Brand Activism - the Battle Between Authenticity and Consumer Scepticism

An explorative study on how consumers evaluate authenticity of brands that engage in brand activism

by

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June 2020

Master's Programme in International Marketing & Brand Management

Abstract

Title

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Date of the Seminar

2020-06-04

Course

BUSN39

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Keywords

Brand activism, Brand authenticity, Marketing scepticism, Brand trust, Branding

Thesis purpose

The purpose with the research is to advance our understanding of authenticity in brand activism. Therefore, it aims to explore what consumers think of brand activism and why. Moreover, the objective is to understand how consumers evaluate brands that engage in brand activism and whether they find such communications as authentic and trustworthy.

Methodology

This research has an interpretivist approach since the aim is to understand consumers' perceptions, opinions, and attitudes towards brand activism. Furthermore, the purpose of the research is explorative to its essence. A qualitative approach was therefore adopted since it allows the research to define the 'how' and not just demonstrate whether it does influence consumers.

Theoretical perspective

The concepts brand authenticity, brand credibility, brand trust, theory of pollution and purity, marketing scepticism and congruence were chosen in order to help explain how consumers evaluate brands' authenticity when engaging in brand activism.

Empirical data

To answer the research question, a qualitative approach was adopted. The research is based on two synchronous online focus groups combined with 13 semi-structured interviews with Swedish consumers.

Findings/Conclusion

The research found that consumers find it important that there is a consistency and logic between brands' products and the stand they are taking. Furthermore, they find brand activism to be an adaptation to most current trends, resulting in that it appears inauthentic. While the consumers do appreciate that brands take an active stand, it is important that they do not infringe on their personal values. Moreover, brand activism can be perceived as empty talk and it is important to consider facts and concrete actions in order to increase the authenticity. Consumers are sceptical towards brands' good intention with brand activism, since they think that their ultimate goal is to increase their profits. Lastly, consumers argue that brands who engage in brand activism should not forget the importance of the product and the quality since a loss of focus will result in a perception of inauthenticity.

Practical implications

There should be a clear consistency between the issue and a corporation's operations. Moreover, it seems that if a brand chooses to engage in a socio-political issue, it should not patronize a certain group since it is considered as disrespectful. Brand managers should keep in mind that consumers might consider brand activism as inauthentic if it only is incorporated in advertisement. Therefore, it is important to remember the actual product and consider actions and goals that can help to support the stand the company is taking.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to ...

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1 Introduction

The political activity of companies is one of the most relevant subjects in the recent academic literature in a social context of growing public distrust for the institutions

- Manfredi-Sánchez (2019, p.343)

During recent years, there has been a more visible change in branding where brands are starting to take a more concrete ideological and social stand to become more authentic as well as confront different issues that matter to their customers (Baird, 2020; Kotler & Sarkar, 2017; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Moreover, consumers have become more conscious about different branding strategies which forces managers to adapt new ways of branding in order to persuade consumers. This is a result of a changing consumer culture and society's increasing influence on business, where consumers expect brands to solve social issues (Holt, 2002; Molleda, 2010; Shivakanth Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Furthermore, organisations are gradually being pressured by all their stakeholders to be more transparent, open and responsible (Molleda, 2010). It is therefore no longer enough to be neutral in a world that is becoming more polarized (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). Organisations have exploited consumer brands with the purpose to broaden their values and promote specific aspects that include core political issues, even controversial ones. This has been described as the *"corporate political shift"* whose aim is to take a stand instead of focusing on increasing sales (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). This has not only attracted the biggest brands around the world but also smaller brands. The phenomenon of taking a stand is defined as brand activism which emerges when a company or a brand aligns its core values and vision with the support or promotion of social, environmental, economic and cultural issues (Shivakanth Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019).

Brand activism can take form in different ways such as donating money to a specific cause, lobbying for the cause and/or making statements which underlines the cause, through marketing and advertising communication (Shivakanth Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Companies have in different ways incorporated social issues in their communications in order to show what they stand for and gain authenticity.

For example Nike, among others, has chosen to take an active stand against racism by releasing the advertisement titled *"dream crazy"*, featuring the former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick with the slogan *"*"Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything. Just do it"*. This was after Kaepernick chose to kneel for the national anthem in a protest for racial injustice in the United States (The Guardian, 2019). The advertisement was a risky move resulting in some backlash such as the hashtag #JustburnIt where people videotaped themselves burning their Nike shoes (Bostock, 2018). Furthermore, the president Donald Trump chose to post a tweet about the ad, writing, *"Nike is getting absolutely killed with anger and boycotts. I wonder if they had any idea that it would be this way?"* (Green, 2018). Despite the backlash, the commercial became a success where Nike's market value rose with $6 billion, resulting in their stock price reaching an all-time high (Reints, 2018). The advertisement even won an Emmy award for outstanding commercial (The Guardian, 2019).

Brand activism has attracted the attention of marketers, academics, and brand managers around the world (Shivakanth Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). According to Krystle M. Davis, the trend of brand activism is expected to grow worldwide (Davis, 2019; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). This is also mentioned in an interview with Hanneke Faber, the president of Unilever Europe, who claims that the future of branding is activism (Christian, 2019). It is however stated that a purpose without authenticity cannot work since brand activism needs to be done authentically (Lirtsman, 2017). In 2017, research showed that 66 percent of young consumers want brands to take a stand where 60 percent of millennials' purchases were driven by their beliefs (Stillman, 2019). Even though consumers expect brands to take a stand, the scepticism towards such actions has increased and 39 percent answer that they do not find it credible (Marketing Charts, 2019). However, little is known about what authenticity actually means to consumers in the context of brand activism.

1.1 Problematization

As there is an increased distrust for institutions, consumers demand brands to engage in socio-political issues (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). The importance for authenticity in brands has therefore become more important than ever. Kotler and Sarkar (2018) discuss that there is a certain danger in being inauthentic and that it can influence brand trust. Despite that, brands struggle to become authentic in a world that is more polarized and where consumers require

corporations to take greater social responsibility. Kotler and Sarkar (2018) state that since consumers' requirements on brands have increased, where it is stated that brands need to stay relevant and authentic, there has been a visible shift to a brand activism strategy. However, no research has covered the aspect of how consumers evaluate authenticity of brand activism. Consumers seem to remain sceptical towards the credibility of brand activism although they expect brands to take an active stand (Marketing Charts, 2019; Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019). There is therefore an urge to establish trust among consumers since it has become especially important in regard to brand reputation and where both the public and opinion leaders are more sceptical towards businesses' operations (Greyser, 2009). This creates a need to understand what they perceive as authentic and trustworthy.

There is a lot of research regarding consumer activism and anti-brand activism but limited research within the field of brand activism as well as how consumers evaluate brands that adopt such strategy (Cambefort & Roux, 2019; Klein, Smith & John, 2004; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Romani et al., 2015; Thompson, Rindfleisch & Arsel, 2006). The reason why we consider brand activism to be a highly relevant topic is twofold; firstly, it is yet a relatively undiscovered phenomenon gaining increased attention in academia, which calls for more research within the field. Secondly, it is essential to study brand activism since it has become more visible in contemporary advertising and market-strategies, although little is known about its effectively. No research, to the best of our knowledge, has covered the aspect of how consumers evaluate authenticity of brands that engage in brand activism. Since brand activism is seen to be a relevant future element in branding, it is worth to investigate how brand activism might influence consumers' trust in a brand and their perception of a brand's authenticity. This opens up for the discussion on whether consumers trust or distrust such strategies and the reasons for such opinions. Do the consumers care about brand activism? Does it make them perceive the brand as more authentic or would they prefer the brands to avoid taking a socio-political stand?

1.2 Literature Review

The following review explains the current state of knowledge in brand activism and aims to portray a holistic picture of what has been said. The main research that has treated the topic is done by Manfredi-Sánchez, (2019), Shivakanth Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah and Anand, (2019) and Kotler and Sarkar (2017, 2018). However, Dahlén and Rosengren (2016) also add an understanding to the topic by explaining the change in marketing communications.

Although their article is not directly concerning the topic of brand activism, it still adds an understanding of the changed focus in corporations' purpose with advertising. Since there is scarce research within this field, we can draw learnings from the area of consumer activism and anti-brand activism that can explain the trend and the underlying motivations to the emergence of brand activism. Consumers, throughout history, have shown their authoritative influence in society by motivating a change in managers' behaviour, corporations' operations and brands through anti-brand behaviours or oppositions to prevailing consumer cultures.

There is a lot of research on understanding why consumers create an anti-brand behaviour and what drives consumers to adopt such behaviour. Consumption is becoming more and more central in people's lives which has influenced consumers to engage in different movements. Their aim is to challenge and transform consumption patterns but also corporations' actions through ideologies that question the mainstream view. Kozinets and Handelman (2004) explain how the focus is no longer to change principles and policies through such movements but the underlying culture and ideology of it. Romani et al. (2015) investigated how moral misconducts of a brand and its parent brand can motivate consumer brand activism. Similarly, Klein, Smith and John (2004) discovered other motivational factors to why consumers choose to boycott. The authors emphasize the fact that companies need to consider social issues in their business strategy since for example a boycott can occur if consumers feel that corporations are not engaging in social issues. This can result in harm to both the brand and the corporate reputation (Klein, Smith & John, 2004).

Other influences of anti-brand activism that can harm a brand are discussed by Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel Thompson (2006). The authors explain that a so-called doppelgänger brand image can occur when companies engage in emotional branding and where consumers oppose such communication or even make parodies out of it, which can de-authenticate the brand. More specifically, emotional branding can cause different reactions such as anti-brand activism which in turn can harm a brand's reputation meaning that it de-authenticates a brand's values and identity in light of others (Thompson, Rindfleisch & Arsel, 2006). Other researchers such as Cambefort and Roux (2019) investigated perceived risk of anti-brand behaviour or what motivates consumers to act against a brand. It is concluded that among others, consumers can collectively oppose a brand to obtain acceptance or express dissatisfaction with a company's practices. It is argued that consumers might perceive an offering as less attractive if the risk of resistance behaviour is high.

Therefore, the authors explain that consumers need to be motivated and encouraged by other institutions to take the risk in anti-brand behaviour since perceived risk might impede their aspired behaviour of activism (Cambefort & Roux, 2019). Consumers and other stakeholders can participate in boycotts to for example motivate a change in managers' irresponsible behaviour, as Davidson, Worrell and El-Jelly (1995) concluded. Lightfoot (2019) looked into how consumers act in order to encourage a social change, but there is research needed on how brands' activism can have an influence on consumers and whether it is perceived as trustworthy and authentic. Some state that consumers do not care about companies' ethical behaviour whereas some argue that it is determinant for consumers' purchase decision (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). Consumers' increased engagement in anti-brand and consumption activism has motivated a change in corporate strategies. Companies have started to incorporate social-political concerns into their strategies where many take more apparent stands in such issues. This means that corporations have started to assume the role of activists often reflected through their communication and brands. Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) discusses this phenomenon and defines it as brand activism by saying that it has emerged from a series of communication practices *"in the intersection between politics, the corporate world and activism"* (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019, p.344).

Already in 2016, Dahlén and Rosengren (2016) anticipated a change in advertising arguing that it would be more brand-oriented with the aim to persuade consumers in order to become more trustworthy. Kotler and Sarkar (2017) added to this by showing that there is a change in market-strategy. It is not about positioning the company anymore to gain competitive advantages but to take a stand and motivate a change where the idea is based on real values anchored in the brand. If there is a gap that is too large between a business's values, customers and society it can harm the business (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). Kotler and Sarkar (2018) argue that companies need to adapt an outside-in mindset by considering societal issues and through that, engage in brand activism which can impede or promote improvements in society (Activistbrands, 2018). Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) investigated how brand activism is a strategy for companies in order to influence consumers with campaigns which are sustained by political values.

The author states that the young generation creates new demands on global firms' behaviours, motivating to engage in brand activism. However, it turns out that the end-product of brand activism appears inauthentic which constitutes a barrier for the firms to adopt this new strategy.

A part of brand activism is the result of a transformation in social responsibility and corporate communication management which is influenced by different social movements (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Research has shown that when companies have the ability to connect with their customers on emotional issues, the bond becomes stronger than the actual product, quality or price. Nonetheless, it turns out that there are both pros and cons with brand activism meaning that it can lead to increased publicity and consumer identification but also result in consumers boycotting the brand (Shivakanth Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) problematizes the relation between a corporation and its marketing, arguing that it is not enough to market issues if the organization does not consider the concerns throughout the different divisions globally.

