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# The Authentic Activist

Examining the antecedents of the perceived authenticity of  
brand activism

by

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## Abstract

- Title:** The Authentic Activist: Examining the antecedents of the perceived authenticity of brand activism
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- Key Words:** Authenticity of Brand Activism, Brand Activism, Authenticity, Perception of Authenticity, Antecedents of Authenticity, Judgement of Truth, Marketing Scepticism, Socio-political Issues
- Purpose:** The study aimed to investigate which antecedents affect consumers' perception of the authenticity of brand activism.
- Methodology:** The study followed a deductive approach. Thereby, hypotheses derived from the theory were quantitatively tested using structural equation modelling based on data collected from 305 participants in a web-based survey.
- Theory:** The study was based on the idea that being perceived as authentic is about the perception of truth. Within brand activism, this is centred around the perception of how true-to-ideal and true-to-self the activism is. Drawing on cognitive and social psychology, Bayesian Models of Cognition, Persuasion Knowledge Theory, and Attribution Theory were used to deduct hypotheses. Thus, the perceptions of four antecedents were hypothesized to be positively related to the perception of the authenticity of brand activism, namely *impact*, *uniqueness*, *heritage*, and *continuity*.
- Findings:** Results from the analysis showed a significant positive relationship between each of the antecedents and the perceived authenticity of brand activism. Thus, all four hypotheses were supported.
- Implications:** Academically, this study contributes to the nascent research stream of brand activism by suggesting antecedents of consumers' perceived authenticity of brand activism. Because of similar findings in studies about antecedents of authenticity in related domains and shared theoretical foundations, the study suggests that a cross-domain theory of perceived authenticity might be possible. Managerially, the findings suggest that improving consumers' perception of the examined antecedents might help improve consumers' perceptions of the authenticity of a brand's activism.

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# 1. Introduction

In 2020, what started on social media after the homicide of African American George Floyd by a white police officer, became a public outcry across the globe. Even companies started raising their voices in support of Black Lives Matter, calling for equality and change.

Nike was one such notable example, publishing an ad just five days after the incident (Aghadjanian, 2020). The ad said, “For Once, Don’t Do It”, referring to not being silent when it comes to racism, police brutality and inequality (Nike, 2020a). Three days after publishing the ad, Nike had already received 210,000 likes on Twitter and nearly 14 million views on Instagram (Aghadjanian, 2020). This support did not only come from consumers, but also from news agencies like CNN (Aghadjanian, 2020), and even competitors like Adidas shared their ad saying: “Together is how we make change” (Adidas, 2021).

The reception was not all positive, however, and the brand also faced serious accusations where many criticised the authenticity of its message (Aghadjanian, 2020). The main topic of attention was a lack of diversity within the company. For example, one Twitter post said: “Not one Black person on your executive leadership team [...] for a company that’s made billions out of Black sports people and consumers. Change THAT.” (Gallop, 2021). Nike’s post was not only heavily criticized by users online, but also offline as protesters looted a Nike store (Aghadjanian, 2020). Clearly, there were mixed opinions about the authenticity of Nike’s statement, but what made some consumers perceive it as authentic and others not?

## 1.1. The trust crisis and growing brand expectations

First, it is important to understand that scepticism towards the authenticity of marketing communication is not a new phenomenon. In fact, the scepticism against Nike’s statement can even be said to mirror a larger trend of growing scepticism and an overall lack of trust in society. Like Kotler and Sarkar (2018) explain, there is growing pessimism about the future among consumers and a trust crisis where citizens are losing faith in government, media, and other institutions. This development has been worsened by the global COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis, where misinformation and a failure of public institutions to manage the crises has decreased trust even further (Edelman, 2021a). Indeed, trust in government, NGOs, media, and business have all decreased during the crisis (Edelman, 2021a).

To worsen the situation, consumers are also becoming more concerned about issues in society since they feel that issues such as climate change, racial or gender inequality are impacting their lives nowadays more than before (Yeomans, 2018). Outcries for societal change are becoming increasingly prevalent, as can be seen through recent movements such as #metoo and #BlackLivesMatter. Although trust has decreased in some of the major institutions, including private ones, consumers are also at the same time increasingly viewing brands and business as responsible for driving these changes (Edelman, 2021a; Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). In fact, a 2020 survey shows that 80 percent of consumers want brands to solve society’s problems (Edelman,

2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, where trust in media and government has decreased in particular, this expectation has grown, as noted by Edelman (2021b):

When the government is absent, people clearly expect business to step in and fill the void, and the high expectations of business to address and solve today's challenges has never been more apparent. (para.10)

The reason for consumers to turn to brands as other institutions fail lies in the importance of trust in consumers' choices of brands. Indeed, trust has been found to be the second most important factor after price in consumers' decisions to buy new brands (Edelman, 2020). Hence, as can be expected, many successful brands also have high trust (Morning Consult, 2020a), and as of the pandemic, businesses have become the highest trusted institution (Edelman, 2021a). In fact, a report from Morning Consult (2020b) showed that American consumers' trust in some brands, such as Amazon and Google, is higher than their trust in teachers, extreme weather warnings, the police, scientific studies, the U.S. government, and the media.

As a result, brands are now facing growing pressure to take a stance on morally loaded questions, and brands whose values are not aligned with their business operations and consumer expectations may suffer (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). In 2020, 60 percent of Americans say that a brand's stance on racial injustice could make them buy or boycott the brand, and 52 percent of African Americans that they would not work for a company that failed to talk about addressing racial inequality (Edelman, 2020). Brands, such as Nike, have been standing up to the challenge of meeting these expectations, and academia has followed. The result has been the concept of brand activism.

## 1.2. Brand activism

Brand activism is a values-driven agenda by brands to improve the world and impact big societal issues such as inequality, racism, and global warming (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). Because of the growing consumer concerns about socio-political issues and growing expectations in brands, brand activism has grown in popularity and Nike is far from alone in involving itself in various socio-political issues. For example, Ben & Jerry's (2021) made a post on social media saying "We must dismantle white supremacy" to support Black Lives Matter, AirBnB (2017) had a "WeAccept" campaign to show support for refugees, Microsoft's (2021a; 2021b) #MakeWhatsNext and Always' (2021) "Like a Girl" campaigns are both directed to empower and encourage young women, and Patagonia's (2021) mission that "We're in business to save our home planet" is completely centred around sustainability.

Yet, as the Nike case demonstrated, taking a stance is risky. The socio-political issues targeted by brand activism are, by their very nature, polarizing and emotionally loaded (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). As a result, brand activism tends to generate publicity around the brand (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019), for better or for worse. On the positive side, this can help the brand connect with consumers who share the same values and increase their loyalty (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). On the negative side, not all consumers will share



the brand's values, and some might be vocal in their disagreement, which can lead to backlash and boycotting (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Moreover, while consumers expect brands to enter the political sphere, they increasingly also question the brands' motives when they do so (Holt, 2002). This scepticism has likely been heightened in recent years by the trend of decreasing trust (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018), and by questionable Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices where brands have exploited socio-political issues for profit, for example, through greenwashing (Urbański & Haque, 2020), pinkwashing (Carter, 2015), and woke-washing (Mahdawi, 2018; Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry & Kemper, 2020). These practices have led to various scandals (e.g., Hicks, 2020; Priya, 2020), and today, consumers are cautious of brands' socio-political involvement and their underlying motives. Hence, even if consumers agree with the brand's stance, they might still criticize the authenticity of the brand activism, leading to various negative outcomes for the brand (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

In difference from CSR, which is motivated by societal obligations to stakeholders (Wettstein & Baur, 2016), brand activism is a values-driven agenda. Hence, several authors see brand activism as a way of overcoming this scepticism since the socio-political involvement is usually more authentic and trustworthy. Manfredi-Sánchez (2019), for example, sees brand activism as a solution to the conventional political advertising practices that have been criticized for their lack of authenticity. It does this, he claims, because of how brand activism aligns identity, communication, and practice, and gains authenticity by copying the aesthetics of authenticity from social movements. Kotler and Sarkar (2018) agree and view brand activism as a natural response to the trust crisis. As the Nike case shows, it is, however, not enough to simply engage in brand activism to overcome the mistrust and scepticism, it is also essential that the brand activism is perceived as authentic.

Inauthenticity tends to incite strong reactions, and many companies have faced serious backlash when the authenticity of their activism has been criticised. Just with regard to Black Lives Matter, Netflix, Amazon, and Disney, among many other brands, were confronted with a backlash due to inauthenticity after voicing their support for the movement (Venn, 2020). For example, even though Amazon was one of the first companies to show support for Black Lives Matter, it was perceived as inauthentic by many consumers (Kari, 2020). Not only did customers start raising their voices and demanded Amazon to stop their commercial partnership with the U.S. police force (Kari, 2020), but criticism even came from inside the company. The Amazon Employees for Climate Justice group said that "Amazon's words mean nothing when they are firing black employees organizing for better working conditions" (Kari, 2020), referring to inequality in the treatment of white and non-white employees.

On the other hand, being perceived as authentic can positively influence, for instance, brand trust (Ilicic & Webster, 2014), brand loyalty (Moulard, Raggio & Folse, 2016), brand reputation (Vredenburg et al., 2020), and brand attachment (Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin & Grohmann, 2015). It is, however, worth mentioning that, although brand activism may appear more trustworthy than CSR, the polarized and emotional socio-political issues that are

targeted by brand activism makes it riskier and the consequences of criticized authenticity more severe (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Therefore, to overcome consumer scepticism and avoid being perceived as inauthentic, it is crucial to understand what affects consumers' perception of the authenticity of brand activism.

### 1.3. Research gap

Despite the increasing prevalence of brand activism and the growing importance of authenticity, brand activism is still a nascent concept. As a result, there are still many facets of it in need of more research. This is particularly true for research on the authenticity of brand activism.

In a literature review of brand authenticity, Södergren (2021) noted the study of authenticity in the brand activism context as an overall research gap, and some authors have highlighted it as a limitation in their studies (e.g., Bhagwat, Warren, Beck & Watson, 2020). Although some authors have explored the connection between authenticity and brand activism, most of them have focused on the brand activism's potential to appear more authentic than other forms of socio-political involvement such as CSR (e.g., Kotler & Sarkar, 2018; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Moorman, 2020), rather than focusing of the factors that influence the consumers' perceptions of it. This is the case even though many of these studies emphasize the importance of perception in authenticity research (e.g., Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway, 2016; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Ilicic & Webster, 2014; Morhart et al., 2015; Moulard, Raggio & Folse, 2021). Furthermore, among those who have discussed what makes brand activism, or similar types of socio-political involvement, authentic (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Wettstein & Baur, 2016), only a few studies (e.g., Vredenburg et al., 2020) were directed directly to the subject.

Moreover, while it is possible that some of the more developed literature on the attributes, that is, factors that characterize something (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021a), and antecedents, that is, factors that affect something (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021b), of CSR authenticity (e.g., Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway, 2016; Gunawan, Budiarsi & Hartini, 2020; Kim & Lee, 2020), can be applied to the brand activism context, this has not yet been tested. Although CSR and brand activism are conceptually related, there are significant differences between the two that might affect the generalizability of findings from one area to the other. There are three main differences between the concepts. Firstly, there is a difference in purpose and motive; while brand activism is values-based, CSR is stakeholder-based (Wettstein & Baur, 2016). Secondly, there is a difference in the issues that are targeted; brand activism targets controversial issues while CSR tends to target those for which there is mostly a consensus (Nalick, Josefy, Zardkoochi & Bierman 2016). Thirdly, while CSR can be quiet, the brand is vocal in its stance when engaging in brand activism (Wettstein & Baur, 2016).

Overall, since brand activism is an emerging research stream, there are still many facets that need more research. Given the current situation of decreasing trust and growing expectations in brands, the authenticity facet is particularly important. While research from other similar domains such as brand authenticity or CSR authenticity may serve as a foundation for research

into the subject matter, brand activism remains a distinct phenomenon that requires its own study.

#### 1.4. Research purpose

Targeting this research gap, this study focuses on the following research question:

**RQ:** Which antecedents affect the consumer's perception of the authenticity of brand activism?

To answer the research question, we first deduce the antecedents of perceived authenticity of brand activism – namely *impact*, *uniqueness*, *heritage*, and *continuity* – from theories from cognitive and social psychology. The relationships between these antecedents and the authenticity of brand activism are then tested through the quantitative analysis of a web survey. The results should help guide future research on the perceived authenticity of brand activism by confirming which antecedents are positively related to it. Managerially, the findings provide brand managers with antecedents that might help them increase the perception of the authenticity of their brand activism.

#### 1.5. Outline of the study

The study is divided into seven chapters. This first chapter, the Introduction is followed by the second chapter, the Literature Review, where we present definitions of brand activism and the authenticity of brand activism, as well as different antecedents and attributes of authenticity. The third chapter, the Theory, covers theory about what affect consumers perception of authenticity and leads to four hypotheses. In the fourth chapter, the Methodology of the study is presented. The fifth chapter, the Results, Discussion presents the findings of the survey. This section is followed by the Discussion in which the findings, their implications, and the limitations and suggestions for future research of the study are presented. Finally, the seventh chapter, the Conclusion, presents conclusions from the study.

## 2. Literature Review

*In this section, we review the literature of two areas. Firstly, we review the brand activism concept and what distinguishes it from other related concepts. Secondly, we investigate views on perceived authenticity in the branding and CSR contexts, including views on the antecedents of authenticity. Since brand activism is still a novel subject, we draw on the related and more developed fields of brand authenticity and CSR authenticity literature to support the review.*

### 2.1. Brand activism

To investigate what affects consumers' perceptions of authenticity of brand activism, it is first essential to understand the meaning of brand activism. Brand activism is a nascent concept that has emerged in the marketing literature in recent years. The most common definition used in the literature is the one provided by Kotler and Sarkar (2017; 2018). They define brand activism as a values-based agenda that “consists of business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society” (2018, pt.467). However, this definition is just one among many, and there are different perspectives on the concept and how it is different from related concepts such as CSR, corporate political advocacy, and socio-political activism. These different perspectives provide valuable insights for a better understanding of brand activism. Consequently, it is essential to review the associated literature to map out the characteristics of the concept of brand activism and highlight the similarities and differences with related concepts.

#### 2.1.1. *The motivation behind brand activism*

A common point of unity among the different perspectives on brand activism is that brand activism is a values- and purpose-based agenda (e.g., Kotler & Sarkar, 2017; Vredenburg et al., 2020). In other words, similarly to closely related concepts such as corporate political advocacy (Wettstein & Baur, 2016), brands engaging in brand activism do so because of the intrinsic merit of the values that they hold, not because of self-interest or economic interests (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). Indeed, these values could be completely disconnected from the corporation's business operations, and believing in them, the brand would promote them regardless of their connection to the business operations (Wettstein & Baur, 2016).

This values-based motive is one of the key characteristics that conceptually differentiate brand activism from several related concepts. For example, Corporate Political Activity (CPA) is a similar concept that refers to when companies engage in political activities with the sole purpose of advancing their own interests (Wettstein & Baur, 2016). CPA is, hence, due to this transactional nature, distinct from brand activism. Similarly, classical and ethical lobbying, which may be viewed as CPA activities, are also distinct from brand activism since they depend on the connection between a socio-political issue and the business operations of the company (Wettstein & Baur, 2016).

