SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT

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What Really Matters –
The Consumer Evaluation Process of Brands in the Post-Brand Activism Stage

A study about the evaluation of brands who are taking a political or social stand through the consumer in the post-brand activism stage with regard to consumer-brand relevance

by

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Abstract

Title: What Really Matters – The Consumer Evaluation Process of Brands in the Post-Brand Activism Stage

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Thesis purpose: This master thesis has two purposes. First of all, to increase the knowledge about the overall perception of brand activism from a consumer perspective. The second purpose is to show the importance of different principles in the consumer evaluation process of brand activism, which are leading to brand relevance.

Methodology: A qualitative study has been carried out. The interviews were conducted with millennials both from Germany and the Netherlands who were born between 1980 to 2000. The researchers made use of the snowball strategy in order to collect the right empirical data.

Theoretical perspective: The main theories that the study based upon were the evaluation principles (Authenticity, Genuineness and Legitimacy) which are leading to brand relevance.

Empirical data: In this study, 17 interviews were conducted. The informants needed to be familiar with brand activism and belong to the millennial generation.

Findings/conclusions: The findings of the research indicate that authenticity, genuineness and legitimacy are playing an important role in the post-brand activism evaluation process and furthermore, for the consumer's brand relevance. Besides that, we found out that brand activism is currently seen as an Add On for the consumer evaluation and not as a necessary part in the brand communication.

Practical implications: The results of the study identified and developed the consumer evaluation process of the post-brand activism stage, visualized in a framework. It shows that the main principles authenticity, genuineness and legitimacy are evaluated in two different stages. The study also points out that consistency is another important principle, which implies that the brand is communicating a consistent political or social stand over time and not switching between different political or social positions.

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1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the background of brand activism and the current status of it in the marketing world. It is followed by a short introduction of the existing literature about brand activism and theoretical principles for consumer evaluation that leads to the purpose of the study which is specified in a research question. Lastly, the aims and contributions of this research and an outline of this paper's structure are presented.

1.1 Background

In September 2018 Nike launched its new advertisement campaign 'Dream Crazy' starring Colin Kaepernick amongst other athletes who are known for showing a political or social stand. For Nike it was important to show through this advertisement, that no matter where you are coming from or what issues/problems you need to face, you can become whatever you want. The sportswear brand decided to make a statement regarding political and social issues in the US (racial/gender/disability discrimination) and in the world of sports in general. The reaction to the advertisement triggered mixed feelings among the consumers of the brand. The share prices fell and a lot of consumers also showed their negative opinion on this brand through, for example, uploading videos, showing that they were burning their Nike clothes to boycott the brand (Kelner, 2018). Studies have shown that more than half of consumers (57%) are willing to react in a negative way to a brand taking a public stand if it does not fit their own public stand (Gilliland, 2018). On the other hand, a political stand can also have a positive effect, which means that the consumers agree on the public stand a brand is taking and they are willing to interact with the brand (Rehkopf, 2018).[1]

This advertisement is a good example of what is currently happening in the advertisement world. Brands are taking a political or social stand, also called brand activism, by trying to have an impact

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[1] Pijnappel & Pohl, 2020

on problems within society. Brand activism is a good way for brands to get in contact with consumers and to make aware of certain public stands. In this way brands can target their audience who share the same thoughts (Turner, 2019). What can be seen right now, is that more brands are making use of brand activism (Warc, 2019). The reason why these brands are taking a political stand is not to sell more products, instead they want to become leaders in their industry and show that they care about the society (Activistbrands, 2018). Regarding the fact that more and more companies evolved taking a political stand in the previous years (George-Parkin, 2019) it shows that there is a need for companies to stay relevant for their consumers to overcome the competition (Lloyd, 2019). Besides the fact that brand activism is important for companies, it also shows a change in the brand-consumer communication regarding the interest of the consumers. Nowadays, consumers are more involved in advertisements of companies. They want to see brands making use of marketing not just to gain more profit but to support what is happening in society. In the USA 91% of the millennials stated that they would more likely buy a brand which is taking a political or social stand. Consumers are loyal to brands that are in line with their political, sustainable and social thoughts (Hodge, 2020).[2]

Because of the fact that brand activism is a relatively new marketing technique, there is not that much existing literature about it right now. In addition, the existing literature is writing about the impact of brand activism for companies. There is little knowledge about brand activism in relation to the consumer's perspective. However, we have found some interesting principles that may help us to further expand the consumer perspective and especially in regard to the brand relevance for the consumer. Consumers evaluate brands on the basis of three different principles; authenticity, genuineness and legitimacy which lead in the end to brand relevance for them. In this study brand relevance is defined as the importance of a certain brand for the consumer. It is about the interaction of the consumer to the brand and being in a relationship with the brand. The reason why it is important to do research on brand relevance is because it is more difficult for companies to become or remain relevant to consumers. Holt (2002) describes this in his article about branding paradigms as well. He indicated that consumers are more aware of the marketing motivations of brands and how they are using certain techniques to increase sales. This can finally lead to consumer resistance. As a result, brands need to think about new marketing approaches to become or stay relevant for consumers, these techniques are formulated in paradigms. Brand activism can be seen as such a new paradigm for brands. Older paradigms are not working that well anymore

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2 Pijnappel & Pohl, 2020

because consumers know how it is functioning, and as a consequence it is time for a new stage. Brand activism might be eliminating some of these conflicts.

Because brand activism is quite a new marketing technique, we do not know yet how consumers evaluate brand activism. Therefore, this study focuses on the evaluation process of consumers in the post-brand activism stage and whether that evaluation influences the relevance of the brand for the consumer or not. We defined the post-brand activism stage as the stage which does not include exclusively the advertisement, but moreover covers the overall communication of the political or social stand a brand is taking. Every evaluation process has its important factors and we are identifying through our research which factors the consumer considers as most important for his/her own evaluation. Existing literature is mainly focused on the company perspective within brand activism and contributing to this and to bring in a new angle this paper will cover the consumer side, and what kind of relevance brand activism has for them. With this consumer perspective, we will develop new insights from our research and answer the following research question: 'How do consumers evaluate brands in the post-brand activism stage and what is the importance of evaluation-principles for the consumer-brand relevance'?

1.2 Research Purpose

This thesis is primarily intended to address two purposes. The first purpose is to increase the knowledge about the overall perception of brand activism from a consumer perspective. And secondly, to show the importance of different principles in the consumer evaluation process of brand activism leading to brand relevance.

1.3 Contribution Aim

The aim of the presented research is to give a theoretical contribution to the field of marketing communication, specifically the brand communication through brand activism and addressing social issues. We are presenting the state of previous research and existing theories to contribute to the research with a self-developed model to clarify the consumer evaluation of brands regarding the post-brand activism stage. This development of the theoretical model and our research

advances existing conceptualizations of consumers' evaluation of brand activism and combining different evaluation principles to close the gap we identified in previous literature. Moreover, contributions are made by presenting the evaluation process with the outcome of brand relevance which will be reached through the combination of the theoretical principles of authenticity, genuineness and legitimacy.

1.4 Delimitations

The main delimitation of the study is that we are focusing solely on the consumer perspective of millennials on brand activism in the Netherlands and Germany. The informants were chosen based on their interests in political and social issues in combination with brands and their nationalities (German and Dutch). We chose to gather empirical material through interviews with millennials to achieve interesting opinions from informants who can participate in this study by giving us insights about the post-brand activism perception from the consumer point of view.

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

We introduced our research topic by giving some general background information in the introduction. In addition, we gave some information about what and how we did research, the aim of this thesis and shared our research question. This introduction is followed by the second chapter, the literature review. Within this chapter we dive into the relevant existing literature about brand activism. It is divided into four different subchapters; brand activism, the response of the consumers on brand activism, the timing of brand activism and brand activism in relation to millennials. To support the literature review, chapter three is about the theoretical framework of existing theories. These theories help us to guide us with a framework through the thesis and to close the identified gap in the existing literature. This chapter is focusing on five different concepts; evaluation, authenticity, genuineness, legitimacy and brand relevance. All five concepts are associated with the brand activism evaluation process of consumers. Based on the previous chapters we describe our empirical methodology in chapter four. In this chapter the focus will be on how to conduct research and make sure that we study exactly what we want to investigate. Chapter five is about the analysis, where we present our findings of the research. This chapter is

divided into the same theoretical concepts as in chapter three; evaluation, authenticity, genuineness, legitimacy and brand relevance. Our findings are presented on the basis of a self-designed model to give an overview and make it easier to read. In addition, it is an easy way to link it to the existing literature. This link will be made in chapter six, within the discussion of the key findings. In this chapter the focus is on bringing the existing literature and the outcomes of the empirical study together. Finally, we close the thesis with the conclusion of our research and answer the research question, share our limitations and make suggestions for further research.
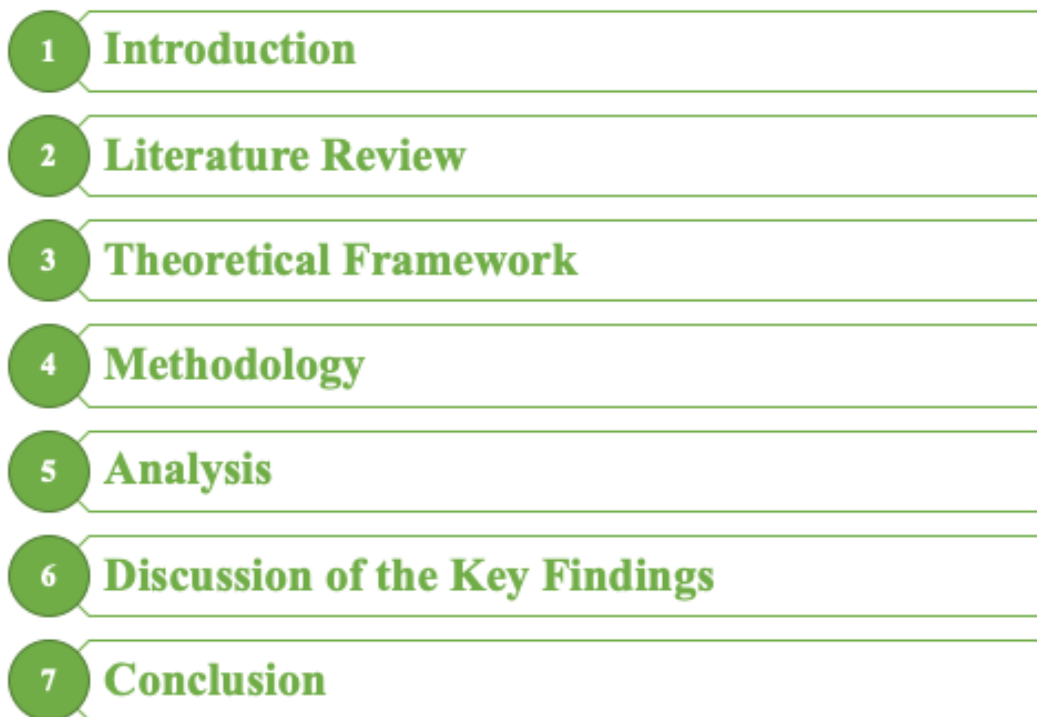

Figure 1:   *Outline of the thesis*

2 Literature Review

To be able to get a clear picture of brand activism, it is necessary to make an overview about the existing literature. This literature is divided into four different streams: Brand activism in general, to find out what this way of marketing entails; The response of the consumer to brand activism, which considers the possible reactions of consumers to this specific way of marketing; The right timing of taking a political stand and the last stream deals with the target group, which is most attracted by brand activism.

