements within the airline industry, we acknowledge these results are ambiguous to replicate to other industry settings. Furthermore, as this is to our best knowledge the first paper that touches upon consumers' perception on brand activism within the airline industry, in order to grasp a more comprehensive view and further research of the consumers perspective of the phenomenon should be conducted. However, we find that our framework presented above provides a solid foundation for further research. Additionally, we acknowledge that because the stimulus material was used in the interviews, there is a possibility that the respondents' perceptions are biased to the material provided, and not to phenomenon. Furthermore, a possible constraint to consider is that this study only investigates Scandinavian consumers, and as we are aware that there are differences among consumers and across cultures and countries, implying that these results might vastly vary if the study would be conducted among other nationalities. It is further noteworthy to mention that our findings of this research are limited to our eleven respondents and subjective viewpoints.

Another point to consider regarding the data collection was that it was merely conducted by applying a mono-method approach, indicating that triangulation was not reached. Hence, in order to provide more in-depth knowledge, we acknowledge that the study could have been enriched with a netnography study. According to Kozinets (2002), netnography enables the research to provide more naturally occurring behaviour, indicating that consumers are more inclined to express their real attitudes and intentions online. However, as our study was limited to Scandinavians inhabitants and millennials, we could not guarantee that the consumers online fulfilled our requirements, and thus was this data collection method not applied. Although, we suggest further research to supplement the interview with a netnography study, to gain a research understanding of consumers perception and respondents to the phenomenon of brand activism, to provide more extensive knowledge to the literature of consumer activism.

Given this study recognises a gap between respondents' attitudes towards political consumption by buycotting or boycotting, and their attested behaviour, we find that it would be interesting to explore this gap further. Finally, we recognised that respondents were more prone to react negatively when a brand conveyed brand activism with a negative perspective. On the contrary, when brands conveyed brand activism with a positive or inspiring message, respondents reacted more positively. Thereby, we encourage further research of the nature of the message in brand activism.

References

Altexsoft (2020) Airline Marketing and Advertising Use Cases from American Airlines, Ryanair, Air France, and Others, Available online: https://www.altexsoft.com/blog/airline-marketing-advertising/ [Accessed 23 March 2020]

Baek, W. Y., Byon, K. K., Choi, Y. H., & Park, C. W. (2017). Millennial consumers' perception of sportswear brand globalness impacts purchase intention in cause-related product marketing, *Social Behavior and Personality: an international journal*, vol. *45 no*. 8, pp. 1319-1335

Baek, Y. M. (2010). To buy or not to buy: Who are political consumers? What do they think and how do they participate?, *Political Studies*, vol. *58*, no. 5, pp. 1065-1086

Banis, D (2019) Is KLM's 'FlyResponsibly' Campaign Just Greenwashing? Forbes, Available online: https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidebanis/2019/07/18/is-klms-fly-responsibly-campaign-just-greenwashing/#29b200474a6a [Accessed 15 April, 2020]

Batey, M. (2008) Brand Meaning. New York: Routledge

Batra, R. (2019). Creating brand meaning: A review and research agenda, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, vol. *29*, no. 3, pp. 535-546

Becker-Olsen, K. L., Cudmore, B. A., & Hill, R. P. (2006). The impact of perceived corporate social responsibility on consumer behavior, *Journal of business research*, vol. *59, no.* 1, pp. 46-53

Belk, R. W. (1988). Possessions and the extended self, *Journal of consumer research*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 139-168

Beresnevicius, R. (2019). Top 5 bankrupt airlines in 2019, Aerotime Hub, Available online: https://www.aerotime.aero/rytis.beresnevicius/24093-top-5-bankrupt-airlines-2019?page=1 [Accessed 23 March 2020]

Berthon, P., Pitt, L. F., & Campbell, C. (2009). Does brand meaning exist in similarity or singularity?, *Journal of Business Research*, vol. *62*, no. 3, pp. 356-361

BCG - The Boston Consulting Group (2012). The Millennial Consumer Stereotypes, Available online: https://www.bcg.com/documents/file103894.pdf [Accessed 28 April 2020]

Bhat, S. & Reddy, S. K. (1998). Symbolic and Functional Positioning of Brands, *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 32-43