1.3 Critique of Prior Research

Dahlén and Rosengren (2016) argued that there is visible change in advertising in contemporary society where communications are becoming more brand oriented trying to impact people and create social effects such as trust in advertising. Kotler and Sarkar (2017) add to this by showing that there is a change in market-strategy. It is not about positioning the company anymore in order to gain competitive advantages but rather to take a stand and motivate a change where the idea is based on real values rooted in the brand. However, the authors do not investigate how the change in strategy and engagement in social issues influences consumers' perception of a brand. Companies aim to become more authentic although no research, to the best of our knowledge, has investigated how such changes influence consumers' evaluation of brands' authenticity. The authors do not consider whether these changes actually do increase trust among consumers or how it affects their relation to a brand. Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) investigated what political issues that are incorporated in an organization's strategy and whether these issues are related to their industry or to globalization. However, his research is mainly focusing on organizations' strategies resulting in a corporate perspective.

On the contrary, Shivakanth Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) takes a consumer perspective and argues that brands can simply not afford to be neutral when there are new generations who want to be able to identify with brands who are socially responsive, morally superior and have a high ethical standard. Their research on brand activism only investigated millennials' perception of brand activism with a quantitative approach meaning that they did not only leave out the rest of the consumers, but also the underlying reasons for

their opinions. It is stated that surveys do not show consumers' real preferences and behaviours and that such information is unreliable (Auger & Devinney, 2007). This opens the possibility to research the reasons to how consumers perceive and evaluate brand activists' authenticity and what their reasons are for such opinions.

To summarize, there is scarce research on the topic even though researchers suggest that brand activism is becoming more and more important. Moreover, brands need to gain authenticity in a world where consumers distrust institutions and are sceptical towards marketing communications. It is stated that brand activism can contribute to brand authenticity although no research, to the best of our knowledge, has investigated whether consumers find brand activism authentic. Additionally, the research regarding brand activism is mostly quantitative and lacking a qualitative approach with a consumer perspective (Cambefort & Roux, 2019; Kozinets, 2014; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Romani et al., 2015).

1.4 Research Aim

The purpose with the research is to advance our understanding of authenticity in brand activism. Therefore, it aims to explore what consumers think of brand activism and why. Moreover, the objective is to understand how consumers evaluate brands that engage in brand activism and whether they find such communications as authentic and trustworthy.

1.5 Research Question

How do consumers evaluate authenticity of brands that engage in brand activism?

2 Theoretical Framework

The following section portrays the general theory that serves as an inspirational tool to help answering the research question. Since brands aim to become more authentic through brand activism, there are several concepts that need to be considered. Brand authenticity, credibility and trust are three theories that are relevant to provide a comprehensive understanding of how consumers perceive brands and how they evaluate them. Furthermore, in order to understand consumers' evaluation of trust and what is considered as accepted or not accepted on a more psychological level, the theory of pollution and purity is introduced. Moreover, the theory of marketing scepticism is included in order to understand the reason for why consumers might have a sceptical perception towards brand activism and how it influences a brand's authenticity. While marketing scepticism can explain a possible distrust among consumers towards brand activism, the theory of congruence can help to describe to which extent consumers consider a fit between the company and the cause-related efforts as important.

2.1 Brand Authenticity

Authenticity is defined as *"the quality of being real or true"* (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2020). Brand authenticity is therefore the extent to which a brand is perceived as real or true to its essence and what it communicates. Brand authenticity is considered as important both in the context of consumer behaviour and branding. It is seen as self-authored and self-determined meaning that it is either socially or personally constructed. Morhart et al. (2015) explain that brands use elements such as credibility or moral values to enhance or create brand authenticity. Furthermore, quality commitment, heritage and sincerity are also important drivers of brand authenticity both from a consumer and corporate perspective (Napoli et al., 2014). The post-modern markets are brand-dominated where consumers now struggle to determine what is real and what is fake (Beverland, Lindgreen & Vink, 2008). Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink (2008) discuss the issue of aiming for authenticity while advertising through mass-marketing which is seen as antithetical. It appears that authenticity has become something consumers attribute to brands instead of previous definitions where authenticity was transcending the self and the market (Napoli et al., 2014).

Napoli et al. (2014) continue to argue that authentic brands' recognition factor is the possibility to stay true to its design while at the same time developing in a direction which reflects modernity. Moreover, a brand that is rooted in tradition and heritage becomes a cultural icon that provides a symbolic meaning and thus contributes to the brand's authenticity and legitimacy. A sincere story that represents a place, tradition or non-commercial values can become crucial when communicating authenticity to consumers (Napoli et al., 2014). The authors state that consumers ascribe authenticity to brands based on aspects such as nostalgia, cultural symbolism, sincerity, craftsmanship, quality commitment and design consistency. They explain that *"a brand's ability to create enduring mental associations between the brand and things that matter to an individual"* (p. 1096) is considered to be the core of authenticity (Napoli et al., 2014).

Consumers are said to seek an authentic consumption experience (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). The need for authentic consumption is the result of loss of sources that enhance meaning and self-identity (Wang & Scheinbaum, 2018). Wang and Scheinbaum (2018) explain how consumers seek for authenticity in brands in a world of fake or meaningless market offers. It is even stated that authenticity has become more important than the quality of product (Wang & Scheinbaum, 2018). Morhart et al. (2015) argue, referring to the constructivist perspective, that authenticity might be constructed based on a person's own beliefs and expectations which can make it difficult to create one coherent perception of authenticity. Greyser (2009) discusses the concept of brand authenticity and presents four contexts in which communications can influence brand authenticity. He introduces 'talking authentic' which refers to communication and 'being authentic' where the core values should be reflected in the behaviour. The third context regards 'staying authentic' which is where the corporations stay true to its core values and keep them consistent.

Lastly, the fourth context is to be able to 'defend authenticity' in times of crisis which is based on long-term trust. Napoli et al. (2014) explain that authenticity is important for consumers because it is a part of their identity projects. Consumers might choose brands with certain cues in order to fit into a wider social setting to express their social affiliations. It is argued that consumers choose and reject brands as a part of their perception of authenticity by referring to one-self or based on a collective expression (Ratneshwar, Mick & Huffman, 2000). Scott (2005) presented the institutional theory which explains the relation between corporations and society.

It is especially relevant in the context of authenticity which Beverland and Luxton (2005) also discuss since it suggests that firms need legitimacy in order to remain relevant and thus might even mean conforming to industry standards. The authors state that organizations present an image externally which does not correspond to the internal practices. This usually results in so-called de-coupling which means that firms aim for legitimacy and try to conform to institutional logic, a set of norms that are institutionally accepted. Usually, the goal with decoupling strategy is to gain support for the firm's agenda and, in this way, create an appearance of authenticity in the eyes of the public (Beverland & Luxton, 2005).

2.1.1 Consumers' Perceived Brand Authenticity

Morhart et al, (2015) explain brand authenticity and develop a framework which measures consumers' perceived brand authenticity. The authors present a definition of perceived brand authenticity based on three perspectives, the objectivist perspective, the constructivist perspective and the existentialist perspective. The first perspective, *objectivist,* refers to that *"Authenticity is seen as a quality inherent in an object and evaluated by experts" (Morhart et al., 2015, p. 201).* An example of the objectivist perspective are labels of origin or the age of the brand. The second perspective is *constructivist* and means that authenticity is personally or socially constructed based on one's own beliefs, expectations, and perspectives. This perspective explains for example consumers' belief in commercially created authenticity. Finally, the last perspective is the existentialist.

This perspective suggests that a person perceives authenticity if the brand relates to a person's own identity, if the brands provide self-relevant information. Based on these perspectives, the four dimensions were identified within perceived brand authenticity namely: credibility, integrity, symbolism, and continuity. Credibility refers to whether the brand stays consistent over time and specifically its ability to deliver on its promises. The authors also conceptualize it as the brand's ability to continuously be transparent and honest. The more credible a brand appears, the more authentic it becomes. Integrity refers to a brand's intentions and its values that it communicates as well as showing moral responsibility. Symbolism refers to a brand's ability to be seen as a resource for identity construction which provides identification through values, relationships and roles (Morhart et al., 2015).

Symbolism, in other words, is how consumers can define who they are and who they are not through the symbolic quality of the brands. Lastly, continuity refers to a brand's ability to stay timeless and their dimension of historicity and its ability to transcend trends. Morhart et al. (2015) find different cues that influence consumers' perception of brand authenticity. However, they argue that some cues might be moderated by marketing scepticism.

2.2 Brand Credibility

Wang and Scheinbaum (2018) define brand credibility as:

> *The believability of the information conveyed by a brand, which requires that consumers perceive that the brand has the ability and willingness to continuously deliver what has been promised (Wang & Scheinbaum, 2018, p. 20)*

It is said to consist of both trustworthiness and expertise (Baek, Kim & Yu, 2010). Brand credibility is based on the assumption that brands have both the willingness and ability to deliver on their promise (Joffre & Tülin, 2004). Willingness refers to a brand's trustworthiness whereas ability concerns a brand's expertise. If brands do not act on these expectations, it can result in harming the whole brand value. It is argued that brands that have consistency and clarity through all its practices of marketing communications are more probable to obtain a perception of credibility (Baek, Kim & Yu, 2010; Joffre & Tülin, 2004). A brand that is credible is more probable to become an option in a consumer's consideration set and brand choice. It is claimed that one of the most important characteristics of a product is its credibility. Besides functional aspects such as price and quality, a company's past behaviours resulting in reputation also play an important aspect to increase brand credibility (Joffre & Tülin, 2004). Moreover, Baek, Kim and Yu, (2010) claim that brand credibility can have a positive influence on consumers' purchase intentions.

2.2.1 Brand Trust

A key concept that is often mentioned within relational marketing is trust, since without it, there is no stable and lasting relationship. However, what trust is in its simplest form is often debated, it can be seen as a will, a presumption or a belief (Louis & Lombart, 2010). Delgado-Ballester and Luis (2001) define trust as a feeling of security and a belief that a certain behaviour is based on good intentions.

Moreover, trust is built on the premise that it excludes lies, broken promises and taking advantage of someone or something. This can be related to business where a brand offers a promise to its consumers and faces many expectations from different stakeholders which requires a strong trust base (Molinillo et al., 2017). However, this trust, which may have been built up over several years, can be destroyed in one blow if a brand breaks its promise or lies (Bertilsson & Tarnovskaya, 2017). There is a discussion whether trust is considered to be unidimensional or multidimensional (Louis & Lombart, 2010). According to Delgado-Ballester and Luis (2001), brand trust consists of two dimensions, brand reliability and brand intentions. The first mentioned dimension refers to a brand's capability to meet consumers' needs whereas brand intention comes from the belief that a brand will not take advantage of a consumer's vulnerability. Therefore, trust can be broken if a consumer perceives that a brand's decisions are not in line with their expectations. Superior brand performance such as large market share or premium price may often result from a large customer loyalty. Consumers have for a long time been loyal to brands whose image they can identify with (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

Brand loyalty explains the extent to which a consumer is satisfied with a product or service performance (Delgado-Ballester & Luis, 2001). Consumers perceive the quality of a brand based on the satisfaction with the product or service and the link between brand loyalty and brand satisfaction is brand reputation. The loyalty can be determined by the trust in the brand and by the feelings for it. Trust is mainly relevant in situations where uncertainty arises such as when there are only small differences between products. Therefore, trust helps reduce uncertainty in an environment where consumers feel vulnerable since they know that they can rely on the brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester & Luis, 2001). A consumer develops trust based on previous experiences with a brand through channels such as product purchase, advertisement, word of mouth and brand reputation (Delgado-Ballester & Luis, 2001). Delgado-Ballester and Luis (2001) argue that trust is generated when a brand is consistent and fulfils its commercial promise meanwhile protecting and caring about the consumer's welfare and needs.

2.2.2 Theory of Pollution & Purity

The theory of pollution and purity was developed by Mary Douglas (1966) who describes it as a psychological process of how people attribute something as right or wrong, as acceptable or not acceptable. This theory can help to explain how consumers determine whether a brand can be trusted or not. Consumers are known to categorize objects and activities based on their wider cultural contexts and determine whether it is pure or polluted. The theory can be related to authenticity since consumers are said to accept or reject brands based on their perception of authenticity, which is built on a collective expression (Ratneshwar, Mick & Huffman, 2000). Belk and Wallendorf (1989) draws upon similar assumptions as Douglas (1966) and look into consumer culture and how consumers sacralise and profane experiences and activities. This resembles categorization and classification of what is considered to be accepted or not as in the theory of pollution and purity. Sacredness is connected to authenticity, which is something that is considered real based on previous experiences and imagery. The more sacred something is perceived, the more authentic it becomes (Belk & Wallendorf, 1989). This theory implicates that consumers attribute objects or actions with either dirtiness or sacredness which shapes social life. Nixon and Gabriel (2016) describes how consumers might hold deep pollution beliefs that are shaped by a cultural context. Dirt constitutes abstract moral ideas and is based on the assumption that it contradicts a so-called socially constructed logic. Douglas (1966) explains,

> *A polluting person is always in the wrong. He has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger for someone (Douglas, 1966, p. 12)*

Therefore, it is seen as a threat and can contaminate what is pure which creates a certain line that cannot be crossed, since dirt should not interfere with purity. If it is difficult to categorize or classify an object or activity, it leads to confusion which directly gives a perception of dirtiness, that something goes beyond our set schemes. Purity on the other hand is, similarly to trust (Delgado-Ballester & Luis, 2001), defined as a feeling of safety and order where consumers look for consistency that is based on their experiences. If something contradicts the set classification system of a consumer, it becomes a threat and impure. Dirt is seen as a danger and when it comes to moral rules, it determines whether something is right or wrong (Douglas, 1966).