2.1 Brand Activism

Clemensen (2017), indicates that Corporate Political Activism (CPA) is part of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). For companies CSR is an approach of doing business, by taking care of the economic, ecological and social side of commerce. Companies that took, or still take, a political stand have started when CSR was introduced. With CSR, brands started to play a role in what was going on in society. Over the years, CPA has developed further and has become more than just CSR. It is now a way of marketing in itself. CPA is responding to what is happening in society by taking a political stand, which is a good way to reach millennials (Clemensen, 2017).[3]

According to Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) brand activism is a political shift of the company. The goal of this shift is not to increase sales, but it is about taking a political or social stand to start an emotional relationship with the consumer. This emotional relationship is based on specific values and that the political stand of the company is in line with the principles of the consumer. When a brand is taking a political stand, it is not just about creating a political identity, it is more about

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[3] Pijnappel & Pohl, 2020

creating a personality where the consumer can identify themselves with and can start a relationship with the brand.[4]

2.2   Consumer's Response on Brand Activism

As a result of taking a political stand, the existing literature states different reactions consumers have towards brand activism. These actions are called buycotting or boycotting the brand who is making use of brand activism. This reaction implies the perception of the consumer, if the stand the brand is taking fits their thoughts. It is about the emotional expression of consumers. In this way consumers show whether they are happy, sad, positive or negative towards the public stance of the brand. This has to do with personality, cognitions and perceptions of the brand through the consumer. Besides that, buycotting or boycotting a brand is also seen as rewarding or punishing brands. When buying the brand, the consumers show that they agree with the statement. When the consumers do not buy the brand, the consumers show that they do not agree with the statement. It can be concluded that it is also about political consumption (Hong, 2018). Hong (2018) describes buycotting and boycotting as followed. Buycotting means that when the brand is in line with the thoughts of the consumers, this leads to interest of the consumer for that specific brand. In the end this can lead to an interaction with the brand and finally to purchasing products of the brand. On the other hand, boycotting can be identified as the opposite of buycotting. It implies that consumers want to avoid the brand because the identity of the company is not in line with their thoughts and additionally that the consumer is thinking negative about the brand. For example, if the public stance is not in line in terms of social, political, ethical and economic reasons. According to Klein, Smith and John (2004) boycotting is an example of the power of the consumers. It is an emotional response from consumers to the communication of a brand. The most important reason to boycott a brand is when a brand performs unethical behavior in the consumers eye.[5]

Boycotting can additionally lead to anti-brand activism. Since the mid-2000s, activists started to have more power over what happens to brands. Social media has contributed to this because it is very easy to share messages and thoughts via social platforms with the rest of the world about the negative sides of brands. This also can create anti-brand activism. On the contrary brand-focused activism is aiming to enter into dialogues with brands trying to make compromises and ensure that

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[4] Pijnappel & Pohl, 2020
[5] ibid.

brands are willing to change voluntarily. This way of brand-focused activism is very successful. For example, more sustainable products are entering the market, which are based on the dialogues between consumers and brands (Dauvergne, 2017).[6]

2.3   Timing of Brand Activism

To make sure that consumers will interact with the brand, it is important to address a political or social stand at the right time. The correct timing is essential to capture what is happening in society at the moment (Clemensen, 2017). According to Karlsson, Kjalko and Pauldén (2017), timing is not the only important part of brand activism, a fit between the brand identity and the identity of the political issue is also very essential. It needs to be in line with the values of the brand. Hong and Manfredi-Sánchez (2018; 2019) supporting those findings in their studies as well.

Another interesting finding that Hong (2018) describes is that the social environment also plays an important role in this process, which comes along with the timing. The more consumers support a public stand, the more the emotions and the attitude towards a brand will be moderated. The reason for this is that individuals do not want to be solitary. When more and more individuals agree with the political or social statement of the brand, the more individuals will follow them. Not only when the social environment agrees with the political or social stand it influences the attitude or behavior from consumers, but also when they boycott the brand. The more individuals in their social surrounding participate in the boycott, the more individuals will join as well (Klein, Smith & John, 2004).

2.4   Brand Activism and Millennials

Brand activism is a way of undertaking marketing that is attractive for millennials, born from 1980 to 2000 (Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). This generation is more positive about brand activism instead of other generations. The reason for this is that they feel more responsible to buy products that are good for people and the environment. They grew up with the knowledge of the environmental issues such as global warming, which means that they are more aware of it

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[6] Pijnappel & Pohl, 2020

and this ensures that they feel more responsible for what is happening with the world (Clemensen, 2017). This group of individuals think it is important to buy a product of a certain brand which has a goal besides just selling products, or which supports a purpose. When a brand is acting unethical, millennials will stop buying the brand and eventually start boycotting the brand (previous explained in Chapter 2.2). Because brand activism is about personal thoughts, the relationship between consumers and the brand is more emotional and intense than just buying a product. Millennials want to identify themselves with a brand that is socially responsible, has the same norms and values and is aware of what is going on in the world. This generation expects from brands that they want to help the well-being of the society. Buying the right products of the right brands gives millennials a way of contributing to make the world a better place. When a brand is neutral and not showing a political or social stand, it is more likely that the brand cannot create an emotional relationship with millennials (Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019).

2.5   Summary Literature Review

As it shows the literature focuses on the brand perspective in relation to the different streams of brand activism. In general brand activism means the political or social stand a brand is taking to make aware of certain issues that are going on in the world. Besides using brand activism as a marketing tool, the brand needs to be aware that the consumers may have different responses regarding the political or social stand the brand is taking. Those responses are called buycotting and boycotting. It is important for brands to estimate the response of the consumers to time their brand activism campaigns right and to take a current political or social stand. For brands it is also important to know that especially millennials are interacting with brands who are taking a political or social stand. For millennials it is important that brands are showing a certain stand that they can identify themselves with.

Brand activism is a relatively new marketing technique. Because of this, there is not that much existing literature about this specific field, especially not from the consumer perspective. The existing literature is about creating an identity for the company when taking a political stand. When a brand is taking a political stand, the consumer identifies themselves not just with the brand but also with the stand the brand is taking, it reflects the identity of the consumer. As a result of analyzing the existing literature the focus was on the direct emotional reaction of seeing a brand activism campaign (buycotting, boycotting). Additionally, nothing is stated in the literature

regarding the brand relevance for the consumer in relation to brand activism. This drew our attention towards the fact that it is interesting to research if there is a link between the evaluation of the post-brand activism stage and the outcome of brand relevance for the consumer. Finally, the existing literature is only talking about millennials as the main targeted consumer in this field because research showed that brand activism is more attractive to millennials and important to them.

3 Theoretical Framework

Based on the literature review different theoretical concepts were chosen to close the identified research gap of the consumer evaluation process in the post-brand activism stage. This chapter will focus on existing literature about the concepts of evaluation, authenticity and genuineness, and legitimacy as evaluation principles and brand relevance as a possible outcome of the evaluation process. Finally, a self-developed theoretical model will combine the knowledge of the existing literature and the theoretical concepts and visualize the evaluation process.

3.1 Evaluation

According to the Cambridge dictionary evaluation is defined as the process through which the quality, value, importance or amount of something is judged or calculated (Cambridge University Press, 2020). Putting this description into consideration of our topic, it means that the consumer's evaluation of brand activism is the judgmental process a consumer is going through while or after the perception of an advertisement or statement of a brand that is taking a political stand or social stand. The consumer is calculating the importance, value and quality of the social issue a brand is taking on.

Consumers are more likely to buy products that make it possible to identify themselves with. When the consumer is satisfied with the purchase, this leads to a positive brand trust, relationship with the brand, purchase intention and a perceived quality. Besides satisfaction, a brand can create a good relationship with their consumer when it transfers positive emotions and the consumer is evaluating it as given (Jian, Zhou & Zhou, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Although the evaluation differs per product category, there are two principles that apply to each category: differentiation and association. Differentiation is about the differences between the brands. These differences are weighted by importance. This makes it clear to the consumer which brand suits his or her wishes the best. Associations are related to the expectations, thoughts, knowledge and the image of the brand that consumers have (Fischer, Völckner & Sattler, 2019). Brands can make the purchasing process easier for consumers. A brand can give consumers the feeling that this specified product has a greater advantage than others. This feeling is based on two factors: risk reduction of a bad bargain and the social environment. Risk reduction is related to the knowledge of consumers. When consumers know that a brand offers good quality or characteristics it adds value for them, and it is easier for them to choose that brand. In addition to the evaluation differentiation per product category, it also varies by age. The older the consumers, the more experience they have with several brands and the better they know the brand's identity and can decide whether they like a specific brand or not. On the other hand, young individuals change brands more often to find out the best fit between a brand and their identity and requirements (Fischer, Völckner & Sattler, 2019).

As pointed out in Chapter 2 the consumer is seeking the identification with the company especially in relation to brand activism. To enlighten the identification process between consumer and company an understanding of this will be given in the following. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) show that a strong relation between a consumer and a company often arises when the consumer can identify themselves with the company. This is called C-C identification and is the identification from the consumers point of view. Through the identification with the company the consumer is able to identify themselves properly to their social environment through the company. When a consumer learns more about the identity of a brand, then it is up to them if their own identity and the identity of the company are matching so that the consumer can take the initiative to start a relationship. The reason why the consumer takes the initiative is because they want to have the power about showing their identity to their social environment. The consumer can choose which brands represent their identity the best and through that it is important that this process is done carefully, because only in this way they are interacting in the social group which they consider as right for them. In this process it is about the perceptions and the influence of what the consumer reflects through his or her identity. A brand is attractive to a consumer when it meets self-enhancement, self-continuity and self-distinctiveness.

Theoretical Framework

To visualize the C-C identification explained previously Figure 2 shows a model describing the identity of a brand in combination to the identity of a consumer. According to Bhattacharya and Sen (2003), the more positive a consumer is about a brand identity, the more it is in line with the consumer's identity, which is pointed out as Identity Similarity. In addition, it is also important that the brand identity is distinctive from other brands. In this way it is possible for the consumer to distinguish himself from a group to which he or she does not want to belong to: Identity Distinctiveness. Finally, consumers also find it important when a brand is prestige: Identity Prestige. This leads to another important aspect, the trust of consumers in the identity of the brand. To have a positive C-C identification, the evaluation of the consumers must have shown that the brand is reliable in their communication about the identity: Identity Trustworthiness. When a brand has a trustworthiness identity, consumers are more likely to buy a product of it to represent their own identity. If the consumer trusts the company the identity of the company gains attractiveness for the consumer: Identity Attractiveness. The last two factors that are affecting the C-C Identification are the embedded interactions with the company (Embeddedness) and the Identity Salience. If all these stages lead to a positive outcome, there will be a positive C-C identification and the brand has several positive aspects to offer: Company Loyalty, Company Promotion, Customer Recruitment, Resilience to Negative Information, Stronger Claim on Company.
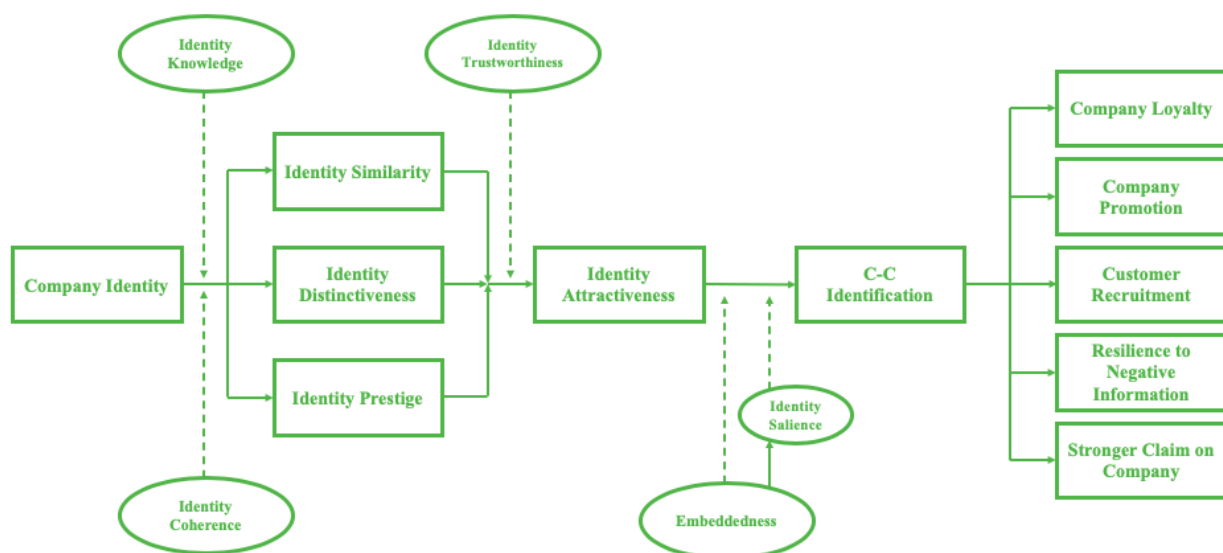

Figure 2:   C-C-identification model adapted from Bhattacharya and Sen (2003)

Holt (2002) additionally claims that products and companies have become part of the identity of the consumer as a result of authenticity. Since the postmodernism authenticity has become more important within the marketing field. To add a valuable contribution to the identity of consumers,

a brand really needs to be authentic. This change ensures that there is a link among brand activism and the relationship between consumers and brands. For consumers, a brand which is perceived as authentic is the right way to express themselves. In this way, a consumer can exercise control over what they want to convey about his or her identity. Besides that, this can also lead to a connection between consumers. By showing that a specific brand is in line with the identity of themselves, it is easy to see which consumers share the same identity characteristics with each other. Especially young generations are looking for brands that represent their identity, within this search authenticity is key (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010).