Bhattacharya, C. B., & Sen, S. (2004). Doing better at doing good: When, why, and how consumers respond to corporate social initiatives. *California management review*, vol. *47,* no. 1, pp. 9-24

Blackhall, M. (2019) Global Tourism Hits Record Highs - But Who Goes Where On Holiday? The Guardian, Available online: https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/jul/01/global-tourism-hits-record-highs-but-who-goes-where-on-holiday [Accessed 03 April 2020]

Brennan, L., & Binney, W. (2010). Fear, guilt, and shame appeals in social marketing. *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 63, no. 2, pp. 140–146

Bryman, A., & Bell, E. (2011). Business Research Methods, 3rd ed., Cambridge; New York, NY: Oxford University Press

Carson, D., Gilmore, A., Perry, C. & Gronhaug,, K. (2001) Qualitative Marketing Research, London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Chamberlain, L. (2020) How Airlines' Embrace Of Social Media Is Evolving After A Decade Of Learning, Kambr, Available online: https://kambr.media/how-airlines-embrace-of-social-media-is-evolving-after [Accessed 04 April 2020]

Chang, C. T., & Chu, X. Y. M. (2020). The give and take of cause-related marketing: purchasing cause-related products licenses consumer indulgence, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, vol. *48* no. 2, pp. 203-221

Colson, T (2016) How Patriotic World-Leading Economies Are, Business Insider, Available online: https://www.businessinsider.com/yougov-19-most-patriotic-countries-in-the-world-2016-11?r=US&IR=T [Accessed 23 April, 2020]

Das, N., McNeil, C., Pouder, R. W., & Daly, J. P. (2020). Is cause-related marketing a winning strategy? An event study analysis. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, vol. *28* no. , pp. 43-55

Dauvergne, P. (2017). Is the Power of Brand-Focused Activism Rising? The Case of Tropical Deforestation *Journal of Environment & Development,* vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 135-1*55*

Deichgræber, R (2020) Nødlandingen af SAS Reklamefilm er Forsidestof i Hele Skandinavien, Finans, Available online: https://finans.dk/erhverv/ECE11939432/noedlandingen-af-sas-reklamefilm-er-forsidestof-i-hele-skandinavien/?ctxref=ext [Accessed 14 April, 2020]

Deloitte (2016) through The Passengers' Eyes: Delivering The ''Right'' Airline Customer Experience, Available online: https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/consumer-business/articles/airline-customer-experience.html [Accessed 03 May 2020]

Deloitte (2018) Gen Y – The rise of the individual, Available online: https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/se/Documents/technology-media-telecommunications/Deloitte-Millennial-Nordic-Report.pdf [Accessed 28 April 2020]

Dodd, M. D., & Supa, D. (2015). Testing the viability of corporate social advocacy as a predictor of purchase intention, *Communication Research Reports*, vol. *32*, no. 4, pp. 287-293

Dubois, A., & Gadde, L. E. (2002). Systematic combining: an abductive approach to case research. *Journal of business research*, vol. *55, no*. 7, pp. 553-560

Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R., Jackson, P., & Jaspersen, L. (2018). Management & Business Research, London: SAGE Publications Ltd

Elliott, R. & Wattanasuwan, K. (1998). Brands as Symbolic Resources for the Construction of Identity, *International Journal of Advertising*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 131-144

Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American journal of theoretical and applied statistics*, vol. *5*, no. 1, pp. 1-4

European Commission. (n.d). Corporate Social Responsibility & Responsible Business Conduct, Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/growth/industry/sustainability/corporate-social-responsibility_en [Accessed 18 April]

Firat, A. F., Dholakia, N., & Venkatesh, A. (1995). Marketing in a postmodern world. *European journal of marketing*, vol. 29 no. 1, pp. 40-56

Glaw, X., Inder, K., Kable, A., & Hazelton, M. (2017) Visual Methodologies in Qualitative Research: Autophotography and Photo Elicitation Applied to Mental Health Research, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods,* vol. 16, no. X pp. 1-8 [Accessed 04 May, 2020]

Hammerl, M., Dorner, F., Foscht, T., & Brandstätter, M. (2016). Attribution of Symbolic Brand Meaning: The interplay of consumers, brands and reference groups, *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 32-40