In addition to CPA, CSR also differs from brand activism in terms of its underlying motives. Rather than having the value-grounded motives of brand activism, the motive behind CSR can be viewed as living up to its societal obligations, that is, the role and responsibility of a corporation in its network of stakeholders, and creating initiatives to support and balance the interests of these stakeholders (Wettstein & Baur, 2016). In fact, because brand activism is values-based, it may even be necessary to oppose stakeholder interests that are not in line with the brand's values (Wettstein & Baur, 2016).

### 2.1.2. *The manifestation of brand activism*

While most agree that brand activism is a values-based agenda, there are inconsistent views on how brand activism is manifested in practice. As Kotler and Sarkar note, “the heart of all activism is action” (2018, pt.1790), and most authors agree that brand activism must involve some sort of action. Even though there are some conflicting views on what this action entails, there is one point of convergence: activism is purposely visible (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018; Hambrick & Wowak, 2021; Bhagwat et al., 2020). This means that a brand engaging in brand activism must take a publicly vocal stance on an issue. As Kotler explains,

We say that your brand is ‘active’ when it makes its purpose and concerns clear to the target customers. A brand is active when it feels free to adopt a cause, to take a stand on some social problem (Kotler & Sarkar, 2019, para.3).

Indeed, some authors focus solely on the communication aspects of brand activism. One notable example is Manfredi-Sánchez (2019), who views brand activism as a communications strategy. He outlines four characteristics of this communication. Firstly, the communication has a symbolic and intangible character centred around values, rather than around rational arguments or products and services. Secondly, it is based on values and problems and is not necessarily coupled with expressing support for any political parties. Thirdly, even if campaigns and initiatives are local, communication is directed to a global audience. Finally, there is a focus on digital communication and brand activism can be seen to utilize practices that characterize digital activism.

While few authors disagree with Manfredi-Sánchez's (2019) characteristics of brand activism communication, most authors seemingly agree that brand activism entails more than just communication. The opinion on this subject is, however, divided. On the one hand, authors such as Vredenburg et al. (2020) suggest that brand activism must involve both intangible messaging and tangible practice. On the other hand, some authors, such as Moorman (2020) and Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019), mean that brand activism involves public statements and messaging and/or practice, such as donations and lobbying.

In this study, brand activism is seen as always involving making a public statement, which may, but must not necessarily, be followed by tangible practice. This view has implications for how brand activism is distinct from other related concepts. Firstly, it makes it distinct from corporate philanthropy, which is also value-based. This is because corporate philanthropy can

be quiet and does not require vocal promotion of said values (Wettstein & Baur, 2016). Secondly, because brand activism may or may not involve tangible practice, it is also distinct from corporate political advocacy, which focuses solely on the communication aspect (Wettstein & Baur, 2016). Finally, since CSR emphasizes tangible action (Vredenburg et al., 2020), which is only complementary for brand activism, this is an additional difference between CSR and brand activism.

### 2.1.3. *The issues targeted by brand activism*

Another key distinguishing characteristic of brand activism is the nature of the issues that are targeted. Brand activism targets what Nalick, Josefy, Zardkoochi and Bierman (2016) refer to as socio-political issues, making it a form of socio-political involvement (Nalick et al., 2016). They outline three characteristics that describe these issues. Firstly, these issues tend to be controversial, lack societal consensus, and be characterized by an, often, polarized debate. Secondly, due to information asymmetries and low information structure, they tend to be emotional issues with limited possibilities for rational reasoning. Thirdly, the issues are dynamic and ever-evolving.

The first of these characteristics is particularly distinguishing for brand activism. Most brand activism researchers agree that, in difference from practices such as CSR and Cause-Related Marketing (CRM), which focus on generally accepted issues, brand activism targets controversial and polarized issues (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). While these controversial issues may cover a wide range of areas, Kotler and Sarkar (2018) outline six fields of brand activism: political, social, economic, legal, workplace and environmental. These socio-political issues lack societal consensus and challenge established norms in some way, meaning that the brand either chooses to defend or challenge the status quo (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Moorman, 2020; Nalick et al., 2016; Vredenburg et al., 2020). These types of issues tend to incite strong emotions among those engaged in them, which is also why the debate around them is so divided (Nalick et al., 2016). As a result, brand activism is riskier than, for example, CSR. Because not all stakeholders may agree with the side and the values promoted by the brand, brand activism may inevitably risk alienating some of the brand's stakeholders (Nalick et al., 2016).

While brand activism is about taking a stance on a controversial issue, Kotler and Sarkar (2017) suggest that such a stance can be located on a spectrum of progressiveness. On the one side, there is progressive brand activism, which aims at promoting the common good, and on the other side, there is regressive brand activism, which aims at going against it (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). There are conflicting viewpoints in the literature around the scope of brand activism regarding this spectrum. Some authors, such as Sibai, Mimoun and Boukis (2021) imply that brand activism is progressive per definition, while others (e.g., Kotler & Sarkar, 2017; Vredenburg et al., 2020) mean that brand activism can be either progressive or regressive. Because both regressive and progressive brand activism share the same characteristics, and because the regressive/progressive classification of a brand activism stance can be subjective and depend on contextual factors, we hold the latter position.

While Nalick, Josefy, Zardkoohi and Bierman's (2016) third characteristic of socio-political issues, namely their dynamic nature, is not particularly unique for brand activism, it has noteworthy implications for it. To elaborate, because socio-political issues exist in a certain historical, cultural, and political context, the controversy and nature of them may evolve or resolve with time (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Indeed, as Nalick, Josefy, Zardkoohi and Bierman (2016) mention, consensus on these issues is unstable and "evolving over time and with differences persisting across geographies, religious beliefs, and individualized demographic and ethnic backgrounds." (pt. 385). This means that a brand may change their activist stance or focus over time. It also means that brand activism efforts tend to be ad hoc or accidental, being performed as socio-political issues rise and the brand's values are challenged (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). This further differentiates the concept from CSR and CRM, which tend to be parts of the corporation's strategic plan (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). Nevertheless, we would argue that, just as for socio-political activism (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021), brand activism is conceptually not limited to any specific era or location.

#### 2.1.4. *The performer and receiver of brand activism*

Another way brand activism distinguishes itself from other related concepts is in terms of who performs the activism and who is targeted by it. In difference from CPA and similarly to corporate political advocacy (Wettstein & Baur, 2016), brand activism takes place outside of formal political channels and is addressed to the larger public – the citizen-consumer – rather than formal political institutions or agents (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019).

Regarding the performer of brand activism, researchers vary in their positions. On the one hand, Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) claim that brand activism can be performed by the corporation or the brand. On the other hand, Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) claims that, since the campaigns are focused on engaging and transmitting values to consumers, it is the brand that leads the brand activism efforts, not the corporation. Moreover, several authors suggest that brand activism can be conducted by both brands and individuals (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018; Moorman, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). In our view, it is just like the name, and Manfredi-Sánchez (2019), suggests: brand activism is performed only by the brand. Brand activism is centred around values, and values are within the branding domain.

Limiting brand activism to the brand also helps distinguish it from two closely related concepts. Firstly, it helps draw the line between brand activism and corporate socio-political activism, which can be instigated by the corporation itself (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Secondly, it differentiates brand activism from CEO socio-political activism, which focuses on activism efforts by business leaders (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). Nevertheless, it has for long been accepted in the branding literature that individuals, such as celebrities or business leaders, can be viewed as brands as well (Kapferer, 2012). In other words, individuals, when viewed as brands, can still engage in brand activism. However, this does not mean that CEO socio-political activism should be viewed as a subcategory of brand activism; it is still different in the sense that it focuses solely on communication alone (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). Even so, given that both a brand and its leaders can engage in brand activism, they do not have to be synchronized. They

are viewed as independent units and the values expressed in the brand activism efforts by the CEO as a brand may even conflict with those of the corporate brand.

#### *2.1.5. Interpretation of brand activism*

To summarize, brand activism is seen in this study as a values-based agenda of a brand directed to the citizen-consumer in the defence or the opposition of the status quo of a controversial socio-political issue. This always includes expressing a vocal stance on the issue and may also be complemented by tangible practices such as donations. The differences between brand activism and related concepts are presented in Table 1.



**Table 1.** Conceptual differences between brand activism and related concepts along with a selection of dimensions.

Concept	Notable authors	Motive	Form	Issue type	Performed by
Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway (2016); Joo, Miller & Fink (2019); Kim & Lee (2020)	Stakeholder-based	Practice (and communication)	Noncontroversial	Corporation / Brand
Cause-related Marketing (CRM)	Varadarajan & Menon (1988); Brønn & Vrioni (2015)	Business-based	Practice	Noncontroversial	Corporation / Brand
Corporate Philanthropy	Wettstein & Baur (2016)	Values-based	Practice	Noncontroversial / Controversial	Corporation
Corporate Political Advocacy	Wettstein & Baur (2016)	Values-based	Communication	Controversial	Brand
Corporate Political Activities (CPA)	Wettstein & Baur (2016)	Business-based	Practice	Noncontroversial / Controversial	Corporation
Socio-political Involvement (SPI)	Nalick, Josefy, Zardkoohi & Bierman (2016)	Mixed	Communication and/or practice	Controversial	Corporation / Brand
Socio-political Activism / Political Activism / CEO Political Activism	Hambrick & Wowak (2021)	Value-based	Communication	Controversial	Business leader / Individual
Corporate Socio-political Activism (CSA)	Bhagwat, Warren, Beck & Watson (2020)	Mixed	Communication and practice	Controversial	Corporation
Brand Activism	Kotler & Sarkar (2017; 2018; 2019); Manfredi-Sánchez (2019); Vredenburg et al. (2020)	Values-based	Communication (and practice)	Controversial	Brand

## 2.2. Authenticity

As uncertainty and mistrust are increasing in today's society (Edelman, 2021a), consumers also start questioning brands' motives in terms of taking a socio-political stance (Holt, 2002). To overcome this scepticism and limit possible negative outcomes of brand activism, it is essential that the brands' efforts are perceived as authentic (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018).

To examine which antecedents are related to consumers' perceptions of authenticity, it is first important to understand the meaning of authenticity. Since the authenticity of brand activism is a nascent concept, information from similar concepts – namely brand authenticity and CSR authenticity – is used to get a better understanding of the topic of interest. In the subsequent sections, we thereby review the emergence, the research streams, and different views of both brand and CSR authenticity, followed by the definition of the authenticity of brand activism. This ultimately leads to a review of the different suggested antecedents of authenticity.

### 2.2.1. Emergences of brand and CSR authenticity

To understand the concepts of brand and CSR authenticity, it is important to know what authenticity means and where it comes from. Authenticity derives from the Greek word 'authēntikos', where 'autos' means self and 'hentes' means 'doer' or 'being' (Spiggle, Nguyen & Caravella, 2012). Consequently, authenticity refers to someone's acting as their natural self-being. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the term evolved to a synonym for genuineness (Trilling, 1972 cited in Södergren, 2021) and is nowadays mostly used to describe values such as realness, truthfulness, responsibility, and transparency within the branding literature (e.g., Beverland, Lindgreen & Vink, 2008; Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland & Farrelly 2014; Södergren, 2021). Overall, this has resulted in two major concepts: brand authenticity, and CSR authenticity.

Firstly, within brand management, brand authenticity has emerged (Södergren, 2021). Parallel to that, the marketing scepticism concept has also evolved, which explains the consumer's feeling of being unwillingly influenced by companies, and lead to mistrust from the consumer (Isaac & Grayson, 2017). While this mistrust has increased during the last years, consumers' expectations of brands and their authenticity did so as well (Edelman, 2021b). If consumers perceive the brand as authentic, this has been shown to positively influence the brand in terms of brand trust (Ilicic & Webster, 2014), brand loyalty (Moulard, Raggio & Folse, 2016), perceived quality, and cultural iconicity (Holt, 2002). It has also been shown to be connected to brand reputation (Napoli et al., 2014) and brand equity (Vredenburg et al., 2020), and to increase brand attachment and word-of-mouth (Morhart et al., 2015).

Secondly, similarly to brand authenticity, the CSR authenticity concept has emerged as a reaction to consumer's scepticism of social actions companies take (Joo, Miller & Fink, 2019). This scepticism is particularly directed to the underlying motives of the companies, where they are perceived as exploiting a cause for ulterior motives. This has resulted in phenomena such as greenwashing, which concerns environmental causes (Urbański & Haque, 2020), pinkwashing, concerning breast cancer (Carter, 2015), and woke-washing, concerning marginalized causes

(Mahdawi, 2018; Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). If consumers perceive the brand's motives as exploitative or insincere, their confidence is weakened (Urbański & Haque, 2020). To avoid such an outcome, it is essential for brands to be authentic in their CSR engagement. According to Alhouti, Johnson and Holloway (2016), authentically perceived CSR initiatives can positively affect employee perceptions, consumer purchase intention, and brand loyalty. Joo, Miller and Fink (2019) add on by stating that also an organization's reputation and word-of-mouth can be increased by perceived CSR authenticity. Moreover, Gunawan, Budiarsi and Hartini's (2020) study show that the perception of CSR authenticity has a positive influence on the company's corporate image and credibility. According to the authors, this is because CSR authenticity indicates that the company is truly concerned about the community and not only economic interests.

Due to the numerous possible outcomes that brands can benefit from if being perceived as authentic and its rising importance within brand management, the concepts of brand authenticity and CSR authenticity have become of great interest to researchers.

### *2.2.2. Research streams on brand and CSR authenticity*

Within the brand authenticity literature, Södergren (2021) has identified three different research streams. The biggest research stream has an epistemological focus, whereby researchers investigate authenticity in terms of how information is validated in one's environment, that is, how the "real thing" is differentiated from the "fake thing" (e.g., Beverland, Lindgreen & Vink, 2008; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014; Schallehn, Burmann & Riley, 2014; Spiggle, Nguyen & Caravella, 2012). This research stream is where most of the CSR authenticity studies are also found (e.g., Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway, 2016; Fatma & Khan, 2020) and is also closest to this study, since we focus on the evaluation of antecedents of brand activism authenticity. The second research stream refers to authenticity in sociological terms, meaning that authenticity is something negotiable, which derives from the community. While several studies can be found in terms of brand authenticity (e.g., Brown, Kozinets & Sherry, 2003; Holt, 2002; Leigh, Peters & Shelton, 2006), the CSR authenticity literature does not seem to have covered this perspective. The third research stream lies in the emotional and moral aspects of authenticity, whereby literature from both brand and CSR authenticity highlight that authenticity derives from an individual's experience (e.g., Kim & Lee, 2020; Leigh, Peters & Shelton, 2006).

In addition to Södergren's (2021) findings, there were two major goals that many researchers tried to achieve in brand authenticity and CSR authenticity studies. These are, firstly, to construct a framework to measure authenticity (e.g., Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway, 2016; Ilicic & Webster, 2014; Joo, Miller & Fink, 2019; Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014), and secondly, to investigate the drivers of perceived authenticity (e.g., Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway, 2016; Fatma & Khan, 2020; Schallehn, Burmann & Riley, 2014; Vredenburg et al., 2020). These studies provide a good foundation for the definition and antecedents of the authenticity of brand activism.