3.2 Authenticity and Genuineness

According to Chung and Lee (2019) authenticity can be defined as something or someone that/who is "real, genuine, original and true". These words mean that brands and actions are actually what they say they are. It is about the brand story that they are telling the consumers. Brands need to be 'real'. Although, Chung and Lee (2019) also indicate that it is difficult to give an ambiguous definition of authenticity. Most of the definitions are all linked to fairness, realness and what consumers want (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019). Another important factor of authenticity is personalization. This means that the consumer wants communication that suits their personal desires. Individuals want to create personal relationships with the brand (Shanahan, Tran & Taylor, 2019). Brand stories ensure that consumers consider a brand as authentic. The reason for this is that consumers evaluate stories less critical than factual information. Stories are processed in a way that assumes the story is true and they make it possible that the consumer has its own perception of the story. This makes it easier for individuals to identify themselves with a brand. They are believing the story, perceiving the story as true and that their experience can take them wherever they want (Hamby, Brinberg & Daniloski, 2019). The connection with a company via a brand story is so important that consumers do not have a negative attitude towards counterfeiting products. As long as the brand story is true and identifiable, it is likely that consumers will buy a product. Through that, the genuineness of brands can be interpreted in different ways (Commuri, 2009).

Authenticity or genuineness is not only an important input for the marketing of brands but in recent years it also has become essential for the consumers themselves (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019). This is also called intrapersonal authenticity (Mody & Hanks, 2020). With authenticity

consumers want to give meaning to their lives (Farra et al., 2019). Individuals want to be authentic; they want to show their original self through the fact that products are an extension of themselves. Previous research shows that products are seen as parts of the extended self for consumers (Belk, 1988). For consumers, authenticity comes from the inside. It is about who they really are. Authenticity is not about the environment of individuals, it arises inside. Having in mind that authenticity is so important for consumers, it is also called as the cornerstone in the marketing world (Chalmers & Price, 2009). The marketing and business world are responding very well to this need by introducing brand authenticity.

Brand authenticity has a positive effect on the trust, involvement, loyalty, satisfaction and dedication of the consumers towards brands. Because authenticity has become more important, brand authenticity has become more valuable as well for brand management. An authentic brand leads to satisfied consumers, which will lead to a better image and relationship with the brand (Lee & Chung, 2019). According to Hernandez-Fernandez and Lewis (2019), they refer to what Napoli described in 2014, that brand authenticity helps brands to evaluate strategic choices in an effective way to create an authentic brand contribution to consumers. The power of an authentic advertisement is when it translates the fantasy of that product or brand to the consumers. It is important to make a link between every-day life and what the product can offer the consumer. However, undoubtedly an advertisement, cannot be something authentic or real. Even when it looks like it is authentic, it has been staged (Chalmers & Price, 2009).

Brand authenticity also has something to do with the social environment. An authentic brand is a result of a socially constructed brand meaning. This is primarily related to communities that use authentic brands to identify themselves. Therefore, it is important that a brand is authentic in the physical characteristics to make sure that consumers can show to which community they belong (Pattuglia & Mingione, 2017). As stated by Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) it is important for the consumers of brand activism to identify themselves with the stand which can be linked to brand authenticity. Brand activism should be associated with brand authenticity to reach that stage of consumer-company identification.

Right now, it is difficult for companies to be authentic because consumers have an influence on this aspect as well. For brand managers it is relevant to make sure that the brand becomes a part of communities. Brand activism could be a good example to do this (Beverland, 2005). This is shown by an example Beverland (2005) has given about Levi's. A long time ago the brand Levi's supported and stood up for homosexuals. From that day, the brand always has been relevant to this

group of consumers. This shows that brand activism can help brands to start a relationship with them in an authentic way and become part of a community (Beverland, 2005). Nowadays, it is increasingly difficult to be perceived as authentic. As a result, brands are introducing more extreme variants of authenticity, which makes it implausible and can lead to the opposite effect. Nowadays, brands are more focused on fitting into the right consumer communities instead of staying close to their own identity and creating a real authentic brand (Holt, 2002). According to Pattuglia and Mingione (2017), this could create an anti-branding community. This may cause more consumers to avoid or ignore that brand.

3.3   Legitimacy

Regarding the purpose of the study the definition of brand legitimacy is important to clarify. According to Kates (2004) brand legitimacy is an overall perception or even an assumption that the action a brand is taking, in the case of the study taking a political or social stand, is for the consumer appropriate, proper or eventually also desirable and furthermore it needs to be seen by the consumer that the action can be classified into some socially constructed system for example norms, beliefs and values. In addition, the study of Kates (2004) shows that brands have a moral responsibility regarding their actions. Through that the consumer evaluates the actions if they see the brand as legitimate to communicate it. This evaluation can be merged together with the principle of authenticity. If the brands are perceived as authentic, it is most likely that they are seen as legitimate and through that the brand can help negotiate social issues. But on the other hand, it is possible that when a brand is perceived as inauthentic in the past it is less likely for them to gain legitimacy in the future. Additionally, there is no research about the perception of legitimacy in context to brand activism and if a brand and their brand activism campaign is perceived automatically as legitimate through the perception of authenticity.

Through the minimal existing research on brand legitimacy, we decided to also define legitimacy in a more general way to figure out how legitimacy can be perceived. To legitimate something is known as the social process in which an organization or practice is made harmonious with other values, institutions and social norms (Suchman, 1995). The concept of legitimacy describes the process when an idea (i.e.) will be incorporated within the mainstream foundations of society (Humphreys, 2010) and is an important base for social property which indicate the affection on the behavior of for example organizations (Hu et al., 2018). Previous research enlightens

legitimacy from different perspectives. Within the institutional theory, legitimacy is divided into the levels of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive legitimacy (Scott, 1995). In that sense regulative legitimacy describes the conformation of a practice to rules and regulations. Within normative legitimacy the degree of congruence of practices with main values and norms is important. The cultural-cognitive legitimacy contains the perception of taking the practice for granted, and therefore categorizing the practice in already existing cultural frameworks (i.e.) (Suchman, 1995). Besides the different perspectives there are also different mechanisms how the process of legitimation can occur, for example through the action of rewarding or punishing companies through their consumers (Humphreys, 2010). Humphreys (2010) argues that it is important to also enlighten the fact that it is necessary to understand the happening shifts in discourse in the history of a practice over time. She claims that different influences from the outside (cognitive structures, social structures and regulatory structures) have an effect on how legitimacy is evolving throughout the time and how consumers evaluate legitimacy.

The perception of consumers regarding brands taking a public stand does not imply directly the regulation or rules of the government. Through that the meaning of legitimacy in general also combines the action of brand activism and legitimacy how the consumer recognizes and especially evaluates their own main norms and values in conjunction with the brand and categorizes the practice in existing cultural frameworks. Through that the consumer evaluates the actions of a brand if they are legitimate or not (Hu et al., 2018).

3.4 Relevance

A brand is perceived as relevant when consumers are convinced that this brand is important for them. For example, the brand offers functions that are valuable for the customer. Because of this, brands can make the purchasing process easier for consumers. They can eliminate the risks of a bad bargain when consumers are familiar with the brand. In addition, consumers judge brands on quality and relevant functions to make the choice easier for themselves. And that is exactly that makes a brand relevant for consumers, it is easier for them to buy products.

Like Black and Veloutsou (2016) indicated, there are three principles that affect brand relevance: the brand community, the brand itself and the individual consumer. These are the key points in the evaluation to start a relationship with a brand or not. According to Bhattacharya and Sen (2003),

relevance is about company identity, identity attractiveness and C-C identification. It is important that there is similarity between the identity of the brand and the identity of the consumer. Besides that, a brand must generate prestige and ensure that the consumer is a member of the right group. The social aspect is therefore also relevant. Actually, Figure 2 applies to relevance as well. Relevance is about the C-C identification. If there are similarities, it has a distinctive character and it offers prestige, if it is attractive and reliable. Then a brand can be relevant for consumers.

Uggla (2014) indicates that a lot of researchers write that brand relevance is a main goal in advertisement, because they think that brand relevance creates a relationship between a brand and a customer. In contrast to what other researchers state, he thinks relevance is helping consumers to gain knowledge about a brand and through that creating brand value. Most important, relevance is giving a deep meaning to consumers about a brand. The energy brands give consumers, can lead to relevance and finally into a relationship with the brand. That is the reason why Uggla (2014) does not think relevance is a main goal, but that it is helping brands to start a relationship with consumers. He sees the relationship as the central objective.

Finally, an important factor within relevance is innovation. A brand has to go along with developments in the markets and responds to trends. In other words, brand relevance can mean change for the company. The difficult part of this change is the consistency and the relevance of the brand. To stay or become a relevant brand for the consumer it needs to respond to what is happening right now in society. At the same time, it needs to be in line with the brand core. The brand needs to be consistent, otherwise it will look implausible (Beverland, Wilner & Micheli, 2015). Putting this together it is interesting for the present research if brands who are taking a political or social stand are relevant for the consumer through their brand activism campaigns.

3.5   Summary Theoretical Framework

As previously presented, there are different theoretical concepts that we identified in relation to the consumers perception of brand activism. Additionally, we find the theoretical principles helpful to answer the research question and contribute to the existing research. Clarifying the theory of evaluation, authenticity, genuineness, legitimacy and relevance brings it together with the marketing tool of brand activism. To visualize this, we developed a framework showing the process in the post-brand activism stage (Figure 3). After perceiving brand activism, the evaluation

process is starting. This means that the consumer is in the process of judging or calculating the overall brand communication of brand activism. As we identified through the existing literature authenticity, genuineness and legitimacy are important principles in an evaluation process. This draws our attention to the fact to integrate them in the stage of evaluation in the framework. Authenticity and genuineness are the perceptions of whether something is real, original or true. The literature additionally defines that consumers are seeing brands or especially the communication of brands as authentic and genuine when it is personalized and fitting their personal needs and wants. This can be linked to brand activism if it plays an important role for the consumer in the brand activism evaluation process and is contributing to the research. Another principle for the evaluation process is legitimacy, which is defined by literature that a brand's actions are perceived by the consumer as appropriate. In addition, legitimacy is coming along with authenticity and genuineness. Choosing those three principles of the evaluation process for the research led us to the outcome of brand relevance for the consumer. In this study we defined brand relevance as the importance of a certain brand for the consumer. It is the interaction of the consumer to the brand and being in a relationship with the brand.

| Post-Brand Activism Stage | ⇒ | Evaluation (Authenticity, Genuineness, Legitimacy) | ⇒ | Brand relevance for consumer |

Figure 3:   *Consumer Evaluation Process Model*

4 Methodology

This chapter deals with the methodology of the presented study. It starts with giving a short overview about the chosen methodological approach, which is then followed by the outcomes of a pilot study, the research philosophy, research design and approach and finally the research quality.

4.1 Overview

Qualitative research has been carried out to accomplish this study, because this research design made it possible to interact with our participants on a human level and additionally we were able to learn through the interaction on a human level how the meanings of the answers were constructed through cultures (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We used the ontological relativism approach, which is linked to a strong social constructionist epistemology. The reason we chose this method was because the research had an exploratory nature. This means that conclusions were drawn on the basis of empirical research. In qualitative research, the focus is on what the informants are telling the researchers. There is not just one single truth so the outcome of the study, conclusion, is created by the answers of the informants (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

4.2 Pilot study

As a preparation for the research a pilot study with two participants was conducted mid-February 2020. This pilot study was performed in order to gain an overview about the responses, to see whether they were contributing to the research and if the topic guide of the interviews was leading

the interviewers and the interviewees in a nice flow through the interview. It also provided us with information, whether the interviewees understood the questions correctly and if it is easy for them to answer them. The interviews took place face-to-face in a surrounding the interviewees felt comfortable in so that it could be guaranteed that they could answer the questions truthfully. The interviews were recorded so that we were able to transcribe the interviews afterwards and also to relive the interview and figure out possible hesitation in regard to misunderstanding of questions. After the interview we additionally talked with the interviewees to ask them how they felt during the interview and if the structure of the interview was understandable. Furthermore, the interviewees were informed about the outcome of the study and were asked whether they had some additions to make for the topic guide that would have helped them to be able to give more insights and information. Through that we were able to adjust the topic guide for the actual research and to make some changes of the direction and structure of the interview. Based on the comments of our interviewees we decided to expand the topic guide and add follow-up questions. The participants gave us good recommendations of questions we should ask to gain the information we need for answering our research question. After informing the interviewees about the goal of the study, they gave us the feedback that we could have guided them better into the right direction so they could give us more valuable insights. Overall the informants considered the topic of the interview interesting and the structure as adjustable so that the authors are able to get a better overview about the knowledge of the participants.

4.3   Research Philosophy

To be able to follow the methodology of our research, the understanding of the philosophical grounding and the assumptions of the research are important to clarify. The groundings are divided into ontology and epistemology and both groundings rely on different assumptions (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

4.3.1 Ontology

According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2018), the meaning of ontology is the expectation of how the investigated research sees the nature of reality. It clarifies what reality is in general, what different types of beings are in this specific reality, the possibility that different types of beings exist in that

reality, and the definition of the word 'type'. The assumptions of ontology concern four different positions: realism, internal realism, relativism and nominalism. Regarding the fact that this study focused on the ontological position on relativism the other three positions will not be discussed in detail. The ontological view of relativism points out the dependence of phenomena on the perspectives of observations from the perspective of the researcher. There is not just one truth existing but multiple truths which are dependent on the observer's view. Going into detail, Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) describe relativism as an individual's construction of scientific laws implying that every individual defines their own context so that it is in the eye of the beholder to have their own truth. Due to the fact that this study focused on the consumers evaluation of brand activism campaigns and the development of the relationship quality there was not just one single truth to figure out and it was important to gather the experiences of different individuals. In general it is important to understand that different phenomena are experienced differently by individuals and that their motivations are dependent on things like for example racial and cultural background (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Through our ontological perspective on relativism we were always aware of the fact that every of our informants had to share their own truth and to be open minded to accept every individual's motivation and having in mind what could be the reason why they were those answers.