Hartman, T. (2017) New Study Finds Consumers Feel Neither Loyal Nor Valued By Airlines, Branding, Available online: https://brandigo.com/new-study-finds-consumers-feel-neither-loyal-valued-airlines/ [Accessed 29 March 2020]

Hessekiel, D. (2018) Engaging Gen Z In Your Social Impact Efforts, Forbes, Available online: https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidhessekiel/2018/06/26/engaging-gen-z-in-your-social-impact-efforts/#67a70a2e6499 [Accessed 21 May 2020]

Hollenbeck, C. R., & Zinkhan, G. M. (2010). Anti-brand communities, negotiation of brand meaning, and the learning process: The case of Wal-Mart, *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, vol. *13*, no. 3, pp. 325-345

Holt, D. B. (2002). Why do brands cause trouble? A dialectical theory of consumer culture and branding. *Journal of consumer research*, vol. *29*, no. 1, pp. 70-90

Hoppner, J.J. & Vadakkepatt, G.G. (2019). Examining moral authority in the marketplace: A conceptualization and framework, *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 95, pp. 417-427

Hwang, C., Lee, Y., Diddi, S., & Karpova, E. (2016). Don't buy this jacket. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal*, vol. 20, no. 4, pp. 435-452

Jackson, A. (2018). The 10 most critical problems in the world, according to millennials, Business Insider, Available online: https://www.businessinsider.com/world-economic-forum-world-biggest-problems-concerning-millennials-2016-8?r=US&IR=T [Accessed 24 May, 2020]

Jeng, S-P. (2016). The Influence of Airline Brand Credibility on Purchase Intentions Journal of Air Transport Management, vol. 55, no 1, pp. 1-8

Jolly, J. (2020) Europe's Airlines Expected To Lose 76 Billion Dollars In Passenger Revenues In 2020, The Guardian, Available online: https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/mar/26/europe-airlines-expected-to-lose-76bn-in-passenger-revenues-in-2020-coronavirus [Accessed 08 April 2020]

Keldsen, T (2015) Tumult i Flybranchen Påvirker Danskernes Holdninger, Men Ikke Nødvendigvis Deres Købelyst, YouGov, Available online: https://yougov.dk/news/2015/03/25/tumult-i-flybranchen-pavirker-danskerne-holdninger/ [Accessed 14 April, 2020]

Kelleher, S. (2019). Brand activism: do consumers care?, Comscore, Available online: https://www.comscore.com/Insights/Blog/Brand-activism-do-consumers-care [Accessed 21 May 2020]

Klein, J. G., Smith, N. C., & John, A. (2004). Why we boycott: Consumer motivations for boycott participation, *Journal of Marketing*, vol. *68*, no. 3, pp. 92-109

KLM (2020a) KLM's Company Profile, Available online: https://simpleflying.com/klm-fly-less/ [Accessed 15 April, 2020]

KLM (2020b) All About Sustainable Travel, Available online: https://www.klm.com/travel/nl_en/prepare_for_travel/fly_co2_neutral/all_about_sustainable_travel/index.htm [Accessed 15 April, 2020]

Kozinets, R. V. (2002). The Field Behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities, *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 39, no. 1, pp.61–72

Kozinets, R. V., & Handelman, J. M. (2004). Adversaries of consumption: Consumer movements, activism, and ideology. *Journal of consumer research*, vol. *31*, no. 3, pp. 691-704

Lee, J., & Kim, J. (2016). The effect of consumer characteristics on the cause-related marketing campaign: The role of personal life values, *International Journal of Business and Management*, vol. *11*, no. 9, pp. 82

Leer, J (2020) Glem Alt Om Flyskam, Forsvar En Klimasynder, Bureaubiz, Available online: https://bureaubiz.dk/klumme/glem-alt-om-flyskam-og-forsvar-en-klimasynder/ [Accessed 21 April, 2020]

Ligas, M., & Cotte, J. (1999). The process of negotiating brand meaning: a symbolic interactionist perspective. *ACR North American Advances*, vol. 26, pp. 609-614

Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985). Naturalistic Inquiry, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage

Mandfredi-Sánchez, J. L. (2019). Brand Activism, *Communication and Society* vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 343-359

Marin, L., & Ruiz, S. (2007). "I need you too!" Corporate identity attractiveness for consumers and the role of social responsibility, *Journal of business ethics*, vol. *71*no. 3, pp. 245-260