### 2.2.3. Views on brand authenticity

As the brand plays a major part in brand activism, it is to be expected that ideas from brand authenticity can help for a better understanding of the perception of authenticity of brand activism. As brand authenticity has many different interpretations within the branding literature, an overview presenting different researchers' perspectives on authenticity is given analogously in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Interpretation of authenticity based on the different viewpoints in the branding literature.

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Interpretation of brand authenticity</b>
Beverland, Lindgreen & Vink (2008)	Brand authenticity in an advertising context has three forms: pure (literal) authenticity, approximate authenticity, and moral authenticity.
Bruhn, Schoenmüller, Schäfer & Heinrich (2012)	Brand authenticity (1) addresses the authenticity of market offerings, (2) is based on an individual's evaluation, and (3) refers to a variety of attributes due to the missing distinct definition of the concept.
Ilicic & Webster (2014)	Brand authenticity in the consumer-brand relationship context is a construct that describes brands being true in their relationships with consumers.
Joo, Miller & Fink (2019)	Authenticity in a consumer-based CSR context is a multidimensional construct including seven different, yet interconnected, dimensions (community link, reliability, commitment, congruency, benevolence, transparency and board impact).
Morhart et al. (2015)	Brand authenticity is (1) the extent to which consumers perceive the brand to be true to itself and its consumers and (2) the extent to which the brand helps the consumers remain true to themselves.
Moulard, Raggio, & Folse (2016)	Authenticity is the degree to which an entity in one's environment (e.g., object, person, performance) is perceived to be true to or match up with something else.
Napoli et al. (2014)	Authenticity is the consumers' subjective evaluation of genuineness attributed to a brand and is characterized by its multiple facets.
Schallehn, Burmann & Riley (2014)	Authenticity is the degree to which personal identity is causally linked to individual behaviour and is perceived when a brand is consistent, continuous and individual in its behaviour.
Spiggle, Nguyen & Caracella (2012)	Brand extension authenticity is a consumer's sense that a brand extension is a legitimate, culturally consistent extension of the parent brand.

Table 2. illustrates the variety of authenticity viewpoints presented in the literature, as well as some similarities between them. Firstly, most researchers acknowledge that there are several meanings of authenticity. Secondly, most of the researchers agree that authenticity is a broad socio-cultural concept which is perceived individually by each consumer (e.g., Bruhn et al., 2012; Napoli et al., 2014). In other words, it means something different to everyone, which leads to a multidimensional construct influenced by a variety of factors (e.g., Bruhn et al., 2012; Joo, Miller & Fink, 2019; Napoli et al., 2014). Thirdly, authors use words such as truthfulness, genuineness, consistency or alignment to describe what consumers perceive as authentic when

referring to the brand's behaviour, which includes activities such as communication, CSR, brand activism, or brand extensions (e.g., Ilicic & Webster, 2014; Morhart et al., 2015; Moulard, Raggio & Folse, 2016; Napoli et al., 2014; Spiggle, Nguyen & Caravella, 2012; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

To bring the various meanings of brand authenticity together, and thus create a uniform understanding, Moulard, Raggio and Folse (2021) suggested the Entity-Referent Correspondence (ERC) framework of authenticity. Because of its holistic perspective, this framework is particularly useful for understanding the authenticity of brand activism. Using the framework, Moulard, Raggio and Folse (2021) view the consumer's perception of authenticity as the consumer's perception of the extent to which an entity is true to, or corresponds with, something else, labelled as the referent. Hence, Moulard, Raggio and Folse (2021) suggest three types of authenticity based on different referents: true-to-ideal, true-to-fact, and true-to-self.

Firstly, Moulard, Raggio and Folse (2021) describe true-to-ideal as the consumer's perception of the degree to which attributes of an entity correspond with a socially determined standard. They see this socially determined standard as an ideal that is created based on a group's consensus about the ideal's attributes and, therefore, as something that does not exist outside of human consciousness. For example, if a consumer buys a pastry from a high-end bakery, they likely expect the pastry to be handmade, look good, taste great, and so on.

Secondly, Moulard, Raggio and Folse (2021) describe true-to-fact as explaining the consumer's perception of the degree to which communicated information about an entity corresponds with the actual state of affairs. In other words, it is about whether the information about an object is perceived as matching the facts, that is, the actually occurred events or the entity's actual qualities. Even though facts are existing independently of the consumer's mind, facts are generally implied since consumers usually do not have knowledge about the actual state of affairs (Moulard, Raggio & Folse, 2021). To exemplify the true-to-fact dimension, if a brand claims to produce their products sustainably, and there is enough evidence that supports it, for example, that it compensates for carbon dioxide emissions, it will be perceived as true-to-fact.

Finally, Moulard, Raggio and Folse (2021) introduce true-to-self, which describes the consumers' perception of the degree to which the behaviour of an entity corresponds with its intrinsic motivations, compared to the extrinsic ones. According to Moulard, Raggio and Folse, these intrinsic motivations reflect an entity's 'true self', which they describe as a collection of actual, fixed, innate characteristics, but also as distinct from the fact due to its psychological nature. Since one's motivations are private, they are inaccessible to others and therefore can only be implied (Moulard, Raggio & Folse, 2021). For instance, if a brand that's identity and value is connecting people publishes a new platform that allows people to share experiences with each other, this will be perceived as being true to itself.

#### 2.2.4. *Views on CSR authenticity*

Due to the similarity of brand activism and CSR, and the fact that CSR authenticity research is less nascent, views on CSR authenticity are also useful to understand the authenticity of brand activism. Authenticity in a CSR context means “the perception of a company’s CSR actions as a genuine and true expression of the company’s beliefs and behaviour toward society that extend beyond legal requirements” (Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway, 2016, p.1243). Alhouti, Johnson and Holloway (2016) were one of the first who clearly defined CSR authenticity based on the general idea of the perceived authenticity of marketing initiatives. Their definition is similar to the ones of brand authenticity presented above since most of them focus on the idea that something is being perceived as genuine or true. However, Alhouti, Johnson and Holloway’s (2016) definition of CSR authenticity is more precise than the many different definitions of brand authenticity. The reason for that could be that CSR authenticity is a much smaller and clearer defined context than brands. Since most of the subsequent studies (e.g., Fatma & Khan, 2020; Joo, Miller & Fink, 2019) are based on Alhouti, Johnson and Holloway’s (2016) definition of CSR authenticity, there seems to be more of a consensus regarding this concept in the literature compared to the one of brand authenticity. This makes CSR authenticity studies more comparable and helps build a solid basis for understanding the perceived authenticity of brand activism.

#### 2.2.5. *Interpretation of the authenticity of brand activism*

To provide a clear perspective of authenticity in the brand activism context in this study, understanding its attributes is first essential. Attributes are required for something to be authentic and help discern the meaning of the concept. Without the attributes, there is no such thing as authenticity. It is important to note that both the literature on brand authenticity and on CSR authenticity are inconsistent in their definitions of authenticity and what they classify as attributes of authenticity. Additionally, they are inconsistent in what elements they classify as attributes of authenticity versus antecedents of authenticity; while one study classifies one factor as an antecedent, another classifies it as an attribute. Although a part of the disparity can be attributed to variety in the scopes of the studies – some looked at the authenticity of brands and some for CSR – the disparity and inconsistency in the literature remain high. Despite this disparity, the attributes contribute to a better understanding of what constitutes authenticity. A list of attributes highlighted in the literature was synthesized and can be found in Table 1 in Appendix 1: Additional tables.

While this study does not aim to propose a new conceptualization of the authenticity of brand activism or to construct a scale to measure it, the study needs to be based on a clear conceptualization. Since no scales have yet been proposed to measure the authenticity of brand activism, the CSR authenticity scale proposed by Alhouti, Johnson and Holloway (2016) was used. This scale was conceptually closest to brand activism compared to the ones proposed in the other studies and its reliability and validity had already been tested (e.g., Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway, 2016; Gunawan, Budiarsi & Hartini, 2020). Hence, this study extends the

conceptualization of CSR authenticity that Alhouti, Johnson and Holloway (2016) used to the authenticity of brand activism.

Consequently, the authenticity of brand activism has six major attributes, as highlighted by Alhouti, Johnson and Holloway (2016). These are truthfulness, fact, honesty, genuineness, trustworthiness, and actuality. Moreover, while not explicitly stated as attributes, it is clear from their scale that Alhouti, Johnson and Holloway (2016) also recognize benevolence and congruence as attributes of authenticity. In other words, the authenticity of brand activism is characterized by that the brand tells the truth and stays true to what it says. The activism is also value-driven, the brand stays true to its values and stands up for them, and genuinely cares about the well-being of society.

It is worth mentioning that this definition does not account for time-dependent attributes such as continuity and heritage, which were mentioned frequently by other authors, and require that the brand has a history. That is to say, based on the definition provided by Alhouti, Johnson and Holloway (2016), new and young brands can still engage in authentic brand activism. This does not, however, imply that these elements do not affect the perception of authenticity, only that they are not required for authenticity per se.

Alhouti, Johnson and Holloway's (2016) conceptualization is also adequate because it encapsulates the essence of authenticity that has been highlighted by other authors, namely that it is about the extent that consumers perceive someone or something as 'being true' to something (e.g., Moulard, Raggio & Folse, 2021; Morhart et al., 2015). That is, perceived authenticity is about the perception of truth. In the context of brands, this tends to be that consumers perceive the brand as staying true to the ideals and its values; in the context of CSR, that the brand stays true to what it says and that their CSR initiatives truly mirror their obligations to their stakeholders; and in the context of brand activism, that the brand fulfils consumers' expectations with its activism actions, and that the activism is truly driven by the brand's values directed to improve society.

#### 2.2.6. *Antecedents of authenticity*

The research question in this study is centred around what affects perceived authenticity in the brand activism context. It is, hence, essential to review if any antecedents for authenticity of brand activism have been suggested in previous literature, as well as what antecedents of authenticity have been suggested in related domains. Consequently, a literature review was conducted to map out the antecedents of authenticity.

Looking at literature on brand activism, no study suggested antecedents of authenticity, whereof the review was centred around suggested antecedents of authenticity in related domains. A particularly helpful study was Södergren's (2021) literature review of brand authenticity, which attempted to map out the antecedents that had been used in the literature so far. However, because many studies were inconsistent in how they referred to, and used, antecedents versus attributes of authenticity, Södergren's classification of studies and antecedents had

to be revised. In this study, attributes conceptualize authenticity, whereas antecedents determine what may lead to, or influence, authenticity. In other words, antecedents may increase or decrease authenticity, but it is not required per se to make something authentic. The antecedents may, however, be related to the attributes in the way that the perception of an antecedent may affect the perception of an attribute, and thereby also authenticity itself. Furthermore, many studies were not covered in Södergren's review. The full list of antecedents found in our review is presented in Table 3 together with definitions and notable studies.

The antecedents were assigned to three categories: iconic cues, indexical cues, and moral or existential cues of authenticity. The iconic cues and the indexical cues categories were first suggested by Grayson and Martinec (2004), and the third category was added by Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink (2008). While not all authors refer to these categories, we found that their suggested antecedents still fitted in the categories and, thereby, sorted the antecedents appropriately. The category of indexical cues had the most antecedents. These antecedents were more factual and drive authenticity because they provide factual connections. For example, the antecedent continuity provides proof of authenticity through consistent values over a longer period of time. The iconic cues category had the second-most antecedents. These antecedents were symbolic in nature and drive authenticity because they imply that the object is similar to something else. For example, a brand could be perceived as more authentic through the antecedent heritage, as it implies that the brand is like what it used to be and to the values it originated from. The last category was moral or existential cues. These cues generate authenticity by assisting in the consumers' self-authentication process. Only one antecedent – self-referential brand characteristics – fitted under this category. While iconic cues are verified through a symbolic connection and indexical cues through a factual connection, both are in line with the general views on authenticity, that is, that authenticity is related to being true to something (e.g., Beverland, Lindgreen & Vink, 2008; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Morhart et al., 2015). Viewing the cues through Moulard, Raggio and Folse's (2021) framework, indexical cues can be said to correspond to true-to-self and true-to-fact, whereas iconic cues correspond true-to-self and to true-to-ideal. The moral/existential category, on the other hand, fell outside of the perspective on authenticity that was held by most authors, does not correspond well to Moulard, Raggio and Folse's (2021) framework, and was only included in two studies (Beverland, Lindgreen & Vink, 2008; Morhart et al., 2015).



**Table 3.** Antecedents of authenticity within the branding and CSR context organized into the categories iconic, indexical, and moral/existential cues.

Antecedents	Definition	Studies	Scope
Iconic cues	The degree to which something is perceived as being similar to something else.	Grayson & Martinec (2004)	Authenticity of market offerings
		Beverland, Lindgreen & Vink (2008)	Authenticity in advertising
		Morhart et al. (2015)	Brand authenticity
Heritage	The degree to which the brand is perceived as connecting to its origin and legacy.	Morhart et al. (2015)	Brand authenticity
Motive	The degree to which the brand is perceived as public-serving instead of self-serving (i.e., profit-seeking).	Holt (2002); Morhart et al. (2015)	Brand authenticity
		Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway (2016)	CSR authenticity
Scarcity	The degree to which the brand is perceived as not having its goods or services generally available or accessible.	Moulard, Raggio & Folse (2016)	Brand authenticity
Uniqueness	The degree to which the brand is perceived as being unusual compared to its competitors in the way it fulfils its promise.	Schallehn, Burmann & Riley (2014); Moulard, Raggio & Folse (2016)	Brand authenticity
Indexical cues	The degree to which something is perceived as having a factual and a spatio-temporal connection with something else.	Grayson & Martinec (2004)	Authenticity of market offerings
		Beverland, Lindgreen & Vink (2008)	Authenticity in advertising
		Morhart et al. (2015)	Brand authenticity
Brand-congruent employee behaviour	The degree to which the brand is perceived as having the employee behaviour in line with the brand's promise.	Morhart et al. (2015)	Brand authenticity
Consistency	The degree to which the brand is perceived as having the current behaviour aligned.	Schallehn, Burmann & Riley (2014)	Brand authenticity
Continuity	The degree to which the brand is perceived as remaining stable in its core values in recent times.	Schallehn, Burmann & Riley (2014)	Brand authenticity

Impact	The degree to which the brand is perceived as making a real and meaningful difference.	Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway (2016)	CSR authenticity
Longevity	The degree to which the brand is perceived as being existent for a longer period of time.	Moulard, Raggio & Folse (2016)	Brand authenticity
Longitudinal consistency	The degree to which the brand is perceived as remaining stable and not having changed over a longer period of time.	Schallehn, Burmann & Riley (2014); Moulard, Raggio & Folse (2016)	Brand authenticity
Fit	The degree to which the brand is perceived as having its products and CSR actions in line.	Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway (2016); Kim & Lee (2020)	CSR authenticity
Reparation	The degree to which the brand is perceived as seeking to amend previous scandals or misdeeds.	Morhart et al. (2015) Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway (2016)	Brand authenticity CSR authenticity
Transparency	The degree to which the brand is perceived as being open for public evaluation.	Holt (2002)	Brand authenticity
Moral/ Existential cues	The degree to which something is perceived as revealing or helping to construct the consumer's identity.	Beverland, Lindgreen & Vink (2008) Morhart et al. (2015)	Authenticity in advertising Brand authenticity
Self-referential brand characteristics	The degree to which the brand is perceived as helping customers' self-authentication by connecting with personal moral values.	Beverland, Lindgreen & Vink (2008) Morhart et al. (2015)	Authenticity in advertising Brand authenticity

Overall, few, or no, authors had suggested any antecedents for the authenticity of brand activism. Moreover, as visible in Table 3, the literature on antecedents of authenticity in related domains was incoherent. In total, 14 different antecedents were identified among the reviewed studies, and although Morhart et al. (2015) covered the most antecedents with a total of five antecedents, no study covered all of them. In fact, eight antecedents were mentioned by solely a single study. Hence, because literature on antecedents of authenticity was incoherent and only covered related domains, not brand activism, which is a distinct domain, these studies alone were not enough to derive antecedents of perceived authenticity of brand activism. Therefore, a solid theoretical foundation was required to examine this further.