It can be difficult to change a certain order or structure if it is cherished by society, since it is considered to be the pure and the right structure, whereas a change would constitute a danger meaning that it will pollute the existing constructed logic. It is however not something universal but rather a variation of social categories (Douglas, 1966; Nixon & Gabriel, 2016). Miller (1998) explains the dirt and disgust by saying that it is something that motivates individuals or groups to distance themselves from others. More specifically, it is a way to distinguish between "us and them" as Miller (1998) describes it.

2.3 Marketing Scepticism

A sceptical person is defined as someone who is willing to challenge the truth of facts. Sceptics doubt the content of communication and perceive the certainty of it as low (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001). The authors Albayrak, Aksoy and Caber (2013) define scepticism as *"a cognitive reaction that varies in accordance with the occasion and content of the communication"* (p. 29). The authors continue by arguing that a sceptic person can be convinced when proof is provided. There is an importance to be authentic and provide proof because the effects of advertisement decrease if consumers feel sceptical about companies' claims (Albayrak, Aksoy & Caber, 2013). Brønn and Vrioni (2001), explain the paradox, which corporations often encounter when considering to, for example, market their CSR involvement, with a statement; if corporations do not say enough about their charity, consumers may think that they are hiding something. However, if they market it too much, consumers may think that they are exploiting the charity (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001).

According to Kim and Lee (2009), consumer scepticism lowers the acceptance of advertising claims. The authors argue that consumers are more likely to distrust a claim if the advertiser is perceived as socially irresponsible. Furthermore, it has been shown that scepticism is triggered and negative attitudes are created when prior expectations and new information lacks consistency (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore & Hill, 2006). Scepticism is used by consumers as a shield to avoid misleading marketing practices. The more consumers know about different marketing tactics, the more they become sceptical towards such communications (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Kim and Lee (2009) argue that consumers tend to be less sceptical when the marketing practice is new and innovative. This means that consumers can become more sceptical when they know about the underlying tactics of marketing (Kim & Lee, 2009).

Holt (2002) adds to this by describing how branding paradigms change when consumers get conscious about their underlying strategy which requires new branding tactics. If companies continue with the same branding, it may result in consumers no longer getting convinced by the authenticity of such activities (Holt, 2002). In relation to scepticism, Mohr, Eroğlu and Ellen, (1998) discuss cynicism which refers to not believing others due to a perception that people act based on selfish motives. It is argued that cynicism is the result of long-term scepticism towards advertising. Sceptics in contrast to cynics can be convinced by companies that show proof or evidence (Mohr, Eroğlu and Ellen, 1998).The authors explain the difference by stating that a cynic person doubts the motives for a commercial whereas a sceptic person can doubt the message itself. Consequently, it is more difficult to change or influence a cynic person (Mohr, Eroğlu & Ellen, 1998). Obermiller, Spangenberg and MacLachlan (2005) claim that the more sceptical a consumer is, the more he or she will dislike advertising, watch it less, rely on it less and prefer emotional appeals rather than informational. Moreover, it is stated that consumers are socialized to be sceptical towards advertisements (Obermiller, Spangenberg & MacLachlan, 2005).

Becker-Olsen, Cudmore and Hill (2006) emphasize the importance of timing and talk about being proactive and reactive when it comes to corporations' actions. They explain that companies often are reactive and engage in social initiatives only as a reaction to NGO pressures, natural disasters, consumer boycotts or other corporate crises. Consumers respond differently to corporations that have reactive CSR initiatives versus proactive initiatives. Supporting ongoing causes may create scepticism regarding possible alternative motives, while support for a disaster leads consumers to feel that the companies are altruistic (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore & Hill, 2006). This is strengthened by Bae and Cameron (2006) who state that if a company has a good prior reputation, its messages and social initiatives are seen as a beneficial activity where consumers have low suspicion. On the other hand, activities that emerge from companies with a bad prior reputation are perceived as self-interested and there is a high level of suspicion from the consumers (Bae & Cameron, 2006). The authors Becker-Olsen, Cudmore and Hill (2006) conclude that a company's credibility is not necessarily considered to be reduced because of firm centred interests such as profit. The scepticism, on the other hand, increases when there is a discrepancy between a company's statements and their actions. This means that consumers are more sceptical when companies argue that their actions are purely social and it appears that their actions are profit-oriented (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore & Hill, 2006).

2.4 Congruence

Many researchers have investigated the concepts of fit, congruence or compatibility which all aim to describe a similar phenomenon but in different contexts (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore & Hill, 2006; Nan & Heo, 2007; Trimble & Rifon, 2006; Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). Varadarajan and Meno (1988) for example described congruence as an observed or visible link between a company's philanthropic efforts and its products, positioning and image. The fit is obtained where there is a clear relationship between the company/brand and the cause-related efforts (Nan & Heo, 2007). Authors such as Trimble and Rifon (2006) developed the concept of compatibility in the context of cause-related marketing and investigated consumers' perception of such marketing. The authors argue that consumers expect the sponsoring of a company's image to be compatible with the sponsored event (Trimble & Rifon, 2006). Cornwell and Maignan (1998) as well as McDaniel (1999) also investigated the importance of fit between the sponsor and the event or cause. It is suggested that it can enhance corporate credibility and brand recall (Trimble & Rifon, 2006). More specifically, consumers expect that there should be a consistency in a brand's operations and its identity in order to appear trustworthy (Trimble & Rifon, 2006). Similarly, Porter and Kramer (2002) suggest that companies need to be consistent and align their charity intentions with their competencies. The authors suggest that companies do not know how to make corporate philanthropy successful.

According to Porter and Kramer (2002), such cause-related marketing has begun to appear more as a strategy with the aim to increase the brand's image. In addition to this, they continue to discuss Milton Friedman's theory about corporations and that the aim of their social responsibility is to gain profit. However, it is stated that Friedman's theory is not sustainable if corporations engage in context-focused charity that is aligned with their core competencies (Porter & Kramer, 2002). Gwinner (1997) for example, distinguishes two types of fit namely, image-based and functional-based where the latter one is explained to what extent the sponsor's product can be used in the actual event. The image-based regards the extent to which the image of the sponsor's brand can be reflected in the sponsored brand's image. More specifically, this means that the sponsor's brand's values should align with the sponsored event's values in order to obtain a fit. These two perspectives can influence consumers' perception both of the sponsor and sponsored event/brand. The greater fit between these two, the better the effect on consumers' positive perception of a brand (Gwinner, 1997).

Pracejus and Olson (2004) conclude that a great fit might result in positive consumer response and the sponsoring company's credibility. Moreover, Nan and Heo (2007) explain that for example a fit between a brand and a cause can create positive consumer attitudes towards a brand. The authors argue that consumers can assume a more critical perspective of a brand or company if they detect a lack of fit (Nan & Heo, 2007; Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). Becker-Olsen, Cudmore and Hill (2006) add that when there is a lack of fit, consumers can even change their perception about a company they might have liked previously. They argue that marketers need to act carefully when selecting social programs to ensure a link between the actions and the company in order to assure that consumers perceive them as socially motivated and not just profit-seeking (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore & Hill, 2006).

3   Method

The following section resonates on the choice of research design and explains why the chosen design is the most suitable to answer the research question. Moreover, it presents where empirical material was gathered and how it was collected, analysed, but also deals with reflections regarding the method's weaknesses, the trustworthiness of the study, and how far the findings can be transferred to other fields.

3.1 Research Philosophy

The starting point in our research is based on the presumption that brands are a social construct built by people which means that people will experience and perceive brands in different ways depending on their previous interpretations and experiences. This research has an interpretivist approach since the aim is to understand consumers' perceptions, opinions, and attitudes towards brand activism (Bell et al., 2019). Moreover, an interpretivist philosophy is usually associated with qualitative studies that explore social behaviours (Denscombe, 2018). Lind (2014) describes interpretivism as a philosophical position that aims to understand and interpret others' perspectives rather than subjectively assuming the underlying reasons for someone's behaviour. Interpretivism allows us to understand the 'why' and 'how' of social actions which once again explains the choice of this philosophical stand for our research (Bell et al., 2019; Bryman & Bell, 2015). We need to understand why consumers might like or dislike brand activism but also how they evaluate authenticity of brands that take a socio-political stand.

3.2 Research Design

The purpose of the research is explorative to its essence since the aim is to explore how brand activism might influence consumers' evaluation of authenticity and trust towards brands (Denscombe, 2018). The authors Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, (2009) explain that an explorative study aims to ask questions, get insight on a phenomenon from new perspectives and understand what is happening, which is our aim in regard to brand activism. The advantage with having an explorative study is that we will have the possibility to be flexible to changes (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

Moreover, it allows us to change our direction if our data gives new insights (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). The research has a qualitative design which is focusing on understanding underlying assumptions, perceptions, and opinions rather than general agreements. The qualitative method allows us to understand how and why consumers might think and feel in a certain way and also explain certain behaviours (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Since the aim is to understand how brand activism can influence consumers' evaluation of brands' authenticity, a qualitative approach is most suitable since it allows us to define the 'how' and not just demonstrate whether it does influence consumers. Additionally, it gives access to a more nuanced and verbally expressed information which creates a broader understanding of the context aimed to investigate (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015; Denscombe, 2018). This is especially relevant in our research since we need to understand the reasons why consumers might evaluate brands that engage in brand activism as more or less authentic. Therefore, a qualitative approach helps us to discover these uncertainties and consumers' explanations to such attitudes.

3.3 Collection of Empirical Material

The research is based on primary data and concerns consumers' perceptions, attitudes and opinions towards brands that take an active stand, in order to explore how they evaluate their authenticity. The material was derived from interviews and focus groups. Consequently, the research is based on a combination of collection methods which both contribute with different materials on the same issue. This allows us to obtain a more nuanced understanding of the underlying reasons for such perceptions and analyse how consumers evaluate and interpret brand activism. More specifically, the research is based on online semi-structured interviews and synchronous focus groups.

3.3.1 Focus Groups

The benefits with conducting a focus group is that it allows a discussion between the participants and provides valuable opinions and thoughts that otherwise might not have appeared in interviews (Bell et al., 2019; Denscombe, 2018). Moreover, a group-designed interview that a focus group constitutes, creates the possibility for participants to question each other's opinions and interpretations but also agree on aspects they otherwise might have missed to express individually (Lind, 2014; Bell et al., 2019).

The focus groups in this research are synchronous which means that they are internet-based where the respondents discuss a topic by commenting on a digital platform, in this case Facebook. Moreover, what is specific for this kind of focus group is that participants are online simultaneously, which leads to a discussion that occurs in real time. This allows a more consistent participation where comments can be written immediately after each other (Bell et al., 2019). Bell et al. (2019) state that a need for inaccessible people makes such online focus groups especially relevant and due to the circumstances with Covid-19, this was the optimal choice of research method. The focus groups were the initial step to obtain empirical material about consumers' perceptions and interpretations of brands that engage in brand activism.

As complementary material, we used video commercials of Kodak, Gillette, Sas and Ikea during the focus groups in order to help the participants obtain a more clear, comprehensive and illustrative example of brand activism. These commercials were aimed to provide a holistic perspective on brand activism but also spark a discussion in the focus groups. This in turn might have contributed to their analytical capability and hence, provided valuable material (Ikea, 2018; SAS, 2020; Gillette, 2019; Kodak, 2016). Bell et al. (2019) argue that synchronous focus groups are good in contexts where sensitive topics need to be discussed which is the case of this research. Political and ideological topics can be considered as sensitive for some people and thus supports the choice of such methods where participants also have the possibility to be anonymous (Bell et al., 2019).

Synchronous focus groups can have both advantages and disadvantages. Such a method decreases the risk that a participant over-dominates the discussion since more shy participants might feel less restricted when being anonymous (Bell et al., 2019). Anonymity also assures that participants do not feel influenced by others' demographic aspects as well as decreases the probability that interviewer bias occurs. Another positive aspect is that it creates a more comfortable environment since the participants can do it from their homes (Bell et al., 2019). It does however make it difficult to assure that we as moderators have the participants' full attention and whether there might be something distracting them. Moreover, it might also be difficult to determine whether the questions are clear enough and if everyone has understood them. Another drawback with synchronous focus groups is that it does not leave room for spontaneous comments but Bell et al. (2019) state that this creates an advantage since it gives the possibility to reflect on answers which otherwise is not possible in traditional focus groups.