4.3.2 Epistemology

Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) indicate that epistemology helps the researcher to figure out the most appropriate ways to understand and inspect the whole nature of the world. It is about knowledge of the nature of the world and the question about knowledge of the people and the acquisition of that knowledge. Epistemology is mainly divided into the approaches of positivism and social constructionism. Regarding the fact that this study will use the approach of social constructionism, in fact strong social constructionism, the approach of positivism will not be discussed in detail. Social constructionism is the idea of a reality that is determined by people instead of external and objective factors. Additionally, the researcher is a part of the research and what is being observed and additionally the main drivers of the study are the interests of the researchers and informants. As the interests are the main drivers for the research it is necessary that the informants are chosen in regard to a certain reason and that the concept of the research requires the perspectives of the stakeholder. Supporting social constructionism Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) describe the epistemology position of strong social constructionism as the try of understanding and appreciating

the fact that individuals have different experiences and if researchers want to explain the behavior of the individuals they should not rely on external causes or fundamental laws. It is used to gather new insights and actions and the understanding of how people invent structures. Having in mind that this study focused on the consumers evaluation of brand activism, figuring out the relevance of the brand for the consumer and the evaluation of the different consumers, the study used the approach of strong social constructionism. Both researchers were part of the research because both were interacting with brands who are making use of brand activism. The researchers also tried to figure out a structure for the consumers evaluation process and which principles are playing an important role in that process. To understand the consumers full experience, it was necessary that the researchers were aware of the fact that every individual has their own experiences.

4.4 Research Design and Approach

In the presented study the research approach was made of an exploratory nature. The main focus lied on collecting the data through in-depth interviews and afterwards the analysis of the interviews. We made use of an inductive approach, focusing on the fact that the premises of the given answers were true and more likely to lead to the conclusion, without giving certainty (Tunca, 2020).

According to Bell, Bryman & Harley (2018) qualitative methods are a successful way of evaluating business concepts, such as evaluation processes. Having that in mind we set our base for the following study. Especially the topic of brand activism and how the consumers are evaluating this kind of marketing can be seen as a difficult topic to get truthful answers of the participants especially in regard to political statements. Having that in mind we figured out that we wanted to interact and connect with our participants on a personal level, so we were also able to learn in which way the meanings of the statements are constructed based on their cultural background (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Additionally, it was also important to conduct relevant outcomes for our study in a more structured way. By making use of our own developed conceptual framework (Chapter 3), it was possible to build further on the existing literature and link it to our own study. In addition, our research philosophical stand (relativism and strong social constructionism) was in line with our choice of using qualitative methods (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

4.4.1 Data Collection

To be more specific about the method of this study, we used a constructionist research design by conducting a cooperative inquiry, which is a certain form of action research. Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) describe action research as a research design where social phenomena are more likely to be in a continuous change rather than that they are static. Furthermore, they state that different beliefs can be associated with the design of action research. One belief is that, as far as possible, individuals who are affected by the research phenomena should participate in the research process. Because brand activism is a process through which the consumers are affected, or can implement changes through brand-focused activism/anti-brand activism, it was necessary in the research to get in touch with consumers who are affected by brand activism and for who it is important that brands are taking a political stand or addressing a social issue. Moreover, it advanced the research that those consumers took place in the research process and that they spoke about their personal perspectives on the addressed issue.

The research in this thesis was conducted through in-depth interviews to gain specific insights of the participants experiences and perspectives on how they are evaluating a brand after perceiving brand activism and the relevance of the brand for the consumer. With our research we focused on the interpretation of the informants, which was possible by using this specific type of interviews. The interviews were conducted from a strong social constructionism point of view. The reason for this is because the informants' answers were considered to be the reality as they are about their own observation, opinions and experiences. This was important for our research because the own experiences of our participants of brand activism are the main key for our research. Those realities of the participants made it able to answer the research question in regard to the empirical data we were able to conduct. Additionally, it can also give certain insights about the reasons why the informants reacted and acted the way they did regarding the phenomenon (Nilsson, 2020). Qualitative interviews are conversations that are arranged on a specific purpose and are structured with a set of questions. It is important for an interview that the interviewer asks questions that are in a contextual matter and also that they are negotiated between the two participants of an interview (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). By making use of this qualitative approach, we wanted to understand the evaluation process of the consumers and additionally be able to directly react to the answers of our interview participants and to always keep the contextual matter (evaluation of brand activism) in the lead.

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The interviews were conducted remotely, via video calls so that we had the chance to analyze the facial and body expressions of the participants. Because reading between the lines and analyzing the different expressions is a really important part of qualitative research. Besides that, running an interview via remote makes it possible for the interviewer to schedule the interview more flexible and make it possible for the interviewer to gain insights even if it is not possible to sit together (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). The video calls were recorded so that there is a possibility to go through it again after the interview to make sure that there are no signs missing. Remote interviews also made it possible that the interviewees can stay in their comfort zone and in their natural environment to feel secure in speaking up freely (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015).

4.4.2 Selecting Informants

Because the study was based on a specific, sensitive topic and it was necessary that the participants had previous knowledge about the topic, the selection was performed through a purposive and snowball sampling. This is a helpful way if there is a limited or difficult access to reach the right participants. As a result, already selected participants, who are fitting, can recommend future participants who are also a fit for the research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Regarding the fact that we were looking for individuals who were familiar with brand activism and who find it an important approach in marketing it was difficult to exactly get in touch with the right participants for the study. Using the snowball sampling method made it possible for us to get in touch with a wider range of suitable participants. Because we were part of the same generation as the informants and through our own interest in that specific topic of brand activism, we were able to look for participants in our own social environment. The interests in political and social issues being addressed by a brand were the main driver for the study and how our participants are observing it. In addition, to enclose the sampling and to focus on two different markets with a similar culture we were focusing on selecting participants from the Netherlands and Germany. These circumstances allowed us to conduct the interviews in our foreign language so that we were able to decrease the problem that important things got lost in translation. In addition, we thought that we could find more informants, in the Netherlands and Germany, who were willing to participate in our research than internationally. In these countries we have a more extended network to reach the right informants via the chosen sampling method. This also provided a certain closeness between us, as the interviewer part, and our selected representatives from our social environment, which makes it possible to increase the credibility of our study. Through that we were able to

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reduce the possible response biases so that our interviewees could open up and were able to speak freely and without hesitation (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015).

Firstly, we started to search for the right informants who were familiar with brand activism in our network. We build upon their network to get in touch with other right informants who are also familiar with brand activism. The focus of the selection was the familiarity. In this way, it was possible to get more background information about their opinions, but also at the same time going into depth about why they have that attitude towards this way of marketing. The why, how and what questions were the main indicators in our interviews. In the table below, we have made an overview from the general information about the informants.

Table 1:Information about informants

	Gender	Age	Nationality	Working field	Interview duration (in minutes)	Number of pages transcription
Informant 1	Female	23	Dutch	Student (within marketing)	24:57	7
Informant 2	Male	25	Dutch	Student (within marketing)	27:31	8
Informant 3	Female	25	Dutch	Student (within marketing)	32:27	10
Informant 4	Female	26	Dutch	Digital marketer	43:32	11
Informant 5	Male	28	Dutch	Team leader supply chain	41:55	12
Informant 6	Male	30	Dutch	Teacher	26:40	11
Informant 7	Male	31	Dutch	Chef	25:12	6
Informant 8	Female	35	Dutch	Brand manager	40:35	13
Informant 9	Female	23	German	Student (Strategy)	49:50	18
Informant 10	Male	24	German	Student (Strategy)	36:24	10
Informant 11	Female	24	German	Customer Specialist Assistant	43:06	12

Informant 12	Female	25	German	Brand Communication Manager	54:42	14
Informant 13	Female	25	German	Team assistant Real Estate	51:36	20
Informant 14	Male	26	German	Student (law)	36:56	11
Informant 15	Female	26	German	Product Manager	53:53	16
Informant 16	Male	27	German	Commercial Director (E-Commerce)	47:06	12
Informant 17	Male	28	German	Student (law)	38:04	10

4.4.3 Semi-structured interviews

We executed our research and gained our empirical data through the use of semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews make it possible for the interviewed person to express their personal opinions, motivations, stories and experiences with a social phenomenon and we were able to gather those insights of the interpretation and understanding of the consumer towards brand activism (Boejie, 2009). To lead the interviewees through the interview a topic guide was created, and the questionnaire was set-up in a semi-structured way (see Appendix A, page 62). This allowed us to address the issue of brand activism specifically to the participant but we were also able to remain flexible to ask follow-up questions and dig deeper into the experience and perspectives he or she has with this topic (Wahyuni, 2012). Being flexible ensures us to directly adjust our questions and react to the answers our interviewee was giving us. Through that we enabled our interviewee to speak freely but that we were still able to guide them through the topic and to gain deeper insights and more information of their own expressions (Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Wahyuni, 2012). The topic guide was set up with different main-questions to lead through the interview and additionally with supporting follow-up questions if it is needed to dig deeper into one specific question topic (Wahyuni, 2012). Through our pilot study we were able to set up our main and the follow-up questions in a good structure so that we made sure to get a broadened outcome of the interview. It is also good to emphasize that the informants were already familiar with brands who are taking a political or social stand, either through the brand activism campaign or before. All the informants knew a brand activism campaign of one specific brand to go into depth about their

opinion about it (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). This led us to the decision not to focus on specific brands but moreover to set up the topic guide in a way that we can just adjust our question towards the brand our interviewee is choosing to focus on during the interview.

4.4.4 Data analysis

To make sure that the data from our study is valid, reliable and that we conducted and analyzed the data in the same way, we made use of the seven stages to analyze the interview studies from Kvale (in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2019).

- **Identifying Themes**
- **Planning**
- **Interviews**
- **Transcribing**
- **Analysis**
- **Verification**
- **Reporting**

Figure 4:   Seven stages adapted from Kvale (in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2019)

The first three stages are about the preparation phase. Identifying the themes is about the why, how and what we wanted to investigate. What are the main subjects we wanted to discuss with the informants? This stage is followed by planning the interviews, briefing the informants, conducting the research and debriefing a summary of what they said. Phase four to seven are more focused on analyzing the data. First it had to be transcribed, followed by an analysis of what the informants exactly told us. After every interview, the verification took place. This means that the researcher evaluated the interview. What went well, what should be better? Do I need to formulate some questions differently? This verification helped to take this study to a higher level and make sure that the outcomes are in line with what the researchers wanted to investigate.

4.5   Research Quality

Within qualitative research, reflexivity is very important. It makes it possible to analyze the data from different angles. In this way it is possible to discover many different and new outcomes (Alvesson, 2003). Reflexivity helps researchers to be more transparent about their method and investigation, which leads to more openness about the quality of the research (Dodgson, 2019). The ambiguity of reflexivity is an advantage, but at the same time it makes it difficult to prove the trustworthiness of the research. In most of the cases of qualitative research, the findings are subjective. This means that informants form an opinion about brand activism from their perspective, which is then interpreted by researchers who are looking to this subject from their own angle. The social background and the information the informants and researchers already have from a specific subject always unconsciously plays a role (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018). Without being aware of it, our backgrounds also played a role in this process. We already know a lot about this topic and marketing in general, this knowledge will be unconsciously included when conducting the interviews and analyzing the data.

Some of the informants of our research were working or studying within the marketing field. This made it possible to go into depth and search for answers on the why, how and what questions. Beforehand, we had two criteria that the informants had to meet; they had to belong to the millennial generation, they needed to be familiar with brand activism and that politics or talking about social issues are playing an important role in their life. Because of the fact that we set up the second criteria we did not focus on any specific brands but moreover, we wanted to conduct the insights of the brands using brand activism our informants know by themselves. All our informants could at least name one brand who is making use of brand activism and with which they are interacting with. The focus was not on specific brands because we really wanted to see the consumers' perspective in general and not in particular to a specific brand. We have tried to get a real image of the opinion of the entire generation by interviewing both men and women with different ages within the range of the generation (see Table 1). The reason that this generation was chosen for this research, was because of the existing literature. Previous research had proven that brand activism is a way of marketing that appeals in particular to millennials. In addition, it was important to us that the informants already had active knowledge about brand activism to ensure that the post-brand activism evaluation process could be properly discussed. This prior knowledge of the informants was necessary in order to get answers on the why questions and to find a deeper

meaning layer. Within this research we mainly looked to brand activism from a consumer perspective from a marketing point of view.