### 2.3. Summary of the literature review

To conclude, as a values-based agenda for socio-political involvement, brand activism has emerged as a distinct concept in the branding literature. Yet, because the concept is nascent, related concepts such as CSR are useful for understanding the authenticity of brand activism. Synthesising perspectives from literature on brand authenticity and CSR authenticity in particular, one such idea is that being authentic is about ‘being true’ to something. The perception of authenticity is, hence, related to the perception of truth. Moulard, Raggio and Folse (2021) created the most holistic framework regarding this where they distilled three categories of truth relevant for authenticity: true-to-ideal, true-to-fact, and true-to-self. Regarding previous studies of antecedents of perceived authenticity, no studies were found in the brand activism domain, and the literature on antecedents in the related domains was incoherent. To proceed with the investigation of the topic, a solid theoretical foundation is needed. The conclusion that the perception of authenticity depends on the perception of truth, and that a particular set of types of truth are connected to authenticity, leads us to theories from which we can derive the most relevant antecedents of the perceived authenticity of brand activism.

### 3. Theory

*In this chapter, we present the theoretical framework for the study and the hypothesized antecedents of perceived authenticity of brand activism. We first explain the underlying ideas of the framework. These ideas lead to theories from two separate theoretical domains, each explained in its own section and resulting in its own antecedents. The chapter ends with the theoretical framework.*

To examine the antecedents of perceived authentic brand activism, it is important to understand how authenticity is perceived. As many authors suggest, the perception of authenticity is about the perception of truth (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Morhart et al., 2015; Moulard, Raggio & Folse, 2016; 2021). Thus, to understand what influences the consumers' perceptions of authenticity of brand activism, we must therefore first understand what type of truth consumers evaluate when evaluating the authenticity of brand activism. Moulard, Raggio and Folse's (2021) three types of truth – true-to-ideal, true-to-fact, and true-to-self – are useful to this end. While some of these types are more prevalent than others, all of them apply to brand activism and encapsulate the core ideas of authenticity that most authors held.

Furthermore, since all three types mostly occur together, they cannot be clearly separated. For example, if someone says that they have certain values, those meet social standards, and the person acts in accordance with them, that shows that they are true-to-fact, true-to-self, and true-to-ideal at the same time. However, even though all three types of truth are mentioned in the authenticity literature, most studies focus on true-to-ideal and true-to-self. This is also the case in our study since brand activism is based on values and being true to them through socio-political involvement, rather than being factual.

The factors that influence consumers' perceptions of the authenticity of brand activism are, thereby, the factors that influence their perceptions of how true the brand activism is to the values behind the activism and society's expectations about them. Because the study of perception lies within the field of psychology, theories from this field are useful for understanding how those perceptions of truth are shaped. Within psychology, theories from two domains are particularly useful for this objective – the domains of cognitive psychology and social psychology.

Firstly, cognitive psychology accounts for how information is processed in peoples' minds, including how the information leads to the judgement of truth. Because of how people judge truth based on Bayesian Models of Cognition (Perfors, Tenenbaum, Griffiths & Xu, 2011) in the marketing context, we assume that consumers' assessments of the impact of the brand activism affect their perceptions of the authenticity of it. This information tells consumers both how true the brand activism is to their expectations – or ideals – as well as how true the brand activism is to the brand's values. This results in one hypothesized antecedent of perceived authenticity of brand activism.

Secondly, Attribution Theory (Heider, 1946) from social psychology can explain how true consumers perceive that the brand activism is to the brand itself (true-to-itself). This is because Attribution Theory (Heider, 1946) describes how people attribute causes to behaviour. This reflects the understanding of true-to-self (Moulard, Raggio & Folse, 2021), the consumer's perception of the connection between the behaviour and the intrinsic motivations. For example, if a brand engages in brand activism, they may do so either based on internal causes such as their values, or external causes such as pressure from stakeholders and competitors. Because brand activism is a values-based agenda, consumers will perceive brand activism as more authentic if they attribute the behaviour to internal causes. Consequently, it is reasonable to derive antecedents of perceived authenticity of brand activism from the sources of information that consumers use to make attributions. Kelley (1973) outlines several such sources, which together result in three antecedents.

### 3.1. Bayesian Models of Cognition and marketing scepticism

Using cognitive psychology, Brashier and Marsh (2020) claim that judgements of truth tend to reflect people's inferences from base rates. This idea is based on Bayesian Models of Cognition, which targets a central question of cognitive development, that is "how we can learn so much from such apparently limited evidence" (Perfors et al., 2011, p.302). In other words, it is about the need for acquiring inductive constraints and about the need for generalizations. Grounded in Probability Theory, the Bayesian approach offers a solution to this problem. From this perspective, "people do not start from a position of complete ignorance but instead begin with prior probabilities" (Brashier & Marsh, 2020, pp.500-501). These probabilities can be referred to as base rates (Brashier & Marsh, 2020).

An often-used example illustrating this idea was introduced by Goodman (1955). The example is as follows: suppose that there are several bags filled with marbles. By looking into the bags, one would discover that the marbles in some bags were black, in others red, and in others white. One would, thereby, recognize that each bag only includes one colour of marbles. If one then draws a single marble from a new bag and this marble was purple, one would expect, without knowing, that the other marbles in this bag were purple as well.

In the context of news and the information we encounter in our daily life, the incoming information tends to be true most of the time (Brashier & Marsh, 2020). Therefore, Brashier and Marsh (2020) argue that Bayesian Models of Cognition suggests that it is reasonable to assume that incoming information is true by default. Only later do people reconsider their judgement when they encounter new evidence (Brashier & Marsh, 2020). Consequently, people tend to believe most of what they hear and see. However, as Perfors et al. (2011) note, learning inductive constraints and base rates is dependent on the context.

The marketing context differs from that of news consumption. While traditional media such as newspapers have the main objective of informing their readers, marketing communication has the objective of influencing consumers in some manner. This is true for brand activism as well, as brands communicate their stance to influence consumers to drive socio-political change.

Consumers are aware of this fact. This knowledge of persuasion attempts is referred to as Persuasion Knowledge Theory (Friestad & Wright, 1994) and goes, according to Isaac and Grayson (2017), hand in hand with marketing scepticism. As a result, consumers who know that the messenger is trying to persuade them, tend to rate the messenger and its message less favourably (Isaac & Grayson, 2017). This has been highlighted as an important issue in corporate-driven socio-political involvement strategies such as CSR and CRM. As several authors note (e.g., Brønn & Vrioni, 2015; Fatma & Khan, 2020; Mohr, Eroğlu & Ellen, 1998), many consumers distrust marketing communication and are sceptical about the true motives behind companies engaging in socio-political activities. According to Mohr, Eroğlu and Ellen (1998), this scepticism leads to a decreased likelihood for positive responses to these activities.

### 3.1.1. *Perceived relative impact on the cause*

Because of consumers' persuasion knowledge and scepticism towards marketing communication, we doubt that Brashier and Marsh's (2020) conclusion that people tend to perceive information as true by default translates into the marketing context. Instead, we hypothesize that persuasion knowledge makes consumers adjust their base rates for marketing communication. Hence, from the perspective of Bayesian Models of Cognition (Perfors et al., 2011), it is rational for consumers to assume that a brand activist statement is false by default – that is, that the brand is not true to society's ideal and the values the brand promotes – and then adjust this view in the light of new evidence, such as tangible brand activism practices. Based on Alhouti, Johnson and Holloway (2016), who also used persuasion knowledge as the underlying theory to explain a similar antecedent of CSR authenticity, we refer to the extent to which a brand activist statement is supported by meaningful tangible actions as the perceived relative impact on the cause. Consequently, we hypothesize that:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** The perceived relative impact on the cause of brand activism is positively related to the perceived authenticity of brand activism.

To elaborate, for a brand to be perceived as authentic, a statement itself can be enough and following actions are not a necessity. However, if consumers think that the brand is making a relatively high impact compared to what they would expect considering its size and profit, we argue that this is positively related to the perceived brand activism authenticity. This is because, as mentioned earlier, consumers expect brands to drive change in socio-political issues (Edelman, 2021b). If a brand is perceived as contributing to the change and this contribution is considered fair relative to the brand's size and profit (Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway, 2016), it is not only perceived as making an impact, but also as being true to the ideal since it fulfils consumers' expectations and, consequently, as more authentic. To give an example, if a brand makes both a statement and a donation regarding Black Lives Matter, not only talking about a cause but also taking tangible actions in form of a donation would make the consumer perceive the brand activism as more authentic.

### 3.2. Attribution Theory and motives

According to the Attribution Theory (Heider, 1946), people continuously make causal inferences on why certain outcomes occur to orient themselves in their environment. These causes can be either external or internal; for example, if we meet someone in a bad mood, we could assume that it is a grumpy person (internal cause) or that the bad mood was caused by the rainy weather (external cause) (Heider, 1958). Over time, these causes may transition into stable beliefs about how the world works (Heider, 1958).

We assume that consumers use the same attribution processes when making attributions for brand activist behaviour. On the one hand, some cues may lead the consumer to attribute the behaviour to external causes such as pressure from stakeholders or profit motives. On the other hand, some cues may lead the consumer to attribute the behaviour to internal causes, that is, to the brand's own values and identity. As per the definition used for the authenticity of brand activism in this paper, benevolence is an underlying attribute of it – brand activism is motivated by values and a genuine concern about society. Factors that increase the likelihood of attributing the brand activist behaviour to benevolent underlying motives should, thereby, serve as antecedents to the perceived authenticity of brand activism.

Consumers may look at several points of information when making their attributions. Kelley (1973) evolved Attribution Theory by claiming that attributions are made rationally based on the factors that co-varies the most with the action or event in question. To elaborate, Kelley (1973) outlined different types of information that people use to make attributions, whereof two are relevant for brand activism: the uniqueness of the behaviour, and whether if the behaviour stays consistent in different situations and over time, both in the long term and more recently.

#### 3.2.1. *Perceived uniqueness of activism actions*

Firstly, Kelley (1973) suggested that people use the uniqueness of a behaviour as an important source of information when attributing causes to behaviour. Based on Kelley's (1973) idea, behaviour that is perceived as different would then be seen as internally motivated since it seems like the brand came up with the idea itself, instead of being externally motivated and, for example, simply following the norm. Schallehn, Burmann and Riley (2014) and Moulard, Raggio and Folse (2016) use this reasoning to suggest perceived uniqueness as an antecedent of brand authenticity. We extend this idea to brand activism, where the perceived uniqueness of the brand activism will affect consumers perceptions of the authenticity of brand activism since they will be more likely to attribute the behaviour to internal motivations. The uniqueness of brand activism may suggest that the brand is not copying what other brands are doing, but that they came up with the initiative based on their own values, and that they care to put in an extra effort. Hence, the uniqueness of brand activism actions illustrates that the brand activism stays true to the underlying values. Consequently, we hypothesize that:

**H<sub>2</sub>:** The perceived uniqueness of brand activism actions is positively related to the perceived authenticity of brand activism.

To exemplify, regarding Black Lives Matter, many brands have been vocal about their support for the African American community. Therefore, it might not be perceived as unique. However, if a brand stands out by, for example, presenting concrete steps of how to avoid inequality within their company, rather than only making a supportive statement, this might be perceived as coming from inside the company and therefore as something special and, consequently, make consumers perceive the brand as more authentic.

### 3.2.2. *Perceived heritage connection*

Secondly, Kelley (1973) proposed that people use consistency of behaviour over time as an important source for making attributions, whereas consistency implies that underlying internal values guide the behaviour and that the behaviour should be attributed to internal causes. Looking at consistency over time, it is reasonable to separate the consistency between the current brand activism behaviour and the historical behaviour into two time frames. The first time frame is the brand's origins and legacy – its heritage. The second time frame is the brand's behaviour in recent years. This division is reasonable since both factors capture different aspects of the brand activism 'being true to something'.

Primarily, the consistency between the current activism behaviour and the heritage of the brand indicates mainly how true the brand activism is to the values of the brand. The brand's origin and legacy can serve as a foundation for its identity and values, and some brand may even be called heritage brands (Urde, Greyser & Balmer, 2007). If the brand activism is rooted in the brand's heritage, or if the values and stories tied to the heritage are in line with the brand activism, that should serve as an indicator for consistency in different situations and over time. A strong connection between the heritage of the brand and the brand activism should, thereby, influence the likelihood of consumers attributing the brand activism internally to the brand's values and, consequently, it should also affect how they perceive the authenticity of the brand activism. A similar heritage antecedent was also suggested by Morhart et al. (2015) in the brand authenticity context. The reasoning about the current brand activism's connection to – or consistency with – the brand's heritage and attributions lead to the following hypothesis:

**H<sub>3</sub>:** The perceived heritage connection of brand activism is positively related to the perceived authenticity of brand activism.

For instance, if a brand originally expressed support for gender equality when founded and later supports Black Lives Matter, even though these are different causes, taking public stances on social issues still might be perceived as part of the company's heritage and therefore as more authentic since the brand is true to itself in its activism actions.