Additionally, it creates the possibility to read previous comments and the participants can express their opinions simultaneously instead of waiting for their turn (Bell et al., 2019).

3.3.2 Interviews

In order to complement the online focus groups, we also conducted individual semi-structured interviews with each participant from the focus groups. Similar to the focus groups, the interviews were conducted online, but this time through Skype. The authors Bryman and Bell (2015) write that it is not only what the respondents say that is important but also how they say it. It would therefore have been optimal to conduct the interviews face to face in real life, but due to Covid-19 it was not possible. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because the aim was to gain a better understanding of how consumers evaluate brand activism and how they perceive its authenticity, which was possible since the method is based on an explorative study (Bell et al., 2019). This is strengthened by Denscombe (2018) who argues that interviews are suitable when there is a need to obtain a better and more comprehensive insight of people's perceptions and experiences about a certain phenomenon, which aligns with our aim.

Denscombe (2018) also states that one of the advantages with semi-structured interviews is that respondents are able to freely elaborate on their thoughts and opinions. Moreover, we have the opportunity to direct and guide the respondent into topics that might provide us with useful information. It means that there is no need to strictly follow a set interview guide but rather use it as a supporting tool which leaves room for additional reflections and valuable insights (Denscombe, 2018). The complement with semi-structured interviews was also necessary because some interpretations or further explanations to opinions or even lack of such opinions can be elaborated on in separate interviews. It also helps us to obtain a broader perspective of the participant's opinions and interpretations which otherwise could have been left out in the focus group. Semi-structured interviews allow the respondents to analyse the questions and topic individually without others' opinions which reduces possible barriers (Lind, 2014; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). This is a valuable aspect of interviews since respondents are independent of other peoples' opinions which might make their answers differ from other respondents' replies and thus provide additional new perspectives (Bell et al., 2019).

There are mostly similar advantages and disadvantages between synchronous focus groups and online interviews. For example, technical issues can occur when conducting interviews through Skype, which was however not an obstacle in our research. Furthermore, Bryman and Bell (2015) write that the location of where the interviews are conducted is important and that it is beneficial if the likelihood for being interrupted is low. The authors also state that the location where the respondents tend to be overheard should be avoided. We believe that an online interview allowed the respondents to be more comfortable at home and made them less exposed. It also limited our possibility to observe what happened in their environment and whether there could be any disturbing factors. However, we still believe that it contributed to a more relaxed environment for the respondent which might have resulted in a greater willingness to respond to sensitive questions. Moreover, there is a geographical advantage with online interviews which also is reflected in our research where we reached participants from different cities in Sweden. It is also more efficient since it probably assures that the interviewee will be able to participate if possible obstacles occur.

3.4 Participant Selection

The participants were chosen through a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling. This means that participants were primarily handpicked and purposely selected since the aim was to target consumers that were both men and women in different age groups (Bell et al., 2019; Denscombe, 2018). Therefore, it was necessary to arrange a wide range of differences in age and gender to achieve a variety in the online focus group. This led us to the snowball sampling meaning that we asked participants whether their colleagues or friends were willing to participate in our research as well. The focus groups consisted of in total twelve persons from Sweden but from different cities, of different ages and of different genders. More specifically, we aimed to create a mix of genders and ages in the focus groups, since the primary aim was not to compare generations or gender but consumers' interpretations and evaluations of brand activism. There are different suggestions for the optimal number of participants in a synchronous focus group but according to Bell et al. (2019) it is recommended to have six to eight participants in order to facilitate participation for people that have limited keyboard skills. Therefore, we chose to divide the focus groups into two, resulting in six participants in each group. The interviews were thereafter conducted with all twelve participants from the focus group with one exception.

There was a pilot study done previous to this research which gave us the thirteenth interviewee as well, Felicia, who did however not have the possibility to participate in the focus groups. The participants were given fictitious names in order to assure their anonymity (See table 1).

Table 1- Information about participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	City	Education	Time/ interview
Lisa	23	Female	Lund	B.Sc Business Administration	25 minutes
Robert	23	Male	Lund	B.Sc Business Administration	31 minutes
Alva	26	Female	Hässleholm	M.Sc Business Administration	42 minutes
David	27	Male	Göteborg	M.Sc Business Administration	36 minutes
Sven	57	Male	Perstorp	Upper Secondary Education	40 minutes
Gabriella	26	Female	Helsingborg	B.Sc Architecture	41 minutes
Linda	40	Female	Hässleholm	B.Sc Early Childhood Education	39 minutes
Elina	48	Female	Hässleholm	M.Sc in Dental Science	32 minutes
Simon	24	Male	Lund	M.Sc in Civil Engineering	23 minutes
Rebecka	28	Female	Helsingborg	B.Sc in Business Administration	48 minutes
Göran	60	Male	Kristianstad	H.V.E Operating Technician	35 minutes
Anna	25	Female	Gävle	M.Sc in Religion in Upper Secondary Education	29 minutes
Felicia	25	Female	Malmö	B.Sc in Human Resources	45 minutes

3.5 Execution of Focus Groups & Interviews

The following section provides information about how we conducted the focus groups and interviews to provide the reader with a comprehensive understanding as well as aim to increase transparency. It explains step by step how each method was conducted but also outlines the different obstacles that occurred throughout the execution.

3.5.1 Focus Groups

The online focus groups were conducted on the digital platform Facebook the 16th and 17th of April 2020. Since the focus groups were based on a digital platform, it required that participants had access to such platforms. However, this was not an issue in this case since we created fictitious anonymous Facebook accounts for the participants and also sent tutorials on how to log in and how to comment and participate on the platform (See Appendix 3). We created two different groups on Facebook called 'Focus group 1' and 'Focus group 2'. Thereafter, we created fictitious Facebook accounts with the names 'Respondent' numbered from 1 to 6. The fictitious accounts were created in order to respect the respondents' anonymity. Furthermore, it was also aimed to give the respondents the possibility to respond truthfully without feeling that they need to hold something back due to their identity being exposed. All the participants received a message one week before the focus group took place where we described the planned execution of the online-focus group. In case someone did not understand some of the information that was sent out, we encouraged the participants to call us as soon as they had any questions or needed additional information, which turned out to be appreciated.

Since this particular method is not very common, we chose to create video tutorials, as already mentioned, in order to reassure that the respondents would know more visually how the focus groups would be managed and what was expected from their participation (See Appendix 3). These tutorials showed the exact steps of how the respondent should log in to the fictitious accounts as well as how to participate in the discussion by showing where to comment and how to find the different links. We sent the tutorials four days before the actual focus-group in order to make it more time efficient, assure that possible technical obstacles could be minimized as well as decrease the participants' uncertainty. Thereafter, we provided the participants with their login information one day before. We carefully planned when and how to send out the information in order to prepare and remind the respondents but also assure that they did not receive too much information at once.

Just as we would have done with a regular focus group, we chose to have it semi-structured meaning that we, as moderators, were not actively participating in the discussion but rather guiding them with supporting questions in order to keep the discussion going (Bell et al., 2019). The first focus group took approximately one hour and 45 minutes while the second group took approximately one hour and 30 minutes. The first focus group took longer since some respondents were late to log in and needed some guidance which was a learning for our second focus group. However, this was not an obstacle that affected the overall purpose with the focus group.

The focus groups were managed as follows; firstly, we provided the participants with the first commercial in a post in a private Facebook group where they received five minutes to watch it. There were no bigger issues with making the participants understand how they should do it, but two of them needed to call us for further instructions. Secondly, we posed a question to the participants along with each posted video-commercial which initiated the discussion and took about 15 to 20 minutes. The respondents were actively participating and gave most of the time fully elaborated answers. We further guided with additional questions if something was unclear or if the discussion started to get out of context. An example of how the participants commented and discussed is shown in Appendix 4. Moreover, we used the 'Facebook chat' to inform the respondents when they should continue to the next commercial and change direction of the discussion. We also informed them that they can use the 'like' button if they agree with someone's statement in order to obtain a more holistic understanding of their opinions. Lastly, when we had done the same structure for each commercial, the participants received messages where we personally thanked them for their participation and once again reminded them of their anonymity. Many of the respondents contacted us saying that they enjoyed this type of method and that they considered it to be fun which might have been the reason for their motivation and engagement.

3.5.2 Interviews

Denscombe (2018) states that it is important that one gathers data which is valid and accurate in order to increase credibility. Consequently, we chose to conduct interviews with the same twelve participants from the focus groups with the purpose to complement the focus-group discussion and understand each participant's interpretations of brand activism in more depth.

We therefore let them elaborate further on their thoughts in a more relaxed environment, namely the online interviews. Due to the circumstances with the Coronavirus (Covid-19), we chose to conduct the interviews through Skype. Prior to the interviews, we analysed all the respondents' answers from the focus groups in order to detect whether there were some additional and individual questions that should be asked during the interviews. The interviews took place between the 20th of April and the 24th of April year 2020. We chose to conduct semi-structured interviews in order to be able to ask follow-up questions on topics which occurred in the focus groups that we found to be interesting (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Moreover, we did not want structured interviews since the aim was to allow the respondents to elaborate on questions and add their own thoughts that maybe would not appear in more closed interviews. Therefore, the questions during our interviews constituted a guideline rather than a fixed framework and are enclosed in the Appendix (See appendix 2).

We firstly asked the respondents about permission to record. Thereafter we thanked each interviewee for their additional contribution to our research and continued by asking several questions. Firstly, we asked about their general perception of attractive brands and then more specifically touched upon the different commercials in order to find out what each respondent might have left out during the focus group discussions. Moreover, we asked the additional individual questions that were derived from the focus groups such as for example what an interviewee meant by personal values. In the end of the interview we assured each interviewee of their anonymity and once again thanked them for their participation. Each interview took about 30 to 40 minutes and were very helpful as complementary material.

3.6 Data Analysis

After gathering the empirical material, the next step was transcribing the interviews which took approximately 38 hours in total. The transcriptions of the interviews provided 63 pages of empirical material which led to the second step, namely, preparing the material for the analysis. In this step, the material from the online-focus group was also included. The focus groups provided a total of 67 pages transcribed material. The material from both the interviews and focus groups needed to be reduced which was done through coding. In order to reduce, organize the material and categorize it into themes, we used a thematic sorting process. This means that we analysed the frequently recurring statements and sorted them into themes in order to create a clearer structure in the material (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015).

The sorting was done by marking the different statements with different colours to underline what statements align with each other. The process required multiple sorting and new attempts to thematize the material since we primarily coded the statements based on their core meaning which resulted in an immense amount of codes. In the end, we reduced the codes into six categories and the categories into two dimensions to create an overview of what had been said about the topic (See Table 2).

Table 2 - Example of coding

Dimension	Category	Citation
Lack of genuineness	Inconsistency	***Gabriella:*** *The only one I actually liked was Ikea because they can really connect to the environment because they are a company that can have an impact on the environment. This is a connection that is necessary, that if a company has a direct impact on an aspect and which the company can stand for, then I think it is okay.*
Perception of duplicity	Deceiving the consumer	***Lisa:*** *Companies say that "we work like this and we help women in these countries", and since you actually want to do good, it is easy to buy the marketing that is out there. That's why you also feel disappointed if it turns out to be false.*

3.7 Trustworthiness

Regardless of which methods that are chosen, the fact remains that it is important to stay critical and reflective (Bell et al., 2019). According to the authors there are, within trustworthiness, four different criteria that need to be fulfilled in order to show validity namely, credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. We chose to follow the different criteria throughout the research to make it as trustworthy as possible. Denscombe (2018) explains that the first concept, credibility, focuses on that there is a need to prove that the data is valid and accurate. In order to increase our credibility, we decided to conduct both focus groups as well as semi-structured interviews including the same respondents, with the purpose to complement and gain as accurate of a response as possible. The focus groups were synchronous which enabled the participants to ask, respond and comment on each other simultaneously. By conducting it through Facebook, we were able to reach respondents from different geographical areas around Sweden which increased the variety in the sampling. Furthermore, by creating

fictitious profiles for all the respondents we could increase the credibility of their responses since there was no pressure for them to be politically correct and therefore also encouraged them to speak truthfully (Bell et al., 2019). The interviews were semi-structured, allowing the possibility for more open answers that were not necessarily related to the interview-guide but still within the topic. Therefore, the interviewees could discuss questions which they found important and relevant (Bell et al., 2019). Bell et al. (2019) also mention the concept of respondent validation in regard to credibility. The concept implies that respondents should be informed about the findings afterward, in order for them to see if the findings are accurate (Bell et al., 2019). The interviews gave the respondents the opportunity to clarify possible vagueness that occurred during the focus groups and thus could confirm whether our interpretations of their statements were right. We also chose to contact the respondents and brief them of how we perceived the data with the purpose to let them accept or adjust it.