Finally, reflection is also very important when it comes to the quality of the research (Dodgson, 2019). This is something we have also carried out very carefully. After each interview, we looked at what went well, what could have been better and whether there was really an answer to what we wanted to investigate. During this entire process, we have been in very close contact with each other. In this way, we could learn from each other's experience to make sure that the research has been carried out properly and make it more one research instead of two separate ones. The same applies to the time during the analysis. It is difficult to articulate a lot of data in certain themes. Therefore, it is important that this is coordinated properly and in good consultation. The seven stages from Kvale (in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2019) have given us a lot of guidance to analyze and structure the data correctly. Throughout the whole research process, much dialogue has taken place in combination with critical self-reflection and evaluation of the position of us as researchers to ensure the quality of our research.

4.6   Summary Methodology

Our research is based on the philosophical perspective of relativism and strong social constructionism. Building upon our philosophical stand we made use of qualitative research by conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This method makes it possible to get deeper knowledge about the why, how and what in relation to the experiences, perspectives, feelings and opinions of the informants. Because our research is related to a social phenomenon, it is important to emphasize that there is not just one single truth. The information we gathered through the interviews reflecting the individual truths of each interviewee. The answers of our interviewees regarding the topic of the evaluation of brand activism indicate that there is no right or wrong, which is in line with our philosophical stand of strong social constructionism. It is essential that the informants can share their experiences with us, in this way it is possible to get a clear picture of the evaluation process and get more insights. Because it can be difficult for participants to share their feelings, opinions and perspectives, we decided to conduct the interviews in the foreign language of them. Therefore, we focused on two different markets who are quite similar to each other; Germany and the Netherlands.

Methodology

The interviews were conducted remotely. We choose to do this via video calls so we could see the informants and analyze both their body language and the stories they told us. To make sure that we could analyze the data the best possible way, we recorded the interviews. This made it possible to listen to what the informants told us again, try to understand it better and link it to each other. In this way it is possible to gain more information to make sure we will get the right information, which makes our research more credible.

The informants who were participating in our research needed to meet two requirements; they needed to be familiar with brand activism, and they needed to belong to the millennial generation. To select the right informants, we made use of a purposive and snowball sampling. The reason why it was important that the informants were familiar with brand activism was because in this way it was possible to gain more knowledge and background information about the post-brand activism evaluation stage. It was also important that they fit in the age range of the millennials, because the existing literature showed that brand activism is a marketing technique that is attractive to millennials.

To make sure that the data from our study is trustworthy and valid, we decided to analyze the data in the same way. Therefore, we made use of the seven stages analysis of Kvale: Identifying themes, Planning, Interviews, Transcribing, Analysis, Verification and Reporting. It is hard to conduct a study that is completely trustworthy. There is always information that informants and the researchers are taking unconsciously into account. This is also something that happened in our research. We already know a lot about the topic, so it is difficult only to focus on what the participants told us and not use the background information we already knew. Therefore, reflection during the whole process of the research is key. It is important to reflect and be critical of yourself all the time to raise the quality of the study. This is something that we did as well, after every stage of Kvale we reflected and discussed with each other what could be better and how we can ensure the quality of our research.

5 Analysis

In the following chapter we will analyze our outcomes of the interviews we conducted with Dutch and German millennials. The chapter will be structured through the theoretical framework we developed as a result of the existing literature and theory. Firstly, we are analyzing the post-brand activism stage. The second part of the analysis points out the evaluation of the brand activism in regard to the brand. And lastly brand relevance will be analyzed as an outcome of the evaluation process.

5.1 Post-Brand Activism Communication

Figure 5:   Focus on the Post-Brand Activism Stage in the evaluation process

The starting point of the analysis structure is how the consumer sees the brand situation or communication after the brand activism campaign. Most of the interviewed consumers were already interacting with the brand before they saw a brand activism campaign of the brand or they got to know a brand through their political or social stand. After seeing the campaign and the first impressions of the campaign, and their decision that it is interesting for them, they start to do more research to get more insights about the political or social stand the brand is communicating. This research stage is the first step in the post-brand activism evaluation process: the post-brand activism stage. It is important to point out that it is not just about the single brand activism campaign but more about the whole research and the overall communication regarding the political or social stand to start the consumer evaluation process. Through that not just the political or social

stand is evaluated singularly but the consumer is able to evaluate it more thoroughly. For the consumer the perception of a brand activism campaign or the communication of a social issue is at first seen as an Add On or a certain Unique Selling Point (USP). Through the interviews we are able to point out a clear preference of the different participants to brands who are taking a political or social stand. For them it is more likely to interact with, or purchase from, a brand addressing a certain political or social issue and they would always, in a competition of brands, choose the brand that uses brand activism. But brand activism is not the main driver to choose a brand. It is seen amongst the informants as an Add On making it more likely to interact with this brand.

On the other hand, the interviewees are also more aware of the fact that brands are using brand activism just as an add on to be part of the marketing stream of brand activism and it can be possible that the brands are not taking it seriously.

"I become more skeptical towards brands because more and more companies are taking a political stand. It is important that the statement is in line with the brand, otherwise it is misplaced. And this affects the credibility, reliability and the feeling you get towards a brand."
(Informant 1)

That can be understood as stated by Holt (2002) that consumers are more and more aware of the commercial motivations a brand has and through that the consumer judges the authenticity in combination with the profit motives. This shows that it is important for the consumer that the political or social stand is identifiable, and it needs to be part of the whole brand. If the consumer is not able to identify an alignment between the brand and the brand activism, they are not able to trust the company.

"Beforehand, I would not expect that H&M and I would share the same concerns about the environment. However, I really believed the message of H&M, it was a super good initiative and it improved my image of the brand. I never doubted their message until I started to delve more into recycling in relation to the brand. H&M damaged my confidence after reading what really happens to the clothes." (Informant 11)

[Contribution by the authors: The interviewee is talking about the recycle project of H&M. Instead of recycling the clothes in a proper way, they were burned]

In her case it was that she firstly perceived an improved positive image of the brand through their social stand, but this changed after she did more research and decided for herself that she cannot

trust the brand anymore. Her research showed that Hennes & Mauritz (H&M) is not recycling the old clothes consumers can bring into the stores, in a sustainable way. Further, they are recycling them in a not environmentally friendly way, which led her to the point that H&M is not relevant for her anymore and that she abandons the brand. She felt tricked by the brand. Other interviewees indicated that when a brand is using brand activism as a trick to increase sales, the brand becomes irrelevant which can lead to resistance. This does not mean that they are not trusting every communication instantly. Because our interviewed consumer is talking in her quote about delving into the subject after seeing the brand activism campaign (post-brand activism interaction), she then started to evaluate the overall communication. This is visualized in our framework as the evaluation stage.

5.2 Evaluation

Our research showed that the stage in our framework of the actual evaluation should not be handled as one but split up into different sections. The three main evaluation principles we could identify were authenticity, genuineness and legitimacy, which are in line with the chosen theories. Starting with authenticity as one of the evaluation principles.

5.2.1 Authenticity

Figure 6:   Focus on Authenticity in the evaluation process

The interviews clearly showed that authenticity is one of the main principles in consumer's brand evaluation of brand activism or taking a social stand. The informants indicated that it is important that brands communicate their addressed political or social issues in an authentic way, which is consistent with the brand image of the consumer and that they are perceiving an overall communication of the political or social stand. In addition, it is crucial that not just the issue is consistent with the brand image but also that the issue is relevant for the consumer in a certain way and that it needs to be aligned with the values of the consumer. Another interesting fact of authenticity, we figure out, is that the brand needs to communicate their addressed issue throughout

the whole company, which means that if the brand for example is taking a stand for diversity but the management of the company is against diversity, the communication is not authentic anymore and the consumer does not believe the company. If the political or social stand is part of the whole company and in line with the norms and values, it shows the consumer that they can trust and believe the company. One interviewee talked about Patagonia as a good example of a company that clearly is living the addressed social issue throughout the whole company. (Contribution by the authors: Patagonia is claiming itself as the company who is in business to save our planet. They are communicating that they are taking action and speaking out loud for the most important environmental issues (Patagonia, 2020)).

"The founder of the brand bought a lot of land [in Patagonia] and founded a non-profit-national park with this land and gifted this national park to the government. Just to make sure that nature stays in its origin but is still available for tourism." (Informant 17)

But it is not just the trust given to a brand by the consumer, which makes the communication of a political or social stand authentic but also the consistency of the addressed issue. The responses showed that it is important for the consumer that brands need to be careful with taking a stand to not lose authenticity through addressing too many different political or social issues.

"If a brand is not consistent and authentic in their statements and communication and addresses different consumers differently, taking a stand could backfire" (Informant 11)

"For me it is important that a brand is authentic and not that it gives me the feeling that it is just a trick to increase sales. To make me a customer, a brand needs to stick to their statement, this is making it more credible." (Informant 2)

In addition to the fact that consistency is very important, authenticity is also very important for the informants to identify with a brand. Our interviewees stated that identification is very essential to start a relationship with a brand. When a brand is taking a political stand, it is easier for consumers to identify with that brand. In this way, it is possible to test whether it is in line with their thoughts, norms and values. The informants indicated that they want to show their identity by presenting certain brands to belong to a group. At the same time, they want to be unique and different from others. That is the reason why authenticity is so important. This is also in line with what Holt (2002) and Bhattacharya & Sen (2003) found out in their research. The identification with an authentic brand is a way to express their own values and norms and to show them to their own social environment. When a brand is making use of an authentic brand identity, consumers think

that this authenticity applies to them as well. Buying a product of a brand is no longer just about meeting a need, it is about telling who you are and where you stand for. Brand activism is helping consumers and making it easier to show who they are and being authentic.

"For me a brand is important when it is in line with how I want to see myself. The question I ask myself several times: can I identify myself with this message? It is not just about the brand identity; it is about the message of the brand in relation to me. In addition, the appearance of the products is also important. Even when the message of the brand is in line with my identity, I also want to look good". (Informant 3)

[Contribution from the authors: The informant is working in the marketing field and used specific marketing terms]

"Are they communicating authentic? And if so, I can definitely combine [the stand of the brand with the brand] for myself so that it leads to positive effects and loyalty rather than leading to negativity towards the brand." (Informant 9)

The responses of the different interviewees were all very similar and alike and listed different important facts regarding authentic communication. This makes it relevant to have in mind that authenticity is key in the consumers eyes. An authentic communication decides whether the consumers stay with the brand or if they were just contemporary supporters. The interviews showed that authenticity is a double-edged sword in regard to brand activism. It plays such an important role in the consumer's evaluation that if the authenticity cannot be transferred through the communication, the consumer is not trusting the brand and is not interacting with the brand anymore. But if authenticity is transferred through the communication the consumer is more likely to pay attention to the brand and interacts with the brand through gathering more information about the brand, talking with friends about the addressed political or social issue and staying loyal to the brand. Authentic communication is either a dealmaker or a deal-breaker. Lastly, we determined through our research that authenticity is the first evaluation principle the consumers are evaluating brand activism with. If the post-brand activism communication is perceived as authentic the interviewees dive deeper into the evaluation and evaluate the political stand if it is genuine or legitimate.

Analysis

5.2.2 Genuineness

Figure 7:   Focus on Genuineness in the evaluation process

Through our evaluation of the interviews we exposed that the consumer evaluates genuineness separately from authenticity, even if the common definition states that genuineness is a part of authenticity.

"A brand can inspire me when it is in line with what I am thinking but it also needs to represent the norms and values of the company. I want a brand that wants to have a real conversation with me. Not just trick me to start a relationship but being open and real in what they think."
(Informant 5)

For our interviewees a brand needs to be genuine within their communication while taking a political or social stand. For the consumer it is important to receive a certain genuineness that the political or social stand is communicated in a way that they are able to bring the issue together with the brand. This was clearly shown in the responses on negative examples that if companies who are criticized for certain things would communicate the opposite.

"For example, Nestlé, which is a brand who is really anxious to appear green in their communication and is paying attention that everything fits, would now communicate with certain animal welfare organizations. That would not be genuine for me." (Informant 10)

[Contribution from the authors: Nestlé is criticized for years for using palm oil and through that destroying the rainforests, the home of Orangutans.]

The consumer does not want to be tricked by the brands, e.g. that they are communicating something that is not the truth and the consumer cannot bring together with the values of the brand or company. In case that the consumer is interacting with the brand and evaluates the communication on first sight as authentic and finds out afterwards that the political stand is not genuine, it damages the brand image in the eye of the consumer. One interviewee mentioned the example of the brand Hello Body, which is a cosmetic brand. (Contribution from the authors: The value of Hello Body is, amongst other things, consciousness and that they are aiming for a better world for people, animals and the earth (Hoell & Keune, 2020)). As the following quote points

out, our interviewed consumer was firstly interested in the brand and gave it a try and after diving deeper into the research found out that they are not genuine in their communication and the brand is not as sustainable as they are trying to show their consumers.