### 3.2.3. *Perceived continuity of recent activism actions*



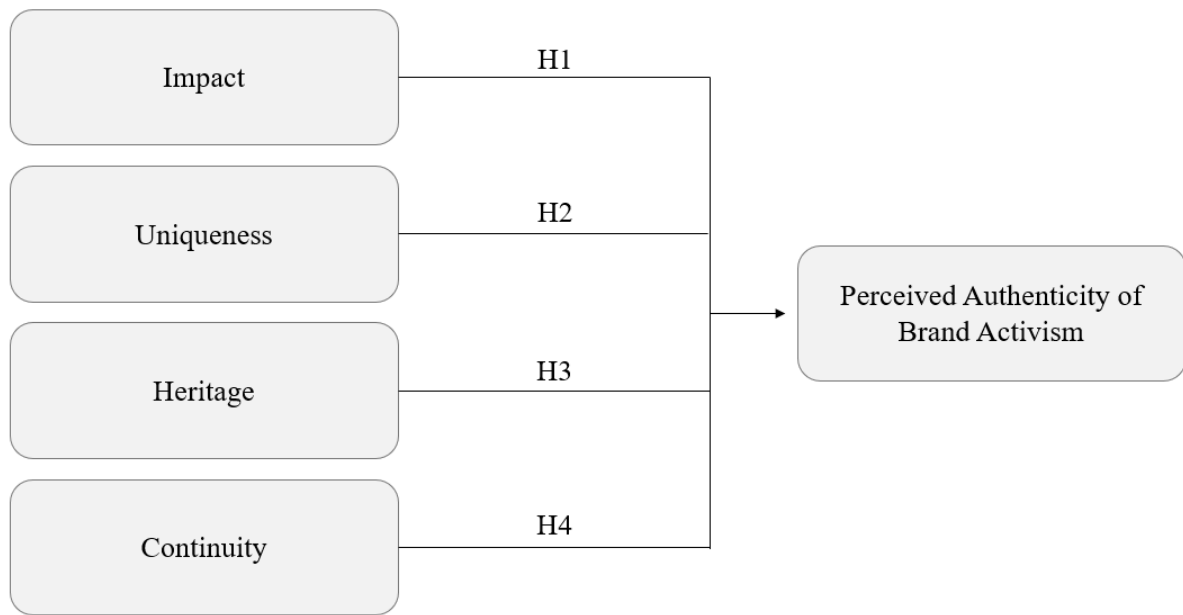
While the brand's heritage was the first time frame we suggested based on Kelley's (1973) consistency over time, the brand's behaviour in recent years constitutes the second. In difference from the heritage connection, the consistency between the current brand's activism efforts and its efforts in the recent years, this time frame also encapsulates how true-to-fact the brand is with its brand activism. While it still focuses on how true the brand activism is to the brand's values, where consistency over the last years make it reasonable for consumers to attribute the behaviour to the brand's values rather than external factors, the information also serves as proof for what the brand does about the issue and that its activism statements can be trusted. This means that if a brand says that they support a stance for a socio-political issue, the continued support throughout the years through statements and actions may serve as evidence to show that they are true to their word. Thus, high consistency between current activism behaviour and behaviour in the more recent years make it reasonable for consumers both to attribute the brand activism to the brand's internal values rather than external factors and partly also to perceive the activism as true-to-fact. In line with Schallehn, Burmann and Riley (2014), we refer to the consistency in values over time in recent years as continuity of recent brand activism actions. In the end, the reasoning about attributions and consistency of values in recent years lead following hypothesis:

**H4:** The perceived continuity of recent brand activism actions is positively related to the perceived authenticity of brand activism.

To exemplify, if a brand has announced their support for Black Lives Matter in several statements or for other similar causes in recent years, this continuity will make the consumer perceive the statements as true-to-self and true-to-fact since the consumer would assume that based on the continuity of publishing statements, taking a stance to support others must be part of the brand's values and real in terms of facts.

### 3.3. Theoretical framework

The four hypotheses result in the theoretical framework for the study, which is presented in Figure 1. Although not always based on the same underlying theories nor used in the same combination, all the hypothesized antecedents of the authenticity of brand activism have been suggested previously in other studies of authenticity. Hence, in line with the authors that suggested the antecedents, simplified labels are used for the antecedents throughout this study to ensure good readability. Therefore, the antecedent perceived relative impact on the cause is further referred to as *impact*, in line with Alhouti, Johnson and Holloway (2016). The antecedent perceived uniqueness of activism action is labelled as *uniqueness*, in accordance with Moulard, Raggio and Folse (2016). The perceived heritage connection is referred to *heritage*, as suggested by Morhart et al. (2015). Lastly, the perceived continuity of recent activism actions is labelled as *continuity*, in line with Schallehn, Burmann and Riley (2014).



**Figure 1.** Theoretical framework for the study.

## 4. Methodology

*This chapter presents the methodology that was employed to answer the research question. The chapter starts with the underlying philosophical research assumptions, transitions into the research approach and design, the data collection and preparation, the sampling distribution, and the data analysis approach. The chapter ends with a presentation of the quality criteria used to evaluate the research.*

### 4.1. Research philosophy

All research projects have philosophical considerations. In this study, we hold the scientific realism position (Hunt & Hansen, 2011). Ontologically, this means that we adhere to classical realism, that is, that the examined objects and phenomena exist regardless of us perceiving them (Hunt & Hansen, 2011). In other words, whether we are studying them or not, we believe that there are such things as brands, brand activism, and authenticity of brand activism out there.

Epistemologically, our scientific realism position draws on positivism and adheres to the principle of phenomenalism, that is, that knowledge can only be acquired through observation and the senses (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This also means that we believe that research should be objective and focus on scientific statements rather than normative ones since these normative statements do not adhere to this principle (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Because it is through the senses we acquire knowledge, we further believe in the principle of inductivism, meaning that it is through observations and the collection of evidence that we can get knowledge about the world (Bryman & Bell, 2011). These assumptions lead to a research process centred around making hypotheses and deductions and then collecting evidence to test them, and where explanations demonstrate deductions about causality and where statistical probability serves as the main tool to make generalizations from the observations (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson & Jaspersen, 2018). Furthermore, because hypothesis testing requires the collection of empirical evidence, the concept examined in the study must be clearly defined so that it can be measured (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). While the literature review laid the foundation for this, the definitions are further elaborated through the operationalization of the concepts in 4.3. Research design.

Epistemologically, the scientific realism position further means that there are some realistic concerns that we acknowledge. These are fallibilistic realism, critical realism, and inductive realism. With fallibilistic realism, we understand that, while we conduct research to improve our understanding of the world, we can never truly confirm any such knowledge claims and know for certain that they are true (Hunt & Hansen, 2011). Indeed, in line with Hunt and Hansen (2011), we view truth as “an attribute of beliefs and linguistic expressions, [...] not an entity in the external world” (p.120). In other words, regardless of the quality of our study, we can never confirm anything for certain. With critical realism, we acknowledge the limitations and errors of the perceptual and cognitive processes we use for testing hypotheses and

evaluating truth (Hunt & Hansen, 2011). Consequently, we do our best to minimize the risk of cognitive and perceptual errors throughout the research process, but never assume that they have been fully eliminated. Finally, with inductive realism, we recognize that it is the long-term success of a theory that makes it reasonable to assume that the structures and objects suggested by it exist (Hunt & Hansen, 2011). Hence, because we have not found any other studies that investigate the antecedents of the authenticity of brand activism, we cannot confidently claim that any relationships between the antecedents and the authenticity actually exist – we would need replicated findings over a longer period and in other, less specific contexts, to confidently make such claims.

## 4.2. Research strategy

Following the philosophical foundations of the study, a deductive approach was employed whereas the hypothesized relationships were quantitatively tested using data collected from a web-based survey.

### 4.2.1. *Deductive research approach*

A deductive approach was taken for the study. This approach was in line with the philosophical foundations and was also appropriate considering the state of research in the research area. As the literature review showed, although brand activism is a novel subject, authenticity has been studied in several other contexts. Hence, rather than following an inductive approach, for example by deriving possible antecedents from consumer interviews, it was more reasonable to look at what antecedents the existing literature and theory suggest and test them in the new context of brand activism. A deductive approach was thereby appropriate since it allows the researchers to test existing theories in new constructs (Burns & Burns, 2008), in contrast to the inductive approach, which is aimed towards theory development and generalizable inferences based on observations (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The deductive approach follows a top-down process, starting from more general information about what is already known, going over more specific information about what is still missing as basis for the hypothesis development, to concrete data collection to test the hypotheses (Burns & Burns, 2008).

Within the deductive approach, either exploratory or conclusive research can be conducted (Malhotra, 2010). Whereas exploratory research concentrates on providing insights into understanding a problem, the more structured conclusive research aims to examine relationships in form of hypothesis testing (Malhotra, 2010). Since this study aims to evaluate the relationship between antecedents and brand activism authenticity, it is more conclusive in nature. Conclusive research can be further divided into causal and descriptive research (Malhotra, 2010). Since the literature on the authenticity of brand activism is still underdeveloped, it was more reasonable to start by examining if there were any relationships between authenticity and the antecedents at all, rather than examining the causality of them. For this study, we therefore followed the descriptive research approach. These descriptive findings would then be useful in guiding future causal research on the topic. The descriptive research approach has important implications for the findings since the direction of any confirmed relationships can only be

inferred from the theory, and not from the results themselves. As Malhotra notes (2010), even though descriptive research is part of conclusive research and, as the name indicates, the findings are conclusive in nature, from a philosophical point of view, nothing can be seen as proven (Malhotra, 2010). Still, Malhotra (2010) notes that findings from descriptive research are conclusive enough to build a solid base for managerial decisions, whereof the results from the study should still be useful for managers.

#### 4.2.2. *Quantitative research*

In line with the most common implementation of descriptive research and the deductive approach, a quantitative analysis was conducted (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Burns & Burns, 2008; Malhotra, 2010). According to Malhotra (2010) quantitative research “seeks to quantify the data and, typically, applies some kind of statistical analysis” (p.139), in other words, it makes theoretical contributions measurable, applies observations or controlled experimentation and presents laws and principles as outcomes (Burns & Burns, 2008). For this study, this means that we first formulated our theoretical contribution, built hypotheses based on that, and then collected observations and finally evaluated those to see if they supported the hypotheses. Because quantitative marketing research focuses on the analysis of consumer behaviour and consumer attitudes (Burns & Burns, 2008), the approach fitted the aim of the study, which was to investigate antecedents of consumers’ perception of brand activism authenticity. However, because quantitative research focuses on testing relationships, it is important to note that it is not possible to evaluate the reasons behind the relationships (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This means that we can test if there is a connection between the presented antecedents and brand activism authenticity, but not why there is one.

To test the hypotheses, quantitative data was needed, and in this study, that meant the collection of primary data. Even though primary data collection requires more effort compared to secondary data, which has already been collected for some other purpose, it guarantees that the data matches the aim of the study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). When it comes to collecting primary data, there are numerous methods of how to do so. Within quantitative research, surveys and interviews are the most common ones (Burns & Burns, 2008).

#### 4.2.3. *Web-based survey*

For our purpose of investigating what makes consumers perceive brand activism as authentic, primary data was collected through a web-based survey. While the results from the survey might present different opinions on the topic, it still allows for generalization (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). This is not only due to the large number of participants compared with other research methods like interviews but also due to the construct of the study. This approach also has other advantages. For example, since the answers were given in privacy without an interviewer or observer, alternative explanations like the interview-effect can be reduced (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). However, this also comes at a price since no further assistance can be provided in case that questions occur on the participant’s side during the completion of the survey (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Additionally, in case that respondents are not

interested in the questionnaire, a risk of respondent fatigue arises (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To limit these issues, participants were given instructions at the beginning of the survey, had the opportunity to contact us if they had any questions, and are asked to answer each question conscientiously. Moreover, scales with less than ten items were used to measure the variables of the study, to limit the burden on the respondents and the risk for respondent fatigue. The scales were also assessed based on the clarity and brevity to minimize the two issues. It is, nonetheless, important to note that misunderstanding and respondent fatigue can only be decreased, never eliminated.

Due to limited time and resources, safety regulations, and convenience, the survey was conducted online. Each participant was provided with a link shared via Facebook, LinkedIn, or WhatsApp to access the survey. Participating in a web-based survey is convenient for most respondents since they have the freedom to choose when and where to participate (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In times of the COVID-19 pandemic, where keeping a safe distance is advised, the latter aspect was essential. However, even though participating in an online survey is convenient for most of the respondents, it is worth noting that it also automatically excludes potential participants without internet access (Burns & Burns, 2008). This exclusion was extended further in the study since the link was only shared via the platforms Facebook, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp. Another issue for participants might be privacy when it comes to data collection and treatment online. To limit these concerns, the study was constructed by using Google Forms which handles data responsibly (Google, 2021) and participants were explicitly informed about how their data will be treated.

Besides these disadvantages, there are some additional benefits of a web-based survey. As Google Forms was used to create the survey, which is one of the most well-known survey tools (Google Forms, 2021), it was convenient for both us and the respondents. This was likely to increase response rate and credibility, as well as saving time for both us and the respondents. Additionally, because the internet has become a major part of everyday life, participating in a web-based survey is seen as least time consuming by most participants compared to other methods such as interviews or focus groups (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). This advantage also applies to this study; by using Google Forms, responses are automatically stored in the online database, facilitating the statistical processing later. In addition to the time-saving factor, this also limited the risk of transcription errors, which usually occur during the manual data entry, and therefore decreased costs and errors (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

### 4.3. Research design

A survey can provide valuable insights if it is properly designed (Burns & Burns, 2008). To this end, it is essential to select an adequate case that respondents can understand and evaluate, to structure the survey appropriately, and to conscientiously decide how to define and measure variables.

#### 4.3.1. *Choice of brand*

The basic requirement in the choice of the brand was its participation in brand activism. Since the investigated antecedents also referred to the previous behaviour of a brand, an existing brand was chosen. Moreover, the brand needed to be widely known within the population to guarantee informed answers from the respondents' side. Based on these considerations, Nike was selected as the case brand of the study. Not only is Nike the world's largest supplier of shoes, apparel, and other equipment for sports (Sabanoglu, 2021), and one of the most followed brands online (Unmetric, 2018), but Nike has also been making social statements since 1988 (Tyler, 2018). Additionally, already in 2018, before the Black Lives Matter movement became famous around the globe, Nike started raising its voice for the African American community (Tyler, 2018). Moreover, Nike recently published an ad about their support for Black Lives Matter in combination with a statement to donate 40 million U.S. dollars over the next four years to support the African American community in the U.S. (Nike, 2020b).

Because of these actions and because of the prominence and actuality of the movement, Nike and their involvement in the Black Lives Matter cause could be evaluated along all the hypothesized antecedents. Furthermore, Nike was also the most commonly used brand in other authenticity studies, used by, for example, Bruhn, Schoenmüller and Schäfer (2012), Holt (2002), and Spiggle, Nguyen and Caravella (2012).

#### 4.3.2. *Survey structure*

The survey in this study was designed to be structured, meaning that each respondent got the same set of questions in the same order to be able to compare the results (Malhotra, 2010). Even though this leads to a simplification of consumers' opinions, this standardization is needed to find patterns in the results (Burns & Burns, 2008). However, according to Burns and Burns (2008), it is extremely difficult to formulate questions with a meaning that is clear to everyone. This is especially true in this study where there is an additional language barrier; since participants from multiple countries were included, the study was conducted in English, which might additionally increase the risk of misinterpretations. An attempt was made to reduce the risk by, firstly, distributing the survey to people who, despite their origin, feel comfortable participating in an English survey. For example, the survey was distributed in international Facebook groups, such as that of English-speaking master programs. Secondly, to further limit that risk, only scales whose reliability and validity had been tested in existing studies were used.

The survey was structured in three parts, namely the introduction, the questionnaire, and the ending. A full overview of the survey and its questions is provided in the Appendix 2: Survey, to guarantee replicability. The first part of the survey, the introduction, contained general information for the respondent. This included the reason for the survey, the researchers behind the study, the subject of matter as well as ethical and privacy considerations. In addition, the participant was ensured that there are no wrong answers but was still asked to read and answer each question carefully. Additionally, participants were informed about the option to join a

lottery to win one out of two 25 Euro Amazon gift cards. This option was given to attract more participants to the survey and facilitate reaching the targeted sample size.