The second concept is transferability, which Denscombe (2018) explains as to what extent the findings can be applicable in other contexts and even generalized. We have conducted a thorough research regarding how consumers evaluate authenticity of brands that engage in brand activism. In this research we chose the following brands as illustrative examples of brand activism, Ikea, Gillette, Kodak and Sas. However, we cannot assure that these findings correspond to all brands but since the purpose is to understand consumers' evaluation of authenticity of brands that engage in brand activism, it is not our aim to generalize our findings. The third criterion is dependability. This aspect considers if the results would be the same if the study would be conducted in the future or by someone else (Denscombe, 2018). Since both online focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted, we were able to see a level of saturation where a repetition among respondents' statements was noted.

Furthermore, when different people conduct interviews there tends to be different questions asked, therefore will the interview guide be a helpful way to make sure that similar questions can be asked. One factor, which may have influenced the dependability negatively, is the fact that the interviews were held in Swedish since it was their native language. They were later on translated to English which might be considered to affect the accuracy in regard to the translation process. However, every part of the process, such as recording, transcripts and coding is restored on our devices and therefore available upon request.

The last concept, which is important to consider in regard to trustworthiness, is conformability. Denscombe (2018) explains that the importance of conformability is that the researchers need to be objective throughout the research and not let feelings or emotions influence the result. We have tried to be as objective as possible by for example letting each other reread what we have written and coded in order to make sure that we have perceived the empirical data the same way. Furthermore, all the data is saved and, upon request, available to take part of, which also may increase the conformability (Bell et al., 2019)

3.8 Limitations

Our method has several limitations that need to be considered. Due to Covid-19, it was not possible to arrange focus groups or interviews in real life which might have limited the group discussion dynamics that otherwise could have been enhanced. Additionally, it was difficult to discover possible environmental factors that might have disturbed the respondents. Moreover, this research is limited to Swedish consumers which influences the transferability to describe consumers' evaluations in a broader cultural perspective. There is also an overrepresentation of women in our sampling and people in their 20's which limits the variety.

4   Description of Commercials

As complementary material for the focus groups, four different advertisements from Ikea, Gillette, SAS and Kodak are included. These four video-commercials were aimed to give an illustration of brand activism and cover different socio-political issues. The following section describes each commercial in greater detail to give the reader an understanding of their context in order to better understand the statements in the analysis.

4.1 Ikea

Ikea's commercial *"The Ikea climate change effect"* treats the topic of climate change and takes place in an Ikea store in Canada where different customers are interviewed. This commercial is based on an experiment where Ikea aims to create reactions and awareness among their customers on what 4 degrees can do to the environment. The video starts by showing several videos of forests that are burning, icebergs that are melting and industries that are polluting. Thereafter, it is written *"We wanted to bring climate change closer to home. So, we brought climate change inside Ikea"*. The company chose to increase the heat level with 4 degrees in the store which shows how much global temperature can arise if emissions continue to increase. Furthermore, the video shows how the customers start to complain about the heat and question whether the store has any air condition working. The video ends by saying *"A small change can have a big impact. So, we are reducing the climate footprint of our products by 70% by 2030"* and lastly encouraging customers to see how they can take action at home referring to their homepage (Ikea, 2018).

4.2 Gillette

Gillette tried to motivate a change in the stereotypical macho culture through its advertising campaign. They chose to engage with the #MeToo-movement and changed their 30-year tagline *"The best a man can get"* to *"The best men can be"*. The video starts with a narrator asking, "*Is this the best a man can get*". Thereafter it shows news clips of women reporting men for sexual harassment but also images reflecting sexism in movies and boardrooms, examples of 'mansplaining' as well as kids being bullied and violence between boys. The video shows clips of fathers neglecting the situation and saying, *"boys will be boys"*. The narrator later says that "*we believe in the best in men"*.

Followed by this, it shows different shots of how men and boys confront other men when they are doing something wrong such as catcalling, saying condescending things or even stop fights between boys. The commercial then illustrates clips of how boys look up to these men who are stopping the others from doing wrong. Finally, the narrator says *"because the boys watching today will be the men of tomorrow"* and ends with the text *"the best a man can get"* (Gillette, 2019).

4.3 Sas

SAS commercial, *"SAS- What is truly Scandinavian?"* concerns the topics of travel, immigration and cultural diversity stating that there is no such thing as 'Scandinavian'. The commercial illustrates how different traditions usually defined as typical Swedish or typical Scandinavian have their roots in other countries' cultures (Henley, 2020). The commercial starts by showing different scenarios and pictures of Scandinavian 'culture' where a narrator asks, *"What is truly Scandinavian?"*. The video continues by showing these cultural aspects where the narrator answers her question by saying *"Absolutely nothing"*. Afterwards, it shows people from different countries answering 'nothing' in their own languages. The woman later continues to say that everything is copied by giving several examples of it, such as that Democracy is from Greece, that the Swedish midsummer pole is from Germany and that Danish Smorrebrod is from the Netherlands. She summarizes these examples by saying *"Going out to the world inspires us to think big even though we are quite small, because every time we go beyond our borders, we add colours, innovation, progress. Adding the best of everything to here…"* (SAS, 2020). The video ends by showing people arriving at an airport where the woman says,

> *In a way, Scandinavia was brought here, piece by piece, by everyday people*
> *who find the best of our home away from home. So we can't wait to see what*
> *wonderful things you'll bring home next* (SAS, 2020).

4.4 Kodak

Kodak has chosen to take an active stand for the LGBT community by illustrating acceptance for love in all its forms. They do that through their commercial called *"Understanding"*. The commercial starts with a teenage kid, called Joey, at baseball practice with his team. After practice he and another guy from his practice, called Dylan, goes home to Joey's family to hang out. The video shows how Joey's little sister walks in on Joey and Dylan kissing.

The picture becomes black where you hear Joey's father calling for Dylan, asking him to come down. Thereafter, a variation of different quick shots come up showing Joey alone and frustrated while his father is not talking to him. The clip shows that Joey's father had found a picture in Joey's drawer of Joey and Dylan. The next shot displays Joey's birthday where his family and grandparents celebrate him while his father continues to ignore him. He however gets a present from him and when he opens it he can see that it is a large canvas of the picture of him and Dylan which his father had chosen to enlarge. It shows Joey's relieved face and how his father gets tears in his eyes where it ends in a hug between them. The video finishes with a text saying "*The moments that capture your love*" (Kodak, 2016).

5   Analysis

The aim of this thesis is to explore what consumers think of brand activism. The analysis emphasizes on the consumers' evaluation of brand activism and how brands' authenticity is perceived after having taken an active stand. This chapter is divided into two main themes namely, 'lack of genuineness' and 'perception of duplicity'. Lack of genuineness describes how brand activism can make a brand appear inconsistent in its operations where it adopts a turncoat behaviour and how it can become a violation of personal integrity. The perception of duplicity describes how brand activism gives the respondents the perception that brands want to deceive them, how they lose focus from their actual products and finally talk more than they do in practice. Worth noting is that the respondents will further be referred to as 'The consumers'.

5.1 Lack of Genuineness

Through the consumers' evaluation of brand activism, it appears that there is a perception of lack of genuineness in such actions. The consumers consider that companies often engage in issues that are inconsistent with their business and thus lack relevance. Moreover, they evaluate brand activism as an adaptation to social trends rather than a sincere and genuine action. Finally, the lack of genuineness is also described by the perception that brand activism does not always respect the consumers' personal integrity.

5.1.1 Inconsistency

A common aspect that regards the consumers' evaluation of brand activism is their perception of the relation between product and message. They argue that it is important that brands that engage in brand activism concern an issue that is consistent with their overall business. This is similar to what Trimble and Rifon (2006) found regarding consumers' expectations about a compatibility between a sponsoring company's image and the sponsored event. Most of them mentioned that it is problematic if brands get involved in issues that do not concern their operations and business. In this case, Gillette, Kodak and Sas were the main examples of such inconsistency whereas Ikea was considered to be a good example of a clear relation between their business, products and the issue. Gabriella explained it as follows,

The only one I actually liked was Ikea because they can really connect to the environment because they are a company that can have an impact on the environment. This is a connection that is necessary, that if a company has a direct impact on an aspect and which the company can stand for, then I think it is okay.

It is argued by the consumers that Ikea has a direct influence on the environment and thus can incorporate it into its operations and connect it to the brand. The need for consistency also explains why some negative attitudes might appear since as Becker-Olsen, Cudmore and Hill (2006) claim, scepticism is triggered, and negative attitudes are created when prior expectations and new information lack consistency. In connection to this, Robert claims that it makes it more trustworthy if a company or their product has a direct impact on the issue. According to Porter and Kramer (2002), consistency between charity-centred actions and a company's competencies can make the actions more credible and thus shadow the perception that a brand uses such actions to gain profit. Similarly, this might indicate that in regard to brand activism, the consumers might perceive it as more credible and become less sceptical if they perceive that there is a connection between the stand they take and the company's business. He compares Ikea with the commercial of Kodak and considers that a camera will not change the view on homosexuals whereas Ikea together with their customers actually can change their impact on the environment. This can be explained by Nan and Heo (2007) who claim that consumers can assume a more critical perspective of a brand or company if they detect a lack of fit.

Even though the majority of the consumers like the message in the Kodak commercial, almost all of them consider it to lack relevance in relation to the product. Interestingly, Linda perceives that Kodak has a clear relation between product and message, but she adds that she could relate to the message on a personal level which might be the reason why her opinion differs from others' statements. The Gillette commercial gives yet another example of inconsistency where many of the consumers consider it to be illogical to play on an issue that has nothing to do with the product. Gabriella mentions that there is no logical connection between razors and the issue. She finds it absurd to connect razors to women's rights and injustice. Anna even questions how a razor should help boys to become men. Trimble and Rifon (2006) explain that a lack of such fit might decrease credibility which is reflected in Linda's statement where she explains that the issue that companies engage in needs to be clearly connected to the product in order to convince her and make it appear authentic.

David concerns Gillette's history and explains that it is not trustworthy to change from being something totally opposite, arguing that companies that want to change need to do it step by step. He argues that Gillette have always reflected the macho-culture whereas now, out of a sudden, they want to change it which he does not find trustworthy. This is something Alva also discusses since, according to her, a company needs to be more consistent in its communications and engage in such issues in order to appear authentic, it is not enough to mention it once. Likewise, Simon states that brands should not engage in issues that do not concern their business,

> *Not necessarily, not if it does not relate to their product. If you are a mass-producer of furniture maybe it is quite relevant to engage in climate change etc. but it is not super relevant to engage in female oppression and sexual harassment as a furniture company. But if you work with fashion or similar, then maybe it can be a thing to support women's rights to wear what they want to wear, so it depends on which industry you operate in. The thing that is most relevant for a company is what they should treat because that is where they will be able to make a great change and impact the most.*

Thus, it becomes inauthentic and untrustworthy for the consumers that brands play on issues that have nothing to do with their business and where the companies' history does not support an engagement in such issues. Baek, Kim and Yu, (2010) and Joffre and Tülin (2004) state that brands that have consistency and clarity through all its practices of marketing communications are more probable to obtain a perception of credibility. Therefore, inconsistency between a socio-political stand and a company/brand causes a perception of lack of credibility. Simon and Felicia also highlight the inconsistency regarding how SAS should focus on issues that impact climate change rather than cover it with other unrelatable socio-political issues. Felicia says,

> *I find it interesting how they avoid the environmental issue when that is their actual problem. Now when there is so much talk about the environment, I think it says a lot about the company that they do not treat this topic being an environmentally dangerous company.*

Consequently, it seems as if they perceive that a lack of consistency might in some cases create a perception that a company is hiding something that they are responsible for which does not appear trustworthy. This aligns with Kim and Lee's (2009) argument that consumers are more

likely to distrust a claim if the advertiser is perceived as socially irresponsible. Furthermore, Brønn and Vrioni (2001), explain the paradox regarding if corporations market themselves too much, consumers view their actions as a way to exploit a charity, while if they do not say enough about their charity they are considered to be hiding something. What can be seen here is that if a corporation chooses to focus on a charity or takes a stand that does not align with their business, consumers may view their actions as inauthentic or wanting to hide something.