"I have heard just good things from this particular brand, through influencers or friends, and then I was paying more attention to the brand and gathering more information about the brand and I found out that they are not keeping their sustainable promise that they are communicating on their products and that their communication is not genuine and I was really shocked."
(Informant 9)

When a brand is addressing a social issue, it is important that the whole company stands behind it and that it is communicated in a genuine way. If they are not doing it in a genuine way and the consumer finds out that they just used the stand to greenwash their brand and to be better evaluated by the consumer, the consumer turns away from the brand (referenced to the quote of informant 9. above).

"I know the brand mainly via a friend, and I learned more about Patagonia when they took a political stand. If I want to buy a bag now, they are not yet top of mind. They need to make more campaigns that all support the same message. I think their statement is very good, and I also want to buy some of them. But then they have to do more to make sure that I think about them when I need something." (Informant 10)

Besides brands who are not telling the truth, the informants also indicated that they have the feeling of being tricked by brands when a brand is taking a political stand for a short period of time. When a brand is taking a political stand for a short time, consumers think that it is just a way to increase sales. Holt (2002) already found out that inconsistent actions can cause the brand trouble and that the consumers' disbelief in the brands action can result in the perception of brand authenticity. Brands need to fight for what they stand for. They need to be open about it. A brand is more genuine when it is taking a political stand for a long term and where the brand is really committed to it. In addition, when a brand is using the statement for a longer period, it is getting more top of mind of the consumer. So, there is a possibility that consumers will choose for that brand more quickly.

Analysis

5.2.3 Legitimacy

Figure 8:   Focus on Legitimacy in the evaluation process

The third principle pointed out through the interviews was legitimacy. The answers showed a clear direction towards legitimacy and how important it is for them in regard to brand activism and the communication of social issues. If the consumer considers the brand not as legitimate to address a certain political or social issue they are not interacting with the brand and take note of the brand in a negative way. As Kates (2004) and Humphreys (2010) research already pointed out is that legitimacy of brands can be seen as an overall perception that the action of a brand is appropriate for the consumer, proper or eventually also desirable and in addition the consumer needs to be able to classify the stand into some socially constructed system for example norms, beliefs and values. If that is not the case the consumer does not trust the brand and does not believe what the brand is communicating. Furthermore, consumers perceive brands who are legitimate in their eyes to take a political or social stand as interesting and interact with those brands. Even if the brand is not offering products the consumer needs, they are still interacting with the brand in regard to the political or social stand because it is important for them and they believe them. In that case the brand and the political or social stand the brand is taking is more important for the consumer than the physical product. Legitimacy comes along with a certain degree of genuineness. So, coming back to the Nestlé brand example in the discussion of genuineness. It shows also that it is neither genuine if they would start communicating the fact that they are supporting an animal welfare organization nor would they have legitimacy in the eye of our informants. Because they are criticized for taking away the rainforest of the Orangutans, they are not morally legitimate to address this social issue. It gives the consumer the feeling that the brand tries to buy itself free from the critics. This shows the destructive side of branding that Bertilsson and Rennstam (2018) describe in their study. The brand is communicating their actions to deflect the attention away from what they are really doing and to trick the consumer. Our interviewees clarified that they are getting suspicion against communications they identify as not legitimate and that the consumer devalues the communication.

"[L'Oréal Paris] stands for strong women through their brand ambassadors and also for women
    empowerment and have now begun to fight against sexual harassment through initiating the

program "Stand Up". Which educates people, together with a charity organization, how to react

in different situations, when you realize that someone is being sexual harassed. And this for

example is something that I find super brave of the brand but also fits the brand core."

(Informant 12)

"To make it credible when a brand is taking a stand, it means that this statement will be used for

a longer period of time. Dove does this very well, continuously conveying the same message.

They keep going on with the same campaigns, so that stays in your head. You also know that they

really stand for that. You also link that message directly to the brand." (Informant 3)

On the other hand, if a company is legitimate in the eye of the consumer to address a certain political or social issue the consumer perceives a positive image of the brand. If a brand for example is addressing a social issue for years and the whole brand core and the brand values are in line with the social issue the brand has built up this legitimacy over the years.

Those three principles make it possible for the consumer to evaluate what the brands exactly stand for and that they get a clearer picture of the background and intentions of the company. The brand identity is getting clearer. Because of this, it is easier for consumers to identify with the brand.

"What I expect from a brand is that it is adding a value to my life that I can identify with. It is

about self-expression; I am showing who I am and where I stand for with buying a brand."

(Informant 8)

Right now, it is easier to know if a brand fits their norms and values. So, this new development within the marketing industry, is much appreciated. The informants indicated that they are looking for brands with which they can identify with. Showing a brand is part of their self-expression which underlines the research of Bhattacharya and Sen (2003). This development where brands are taking a political stand is making it easier to convey the right identity. Despite the fact that brand activism makes it easier to identify, it is also making brands more authentic. The informants indicated that authenticity is very important. Because this is making it possible to distinguish themselves from others. Not everybody has the same values, so in this way it is good when consumers are not following the crowd. This also applies to brands. The informants think it is good that brands are taking a political stand, because it is easier to be a unique person and tell the world what you stand for. In addition, it is very brave what brands are doing. They are not afraid to make enemies. Because this is going to happen, it is tricky to take a political stand. By doing this, we found out that consumers can either love or hate you. At the same time, the informants were very

positive about brand activism in general. It is making it easier for them to create the right identity. The principles and the consumers identification with the brand and the political and social stand they are taking, leads for the interviewees to the outcome of brand relevance. This positive attitude towards brand activism can be positive to make this marketing technique a new branding paradigm (Holt, 2002). Brand activism can be a good way to reach the consumers on another level to start a deeper emotional relationship with them.

5.3   Brand Relevance for Consumer

Figure 9:   Focus on Brand relevance for consumer

Through the interviews we are able to define brand relevance in the case of our informants. For them brand relevance is mainly that the brand is communicating or offering products and services who are necessary for the consumer, if the consumer can identify themselves with the brand/product and that they are loyal towards the brand. This is also in line with what Beverland, Wilner and Micheli (2015), Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) and Black and Veloutsou (2016) define as brand relevance. We were able to evaluate that it is important for the brand relevance that the brand is consistent. This is reflected in interacting with a brand, for example repurchasing products, or wants to gather more information about the brand.

"[…] when such spontaneous purchases become habitual purchases then I think a brand is relevant for me and has then of course, like now with the Dove example, definitely something to do with a long-term use." (Informant 9)

It is interesting to see that for most of them the brand relevance is linked to the brand instead of linked to the product. So, if the brand image is changing (positive or negative) the brand relevance also changes. Additionally, they are describing their brand relevance in regard to brand activism or certain social issues that the stand the brand is taking is relevant for the consumer and through that the brand becomes relevant for the consumer. If a consumer perceives brand activism or the communication of a certain social issue that is interesting for the consumer, they are collecting more information afterwards about the brand and are starting to interact with the brand (if it is a

new brand for them). Information is important for every relation type a brand has with consumers. For example, if consumers are already interacting with the brand who addresses a political or social issue that is in line with the consumers values and interests, they still want to gather important information about the brand to confirm that the brand is relevant.

"Personally, I am not affected by the projects they support per se. But by the fact that, for me, the issues they address are nevertheless of great importance in my political views and of course my relevance is very high towards this brand. And because this brand also repeatedly draws attention to the fact that we have ecological trouble spots and regions that need to be supported." (Informant 17 about the brand Patagonia)

On the other hand, our informants clarified that if the consumer evaluates the communication as not in line with the addressed political or social issue, the brand relevance is decreasing even down to not relevant for them at all anymore and may result in not being bought.

Bringing the responses of the research together with the preceding analysis the evaluation process of post-brand activism has the outcome of brand relevance for the consumer in regard to the brand and not to the product. Consumers need to identify themselves with a brand, it needs to be in line with what they are thinking and their norms and values. Then it is worth it to buy a product of or interact with the brand and show that it belongs to who you are. This is helping consumers and making it easier to show who they are and being authentic. In addition, genuineness is important for consumers, because brands are part of their extended self. It is very important that what brands are telling consumers is true. It needs to be credible what they say. It is not just buying a product; the product tells their environment who they are. When a brand is not fighting for their right brand identity, a consumer cannot share the right identity either. Brand activism is perceived as legitimate by the consumer when they are thinking that the brand has a right to address this certain political or social issue and that it is congruent with the thought about the brand. A relevant and long-term relationship between a brand and a consumer starts with openness and genuineness of the brand.

When brands are taking a political stand, it is really important that they stick to their statement. When a brand changes statements all the time, it is not interpreted as credible or honest. In addition, it is important that the brand is building on to make it possible for the consumer to trust the company.

"The most important thing for me is that it is really in line with the brand. Otherwise it will miss its goal, it must match the DNA of the brand. A one-off campaign doesn't work, they have to

build on it and make it fit their brand identity if I want to support the brand for a long-term."
(Informant 4)

[Contribution from the authors: The informant is working in the marketing field and used
specific marketing terms]

This does not mean that every campaign of the brand needs to be very controversial to show where they stand for. After a campaign the most important aspect is that the brand identity will be top of mind. In this way, it is easier for consumers to identify with that brand and buy it. As a result, the brand is also evaluated more credible. To stay top of mind, the brand needs to create campaigns that are in line with the message of the controversial one to show their identity. For example, Nike created a very controversial campaign to get the attention of the consumers. At that moment, the brand was top of mind of the consumers. Right now, it is fading so it is important to repeat their statement via a new campaign.

"The campaign from Nike was very big and now it has been quiet around the brand for a while.
This does not make it stronger and also does not bring the brand on top of mind. In order to
make itself convincing, the brand must return to this statement more often. In this way, the brand
also makes itself more credible." (Informant 3)

For the interviewee's honesty, trustworthiness and credibility are also very important things. A brand can gain confidence and trust by taking a political stand that is in line with the brand so that the consumer perceives a fit between the brand and the political or social stand. Otherwise consumers will be getting skeptical about the brand. Consumers do not want to get the feeling that a brand tries to reach them to increase sales. And this is what brands are doing when they are taking a political stand that is not in line with their brand identity. Honesty, trustworthiness and credibility are the beginning of a good relationship. To create a good and probably a long-term relationship a brand needs to take a political stand that is in line with the DNA of the brand.

The answers also showed a certain appreciation of the risk brands are taking to communicate a political or social issue.

"That's why I think it's extremely courageous to communicate this [brand activism] and it should
also be appreciated because it's important and affects every brand and every person somehow."
(Informant 9)

Because it is not always easy to address a specific topic, especially topics with a political background for example racism, sexual harassment etc. It shows that the brand is taking a stand that is important for them to show awareness, even if some of their consumers disagree with this specific point of view of the brand. They also pointed out that brand activism shows courage, which is also important for them and is an argument to start a relationship with a brand or deepen the existing relationship. Here it is still important to understand that the informants were talking about relevant political and social stands for themselves. If a brand is addressing i.e. a political stand in a political direction the consumer does not share, it would be taken under negative consideration.

"That's why I think that in general a brand, that also communicates openly about a [political or social issue] doesn't make it easier for themselves, but perhaps gets closer to the emotions of the customer." (Informant 13)

Our research also showed that using brand activism is making the brand more vulnerable and mostly the consumer is perceiving the risk a brand is taking by addressing a political or social issue in an emotional way and that they are also reflecting their own behavior. Additionally, the consumer feels like they are doing something good by appreciating the brand's risk and interacting with the brand.

5.4   Summary Analysis

For the interviewees it is very important that they can identify themselves with a brand. Brand activism is helping them with this identification. With brand activism brands show what they stand for and with what they want to be identified. In this way it is possible for consumers to evaluate if the brand is in line with their own norms and values. For this evaluation they are making use of three evaluation principles to figure out if the brand has a relevance for themselves. We found that the consumers are evaluating the post-brand activism communication in two different stages. In the first stage the evaluation of authenticity is taking place. The consumer decides if the overall communication and perception of the stand the brand is taking is being authentic for them. After the consumer identifies that the brand is authentic, they are evaluating it on a deeper level and assess if the stand is genuine and legitimate. In that stage they are performing further research about the stand in combination with the brand and if they have a right to take this certain stand.

Analysis

The informants indicated that brand activism is making it easier to interact with a brand, but it is not the absolute reason to start a relationship. It further makes it possible for the consumer to get a better picture of the brand. They have the feeling that they know what they buy and that they can contribute to strengthen a certain political or social issue. Because of this, consumers tend to choose a brand that is making use of brand activism. Brands can use it as a unique selling point. Brand activism is helping to change the image consumers had about the brand. This change can be positive or negative. To change it in a positive way it is important that a brand is consistent sticking to what it communicates. This is making the brand more credible and consumers do not have the feeling they have been tricked. When consumers have the feeling that a brand is taking a political stand to increase sales the image of the brand will change in a negative way. It is important that it corresponds with the company. The same applies to a statement that is not in line with the thoughts of a consumer. Brand activism is also a risk for brands, it may lose customers or get new consumers. It makes a brand more vulnerable because it becomes more personal. This can also lead to a positive outcome and having a relationship with a customer.