The second part of the survey was the questionnaire. In the first section, the respondents were asked about demographic information and their familiarity with the brand. Familiarity with the brand was vital for respondents to answer the questions properly. Therefore, if a participant was not familiar with the brand, the survey ended at this point. Otherwise, the survey continued with the demographic questions about the age, gender, nationality, and highest completed or ongoing education. Even though our research does not concentrate on a specific demographic group, this information allowed us to create a sample group profile. In the second section, necessary background information, like the definition for brand activism and an example of the brand's recent activist statement and actions, was provided to make sure that participants had a clear understanding to answer the questions properly. The third section of the questionnaire covered the authenticity of brand activism, followed by the fourth section which focused on the antecedents. This section was divided into subsections focusing on only one antecedent at a time, and each item only expressing one idea, as suggested by Easterby-Smith et al. (2018). This should have helped the respondent focus on the main aspect of the questions and limit variety in interpretations.

The survey ends with a page where respondents were thanked for their participation and had the possibility to enter their e-mail address to be informed about the outcomes of the study and/or to participate in the lottery of gift cards.

#### 4.3.3. *Variables and measurement*

All the variables in the study were complex and not directly observable. Therefore, scales consisting of several items were used to measure these latent variables (Hair, Hult, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2017). For example, authenticity is an abstract concept, which makes it hard to observe and measure with a single question. Hence, to increase the quality of this measurement, multiple questions that together form or reflect the concept can be asked instead, such as "The brand's activism act is genuine." or "The brand is standing up for what it believes in." The use of scales to measure latent variables does, however, entail some reliability and validity concerns. To minimize these concerns, measurement scales from previous studies were then used to measure all latent constructs. These are presented in Table 4 together with the definition of variables.



**Table 4.** Dependent and independent variables with corresponding definitions and example items.

Variable	Supporting Reference	Definition	Number of items	Example item
Dependent variable				
<i>Authenticity of brand activism</i>	Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway (2016)	The degree to which the brand activism is perceived as being true to consumers' expectations and the brand's values.	8	Nike's activism act is genuine.
Independent variables				
<i>Impact</i>	Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway (2016)	The degree to which the brand is perceived as making a real and meaningful difference.	3	I believe that Nike donates a fair proportion of its resources relative to its success.
<i>Uniqueness</i>	Schallehn, Burmann & Riley (2014)	The degree to which the brand is perceived as being unusual compared to its competitors in the way it fulfils its promise.	3	The way Nike engages in this activism act is very different from competing brands.
<i>Heritage</i>	Spiggle, Nguyen & Caravella (2012)	The degree to which the brand is perceived as connecting to its origin and time in terms of values.	3	Nike's activism act appears to connect with what I know about the brand's origins.
<i>Continuity</i>	Schallehn, Burmann & Riley (2014)	The degree to which the brand is perceived as remaining stable in its core values in recent times.	3	In recent years, Nike has already engaged in this type of activism acts.

Table 4 shows that the authenticity of brand activism scale, existing of eight items, is based on Alhouti, Johnson and Holloway's (2016) measurements for CSR authenticity. As explained in Chapter 2. Literature Review, the authenticity of brand activism is a novel concept and therefore, most of the research is based on general ideas of brand and CSR authenticity. Alhouti, Johnson and Holloway's (2016) CSR authenticity scale was chosen and adapted to measure the authenticity of brand activism since their definition of CSR authenticity is conceptually close to the definition used in this study.

The scales for the different independent variables were chosen based on three factors. Firstly, their conceptual closeness to the concept of study was assessed, where the authors' definition of the specific antecedent needed to be in line with our understanding. Secondly, we evaluated if minor changes to the formulation of the items to shift the focus to brand activism were possible without changing the meaning of the questions. Thirdly, the number of items was assessed, where scales with at least three items were used to improve the quality of the selected data analysis procedure (Malhotra, 2010), and less than ten items as to limit response fatigue.

To give an example of the selection process for the *uniqueness* antecedent, we used a scale from Schallehn, Burmann and Riley (2014) existing of three items. Firstly, even though they label the antecedent as "brand individuality", Schallehn, Burmann and Riley (2014) refer to it as uniqueness throughout the text and define it as "the unique way in which the brand fulfills its promise" (p.194). This is in line with our understanding of uniqueness, that is, the degree to which the brand is perceived as being unusual compared to its competitors in the way it fulfills its promise. Secondly, minor changes were possible to shift the focus from the brand to the brand's activism. For example, the item "X fulfills its brand promise in a distinct way." can be reformulated to "The brand engages in activism in a distinct way." without any significant loss in meaning. Thirdly, the scale had three items, which met the criteria for the number of items for the scale.

All the items of all the scales were measured with a 7-point Likert scale, from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. This allows participants to not having to choose a side and give more accurate responses. The original formulations of the items are presented in Table 2 in Appendix 1: Additional tables, and the definition of each variable with the supporting reference and an example item is presented above in Table 4.

#### 4.4. Sampling

The population of a study can be defined as the complete collection of the observations of interest (Burns & Burns, 2008). This needs to be defined in terms of elements, sampling units, extent, and time (Malhotra, 2010). In our case, the element of the population was defined as individuals and restricted by the sampling units, which only included people that were familiar with the brand Nike. In terms of extent, since this study was distributed online, there were no geographical boundaries. In terms of time, the study was limited to 29 April 2021 until 5 May 2021. In other words, the population was any person familiar with Nike who could access the survey within the selected time frame.

The data of this population can either be collected by using census – a complete enumeration of the elements of the population – or a sample – a representative subgroup of the target population (Malhotra, 2010). For our study, sampling was used since the population of interest was very large. More specifically, convenience sampling was employed. This means that the survey link was shared on Facebook, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp with our own social networks and users in survey exchange groups. These platforms were chosen since they are some of the largest social platforms (Barnhart, 2021). Although other platforms might have been viable as well, these were the ones that we were familiar with and where we had the largest networks. Using these should therefore have yielded the most responses. Since participants were also asked to share the link with others, this leads to a snowball effect (Burns & Burns, 2008).

#### 4.4.1. *Sample size*

The sample size was determined a priori to the distribution of the survey based on several considerations. As described below in 4.6. Data analysis, structural equation modelling was used to analyse the data. Following recommendations from Hair et al. (2017), the program G\*Power was used to calculate the minimum sample size. Given the desired significance, power, effect size, and other settings,<sup>1</sup> 132 respondents would be needed as a minimum. However, while this was the minimum requirement for the specific structural equation modelling algorithm used, the analysis also had theory testing elements, whereof a higher sample size was desirable to improve the quality of the analysis. To this end, Malhotra (2010) recommends a sample size of at least 300, given our number of variables and the number of items for each variable. Thus, 132 constituted the minimum sample size for the study, and 300 the desired target. Even though we estimated reaching the minimum number in less time, we thereby decided to leave the study open for one week, or until the target was reached. The study ended up being open for six days, ultimately resulting in 305 responses before the survey was closed.

#### 4.4.2. *Sample distribution*

Although the demographics of the respondents were diverse overall, the distribution was skewed. While usable responses were received from respondents of a total of 45 different nationalities, 62.6 percent of these came from the countries: Austria (26.6 percent), Sweden (21.6 percent), and Germany (14.4 percent). Regarding gender, 69.5 percent of respondents were female, and 30.2 percent were male. While the educational level stretched from primary school to doctoral level, most respondents had, or were studying, a bachelor's degree (39.3 percent), a master's degree (37.0 percent), or a secondary education (20.0 percent). No participant was

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<sup>1</sup> **Settings for G\*Power sample size estimation:**

Test family: *t* tests; Statistical test: *Linear multiple regression: Fixed mode, single regression coefficient*; Type of power analysis: *A priori: Compute required sample size – given  $\alpha$ , power, and effect size*; Tail(s): *Two*; Effect size  $f^2$ : *0.1*;  $\alpha$  err prob: *0.05*; Power ( $1-\beta$  err prob): *0.95*; Number of predictors: *4*

older than 64 years old, and most participants were either 18 to 24 years old (47.9 percent), or 25 to 34 years old (35.4 percent).

#### 4.5. Data collection and preparation

In total, 858 answers were collected. A problem with fake responses was encountered during the data collection process and called for adaptations to the survey and its distribution as well as the removal of 521 fake answers. The problem was discovered when an unusual number of responses were received within a short time frame. While most fake responses had randomized answers, making them impossible to distinguish from real ones, the distribution of nationality differed significantly from before the spam started, and while only half of the previous participants chose to participate in the gift card lottery, all the new respondents wanted to participate. That the responses were fake or fraudulent was later confirmed through the addition of control questions to the survey. Based on these factors and the frequency of answers, we could approximate the time when the fake responses started.

To prevent more fake responses, we tried requiring the users to log in to Google before responding and added control questions such as “Please select ‘1 (Strongly disagree)’ to proceed.” While the control questions initially worked, the fraudsters circumvented them within minutes. To proceed with the data collection, a copy of the original survey was created. Since the control questions did not work, they were removed from the copy.

The new survey was distributed mainly on our own networks and in private groups to avoid further fake responses. Moreover, when new posts were made in any public groups, the lottery of gift cards was not mentioned since we suspected that the lottery had attracted the fraudsters. Information was still provided at the beginning of the survey, however. These measures were successful, and no spam or fake answers were discovered in the new survey. The old survey remained open parallel to the new one since we still received some responses that we could classify as genuine since we recognized the e-mail addresses of the respondents. In the end, to ensure not to include any fake responses, all the responses received after the point of time when the fake answers started whose genuineness could not be assured were removed from the dataset.

Aside from the fake answers, some respondents selected the same answer for all questions, and some respondents were not familiar with the selected brand or did not agree to participate in the survey. In addition, there was also an issue where the survey tool duplicated some responses. Accounting for these responses, a total of 305 usable responses were collected at the end, which exceeded the target sample size of 300 responses. The distribution of responses is presented in Table 5.

Finally, before the analysis was run, the answers were coded to their appropriate numbers; for example, “2 (Disagree)” was recoded to the numerical value 2. The values of the items with reversed scales were also transformed; for example, the value 7 was recoded to 1, 6 to 2, and so on.

**Table 5.** The number of responses and the distribution of response type. Answers classified as “Usable” were used as input for the data analysis.

	All same	Duplicate	Not approve	Not familiar	Spam	Usable	Total
New	6	7	1	3		152	169
Old	7	3		5	521	153	689
Total	13	10	1	8	521	305	858

#### 4.6. Data analysis

Several analyses of the data needed to be conducted for the study. The first analysis was the evaluation of the measurements. Because scales were used to measure latent constructs, it was important to ensure that they were reliable and valid. While the measurements had already been tested for reliability and validity in their original studies where they were proposed, this was also necessary for ours since they were applied to a new research context (brand activism) and a different sample. Additionally, the same combination of constructs had not been used together in other studies. While the items that constitute the measures had been shown to measure the same things, and the measures been shown to be distinct from other measures, items might have overlapped and lacked discriminatory validity. For example, while the concepts should be theoretically distinct, the *continuity* concept and the *heritage* concept bore resemblance to one another. The second analysis of the study, aside from the assessment of the measurement model, was tests of the significance of the hypothesized relationships. The simultaneous need for both analyses resulted in the use of a structural equation modelling approach for the data analysis.

##### 4.6.1. Structural equation modelling

Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was used for the data analysis mainly because it made it possible to test the measurement model at the same time as the hypothesized relationships – all through a single technique (Malhotra, 2010). This thereby facilitated the data analysis compared to running several separate analyses with different techniques. A structural equation model is composed of two models: the measurement (outer) model and the structural (inner) model (Malhotra, 2010).

Firstly, the measurement model depicts how the scales are constructed and which measured variables represent which construct (Malhotra, 2010). The model can be either formative or reflective (Hair et al., 2017). In a formative measurement, each item corresponds to one attribute that shapes the construct (Hair et al., 2017). These items are therefore not interchangeable and together form the construct (Hair et al., 2017). In this study, however, the measurements of all the latent constructs follow reflective measurement models. In a reflective model, the

items of the scale used to measure a construct can be viewed as a representative sample of all the possible items that represent, or reflect, that construct (Hair et al., 2017). In difference from formative models where the items correspond to unique aspects that compose the construct, items in a reflective construct should be highly correlated since they all represent the same construct (Hair et al., 2017). Additionally, this also means that items should be interchangeable, and that some can be dropped from the measurement without it losing its meaning, as long as the measure remains reliable enough (Hair et al., 2017).

Secondly, while the measurement model focuses on how the constructs are created, the structural model focuses on the relationships between the constructs – which relationships there are, what type, and in what direction (Malhotra, 2010). The structural equation modelling can then assess the significance of these relationships based on multiple independent regression equations, thereby testing the suggested hypotheses (Malhotra, 2010).

#### 4.6.2. *Structural equation modelling approach (PLS-SEM)*

There are two types of approaches to SEM: covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) and partial least squares SEM (PLS-SEM) (Hair et al., 2017). One of the main differences between the methods is how they are constructed in the model. As Hair et al. (2017) explain:

CB-SEM considers the constructs as common factors that explain the covariation between its associated indicators. The scores of these common factors are neither known nor needed in the estimation of model parameters. PLS-SEM, on the other hand, uses proxies to represent the constructs of interest, which are weighted composites of indicator variables for a particular construct. (p.15)

Moreover, the two methods have different approaches to estimating the parameters in the model. While CB-SEM focuses on minimizing the divergence between covariance matrices, PLS-SEM focuses on maximizing the variance explained (Hair et al., 2017).

In this study, PLS-SEM was used because of three reasons. Firstly, PLS-SEM is more suitable for exploratory purposes compared to CB-SEM, which requires solid theory (Hair et al., 2017). The topic of the authenticity of brand activism was overlooked among the studies in the literature review and the same theoretical framework that was used in this study had not been employed in any of the other studies, whereof the exploratory direction was more reasonable. Secondly, the data only fulfilled the underlying assumptions of the PLS-SEM approach. In difference from CB-SEM, PLS-SEM does not assume normal distributions (Hair et al., 2017), which the dataset did not fulfil. Finally, PLS-SEM has been acknowledged to require smaller minimum sample sizes than CB-SEM (Hair et al., 2017). Due to time and resources constraints, this was also an important consideration. It is also noteworthy to mention that PLS-SEM tends to have higher statistical power than CB-SEM (Hair et al., 2017), meaning that it is more likely to classify true positives. Moreover, although PLS-SEM is said to be more suitable for exploration rather than theory-testing, Hair et al. (2017) claim that under conditions such as those of

this study (little prior knowledge, normality deviations, and smaller sample sizes), PLS-SEM is a good alternative for theory testing.

A disadvantage with PLS-SEM is, nonetheless, that it, in difference from CB-SEM, does not have an established measure for goodness-of-fit (Hair et al., 2017), which refers to how well the theoretical model describes the variation in the data (Malhotra, 2010). This may limit its applicability for theory testing (Hair et al., 2017). In recent years, however, the Standardized Root Mean square Residual (SRMR), a fit measure conventionally used for CB-SEM, has been applied to PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2017). While results from initial studies testing this measure in PLS-SEM are promising, Hair et al. (2017) claim that it is still too early to know if the measure is good enough. Nevertheless, while considering this, SRMR is still reported as a measure of fit in this study. The recommended SRMR critical threshold of at least 0.08 is used in the study (Hair et al., 2017).