5.1.2 Turncoat Behaviour

Besides inconsistency, it becomes clear that the consumers evaluate brand activism as a sort of turncoat behaviour and feel that corporations often choose to adapt to the most current socio-political issues because it is in fashion. Several consumers express that such behaviour makes them distrust companies' communications since it does not appear as authentic when they adapt to issues just because it is trendy. An example of this is given by Göran who relates to the MeToo-scandals and argues that companies suddenly started to incorporate the issue of supporting women when it became trendy. He says,

> *It is like MeToo that they out of the blue realize that something is happening and that is when they start to react. It is something you should do right away, you should act directly and not wait for it to become modern and present in the media. They start to adapt when they see that it becomes popular. It is easy to choose a path that is already prepared by someone else. It is worse to be the first to take a stand, I think everyone can have their opinions, but it should be done in a sincere manner because the truth comes out sooner or later*

He explains how companies have known that this issue has been a problem for a very long time but suddenly, when MeToo became big in social media, companies saw it as an opportunity to show their support and tried to drive the gravy train. Additionally, he emphasizes the fact that it is more difficult to be the first one to take a stand and much easier to just follow a path that has already been set which is not sincere. Göran's discussion aligns with what Becker-Olsen, Cudmore and Hill (2006) call a reactive company where they engage in social initiatives only as a reaction to pressure from NGOs or after a big event such as natural disasters, consumer boycotts or other corporate crises. Supporting ongoing causes may create scepticism among consumers regarding possible alternative motives.

Felicia further refers to the role of brand activism and discusses the fact that the current trend for companies is to follow the values which consumers find important such as for example the environment. Therefore, it becomes difficult to determine whether these values incorporated by companies are trustworthy or not. The distrust might be explained by Beverland, Lingreen and Vink (2008) who argue that due to the fact that markets are brand-dominated, consumers find it difficult to determine their authenticity. Linda is yet another consumer that expresses that companies know that it is in fashion to show their standpoint in order to attract consumers and make sure that they buy their products.

It has also been noticed that there is a difference between attitudes towards companies' turncoat behaviour. While the majority agrees with Göran and evaluate the turncoat behaviour as something negative, there are also others that say that they understand why companies have to take this approach. Sven for example agrees that companies adapt a certain turncoat behaviour, but he does not necessarily consider it as something negative. He explains that one of the reasons for the turncoat behaviour is that, with time, both management and environment changes and with that also companies' values and stands in certain issues. He says,

> *Now they have a management, but in the future, they will have a new management and they will then focus on new issues. They are affected by what is going on around the world. That is how companies have to be, that is what they think they have to do. I understand that they are fighting for their life, and that they believe that If they are involved in the social debate it will help them since they believe that it is what customers want to hear. […] I think they are on the right track. Of course, they should not forget to show how good their product is, but to put in some values in their message is in fashion*

Sven argues that it is common for management to think that they have to change and follow what is occurring around the world. Just as Porter and Kramer (2002) state about cause-related marketing, brand activism might appear as yet another marketing strategy lacking sincerity. However, even though he understands that it is something companies have to do, he claims that this behaviour results in companies losing their credibility instead of gaining authenticity. Moreover, Sven himself does not find it trustworthy even though he shows an understanding for companies that believe that such a strategy is necessary for their survival. He also highlights that as long companies do not lose sight of their products, he understands that they need to follow the trends.

Interestingly, Beverland and Luxton (2005) suggest that firms might conform to industry standards and adapt to trends in order to obtain legitimacy and become authentic which is not necessarily reflected in the consumers' statements. Even though some might understand the turncoat behaviour, it still does not mean that it gives companies more authenticity in contrast to what Beverland and Luxton (2005) explain through decoupling. Consumers today might be too aware of such a strategy and thus lack trust for its authenticity.

5.1.3 Violation of Personal Integrity

When evaluating brand activism, the consumers often express that brands should not cross the line which interferes with their personal values. They consider that brand activism should stick to social issues instead of treating ideological opinions. It is in some way described as a violation of the consumers' personal integrity. This can be explained by Mary Douglas's (1966) theory of pollution that describes how people categorize objects and activities based on their wider cultural contexts and determine whether it is pure or polluted. In this case it seems that consumers ascribe brands what they should and should not do based on their own wider cultural context and previous experiences. As Douglas (1966) states, it can lead to confusion if it is difficult to categorize or classify an object or activity that goes beyond our set schemes and thus is considered dirty and not trustworthy. Both Elina and Alva suggest that brands can take an active stand in order to create awareness about societal problems, they should however not infringe on the consumers' personal values. Alva explains it in the following way,

> *It is absolutely important to touch upon societal issues, however, I do not think that one should go in deeper on personal values. Societal issues overall YES. If one chooses to do so, one also must be consistent and truly not let the brand get involved in contradictory questions or contexts. Then the trust can really be damaged.*

Alva considers that an interference into her deep personal values that are important to her can influence her trust towards a brand but also motivate her to boycott. Napoli et al. (2014) state that the core of authenticity is a brand's ability to create mental associations of things that matter to an individual. Similarly, it seems that it might be appreciated if a brand takes a stand in favour of the consumers' personal values. However, if the stand is perceived as a violation of their personal integrity it might result in a boycott even though the stand itself is perceived as authentic.

This can also be explained by Douglas (1966) that describes how a perception of purity can create a feeling of safety whereas dirtiness gives the opposite reaction and is considered as something that contradicts the set classification system of a consumer. In the end of the citation, Alva also emphasizes the importance of being consistent in order to create trust. This is also discussed by Delgado-Ballester and Luis (2001) who explain that trust is generated when a brand is consistent and fulfils its commercial promise meanwhile protecting and caring about the consumer's welfare and needs. Alva further reflects on this and argues that it might be something ambiguous since it is based on a very subjective perspective where it can depend from person to person on how important the values are.

Morhart et al. (2015) argue, referring to the constructivist perspective, that authenticity might be constructed based on a person's own beliefs and expectations which can make it difficult to create one coherent perception of it. A clear example is how the majority did not perceive the SAS commercial as positive, but David found it to be fantastic. He labelled the people that opposed the commercial as Swedish democrat supporters and absurd people. He further says that he would be happy to continue to fly with SAS just because of the stand they have taken and the fact that other people have chosen to 'attack' the brand. Correspondingly, Ratneshwar, Mich and Huffman, (2000) explain that consumers choose or reject brands as a part of their perception of authenticity by referring to one-self. Alva on the other hand explains that she personally would perhaps get a bit angry if the commercial regards culture but that she would not boycott it. However, the most important thing in Alva's life is her religion and therefore it would have been a different situation if the commercial would have offended her beliefs. Her comment aligns with what Morhart et al. (2015) describe as moral authenticity which is related to self-identification. It helps consumers to achieve self-identification by connecting their own moral values with the brand's values (Beverland & Farrelly 2010; Molleda, 2010).

Alva gives an example of Coca Cola and Pepsi and explains that if Coca Cola would have done something that supports Catholics, she would have been amazed and happy but if Pepsi would do something against Catholics, she would never buy Pepsi again. Bertilsson and Tarnovskaya (2017) say that trust which may have been built up over several years, can be destroyed in one blow if a brand breaks its promise or lies. Gabriella approaches the discussion similarly by saying that if the commercial would have been about supporting racists then she would not buy anything from them. She explains that it is because that particular issue affects her more while the commercials do not necessarily affect her purchase behaviour.

Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) describe that trust is essential in situations of uncertainty and when consumers have the possibility to choose between similar products. In connection to Alva's example and Gabriella's statement, this might indicate that brand activism can cause a sense of distrust if it violates consumers' personal integrity which motivates them to choose a substitute product. Gabriella also says that she prefers not to know what certain brands stand for because what you do not know cannot hurt you. She describes it as follows,

> *In the end you will not be able to buy anything at all. It helps me to not know what they stand for because in that way I do not need to restrict myself, it becomes easier for consumers in that way.*

This in turn describes a sense of fear that such violation of personal integrity can restrict consumers' freedom if their moral values weigh heavier than the brand and products. Göran tries to define such trespass by arguing that as long as a company does not cross the 'negative line', which means doing more harm than good, it will not impact him. This is something that can be described by Douglas (1966) who explains how dirt should not enter the pure since if it happens, it is too late to withdraw. More specifically, a person is always in the wrong when he or she has crossed a line which should not have been crossed, creating a displacement that results in an unleashed danger for someone (Doulgas, 1966).

This also indicates that the line is somewhat difficult to define since it is based on subjective determinations but most of the consumers agreed on the fact that brands should not intrude into their personal integrity. This is a shared perspective among most of the consumers although Elina questions whether it is possible to not interfere in someone's personal values since it is a very subjective aspect. Although she considers it to be unavoidable to interfere with people's personal values, she still gets upset when she sees SAS's commercial since it makes her, as well as many others, feel as if they try to denigrate the Swedish culture. Linking to the SAS commercial, it created a lot of controversy among the consumers which is illustrated by Göran,

> *It is not their business; this is something politicians should treat not them. Brands should do what they are good at, everyone should do what they are good at. […] if you navigate somewhere else it can turn out very bad if you do not have control in that market. I am like this; if you make me really pissed, I will no longer be motivated to buy from you. I do not want to buy your products again.*

Göran considers that interfering on personal values has nothing to do with companies and their businesses. On the contrary, he thinks that politics is something that politicians should treat and not brands. When it comes to moral rules, consumers ascribe activities with what is right and wrong and therefore it can be difficult to change a certain order or structure if it is cherished by society (Douglas, 1966). A change would constitute a danger meaning that it will pollute the existing constructed logic which can be connected to Göran's statement of how brands get involved in areas, which he considers, do not concern them. This results in a perception that it is not up to brands to engage in political debates where they instead should focus on their traditional purpose which is to sell their products. He describes such activism as unethical since it violates peoples' personal integrity. For example, Elina says that the commercial made her angry and that it went in on her personal identity. She expressed that SAS should leave her meatballs and midsummer pole alone. Simon adds that even though he personally could not relate to the different holidays that were reflected in the commercial, he still does not think that it is okay to patronize the Scandinavian identity since it should be respected. Therefore, even though Morhart et al. (2015) suggest that moral values can enhance brand authenticity, it might be needed to do so without harming or patronizing another specific group.

5.2 Perception of Duplicity

The consumers also evaluate brand activism as an act of duplicity. They consider that such a strategy deceives consumers by promoting an issue while aiming to increase profits. The consumers have the impression that there is a form of hypocrisy when companies try to take an active stand and involve personal values while simultaneously market their actions. Additionally, it is argued that brand activism leaves the products shadowed and makes the companies lose focus of what really matters. Lastly, brand activism is described as empty talk where the consumers consider that companies only focus on mentioning the issues instead of stating facts or showing concrete actions.

5.2.1 Deceiving the Consumer

One notion that describes consumers' evaluation of brand activism is the fact that they feel deceived by the corporations' communication. The consumers have difficulties with seeing brand activism as something truthful. Some express that they do not trust marketing and commercials and do not care about such communication since they know what the underlying purpose is.

This aligns with Obermiller, Spangenberg and MacLachlan's (2005) claim that the more sceptical a consumer is, the more he or she will dislike advertising, watch it less and rely on it less. Moreover, Beverland, Lingreen and Vink (2008) claim that it is difficult to gain authenticity when using channels such as mass-marketing since it could be seen as double standards. Therefore, brand activism appears as yet another strategy used to deceive consumers in order to increase sales. The consumers think that the underlying reasons for the corporations' communication is to increase their sales and mention how it influences their attitude towards all kinds of marketing related communications. One example is Lisa who feels like brands try to fool consumers when they take stands if they communicate it through their advertisement. She explains that if companies want to show their stand, they should do it on other platforms since she perceives commercials as an expensive tool used with the purpose to create awareness about their products and thus increase their sales. Kim and Lee (2009) explains that such sceptic behaviour is the reason why acceptance for marketing claims is low. This might not only indicate a sense of scepticism but even cynicism. Mohr, Eroğlu and Ellen, (1998) explain that cynicism is a result of long-term scepticism and based on the assumption that companies' actions are based on selfish motives. Lisa says,

> *They can have such things in their campaigns or on their website rather than*
> *in their commercials. When I see a commercial, I want to see the product.*
> *They pay so much money to do a commercial and obviously the aim is to sell*
> *more so I feel like it's rude to fool us like that. [...] The underlying purpose*
> *in a commercial is always to sell.*

Similar to Lisa's argument, Göran also states that brand activism is all about gaining consumers trust and that the reason that they involve personal values is in order to sell more which he considers as fake and inauthentic. The thought of brands wanting to sell more also makes him sceptical where he explains that it is the main reason for his mistrust for communications. This might imply that consumers perceive that corporations lack good intentions with brand activism which Delgado-Ballester and Luis (2001) claim, creates distrust for brands. Moreover, both Göran and Gabriella mention that companies would become more trustworthy if they would separate the social issues from their sales and be more consistent in their actions. More specifically he says,

They would be more trustworthy if they would take actions that would last for a longer time, let's say they would help kids that are born with some kind of beauty-defect, then I would believe it more. But not when it is related to a commercial where they try to show some kinds of values while at the same promoting their product. It is completely bad and unethical.