6 Discussion of the Key Findings

The following chapter discusses the key finding of the analysis. It is divided into two parts, while in the first part the development of the theoretical model is discussed and in the second part the findings are linked to the prior research.

6.1 Overview

As presented in the existing literature, brand activism is the action of a brand taking a political or social stand in order to draw attention to certain issues (Clemensen, 2017; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Because it is a relatively new approach of marketing it is important to keep in mind that there is not that much existing literature about this specific topic. Despite this fact, most of the existing literature out there is mainly focused on the company perspective of brand activism. The literature that is available mentioning the consumer perspective, primarily found out that brand activism is especially attractive to millennials. This generation is feeling more responsible for what is happening with the environment (Clemensen, 2017). Because of this, brand activism is a good way for brands to gain brand relevance for their consumers. The reason that the brand is perceived as relevant is because identification is key in this process. The political stand of the brand needs to be in line with the thoughts of the consumers. It also reflects the identity of the consumers. It is not only buying a product of the brand, consumers are showing who they are and what they stand for through the brand (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). To build on this, through our research we can state that brand activism is making it possible for the consumer to get a more emotional relationship with brands if they are able to identify with the political stand or social stand taken. Consumers are able to show where they stand for and what is important for them by interacting with the brand. This makes the brand part of their identity.

6.2   Developing the framework

At the end of the theory chapter, we developed a framework, page 19, which is based on the analysis of the existing literature of the different principles of evaluation. The existing literature stated that it is unclear if consumers are evaluating the principles authenticity, genuineness and legitimacy, and when they are evaluated if they are evaluated at the same time or in a certain order. Based on the results of our study, we show in this revised framework that the evaluation process of the three principles take place in a specific order. In addition, authenticity and genuineness share the same definition in prior literature but we identified with our research that they are separately evaluated in this specific evaluation process.

After conducting our own study, we analyzed the empirical data of the interviews and we found out that our primary developed theoretical framework, presented in Chapter 3, relying on the existing literature about the evaluation process is not totally matching with the results from the analysis. We dived into the evaluation process of consumers from the overall communication of the brand in relation to brand activism in a more specific way. To know more about the order of the evaluation principles, we investigated how these principles are related to each other. In addition, we found out that for consumers authenticity and genuineness is not evaluated as the same. Authenticity is more about the brand identity; it is important that this identity is in line with the thoughts from the consumers. Genuineness and legitimacy are the deeper layers in the evaluation process. Consumers only enter this stage when a brand is perceived as authentic. In this stage, genuineness is more about the stand that the brand has taken. The main differences between the frameworks are how the principles of the evaluation process are related to each other. The development of the framework contains the findings of our research and summarizes the different stages of the consumer evaluation process in the post-brand activism stage. Our main aim with the development of our consumer evaluation process model is to visualize the different stages the consumer passes in the evaluation of post-brand activism communication and which main principles are important for them. Resulting from the research the model was split up into four different stages that have a process order, which means that the different stages are building up on each other. The different stages are defined as followed:

- Post-Brand Activism Stage
- Authenticity
- Genuineness and Legitimacy
- Brand Relevance for Consumer

Discussion of the Key Findings

Post-Brand Activism Stage

Stage 1 marks the starting point in the evaluation process for the consumer. It deals with the contribution of the consumer interacting more with the brand after the first perception of a brand communicating a political or social stand. After collecting more information about the communication of the brand and the political or social stand and digging deeper into the brand situation they start to evaluate the information they gathered. This is when they are reaching Stage 2 in the process: Authenticity.

Authenticity

Authenticity is the main principle for the consumers to evaluate a brands action and their behavior. If the action, communication, and stand of the brand is perceived as authentic by the consumer they are starting to evaluate everything on a deeper level and to question the political and social stand and the action the brand is communicating. That is when the consumer is reaching Stage 3 in their evaluation process in which he or she is focusing on the genuineness and legitimacy of the post-brand activism communication.

Genuineness and Legitimacy

In the questioning stage the consumer evaluates the situation through two different principles. If he or she is perceiving the political or social stand the brand is communicating as genuine and if the brand is legitimate to communicate the stand. If the consumer evaluates the brand's action and stands as genuine and legitimate in their communication, they accept the political or social action, the consumer reaches the post-evaluation stage and the brand is gaining relevance for the consumer.

Brand Relevance for Consumer

The post-evaluation stage is about the acceptance of the consumer towards the brand activism campaign and that the consumer perceives the brand as relevant for themselves. It is the final stage of the evaluation process and as a result the consumer wants to show their identities through the brand which makes the brand relevant for them.

Figure 10 outlines the evaluation process and the different stages the consumer passes within his or her evaluation. The classification into four stages makes it able to better understand how the consumer is evaluating the post-brand activism situation and the importance of the evaluation

principles for the consumer-brand relevance. The framework contributes to the existing literature because it ties up with brand activism and taking a social stand is becoming more and more important for brands and consumers but enlightens the consumer's perspective on the evaluation process and what really matters for them in their evaluation.
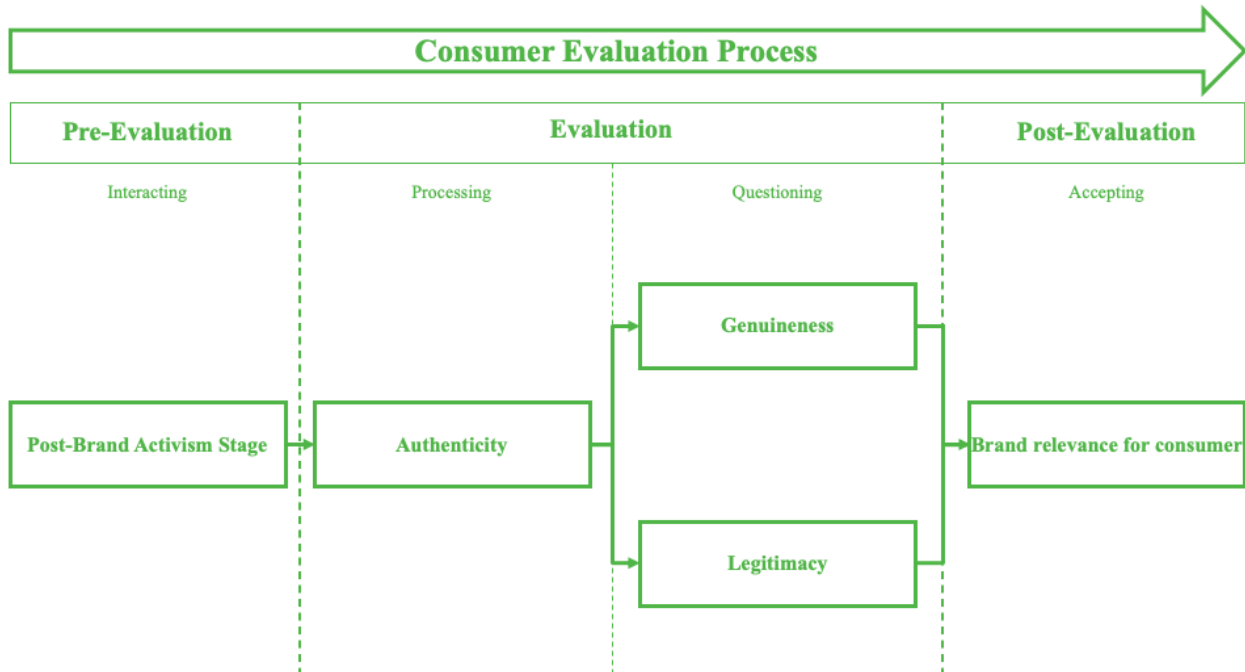

Figure 10:   Developed consumer evaluation process

6.3 Discussion to prior research

With our new framework we are contributing new insights from the consumer side of the post-brand activism stage, in particular the evaluation process of the consumer. The model is mainly addressing and contributing to the prior research of brand activism in general (Chapter 2.1) and brand activism in regard to millennials (Chapter 2.4). With our research we were able to dive deeper into the topic of brand activism, which was stated in prior research from the company's perspective by Clemensen (2017) and Manfredi-Sánchez (2019). Furthermore, we were able to bring it to the next level by highlighting the consumer perspective and additionally developing and introducing a framework, which may also contribute to the company's perspective. Through the focus on the age group of millennials our research moreover refers to what Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) stated in their research about the importance of brand activism for millennials. Because we developed the model based on the responses of this age group in

particular, we shed light on the topic they already did research on. When we compare the outcomes of our study to the existing literature, we can conclude that it is broadly the same. Our research agrees with what Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) describes, brand activism is a good way to start an emotional relationship with consumers. This relationship is based on identification. It is important that the stand is in line with the thoughts, norms and values of the consumers. In this way it is possible that the brand represents the identity of the consumer. According to Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019), brand activism is a good way to get the attention of millennials. This is also one of the outcomes from our study. Millennials are looking for identification with a brand. This generation is searching for a brand that can represent their identity. Besides that, the results of our study correspond to what Hong (2018) described, that consumers respond to brand activism by boy- or buycotting a brand. This is again related to the identification between a consumer and a brand. When the stand of the campaign is not in line with the thoughts of the consumers, it is possible that this individual will build up resistance towards the brand. It can also twist the other way around, when the political stand is in line with the norms and values of the consumers, this person wants to buy a product from this specific brand. However, this is more nuanced than how Hong (2018) describes it. Hong (2018) stated that brand activism is the key factor to boy- or buycott a brand. Our research showed that brand activism is not seen as a key factor for the informants but more that it is playing an Add On role for them. For them it is more likely to choose a brand that is making use of brand activism in comparison to another brand that is not making use of it. But it is not that the actual purchase intention results from the political stand the brand is taking. The main reasons to choose a specific brand is because of the quality, price and feeling that consumers have towards the brand, their social environment, innovation, reliability of the message and also that it is in line with their norms and values. Brand activism is more a unique selling point, which can help consumers to make a choice between two brands, instead of a main factor. The fact that brand activism can be seen as a unique selling point, means that there is not that much resistance towards this relatively new approach in marketing. This can be associated with what Holt (2002) mentions in his study about branding paradigms. Holt (2002) described that consumers gain more knowledge about marketing and that they become more resistant towards these existing paradigms. Because brand activism is quite a new marketing technique to create committed consumers and there is not that much knowledge about the evaluation process of consumers towards brand activism, we identified it as a good option to become a new branding paradigm.

Discussion of the Key Findings

To our best knowledge, right now there is no existing literature combining the consumer evaluation process and brand activism, in particular post-brand activism. For that it is crucial to understand what the main principles for the consumers are to evaluate post-brand activism, which is the reason why we concentrated on existing literature about evaluation, authenticity and genuineness, legitimacy and relevance. According to Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) the identification of the company's norms and values for the consumer plays an important role for the evaluation of the actions a brand is taking. Our research confirms that the consumer is starting their individual evaluation process if they can identify themselves with the stand the brand is communicating. Additionally, if they get a satisfied feeling by interacting with or purchasing a product of a brand, they are more likely to show their own identity through the brand's action to their social environment. To identify themselves with the brand, and moreover with their actions, existing literature states that authenticity is key in the evaluation of the consumer (Holt, 2002). In general, the literature defines authenticity as something or someone who is real and that the consumer is able to believe the brand (Commuri, 2009; Hamby, Brinberg & Daniloski, 2019; Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019; Lee & Chung, 2019; Shanahan, Tran & Taylor, 2019). Bringing it together with brand activism shows that brands can make use of brand activism to reach the perception of the consumer that they are seeing the brand as authentic (Beverland, 2005). As can be seen our informants defined authenticity as a main principle in their evaluation of the post-brand activism stage. For them it is necessary that they are able to get the feeling that the stand a brand is taking, and the communication, is authentic and that they believe that the brand is telling the truth. But additionally, our research also shows that the consumer is not combining authenticity with genuineness, as for example Lee and Chung (2019) are stating it. Our research provides information that authenticity is more likely to be the first stage in the evaluation process. The informants showed that evaluating authenticity in the post-brand activism stage of is not just about the brand activism campaign. This first step is more focused on the authenticity of the overall communication of the brand (website, social media channels, overall campaign, charitable actions). If it is seen as authentic then they are reaching the next stage in their own evaluation process, in which they are evaluating the post-brand activism communication after two main principles: genuineness and legitimacy. As stated, before, the literature describes genuineness as a part of authenticity (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019; Lee & Chung, 2019), which can be clarified through our research because it is moreover seen as an individual evaluation principle for our interviewees. Our research states that after the consumer evaluates the post-brand activism as authentic, they are going more into depth through evaluating if the stand is genuine. This means that the stand a brand is taking is perceived by the consumer as genuine. In this stage it is not just

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about the communication but more about the actual stand the brand is communicating and if this stand is genuine for the consumer. But besides genuineness, legitimacy is another evaluation principle in the second stage, which we identified through the interviews in line with the existing theoretical literature. According to Kates (2004) brand legitimacy is about the perception of the consumer that the action of the brand is appropriate and that the brand is having a moral responsibility towards the action it is taking. For our informants, legitimacy, in regard to brand activism, is when they have the feeling or perception that the brand has the right to communicate a certain stand. So, it is underlining the existing research and links it to the evaluation process. Additionally, our research exposed that our informants not just define legitimacy through evaluating that the brand has a right to communicate a certain stand but moreover that the brand is also internally living the communicated issues through their employees. Enlightening this aspect of embodied brand legitimacy contributes to the existing definition of brand legitimacy of Kates (2004).