Finally, it is worth noting that SEM requires data at the interval measurement level or higher (Hair et al., 2017). As explained in section 4.3.3. Variables and measurement, however, participants of the study assessed the items on Likert scales (1–7) and, thereby, ordinal scales. As Hair et al. (2017) mention, this is a common practice in SEM, whereby the measurements are treated as if they were interval or ratio measurements. They do, nonetheless, emphasize the importance of having clear answer category descriptions (e.g., using “1 (Strongly Disagree)” for 1) for each answer category so that the participants perceive it as symmetric and equidistant. This recommendation was followed.

#### 4.7. Research quality criteria

As noted by Bryman and Bell (2011), reliability, validity, and replicability are prominent criteria when evaluating business research. While replicability is treated throughout the study through the detailed descriptions of methodological procedures, reliability and validity deserve their own sections.

##### 4.7.1. *Reliability*

Reliability focuses on how consistent measurements and how repeatable the results of a study are, and is particularly a problem in quantitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Reliability is particularly important since the validity depends on it; an unreliable measure cannot be valid (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In this study, the internal reliability, that is, the consistency in a scale and its items (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018), was the biggest reliability concern. While only scales that had already been tested in other studies were used to improve reliability, they had not been used together before and not in the brand activism context. The items also had to be reformulated for the study, which might have affected the reliability.

While Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) is generally used to evaluate internal reliability (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Easterby-Smith et al., 2018), there are some issues associated with using the measure for PLS-SEM. Firstly, while PLS-SEM prioritizes items based on their individual reliability, Cronbach's Alpha treats items as equally reliable (Hair et al., 2017). Secondly, Cronbach's

Alpha tends to underestimate the internal reliability since it is sensitive to the number of items of the scales (Hair et al., 2017). Consequently, Hair et al. (2017) suggest the use of Composite Reliability (CR) as an alternative, which tackles both of these issues. Composite reliability, on the other hand, tends to overestimate internal reliability, whereof Hair et al. (2017) recommend the use of both measures where Cronbach Alpha can serve as the lower bound and composite reliability as the upper bound. We follow this recommendation and use Hair et al.'s (2017) recommended thresholds of at least 0.6 for composite reliability and at least 0.7 for Cronbach Alpha when evaluating internal reliability in this study.

#### 4.7.2. *Validity*

While reliability focuses more on the accuracy and stability of the measurements, validity focuses on the integrity of the conclusions of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Measurement validity refers to whether a measure is actually measuring the concept that it is supposed to assess (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Two types of measurement validity are recommended for PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2017). The first type of measurement validity is convergent validity. Convergent validity evaluates how much an item correlates with other items of the same construct (Hair et al., 2017). For all the scales used in the study, the items of each can be seen as alternative approaches for measuring the same construct (Hair et al., 2017). Hence, they should share a high degree of variance (Hair et al., 2017). To assess this, two measures were evaluated. Firstly, in accordance with Hair et al.'s (2017) recommendation, the standard outer loadings of the items should be at least 0.708. Secondly, the critical threshold of an Average Variance Explained (AVE) of at least 0.5 for each construct was used, meaning that the construct explains more than half of the variance of its items (Hair et al., 2017).

The second type of measurement validity recommended for PLS-SEM is discriminant validity, which measures how distinct one construct is from the other constructs (Hair et al., 2017). As mentioned above, some of the constructs bore conceptual resemblance to one another, whereof discriminant validity was a serious concern. While the Fornell-Larcker criterion is conventionally used to assess discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2017), various performance issues have been discovered with this approach (Henseler, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2015). Consequently, the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) of the correlations was used to assess discriminant validity instead, which examines the ratio of between-trait correlations to within-trait correlations (Henseler, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2015). In the context of this study, the recommended threshold of a HTMT value of less than 0.9 is used (Henseler, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2015).

Aside from measurement validity, there is also internal validity, referring to the integrity of conclusions and the degree to which the examined relationships can be attributed to the independent variables rather than other factors (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Burns & Burns, 2008). Because of the use of existing scales that had been suggested and tested in previous studies, a questionnaire designed not to steer respondents, and robust theory, the internal validity should have been satisfactory in this study.



## 5. Results

*This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study, divided into two sections – one for the analysis of the measurement model, and one for the analysis of the structural model.*

### 5.1. Measurement model

The PLS-SEM algorithm was run using *SmartPLS 3.3.3* with default settings<sup>2</sup>. The algorithm had to be run several times. Firstly, the PLS-SEM was run using all the constructs and items as intended. This model was, however, unsatisfactory since the *heritage* construct did not fulfil all the reliability and validity criteria. Neither the Cronbach Alpha nor the AVE was high enough. Furthermore, looking at the standard outer loadings, two out of the three items of the construct had values below the critical threshold of 0.708. These were: “There is no link between Nike's activism act and what I know about the brand's legacy.” with a loading of 0.597, and “There is no link between Nike's activism act and what I know about the brand's legacy.” with a loading of 0.194. Detailed results are found in Table 3 in Appendix 1: Additional tables.

The structural model cannot be evaluated with an unreliable measurement model. Hence, two alternative approaches were considered to solve the problem: removing the heritage items that did not fulfil the quality criteria or removing the construct completely and not testing H<sub>3</sub>. Because the heritage measurement was reflective, the heritage construct should still be measurable even when one or several items are dropped. Thus, it was decided to keep the construct and run models with removed heritage items instead.

Even though two items in the construct had insufficient outer loadings, one was close to reaching the critical threshold and the other one was significantly lower. Hence, because it was possible that this would improve the loading of the other item, only the item with the lowest loading was dropped for the second model. However, the heritage construct still did not fulfil all the quality criteria. The detailed results of this model are presented in Table 4 in Appendix 1: Additional tables.

Hence, the final model was run using only the one heritage item with a satisfactory loading. It is worth noting that the removal of the two heritage items did not change Malhotra's (2010) target sample size recommendations for the analysis. The new model fulfilled all the quality criteria. In terms of reliability, all constructs had composite reliability scores exceeding the critical threshold of 0.6 and Cronbach Alpha values exceeding the threshold of 0.7. In terms of validity, all constructs had AVE scores higher than the minimum threshold of 0.5 and all the items had factor loadings higher than 0.708. The detailed results are presented in Table 6.

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<sup>2</sup> Weighting Scheme: *Path*; Maximum Iterations: 300; Stop Criterion:  $10^{-7}$ .

**Table 6.** The results of the PLS-SEM measurement model.

Construct	Item	Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE	VIF
Authenticity	A1: Nike's activism act is genuine.	0.826	0.925	0.939	0.657	N/A
	A2: The activism act preserves what Nike means to me.	0.810				
	A3: The activism act captures what makes Nike unique to me.	0.791				
	A4: Nike's activism act is in accordance with its values and beliefs.	0.820				
	A5: Nike is being true to itself with the activism act.	0.844				
	A6: Nike is standing up for what it believes in.	0.852				
	A7: Nike is a socially responsible brand.	0.754				
	A8: Nike is concerned about improving the well-being of society.	0.783				
Impact	I1: I believe that Nike donates a fair proportion of its resources relative to its success.	0.820	0.731	0.848	0.65	1.587
	I2: Nike's activism act has a long-term impact.	0.812				
	I3: A large monetary commitment appears to have been made to the cause that Nike supports.	0.786				
Uniqueness	U1: The way Nike engages in this activism act is very different from competing brands.	0.886	0.86	0.914	0.781	1.375
	U2: The way how Nike engages in this activism act is unique.	0.901				
	U3: Nike engages in this activism act in a distinct way.	0.863				
Heritage	H1: Nike's activism act appears to connect with what I know about the brand's origins.	1	1	1	1	1.506
Continuity	C1: In recent years, Nike has already engaged in this type of activism acts.	0.848	0.875	0.923	0.8	1.457
	C2: The recent behaviour of Nike fits to its current activism act.	0.915				
	C3: The activism act of Nike and its recent actions are in line with each other.	0.918				

Regarding discriminatory validity in the model, the HTMT of the correlations between all constructs were less than the threshold of 0.9, showing that the constructs had discriminatory validity. The values from the HTMT analysis are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7.** The HTMT of the correlations between the constructs.

	Authenticity	Continuity	Heritage	Impact	Uniqueness
Authenticity					
Continuity	0.746				
Heritage	0.628	0.521			
Impact	0.817	0.578	0.538		
Uniqueness	0.613	0.380	0.430	0.603	

## 5.2. Structural model

To assess the structural model, whose path diagram is presented below in Figure 2, the recommended steps by Hair et al. (2017) for PLS-SEM were used. Firstly, collinearity between independent variables was assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) scores presented above in Table 6 to make sure that no construct was redundant. All VIF values were well below the recommended threshold of 5, indicating that there was no collinearity problem or any need to eliminate or merge constructs (Hair et al., 2017).

Secondly, the hypothesized relationships were tested. Since PLS-SEM does not assume normal distributions, standard parametric tests cannot be used (Hair et al., 2017). Instead, the hypothesized relationships were tested using the bootstrapping feature of *SmartPLS 3.3.3* with default settings<sup>3</sup>, except for the number of subsamples, where 5000 were used in line with Hair et al.'s (2017) recommendations. The bootstrapping results are presented in Table 8 below. With the bootstrapping procedure, a large number of subsamples are selected with replacement from the original sample, making it possible to estimate the sample distribution and path model and, thereby, to conduct hypothesis testing (Hair et al., 2017). As visible in Table 8, the associated *p*-values of all the *t*-statistics of the paths were approximately 0, which was well below the significance level threshold ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ). This provided support for all the hypotheses. Firstly, the results supported H<sub>1</sub> – that the perceived impact of brand activism on the cause is positively related to the perceived authenticity of brand activism. Secondly, the results provided support for H<sub>2</sub> – that the perceived uniqueness of brand activism actions is positively related to the

<sup>3</sup> **Setup:** Do Parallel Processing: *Check*; Amount of Results: *Basic Bootstrapping*; Confidence Interval Method: *Bias-Corrected and Accelerated (BCa) Bootstrap*; Test Type: *Two Tailed*; Significance Level: *0.05*.

**PLS:** Weighting Scheme: *Path*; Maximum Iterations: *300*; Stop Criterion: *10<sup>-7</sup>*.

perceived authenticity of brand activism. Thirdly, the results supported H<sub>3</sub> – that the perceived heritage connection of brand activism is positively related to the perceived authenticity of brand activism. Finally, the results supported H<sub>4</sub> – that perceived continuity of recent brand activism actions is positively related to the perceived authenticity of brand activism. In terms of coefficients, continuity ( $\beta = 0.366$ ) and impact ( $\beta = 0.315$ ) had the highest standardized  $\beta$  coefficients, and heritage ( $\beta = 0.201$ ) and uniqueness ( $\beta = 0.197$ ) the lowest. Overall, the model had SRMR of 0.061, which was below the critical threshold of 0.08. Thus, the model had a satisfactory fit.

**Table 8.** The bootstrapping results used for path evaluation and hypothesis testing.

Relationship	$\beta$ coefficient	<i>t</i> -statistic	<i>p</i> -value	<i>f</i> <sup>2</sup> (effect size)	Decision
Impact -> Authenticity (H <sub>1</sub> )	0.315	5.529	0.00	0.201 (Medium)	H <sub>1</sub> supported
Uniqueness -> Authenticity (H <sub>2</sub> )	0.197	5.302	0.00	0.091 (Small)	H <sub>2</sub> supported
Heritage -> Authenticity (H <sub>3</sub> )	0.201	4.511	0.00	0.086 (Small)	H <sub>3</sub> supported
Continuity -> Authenticity (H <sub>4</sub> )	0.366	7.707	0.00	0.297 (Medium)	H <sub>4</sub> supported

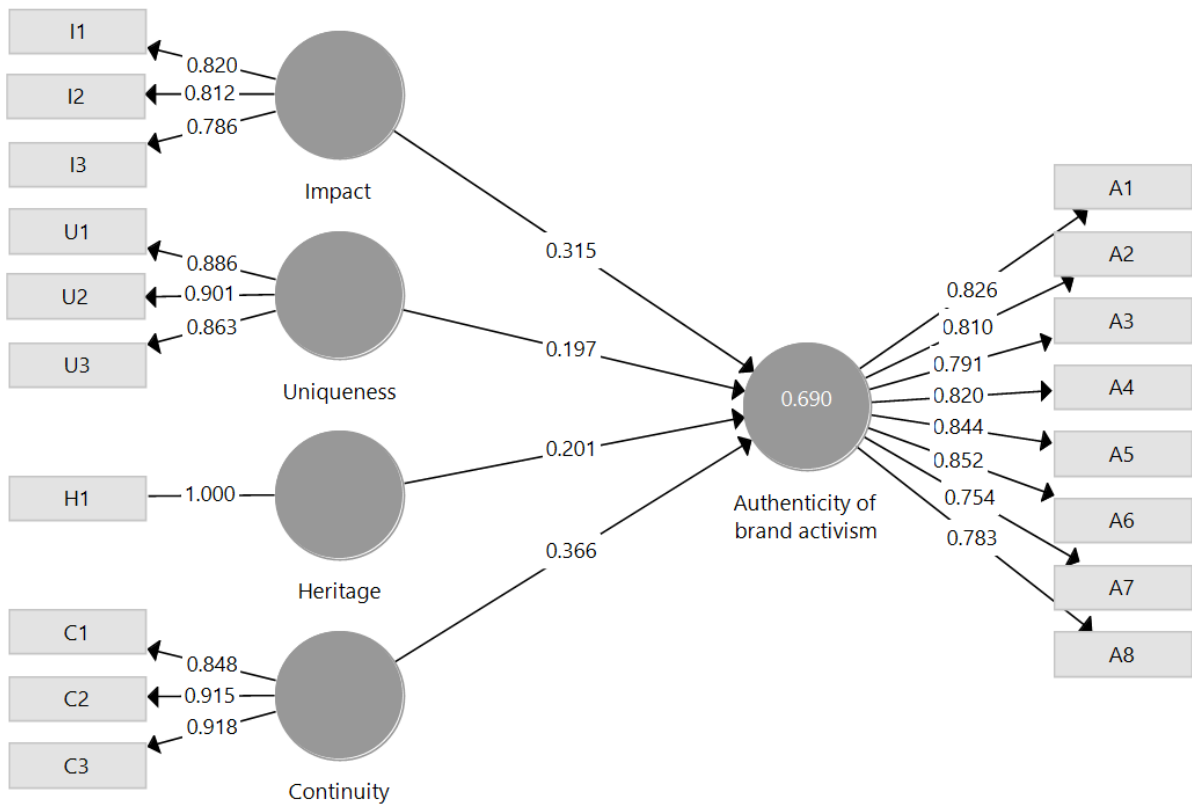
Thirdly, the model’s predictive power was evaluated. The model had a coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) of 0.69 (adjusted  $R^2 = 0.685$ ), implying moderate relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable (Hair et al., 2017).

Fourthly, the effect size of the results was assessed. As visible in Table 8, all relationships had a significant effect size ( $f^2$ ) over the critical threshold of 0.02 (Cohen, 1988). Using Hair et al.’s (2017) recommended classification, the relationships between impact and authenticity and between continuity and authenticity had medium effect sizes, and the relationships between uniqueness and authenticity and heritage and authenticity had small effect sizes.