This is something the majority agrees on, the assumption that companies' main and only purpose is to increase profit which makes brand activism appear as yet another strategy to fool consumers. The perception makes David state that it has come to a level where he mostly only trusts word of mouth and not companies or even its employees. He also says that it might seem cynical but even though he might expect companies to take responsibility in different issues, he lacks trust for such actions because in the end he still considers that their ultimate purpose is to increase their sales. Mohr, Eroğlu and Ellen (1998) state that it is overall more difficult to change or influence a cynic person which might explain David's ambiguity. Rebecka, among others, highlight the fact that even though companies might consider the issues they communicate as important, they still do it to increase sales which does not allow them to trust the good intentions of brands and their communications. Since most of the consumers agreed on the opinion that companies' main goal is profit, Gabriella expresses that it is a way of taking advantage of an important socio-political issue. Delgado-Ballester and Luis (2001) claim that trust is based on a feeling of security and a belief that a certain behaviour is done with good intentions, if a consumer perceives a lack of good intentions, it leads to a break in trust. This might mean that if consumers perceive that brand activism is aimed to increase sales, it can harm consumers' trust towards a brand's communications. She continues by claiming that, besides taking advantage of a socio-political issue, companies even take advantage of their consumers by playing with their feelings in order to gain profit. Felicia adds to this by claiming,

Companies say that "we work like this and we help women in these countries", and since you actually want to do good, it is easy to buy the marketing that is out there. That is why you also feel disappointed if it turns out to be false.

She explains that even though consumers want to do good and choose the right products, it becomes difficult to trust brands since it so often happens that companies say they want to do good while they actually aim to increase their profit. This is also treated by Molinillo et al, (2017) who say that taking advantage of something or someone cannot create a feeling of trust.

5.2.2 Redirects Focus Away From Product

The discourse on brand activism has been received with mixed feelings from the consumers and a perspective that repeatedly emerged throughout the data collection was that the focus should be on the brands' products and their quality. The consumers feel that instead of presenting the benefits of the products and how it will satisfy their needs, they are focusing on making commercials about the stands that they are taking. This results in the products being pushed into the background and the focus being redirected on to the wrong things. By not fulfilling the consumers' needs, the brands are breaking the reliability that the consumers have for them (Delgado-Ballester & Luis, 2001). Sven adds to this by saying,

> *It feels like they do not dare to trust their own products. It does not make the product look especially good and it is both dangerous and wrong that politics should influence the product. I think they should focus more on their products. They should really not forget about their products because it should not be about politics.*

Sven illustrates the perception of how brand activism redirects the focus away from products and argues that it makes the product appear less attractive. He thinks that it seems as if the company does not trust its own products. Alva also mentions that she thinks that some brands are exaggerating the stand that they are taking and highlights H&M as an example. She thinks that they are focusing so much on showing models with different cultures resulting in that they barely show any European models anymore and side-line the importance of their actual products. Göran adds to the discussion on the importance of the product and mentions that commercials do not affect him because he only cares about the quality, design, and functionality of a product. He says,

> *If you want to sell something then it is best to talk about the product and what it can do, not some other issue. It is price and quality that matters.*

Consequently, it could be questioned whether authenticity is more important than quality as Wang and Scheinbaum (2018). Moreover, Lisa says that she wants to see what type of products they have and what she can gain from them in the commercials. She adds that she generally thinks that the product should be in focus in marketing. Lisa also mentions that she flies a lot and that SAS's commercial does not affect her purchase behaviour. She only wants to know if the flight fulfils her needs. The discussion regarding quality aligns with Napoli et al. (2014) who argue that quality commitment is an important aspect in order to create an authentic brand.

Robert has a similar thought in connection to Gillette's commercial. He says that his first thought was not necessarily "*perfect, how much does a pack of razors cost and where can I buy them?*". He considers that brand activism is a way of marketing products which gives him the perception that it is an unsuccessful strategy to make him buy their products. Rebecka, among others, also agrees with Robert by saying that the focus disappears from the actual product which is the razor. This does not only concern Gillette, but the consumers regarded this issue to the most of the commercials. It seems that it is important for the consumers that brands direct focus towards the products and their quality since in the end, those two factors are what they are buying and what contributes to the trust and authenticity of the brand.

5.2.3 Empty Talk

The last but still highly significant aspect of the consumers' evaluation of brand activism is the importance of facts as well as taking more action and making the engagement in socio-political issues more tangible. Among the consumers, it is commonly discussed that brands need to state real facts and show it through actions rather than talk about the existence of socio-political issues since it becomes empty talk and loses authenticity. Albayrak, Aksoy and Caber (2013) state that proof convinces the sceptic person and provides a sense of authenticity which enhances the effects of an advertisement. Therefore, the most appreciated commercials of the four, by a clear majority, was IKEA due to factors such as having statistics, a down-to-earth approach and involving real people which Gabriella describes as follows,

> *I liked this video. They had it in their own store where real people were involved. They made a project and a test out of it. They made the people actually feel it and they also had statistics making it more tangible. They also showed their way in how they could contribute to the message that they highlighted. I did not experience it as that they were trying to 'win' but rather giving and contributing*

Gabriella's statement aligns with Napoli et al.'s (2014) argument about brands' authenticity. They claim that a sincere story based on a place, tradition or non-commercial values can become crucial when communicating authenticity to consumers. Similarly, Simon describes such brand activism as positive because of the fact that they conducted interviews that showed how people felt, listed statistics and conducted an experiment.

The experiment makes the consequences of climate changes more tangible which is an illustrative way to make the consumers realise the severity of it. Simon, among others, also mentions that IKEA makes a promise that they will reduce their emissions with 70 percent which is a clear statement showing interest for more than just increasing profits. According to Morhart et al. (2015) a brand that does not fulfil its brand promise, harms its credibility which in turn influences the authenticity. Connecting to this, Lisa argues,

> *They actually did something concrete. They made the customers aware, but they did not just illuminate the problem, they also added what they personally do. Ikea did something concrete, one could understand that they are a furniture company and their actions would make a difference.*

In contrast to Ikea, Gillette was a commercial that created polarized opinions. Simon who did not like the commercial explains that one of the main reasons for it is because it feels fake and does not include any types of numbers or statistics to back up the issue that they claim to support. There is however still a sense of cynicism, among the consumer, even when it comes to facts where Rebecka for example emphasizes the importance of true facts. Even though she considers facts as important, she is not sure whether they are fully trustworthy. She says that there is often a backside to all these corporations such as for example UNICEF saying that they are helping the children in Africa.

She questions whether organizations really forward 100SEK to the children or if 50SEK goes to the administration fee while 20SEK goes to the manager and the rest to the children. She says that only if she can make sure that all the facts and the information is correct, would she be willing to support the corporation. Her scepticism can be described by Becker-Olsen, Cudmore and Hill (2006) who discuss that scepticism increases when there is a discrepancy between a company's statements and their actions. For this reason, consumers are more sceptical when companies argue that their actions are purely social, and it appears that their actions are profit oriented. Felicia also treats this issue and explains that the dilemma lies in the companies' dirty play where they only show statistics that reflect their positive aspects but do not necessarily show a holistic view of how much they actually have contributed to an issue. If a brand lacks transparency and honesty, it can make the brand appear inauthentic (Morhart et al., 2015). Felicia continues to argue that people should feel obligated to do their own research since one cannot always trust companies' marketing, which Gabriella also expresses.

Their distrust towards marketing can be explained by Friestad and Wright's (1994) statement that the more consumers know about different marketing tactics, the more they become sceptical towards such communications. It is considered that facts should be joined with actions since there is a perception that brand activism is solely empty talk. It becomes clear that real actions are more valued than communications and some explain that such issues should not even be related with commercials and sales since it becomes less trustworthy and authentic. Anna emphasizes the importance of actions and claims that companies should not just talk about the issue and make consumers aware that it exists but actually take measures to solve it.

According to Anna, and many of the other consumers, Ikea's commercial was more genuine and authentic since it involved their consumers and it showed clear goals to improve their impact on the environment. However, she mentioned that in order to make it even more authentic they could have shown what actions Ikea has or will take to achieve it. In a similar manner, when Alva is asked what would make her believe a company's engagement in brand activism she answers *"When the brand lives what it says. Simply through their actions."*. This is something that links to Greyser's (2009) reflection around brand authenticity about 'talking authentic' and 'being authentic' where it seems that in the context of brand activism, the latter term is more probable to provide authenticity among the consumers.

6 Discussion

The analysis provided us with two main trends among the consumers that explain how they evaluate authenticity of brands that engage in brand activism. We have identified five main findings that might give an understanding on what basis they evaluate authenticity but also why and when consumers trust or distrust brand activist engagement.

The first main finding that was pervading throughout the research was that consumers expect brands to engage in issues that cohere with their products, business, or the industry they operate in. It appears that lack of consistency might create a feeling of distrust and perception of inauthenticity. Becker-Olsen, Cudmore & Hill, (2006) explain that it is common for scepticism and negative attitudes to occur when there is an inconsistency between prior expectations and new information. Moreover, Nan and Heo (2007) emphasize that if consumers find a lack of fit then it becomes natural that they assume a more critical perspective of the brand or company. One reason for why the consumers felt that it is important for consistency between brands' active stands and the business they operate in is due to the fact that companies have the possibility to contribute to the issue more directly. Brønn and Vrioni (2001) explain the paradox of a brand that either marketing their social actions too much or too little and how consumers can view it as they are either exploiting or hiding something. We might however add that it is not only the amount of communication that matters but also what type of active stand they are taking in relation to their business.

Another finding is that consumers consider brand activism as yet another adaptation to social trends. Consequently, it turns out that brand activism might be seen as inauthentic due to the reason that consumers see it as brands' strategies to conform to the societal expectations from different stakeholders. Even though some might have an understanding for such activities, it still does not mean that it gives companies more authenticity as Beverland and Luxton (2005) explain through decoupling. Consumers today might be too aware of such a strategy and thus lack trust for its authenticity. When brand activism is related to the perception that brands want to adapt to prevailing trends, consumers do not consider it as trustworthy and genuine. Becker-Olsen, Cudmore and Hill (2006) explain that scepticism among consumers increases for brands who choose to adopt their stand in line with current trends and issues, leading to a perception of inauthenticity. However, brands that act proactively, meaning that, no matter the current trends, always have stayed true to support certain issues are seen as more authentic. The

consumers explain that the reason for it is because it is more difficult to be the first one to take a stand compared to companies that follow trends and therefore just follow a path that already has been set out for them.

Besides general evaluations of brand activism, the consumers also expressed that it somehow can concern them on an individual level. This leads us to the third finding where it seems that there is a certain line that should not be crossed in order for brands to keep their trusted consumers. The consumers argue that they appreciate when brands take responsibility for societal issues but should not go into deep rooted personal values. This might demonstrate that consumers dislike brands that become too personal and get involved into sensitive topics that offend them and violate their personal integrity. Therefore, crossing this line can mean that consumers lose trust for a brand even though they like its products. It is appreciated when a brand takes a stand that aligns with the consumers' own values, but it does not necessarily motivate them to a purchase. However, if it violates their important personal values it can lead to a backlash. It can also signal that consumers have a clear perception of what brands' ought to do whereas politics goes beyond this set logic. Beverland and Luxton (2005) explain how brands adapt to an institutional logic to gain acceptance for their business's agenda. However, meanwhile doing it, it seems that it goes beyond what consumers consider as logical regarding brands' socially accepted tasks. Accordingly, Douglas (1966) describes individuals' perception of what is accepted and not based on their wider cultural contexts. As long as brand activism does not violate consumers' personal integrity, their previous experiences with certain products weighs heavier which means that the trust they have built for the product is more important than the activist stand. Just as Delgado-Ballester & Luis, (2001) say, consumers develop trust based on previous experiences with a brand through channels such as product purchase, advertisement, word of mouth and brand reputation.

The fourth finding is twofold; firstly, there is a need for real stated facts and actions that support the issue a brand is engaging in. It is not enough that brands communicate about an issue and show what they think by stating it in their commercials. Albayrak, Aksoy and Caber (2013) state that proof convinces the sceptic person and provides a sense of authenticity which enhances the effects of an advertisement. If brands only choose to talk about a certain issue, it loses authenticity.

Secondly, this is connected to consumer scepticism for commercials where a clear majority consider that the aim for all kinds of advertising is to increase profit. The consumers tend to think that brands that engage in brand activism do it to increase their own image, gain more consumers and thus increase their sales. Therefore, it could be stated that consumers consider brand activism as inauthentic and distrust its genuineness when there are no actions or facts aligned with the stand they are taking. Delgado-Ballester and Luis (2001) claim that trust is based on a feeling of security and a belief that a certain behaviour is done with good intentions. If a consumer perceives a lack of good intentions, it leads to a break in trust. This means that if consumers perceive that brand activism is aimed to increase sales, it can harm consumers' trust towards a brand's communications which is reflected in this context of brand activism. Moreover, just as Beverland, Lingreen and Vink (2008) claim, it is difficult to gain authenticity when using channels such as mass-marketing since it could be seen as double standards. This might mean that brands need to separate brand activist actions from their sales or support the communications with real actions and facts.