More interestingly now is, whether in fact the relevance of the brand for the consumer is playing a role as an outcome of the evaluation process and if our research can be linked to the existing literature about brand relevance. The existing literature states that a brand is relevant for the consumer when it offers valuable functions for the consumer. Besides that, innovation, identification and consistency are crucial to become a relevant brand for consumers (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Uggla, 2014; Beverland, Wilner & Micheli, 2015; Black & Veloutsou, 2016). Linking that to our research, the outcome was quite similar to the existing literature when the consumers consider a brand as relevant for them. Contributing to the existing literature our study additionally shows that the informants consider a brand as relevant for them when the brand is taking a political or social stand and when they can especially identify with the stand. Our research also provides us with information about brand relevance and the outcome of the evaluation process. The brand relevance will just be considered if everything else is considered as valuable during the evaluation process.

7 Conclusion

In the following chapter the conclusion of the research will be presented. Firstly, the aim of the research will be pointed out which is followed then by the outcomes of the study in general. Lastly, limitations of the research and suggestions for further research will be enlightened.

7.1 Research Aims

The purpose of this thesis was to identify and to visualize the consumer evaluation process of the post-brand activism stage as well as the effect of the process towards the brand relevance for the consumer. To achieve this purpose, we conducted a literature review to pinpoint prior research as well as a theoretical framework determining the main theoretical principles for the consumer evaluation process to create a link between brand activism and the theoretical implications for an evaluation process. This literature review was followed by in-depth interviews with consumers. The interviewees belonged to this generation because they are positive about this marketing technique (Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). The focus of our research was to gain more knowledge about millennials who were familiar with brand activism so in this way it was possible to gain more knowledge and background information about the post-brand activism evaluation stage.

It can be concluded that the stated evaluation principles of authenticity, genuineness and legitimacy play an important role for the consumer evaluation process of the post-brand activism stage. Moreover, brand activism is evaluated as an effective contemporary branding principle regarding the fact that the consumers want to identify themselves not just with the product, but more with the brand itself, showing through the brand their own political or social stand. A

comprehensive conclusion can be found in the following and reveals the outcomes and contributions of our study.

7.2 Theoretical Implications

Through our key findings of our study we were able to identify what really matters for the consumer in their evaluation of brand activism, in particular in the post-brand activism stage. Especially through our development of the consumer post-brand activism evaluation process model, the main principles the consumer considers in their evaluation were pinpointed. As previously discussed, brand activism is not just important for the brand but also for the consumer's identification with the brand and with the political or social stand they are taking. This makes it necessary to also enlighten the consumer perspective and especially the perception and evaluation of brand activism. The key findings of our discussion and the development of the model identified the main principles in the evaluation process and are dividing the evaluation in two stages. Firstly, the evaluation is focusing on the authenticity of the overall situation. If the consumer assesses the situation as authentic, he or she is evaluating the situation on a deeper level. Then they are reaching the second step of the evaluation process. They start not just to evaluate authenticity but also questioning the genuineness and legitimacy of the brand activism. Our findings confirm that both evaluation principles need to be perceived as true so that the consumer is able to fully acknowledge the brand activism situation. If those two stages are accepted by the consumer the brand is gaining relevance for the consumer. That the brand is relevant for the consumer also means that the consumer can identify himself not just through the brand but more through the political or social stand that is addressed by the brand. Our findings state that the consumer is able to express their own identity to their social environment with the brand and through that the political or social stand. For them supporting a brand and adornment with a brand makes it possible to show the outer world what values and norms are important for them and to some extent how they want to be seen. The research clarifies that for the consumer the evaluation principles of authenticity, genuineness and legitimacy play an important role in the process whether a brand is being relevant for the consumer or not. If the consumers identify every principle to be justified during the process the brand is relevant for them. Through the relevance of the brand the consumer identifies themselves with the brand, specifically with the political or social stand.

Conclusion

We were also able to identify a contribution to Kates (2004) and Humphreys (2010) definition of legitimacy, in particular brand legitimacy. Our research showed that the consumers evaluate legitimacy in relation to brand activism also if the company, and especially the employees, live the ideals of the political and social stand. It is not just like Kates (2004) and Humphreys (2010) state that legitimacy is more about the perception that the action of the brand is appropriate but that it is more about the consumer that also perceives embodied brand legitimacy, which means that the brand internally lives their political or social stand through the employees. So not just the action needs to be perceived as legitimate but also the brand internally through their employees.

Additionally to the contribution of legitimacy we found out that brand activism can also be seen as a contribution to Holt's (2002) research about branding paradigms. The research shows that brand activism can be identified as a new branding paradigm to stay relevant for consumers. Maybe it is not yet established properly in the literature, but it seems to be spreading. Brands press their principles to their extreme and consumers become resistant because they know how it is working (Holt, 2002). Nowadays, it is hard for marketers to be genuine. There is a conflict between the consumers' knowledge and the brands development of new branding stages. Older paradigms are not working that well anymore because consumers know how it is functioning, and as a consequence it is time for a new stage. Brand activism might be eliminating some of these conflicts by creating a new paradigm the consumers can trust.

Surprisingly brand activism is right now just to be seen as an Add On for the consumers evaluation and not as a necessary part in the brand communication. Brand activism and brands taking a social stand are appreciated by the consumer but right now they are still just seeing it as an Add On and not as a must-have for the brand. This is one of the key findings from our research. Through the existing literature and existing research this finding relativizes the current state of brand activism importance a little bit. But it is also contributing to the existing literature in the way that it shows that just the brand perspective was put into regard and eventually not the consumer was actually asked about their own evaluation.

The results of the study additionally show that irrespective of the main principles authenticity, genuineness and legitimacy, consistency was stated as another important factor for the consumer's evaluation. It implies that the brand is communicating a consistent political or social stand over time and not switching between different political or social positions.

7.3 Managerial Implications

When looking at managerial implications, there can be concluded that brand activism is a good approach to start an emotional relationship with millennials. Hereby, it is crucial that brands need to choose a political stand that is in line with the identity. Karlsson, Kjalko and Pauldén (2017) already indicated that a fit between the brand identity and the identity of the political issue is also very essential. This is also what our informants emphasized. Brand activism can be a good way for companies to get the attention of the consumer, but they do need to communicate it in a way the consumer does not get the feeling that it is just a trick to increase sales. It is important that the political stand is part of the whole company and that all the employees are positive about this as well. The reason why this is very crucial for the informants, is because before a brand can represent the identity of the consumer, the individual first needs to trust the brand. When a brand is taking a political stand or responding to a social issue which is in line with their identity, it makes it more credible. Moreover, it is important for brand managers to have in mind that the consumer evaluates not just the communication through the advertisement but the overall communication of the political or social stand taken. As well that the consumer evaluates this overall communication in different steps and not just authenticity is important for them but on a deeper layer also genuineness and legitimacy. Through that knowledge they can set up their communication with the different layers of authenticity, genuineness and legitimacy to gain the trust and as a result the relevance for the consumer. Especially to be relevant for millennials it is important that the communication offers the possibility that they can identify themselves with the political or social stand. They want to have a deeper emotional relationship with a brand where they can identify themselves with. Consumers are looking for the right fit between their character and the identity of a brand to be authentic and to become part of the right social environment (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019).

7.4 Limitations and Further Research

The present study identified certain aspects that could be considered for future research and could contribute to the marketing communication field in relation to brand activism. Firstly, how consumers perceive consistent brand activism from brands over a long-term period to generate the

right findings for the implementation in the consumer evaluation process and how the relationship changes throughout this time. For example, a one-year nethnographic study with brand communities of a specific brand, which uses brand activism as a marketing communication tool. The fact that the research gave the insight about brand activism and brands taking a social stand is just seen as an Add On makes it interesting for future research to dig deeper into that direction and to expose the development of the importance of brand activism and brands taking a social stand.

Although we were able to present valuable insights and outcomes of the consumer evaluation process in the post-brand activism stage the study also includes some limitations we want to emphasize. Firstly, the study only focuses on the cultural background of the Netherlands and Germany. The individuals for the research were chosen after their nationality and whether they are interested in politics and social issues. We also need to take into account that despite consideration of a safe and sound environment, in-depth interviews can always display different errors, for example that the interviewer is getting biased by putting their own interpretation in the answer of the interviewee (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

Another limitation is conducting the research through remote in-depth interviews. Before starting to actually write this thesis we decided to conduct our research through focus groups because the interaction between the group participants could lead us to other interesting insights and additionally an internal discussion between different consumers could have brought the research to a deeper level (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). As of the fact that in March the COVID-19 pandemic rose we were no longer able to hold onto our plan to conduct focus groups, but instead needed to think of another eloquent qualitative research method, which could give us valid insights to elaborate our study. We have chosen to perform remotely in-depth interviews, as a matter of fact that we were not able to meet in person during the start of the pandemic. First, we tried to select informants via online brand communities. Because the corona virus just broke out at the time, many individuals had a lot of fear. Hereby they did not have the time and the motivation to participate in our study. As a result, we were ultimately forced to find the right informants within our own network.

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Appendix A

Topic Guide:

The development of the consumer-brand-relationship with brands who are taking a political stand or addressing a certain social issue. Focusing on especially before, during and after the first interaction with brand activism campaigns and how the relationship is changing. Furthermore, if new relationships are evolving through brand activism or relationships are ending after brand activism. Also, the relevance of a certain brand for a consumer and what they consider as necessary principles to perceive.

General information:

Gender:

Name:

Age:

Working / student:

Sector/work field:

1) Does politics play an important role in your life?
2) Do social discussions play an important role in your life?
   a) If so, why?
3) Which brand/brands do you like and why do you like this specific/these specific brands?
4) How did you get in touch with the brand/brands?
5) What is the reason you started a relationship with the brand and interacted with it?
6) What is the reason you buy products from this brand?
7) Do these reasons also differ per product within one specific brand?
8) Would you easily cut off your relationship to this brand to change to a brand with similar products (link it to the answer of 1)?
   a) Why?
   b) When you think about it, is it just product related or also brand image related?
9) How do you evaluate brands?
   a) Authenticity, Genuineness, Legitimacy?
   b) What you hear about a brand? Brand image?
10) Relevance in general
11) When do you see a brand as relevant for yourself?
    a) How do you evaluate this?
12) What does relevance in relation with a brand mean to you?
13) How can a brand reach your attention?
14) Does this also differ per product category?

a) Why?

15) Relevance linking to a certain brand

16) What is the first thing which comes to your mind when you think about brand X?

   a) What do you know about this brand?

   b) What do you think about this brand?

   c) What feelings do you have towards the brand?

17) What do you think about brands dealing with a certain social issue or taking a political stand?

18) What kind of feeling does this evoke in you?

19) How do you look at brands that are taking a political stance or address on a social issue?

20) Do you think that your image has changed to a brand who took a political stand or address on a social issue?

   a) Why yes/no?

21) Can you give other examples of brands that do this?

22) What kind of political advertisement catches your attention?

   a) Why?

   b) In a good or bad way?

23) Political stand linking to the brands after brand activism

24) What did you think of brand X after the brand activism campaign?

   a) What do you think now about this brand, what feelings do you have now towards the brand?

   b) Do you think this is in line with your thoughts/expectations about the brand?

   c) What are the key reasons for your evaluation?

25) What is the reason that this does or does not differ from what you just said?

26) How do you see the relevance of brand X regarding the political landscape for yourself? (note for us, is the attitude changing?)

27) After the campaign, did the relationship with brand X change?

   a) If so, why?

28) So now regarding the fact that you thought about the topic that the brand took a stand in the political landscape what would you expect from the brand to stay relevant for you in particular regarding social and political issues?

   a) Which are the key reasons for your evaluation?

   b) Why do you see those key reasons as relevant for your relationship to the brand?

29) How would that change your opinion towards having a long-term relationship with that brand?

30) Do you have anything further to say about the topic that brands are acting in the political or social landscape?