Martin, H. (2020) Travel By Plane And You Might Get 'Flight Shamed'. This Worries Airlines, Los Angeles Times, Available online: https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2020-02-07/flight-shaming-airlines-climate-change-greta-thunberg [Accessed 03 April 2020]

Neilson, L. A. (2010). Boycott or buycott? Understanding political consumerism, *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, vol. *9*, no. 3, pp. 214-227

Nikel, D (2020) Is Anything Truly Scandinavian? The Bizarre SAS Ad Controversy Explained, Forbes, Available online: https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidnikel/2020/02/13/is-anything-truly-scandinavian-the-bizarre-sas-ad-controversy-explained/#287a335feb2f [Accessed 23 April, 2020]

Olsen, H (2018) Hvem Ejer Egentlig SAS i dag, Insider Flyer, Available online: https://insideflyer.dk/hvem-ejer-egentlig-sas-dag/ [Accessed 12 April, 2020]

Rahmani, F., & Leifels, K. (2018). Abductive Grounded Theory: a worked example of a study in construction management, *Construction Management and Economics*, vol. 36, no. 10, pp. 565-583

Rennstam, J., & Wästerfors, D. (2018) Analyze! Crafting Your Data in Qualitative Research, Lund: Studentlitteratur AB

Robert, S. & Fill, C. (2012). Corporate Reputation: Brand and Communications, England: Pearson Education Limited

Robinson, S. R., Irmak, C., & Jayachandran, S. (2012). Choice of cause in cause-related marketing. *Journal of marketing*, vol. *76*, no. 4, pp. 126-139

Romani, S., Grappi, S., Zarantonello, L., & Bagozzi, R. P. (2015). The revenge of the consumer! How brand moral violations lead to consumer anti-brand activism. *Journal of Brand Management*, vol. *22*, no. 8, pp. 658-672

Salmons, J. (2014) Online Qualitative Interviews, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications

Sarkar, C. & Kottler, P. (2018). Brand Activism: From Purpose to Action, USA: Idea Bite Press

SAS (2020a) Kommentar til SAS Reklamefilm 'What is Truly Scandinavian', Available online: https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2020/kommentar-til-sas-reklamefilm-what-is-truly-scandinavian/ [Accessed 14 April, 2020]

SAS (2020b) This Is SAS, Available online: https://www.sasgroup.net/about-sas/this-is-sas/ [Accessed 22 April, 2020]

Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2012). Research Methods for Business Students, Essex: Pearson Education Limited

Shetty, A. S., Venkataramaiah, N. B., & Anand, K. (2019). Brand activism and millennials: an empirical investigation into the perception of millennials towards brand activism. *Problems and Perspectives in Management*, vol. *17*, no. 4, pp. 163

Simmons, C. J., & Becker-Olsen, K. L. (2006). Achieving marketing objectives through social sponsorships. *Journal of marketing*, vol. *70*, no. 4, pp. 154-169

Slotnick, D. (2019) Dutch Airline KLM Is Telling Customers To Fly Less As The Aviation Industry Confronts The 'Flight Shaming'Movement, Business Insider, Available online: https://www.businessinsider.com/airlines-flight-shaming-reactions-klm-launches-environmental-campaign-2019-7?r=US&IR=T

Sobande, F. (2019). Woke-washing: "intersectional" femvertising and branding "woke" bravery, *European Journal of Marketing* vol. ahead-of-print, no. ahead-of-print, pp. ahead-of-print

Stone, A. (2019). Can The Airline Industry Survive Climate Change?, Forbes, Available online: https://www.forbes.com/sites/andystone/2019/12/10/can-the-airline-industry-survive-climate-change/#2bc7b022708e [Accessed 23 March]

The Guardian (2020). The Guardian view on 'flight shame': face it – life must change, The Guardian, Available online: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/17/the-guardian-view-on-flight-shaming-face-it-life-must-change [Accessed 22 March 2020]

Thrane, C. (2001). Sport spectatorship in Scandinavia: A class phenomenon?, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. *36*, no. 2, pp. 149-163

UNICEF (2014), Pampers and UNICEF unveil ground-breaking achievements in the fight against maternal and newborn tetanus, Available online: https://www.unicef.org/media/media_73715.html [Accessed: 12 May 2020]