The last finding is that the consumers feel that the brands are putting too much focus on the stand they are taking instead of placing the emphasis on the actual product and its quality. This can be connected to consumers' scepticism about brands' 'good' intentions with taking a stand. In the end it seems that consumers might think that the importance of the products should be superior since that is what they are buying. Therefore, it is important that brands fulfil consumers' needs rather than focus too much on promoting certain stands. Wang and Scheinbaum (2018) argued that authenticity has become more important than the quality of products whereas it seems that in this case, products and quality are more appreciated than trying to gain authenticity by engaging in socio-political issues. However, it does not mean that authenticity is not important, but consumers urge that brands should not forget about the product and quality.

6.1 Research Implications

This research has contributed with several implications, both for academia but also for brands and brand managers. Existing theory states that brands need to decrease the gap between businesses' values, customers and society in order to strengthen the business (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). As Kotler and Sarkar (2018) argue, companies need to have an outside-in mindset when concerning societal issues to impede or promote improvements in society.

However, our findings suggest that companies need to be careful with adapting to societal trends since consumers consider such actions as inauthentic where brand activism becomes yet another branding strategy to deceive consumers. It turns out that brands might need to act more proactively rather than reactively when it comes to brand activism in order to obtain authenticity and gain consumers' trust. Moreover, it is not enough to impede or promote societal issues but consumers might expect that brands actively engage in such issues instead of commercializing it since it becomes inauthentic. Similar to Manfredi-Sanchez (2019) findings, we have explored that brand activism is mostly considered as inauthentic, however, he did not investigate the reasons why consumers consider it as inauthentic in order to understand in what way brand activism could be used more efficiently.

We have discovered that consumers could appreciate brands' engagement in such issues if it is done in a sincere and trustworthy manner by actions and facts rather than empty talk in advertisements. Brand activism itself is not enough to create a perception of authenticity, but the way it is done is highly important to consider. There seems to be a strong feeling of scepticism towards such actions because of the fact that they seem to be highly related to profit. Moreover, Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) states that, if a company is global, they need to have consistency throughout the entire organization. They need to implement their brand activism in all the corporations' different divisions in all the countries that they operate in, otherwise it will not be successful. Our findings add that the brand activist issue should not only be adapted in the whole corporation but have a clear coherence with the company's business operations and history track in order to appear logical and authentic.

Shivakanth Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) argue that there are pros and cons with adapting a brand activism approach namely, that while it can lead to increased publicity and consumer identification, it can also result in backlash if the actions are unethical. Similarly, this research has shown that consumers can appreciate brands that take an active stand. However, this research also contributes with an insight for what consumers might define as unethical. Consumers think that there is a certain line which should not be crossed in order to keep their trusted consumers. They argue that brands should not go into sensitive topics or deep-rooted personal values and violate one's personal integrity. Shivakanth Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) also concluded that when companies have the ability to connect with their customers on emotional issues, they form a bond that becomes stronger than

the actual product, quality or price. This research has in contrast to Shivakanth Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019), shown that consumers might actually consider brand activism as a form of duplicity since it redirects focus away from the product which results in the products being pushed to the background. The consumers argue that in the end it is the product that they are buying and that companies therefore need to emphasize on the product and its quality. They argue that it is important that companies fulfil their needs that they have for the product rather than promoting the stands that could increase their sales.

Since the trend of brand activism is considered to increase, this research offers several practical implications that can help brand managers and companies that consider engaging in brand activism. One such implication is that it requires a clear consistency between the issue and the brand's actions or its products. Consumers need to see a clear logic in why a brand chooses to take a stand since it is not enough to do it just because it is considered to be in fashion. Consumers might want brands to concretely express how a certain stand can contribute to society but also in what way it is connected to a brand's and company's already existing identity. Moreover, it seems that if a brand chooses to engage in a socio-political issue, it should not patronize a certain group since it is considered as disrespectful. There is a danger in taking too radical and value-loaded stands if it has not been reflected in the company previously since consumers that trust a brand can choose to boycott it if it becomes too personal. Furthermore, managers need to have in mind that it is not sufficient to only market the certain stand that they are taking since consumers argue that they want to see actual facts and concrete actions. Brand managers should keep in mind that consumers might consider brand activism as inauthentic if it is only incorporated in advertisement. This is because consumers might consider that the purpose with all types of advertisement is to increase brand image, attract consumers and increase sales. Therefore, it is important to remember the actual product and consider actions and goals that can help to support the stand the company is taking.

7 Conclusion

This research has contributed to the societal debate of increased distrust for institutions and need for greater authenticity in a world that is becoming more polarized. In result of this, brand activism has become the possible 'saving grace' that might solve the issue of inauthenticity to help consumers determine what is real and what is fake. While this corporate political shift aims to change focus from increasing sales and instead take a stand that matters to consumers (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019), it has turned out to be a struggle to convince them about its authenticity. Consumers expect brands to take a stand but do not consider such actions as trustworthy. Hence, it has become important to determine in what way brand activism can be applied most effectively and serve as a tool for increased authenticity. The purpose with this research was to advance our understanding of authenticity in brand activism. Therefore, it aimed to explore what consumers think of brand activism and why. Moreover, the objective was to understand how consumers evaluate brands that engage in brand activism and whether they find such communications as authentic and trustworthy. This led to the research question: How do consumers evaluate authenticity of brands that engage in brand activism?

Our research concludes that consumers evaluate authenticity of brands that engage in brand activism based on the following principles. They consider to what extent the brand and its products are related to the stand it is taking. The more logic and consistency there is, the more authentic it becomes to engage in such a stand. Furthermore, consumers consider brand activism as an adaptation to the most current trends which appears inauthentic since it lacks genuineness. While the consumers do appreciate authentic stands, they also consider that a brand loses their trust if it interferes into their personal rooted values. It seems that there is a line which business should not cross in order to maintain their trustworthiness. Another principle that might be highly relevant in order to obtain authenticity is that brands need to consider real actions and facts in regard to their stand instead of just marketing it. This relates to the fact that consumers are sceptical towards companies' good intentions with brand activism. They consider that the ultimate goal is to increase sales and improve their brand's image which makes brand activism inauthentic if it is not proved through facts or actions. Brands are seen to adopt a surface of authenticity when engaging in brand activism while the core is still based on increasing profit. Therefore, it is especially important that brands aim for authenticity inside-out. The last principle regards the quality and products since consumers consider that brands should not

forget about what really is important, the offerings. It can de-authenticate a brand if it appears that it loses focus from its products while engaging in socio-political issues.

In short, it becomes clear that the consumers perceive a lack of authenticity in brand activism. While they expect brands to take their social responsibility, they also emphasize that it needs to be done in a truly authentic way. Brands should not treat consumers as naive individuals but instead engage in brand activism genuinely by adopting it inside-out. They should therefore not only profit from the change but be a part of the change.

7.1 Limitations & Future Research

There are several limitations but also suggestions for future research. One such aspect regards the method for collection of empirical material. Due to the current situation with Covid-19, this research was based on synchronous focus groups and Skype-interviews which restricted the possibility to capture the value of real face-to face meetings. While this research is solely focusing on Swedish consumers and does not aim for generalizability, it can still create a possibility to understand how consumers might evaluate authenticity in other contexts as well but might need complementing research. For example, it could help to explain the authenticity of brands that engage in brand activism in similar cultures such as other Scandinavian countries. Additionally, this research only gives examples of commercials whose brands operate in the aerospace industry, furniture/retail/FMCG industry and electronics industry. It could, however, also give an understanding of brand activism within other industries, among others, transport, education, pharmaceutical, food, health care, entertainment, and news media industry. It is also focusing on brand authenticity in a brand activist context but, with additional research, it might help to explain how contemporary consumers evaluate authenticity in other contexts within the field of marketing and branding.

This research has been limited to four commercials of familiar brands which gives incentives for future research. It could be worth considering examples of brands that are less familiar in order to see whether it influences consumers' evaluation of authenticity differently. Since this research has only focused on consumer perspectives, an interesting suggestion for future research could be to explore how brand activism could influence companies internally and investigate whether it has an impact on current employees' attitudes towards a brand.

Lastly, since we did not research if there was any difference between genders or generations in how they evaluate brand activism it would be interesting to examine if there are any differences and similarities between their evaluation of brand activism.[1]

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[1] [1] Parts of chapter 1,3 and 5 are taken from our Pilot Study that was conducted March 13th, 2020 in the course Qualitative Research Methods (BUSR31), previous to this research.

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Appendix 1 - Focus group guide

- What is your first impression of the commercial?
- *Vad är ditt första intryck av reklamen?*
- Did you like it? Why/why not?
    - What was it that you especially liked/disliked about it and why?
- What was the message of the commercial?
- *Vilket meddelande försöker reklamen lyfta?*
- What feelings did it bring up in you?
- *Vad för känslor lyfter den upp hos dig?*
- Could you relate to the brand after seeing the commercial? Why/why not?
- *Kan du relatera till varumärket efter att ha sett reklamen*
- *Varför/varför inte?*
- What is your perception of the brand after you have seen the commercial?
- *Vad är din uppfattning av varumärket efter att ha sett reklamen?*

Ending questions

- Do you think it is important that brands treat such issues? Why/ why not?
- *Tycker du att det är viktigt att varumärken behandlar sådana ämnen. Varför/varför inte?*
- Did you find it trustworthy? Why/why not?
- *Anser du det som trovärdigt? Varför/varför inte?*

Appendix 2 - Interview guide

Introductory general questions on brands:

- What do you think makes a brand attractive/unattractive and why?
- *Vad tycker du gör ett varumärke attraktivt/icke-attraktivt och varför?*
- What do you expect from a brand?
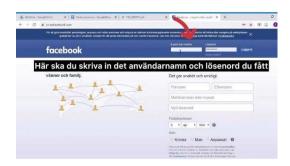- *Vad förväntar du dig från ett varumärke?*

Main questions:

- Do you think it is important that brands engage in socio-political issues as you have seen in the commercials? Why/Why not?
- *Tycker du att det är viktigt att företag engagerar sig i socio-politiska problem såsom de som du såg i reklamen?*
- Does it influence your shopping behaviour? If yes, in what way?
- *Påverkar det ditt shopping beteende? Om ja, varför?*
- Is it important for you to be able to identify your values with a brand? Why/ why not?
- *Tycker du det är viktigt för dig att kunna identifiera dina värderingar med varumärket? Varför/varför inte?*
- Did you feel that you could identify yourself with the brands in the commercials? Why/why not?
- *Kände du att du kunde identifiera dig själv mer eller mindre med någon av de fyra reklamen? Varför/varför inte?*
- What were your feelings after seeing the commercial?
- *Vad kände du efter att ha sett reklamen?*
- How did the commercial influence your perception of the brand?
- *Hur påverkade reklamen din syn på varumärket?*

Final questions
- Now that you have seen the commercials, do they make you trust the brands? Why/why not?
- *Nu efter att ha sett reklamerna, får de dig att lita på varumärkena mer? Varför/varför inte?*
- Do you find the communication in the commercials as authentic? Does it convince you? Why/why not?
- *Tycker du att kommunikationen i reklamerna är autentisk? Övertalar den dig? Varför/Varför inte?*
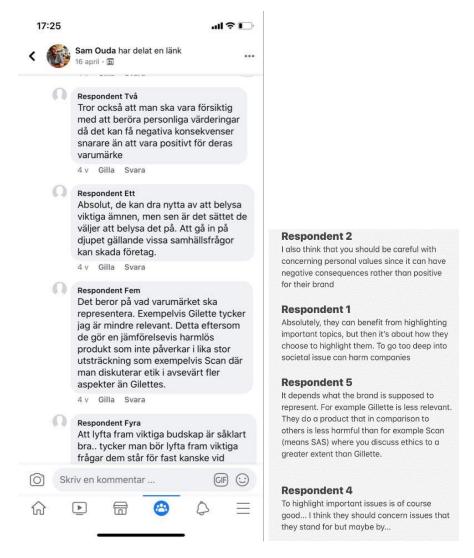
Appendix 3 - Visual examples of tutorial for the focus groups

Appendix 4 - Visual example of a discussion from a focus group

Respondent 2
I also think that you should be careful with concerning personal values since it can have negative consequences rather than positive for their brand

Respondent 1
Absolutely, they can benefit from highlighting important topics, but then it's about how they choose to highlight them. To go too deep into societal issue can harm companies

Respondent 5
It depends what the brand is supposed to represent. For example Gillette is less relevant. They do a product that in comparison to others is less harmful than for example Scan (means SAS) where you discuss ethics to a greater extent than Gillette.

Respondent 4
To highlight important issues is of course good... I think they should concern issues that they stand for but maybe by...

English translation of comments