Varadarajan, P. R., & Menon, A. (1988). Cause-related marketing: A coalignment of marketing strategy and corporate philanthropy, *Journal of marketing*, vol. *52*, no. 3, pp. 58-74

Weinzimmer, L. G., & Esken, C. A. (2016). Risky business: Taking a stand on social issues. *Business Horizons*, vol. *59*, no. 3, pp. 331-337

Wilson, E. J., Bengtsson, A., & Curran, C. (2014). Brand meaning gaps and dynamics: theory, research, and practice. *Qualitative Market Research: an international journal*, vol.*17, no.* 2, pp. 128-150

World Airline Awards (2019) Best Airlines in 2019, Available online: https://www.worldairlineawards.com/best-airlines-2019-by-region/ [Accessed 15 April, 2020]

Wright, L. T., Shaw, D., Newholm, T., & Dickinson, R. (2006). Consumption as voting: an exploration of consumer empowerment, *European Journal of Marketing*, vol 40, no. 9, pp. 1049 – 1067

Zdravkovic, S., Magnusson, P. & Stanley, S. M. (2010). Dimensions of fit between a brand and a social cause and their influence on attitudes, *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 151-160

Appendix A

Interview guide

<u>Personal questions</u>

1. How would you describe yourself as a consumer?
2. Would you compromise on quality or price for a given product or service to support a brand?
3. Do you buy products that you feel you can use to express yourself?
4. How does a brand become likeable to you?
5. How do you base your opinions on brands?
6. Would you say that you generally trust other people, brands and institutions?

<u>Consumer activism</u>

1. Have you ever blacklisted a brand?
2. Have you ever purchased something from a particular brand because you wanted to support them?
3. Have you ever expressed your anger or support towards a brand by liking/sharing commenting on social media channels?
4. Have you ever taken part in a demonstration towards a brand or engaged in an activity to support a brand?

<u>Powerful brands</u>

1. Do you feel large companies hold too much power in society today?
2. Do you feel large companies with great power have a positive or negative effect on our society?
3. Do you think companies should become more involved in society?

<u>Stancetaking</u>

1. How do you feel about brands taking stance on environmental or social issues?
2. Do you think that brands should take stance on social issues?
3. Does brands engaging in social or environmental add value to you?
4. Would you be more willing to support a brand that actively takes stances on certain issues?

Airline industry and activism

SAS

1. What is your general impression of SAS?
2. What do you identify SAS with?

WHAT IS TRULY SCANDINAVIAN
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShfsBPrNcTI

3. What are your initial thoughts after you have seen this advertisement?
4. Do you think it is their place to create awareness of such issues?
5. How do you like SAS after seeing this advertisement?
6. Do you expect any concrete actions of SAS after seeing this advertisement?

KLM

1. What is your general impression of KLM?
2. What do you identify KLM with?

FLY RESPONSIBLY
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4htp2xxhto

3. What are your initial thoughts after you have seen this advertisement?
4. Do you think it is their place to create awareness of such issues?
5. How do you like KLM after seeing this advertisement?
6. Do you expect any concrete actions of KLM after seeing this advertisement?

Final Discussion

1. Have any of these advertisements made you inclined to think or to act differently in general? And towards SAS and KLM?
2. Which one was most suitable for an airline company?
3. Any final thoughts or anything you need to add?

Appendix B

The purpose of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of how consumers perceive advertising within the airline industry, and how it attests to their responses. The research will be used for the course BUSN39 Degree Project in Global Marketing at Lund University School of Economics and Management. The interview will revolve around two advertisements that will be shown, and afterwards the respondent will be asked to share and elaborate on subjective thoughts and perceptions.

Consent for participation in a research interview
BUSN39 Master Thesis

The participant is agreeing to below terms:

- The participant has agreed to participate voluntarily.
- The participant can at any time withdraw consent without further consequence.
- The participant has agreed to let the interview be audio-recorded.
- The participant has agreed to let the interview be transcribed.
- The participant understand they may be quoted.
- The participant understands their identity will remain anonymous.
- The participant understands all information provided will be kept confidential.

Signatures of research participant

-- -----------------------------------

Signature of participant Date

Signature of researcher

-- -----------------------------------

Signature of researcher Date