Lastly, the out-of-sample predictive relevance was assessed by calculating the  $Q^2$  score using the cross-validated redundancy blindfolding procedure in *SmartPLS 3.3.3* with default settings<sup>4</sup>. A blindfolding procedure made it possible to estimate out-of-sample predictive relevance by iteratively omits data points from the dataset and re-estimating the model (Hair et al., 2017). The  $Q^2$  score was 0.445. Since this is higher than 0, it implies that the model had out-of-sample predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2017).

<sup>4</sup> **Blindfolding:** Omission distance: 7.

**PLS:** Weighting Scheme: *Path*; Maximum Iterations: 300; Stop Criterion:  $10^{-7}$ .



**Figure 2.** The path diagram for the PLS-SEM results calculated using *SmartPLS 3.3.3*. Arrows between latent constructs (dark grey) show the path coefficients. Arrows between latent constructs and items (light grey) show outer loadings. The R<sup>2</sup> score of the model is presented on the *Authenticity of brand activism* construct. The full item names and their corresponding abbreviations are presented above in Table 6.

## 6. Discussion

*In this chapter, the findings of the study are discussed in three major sections: interpretation of findings, managerial and academic implications, and limitations and future research suggestions.*

### 6.1. Interpretation

Aiming to elaborate on the nascent research stream of the perception of the authenticity of brand activism, the purpose of the study was to examine which antecedents affect consumers' perceptions of the authenticity of a company's brand activism efforts. The findings of the quantitative analysis provided support for four such antecedents. In this section, we interpret what these results mean given the underlying theory and compare the findings to those of other studies.

#### 6.1.1. *Perceived relative impact on the cause*

The findings showed that the first hypothesis – the predicted relationship between the perceived relative impact of brand activism on the cause and the perceived authenticity of brand activism – was supported. This implies that it might not be enough for a brand to solely express their support for a cause for consumers to perceive their activism as authentic. Because consumers make generalizations about the truth of incoming information (Brashier & Marsh, 2020) and because they are aware of persuasion attempts (Friestad & Wright, 1994) and sceptic towards statements from brands, they need evidence that the brand activism is true to the underlying values to perceive it as authentic. Moreover, as the results imply, it is not enough to provide any evidence, consumers have expectations about the relative impact they expect from the brand's activism. This relative impact tells them if the brand activism lives up to what is expected of someone who holds those values – how true the brand activism is to its 'ideal self'. To increase consumers' perceptions of authenticity, brands must thereby make sure the impact of their brand activism stays true to that ideal.

To exemplify, despite their scepticism towards the government, media, and other institutions, consumers expect brands like Nike to drive change in socio-political issues such as Black Lives Matter. Thus, if Nike is perceived as contributing to this change by making a meaningful difference and long-term impact with its activism actions, relative to its size and profits, then the brand activism may also appear to be perceived as more authentic since it fulfils the consumers' expectations. However, it is important to note that making an impact does not necessarily imply perceived authenticity of brand activism, but instead the focus is on the relative impact compared to the size and profit. For instance, if Nike donates to the cause, but it is seen as small compared to the brand's revenue, it might still not be perceived as impactful in relative terms.

The finding of the positive relationship between impact and authenticity was in line with Alhouthi, Johnson and Holloway's (2016) findings, where respondents saw impact as an important antecedent of authenticity. While their findings referred to the authenticity of CSR actions, the

result of our study implies that the antecedent *perceived relative impact on the cause* can also be applied to the perception of authenticity of brand activism.

#### 6.1.2. *Perceived uniqueness of activism actions*

The second hypothesis, that the perceived uniqueness of brand activism is positively related to the perceived authenticity of brand activism, also was supported. These findings imply that the respondents, in line with Kelley's (1973) extended Attribution Theory, used the perception of uniqueness when evaluating whether if the brand activism should be attributed to the internal values of the brand rather than to external causes, thereby making them perceive the brand activism as more authentic. To exemplify, if respondents perceive Nike's activism actions as different from the competitor's ones, it seems like the activism is internally motivated – that Nike follows its own values rather than a marketing fad – and therefore that the activism is more true-to-itself and, thus, more authentic.

This finding is in line with Moulard, Raggio and Folse (2016) and Schallehn, Burmann and Riley (2014), which also showed that uniqueness was influencing brand authenticity. The relationship that Schallehn, Burmann and Riley's (2014) found was, however, relatively weak. Schallehn, Burmann and Riley proposed that this was probability industry-specific since the investigated fast-food brands are generally not perceived as particularly unique. Thus, the relationship in our study should be stronger according to Schallehn, Burmann and Riley's (2014) assumption, since we use Nike which lies outside of the fast-food sector. Although assessing the relative strengths of relationships lied outside the scope of this study and no such analysis was conducted, *uniqueness* did have a lower  $\beta$  coefficient and effect size compared to the other antecedents. This might be a consequence of a weak relationship in our study as well, which would challenge Schallehn, Burmann and Riley's (2014) assumption that this result is due to the fast-food sector by showing that the relationship is weak in other industries as well.

#### 6.1.3. *Perceived heritage connection*

The results showed support for the third hypothesis as well – the positive relationship between the perceived heritage connection of brand activism and the perceived authenticity of brand activism. The heritage antecedent was based on Attribution Theory (Heider, 1946), where brand activism efforts attributed to the internal factors would make consumers perceive the brand as more true to itself and, thus, the brand activism as more authentic. The support for the relationship between heritage and authenticity, thereby, implies that consumers seem to use the alignment between the brand's activism actions and the brand's heritage as a source of information for making attributions of the activism behaviour. Specifically, alignment is more likely to make consumers attribute the activist behaviour to the brand's values, and thereby perceive it as more authentic. Hence, the findings also provide support for the idea that consumers evaluate the consistency of brand activism over time all the way down to the brand's origins as a source of information for making attributions, which is in line with Kelley's (1973) suggested sources of information for attributions.

The support for the positive relationship between the perceived heritage connection the perceived authenticity is also in line with Morhart et al.'s (2015) findings that a strong perceived connection to a brand's heritage is related to a high perceived authenticity of the brand, and Spiggle, Nguyen and Caravella's (2012) findings that brand extensions are perceived as more authentic if they are perceived to be in line with the heritage of the brand.

#### 6.1.4. *Perceived continuity of recent activism actions*

The results also supported the fourth hypothesis – that the perceived continuity of brand activism was positively related to the perceived authenticity of brand activism. The finding suggests that the perceived consistency between recent and current brand activism actions is used by consumers as a source of information when attributing a cause to the brand activism behaviour, in line with Kelley's (1973) sources of information for making attributions. To elaborate, it seems like consumers that perceive Nike's current activism actions to be in line with similar recent engagements are more likely to attribute the brand activism to internal causes – Nike's values – since the consistency of behaviour over time and in different situations make it reasonable that internal values motivated the activism rather than, for example, following trends and driving sales initiatives. Because the activism is attributed to internal causes, consumers perceive the brand activism to be more true-to-itself and, thus, more authentic.

Overall, the support for the relationship between perceived continuity of recent activism actions and authenticity was in line with Schallehn, Burmann and Riley's (2014) similar findings about the relationship between *continuity* and brand authenticity. Additionally, the *continuity* results could also be said to show some support for a relationship between perceived longitudinal consistency of brand activism and the authenticity of brand activism, as a similar relationship had been suggested by Moulard, Raggio and Folse (2016) and Schallehn, Burmann and Riley (2014) in the brand authenticity context. While continuity focuses on the stability of values of the brand, *longitudinal consistency* focuses on the stability of the brand overall. As a result, a brand that has *longitudinal consistency* does not necessarily have *continuity*, but a brand with *continuity* has some level of *longitudinal consistency*. Continuity only forms a part of the *longitudinal consistency* concept, so the results can only be said to show some partial support for the relationship between *longitudinal consistency* and perceived authenticity.

## 6.2. Implications

Contributing to the emerging research stream of brand activism by covering the important subject of the perceived authenticity of brand activism, which few other studies have focused on, the findings of this study have several implications for both academia and managers.

### 6.2.1. *Academic implications*

Academically, this study contributes to the emerging research stream of brand activism research. More specifically, it contributes to the subject of perceived authenticity of brand activism. In terms of Södergren's (2021) three research streams of authenticity in the branding literature, our study contributes mainly to the stream focusing on how consumers differentiate the



real thing from the fake, that is, what is perceived as being true. However, it is important to note that a clear distinction between the research streams is not possible and that most studies contribute to all three of them somehow. This one is no exception since we also hold the position that authenticity is something that derives from the community and someone's personal experience. Yet, since the study focuses on examining the antecedents of the perceived authenticity, it is mostly about the perception of truth and, therefore, about the first research stream. Furthermore, this study was one of the first studies that examined the antecedents of the perceived authenticity of brand activism. Since several statistically significant relationships between the antecedents and brand activism were found, this can help guide future research into the topic of the authenticity of brand activism.

Additionally, the findings also support the idea that Bayesian Models of Cognition (Brashier & Marsh, 2020), Persuasion Knowledge Theory (Friestad & Wright, 1994), and Attribution Theory (Heider, 1946) are useful in understanding the underlying cognitive and social processes that shape, or influence, consumers' perceptions of authenticity of brand activism. More specifically, Bayesian Models of Cognition and Persuasion Knowledge Theory explains why consumers are sceptic towards brand activism and that they need evidence to determine if it lives up to their expectations, that is, how true-to-ideal (Moulard, Raggio & Folse, 2021) the brand activism is. Moreover, Attribution Theory helps explain how consumers determine if the brand activism is driven by internal brand values or can be attributed to external causes, and thereby, how true-to-self (Moulard, Raggio & Folse, 2021) the brand activism is. Together, these findings provide support for the foundation of a theoretical framework of what influences consumers' perceptions of the authenticity of brand activism.

The study also has implications for research about the perception of authenticity in general. All of the hypothesized antecedents of perceived authenticity of brand activism had already been suggested as antecedents of authenticity in other domains; for example, *impact* had been suggested as an antecedent of CSR authenticity (Alhouthi, Johnson & Holloway, 2016), and *heritage* as an antecedent for brand authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015). That the suggested antecedents of authenticity are valid in other domains as well, despite the conceptual differences between, for example, CSR and brand activism, may lie in the generalizability of the perception of authenticity itself. To elaborate, it seems like there are underlying processes that shape, or influence, the perception of authenticity in several domains. If that is the case, maybe it is possible to create a cross-domain general theory of perceived authenticity. As noted in the literature review, although the conceptualization of authenticity varies a lot between studies, they tend to share a similar perspective, that is, they viewed authenticity as 'being true' to something. We thus concluded that the perception of authenticity depends on the perception of truth, and this reasoning should, thereby, be valid in several other authenticity contexts as well. Even though this study focused on being true to the ideal and to the self, and what consumers evaluate as true may differ between contexts, the cognitive and social processes that shape people's perception of truth should stay the same. Following this reasoning, it might be possible to create a general theory of antecedents of authenticity, a theory that is applicable to a variety of authenticity contexts: CRS authenticity, brand authenticity, brand extension authenticity,

brand activism authenticity, and so on. Such a theory would also help consolidate the scattered authenticity research and bring together the different research streams on the topic. Given the growing importance of authenticity, this would be valuable. This study provides the initial empirical support for creating such a truth-based theory grounded in cognitive and social psychology.

Moreover, this study contributes to the emerging research stream of authenticity in brand activism by distinguishing between *heritage* and *continuity* as antecedents of authenticity. These antecedents are conceptually similar since both were suggested based on Kelley's (1973) idea that consumers use the consistency of past and present behaviour as a source of information in making attributions. While there is a conceptual difference – *heritage* focuses on the brand's origins, and *continuity* on the more recent years – since both focus on the past, it was possible that there would not be any discriminatory validity between them. The findings did, however, show discriminatory validity between *heritage* and *continuity* and no collinearity issues and, thereby, provide empirical support for distinguishing these two concepts.

#### 6.2.2. Managerial implications

The findings of the study have several managerial implications. Firstly, the findings suggest that perceived authenticity of brand activism is positively related to *impact*, *uniqueness*, *heritage*, and *continuity*, consequently, managers can work on improving the consumers' perceptions of these antecedents to increase their perceptions of the authenticity of the brand's activism. More specifically, the findings show how a brand might be able to appear more authentic in their activism by making the activism appear truer to the underlying values and the consumers' expectations regarding those values. Furthermore, in line with Grayson and Martinec's (2004) and Morhart et al.'s (2015) study, the results suggest that this can be done by drawing from two types of sources: iconic cues, and indexical cues. Impact and continuity serve as indexical cues, increasing consumers perception of authenticity of brand activism by providing evidence that the brand activism is true to what the brand says and true to the underlying values and the expectations of consumers. Uniqueness and heritage, on the other hand, increase the perception of authenticity of brand activism through symbolism, that is, by showing that the values motivating the brand activism are true to the brand's origin and what makes it different from other brands. Hence, by using iconic cues, the brand does not necessarily need to support the brand activism by investing in tangible activist initiatives, communication drawing on iconic cues might also improve perceived authenticity.

Secondly, however, while some of the antecedents can be improved solely through the right communication and framing, for example, by emphasizing a heritage connection in the brand activist statement, others may require larger investments and long-term efforts. To elaborate, it might be necessary for the brand to invest significant sums of money and create activist initiatives whose effects persist over many years to have a high perceived impact. Furthermore, to gain and maintain a high perceived continuity, the brand would have to continuously engage in activism efforts and communication over time. The structural model of the study suggests that all the antecedents may improve the perceived authenticity of brand activism, but that not

necessarily all of them are needed to make it authentic. Subsequently, a major challenge in working with these antecedents will be selecting which ones should be prioritized.

Finally, on a general note, we encourage the overall integration of authenticity management into brand activism management. No matter the type of brand activism, any brand activism effort will always be perceived and evaluated by consumers on a continuum of authenticity. Because high authenticity is associated with many positive outcomes, and low authenticity can lead to backlash, how an activism effort might be perceived in terms of authenticity should always be considered. Indeed, authenticity is an inseparable part of brand activism engagements and the results of this study suggest that continuous attention over time and the support of both communication and practice might be necessary to improve consumer perceptions of brand activism authenticity and maintain it over time. Hence, authenticity is an essential part of brand activism, and brand activism management should therefore entail authenticity management as well.

### 6.3. Limitations and future research suggestions

The study has several theoretical and methodological limitations. These are important to consider in order to understand the scope and limitations of the findings, and to understand where more research is needed and where future research opportunities lie. Additionally, by contributing to the brand activism and authenticity research stream, the findings of the study also open new opportunities for research.

#### 6.3.1. *Theoretical limitations and research suggestions*

The study has several theoretical limitations that are important to consider when analysing the results, and which create room for further research. Firstly, because the perception of authenticity is connected to the perception of truth and because values are at the core of brand activism – a values-driven agenda – we focused on theories that could explain how well the brand activism lived up to those values. In the terms of Moulard, Raggio and Folse (2021), we focused on how brand activism was true-to-ideal and true-to-self. However, as Moulard, Raggio and Folse (2021) suggested, true-to-fact can also be interpreted as another dimension of authenticity. In fact, several authors mentioned how credibility and similar factors might affect perceptions of authenticity in other contexts (e.g., Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway, 2016; Beverland, Lindgreen & Vink, 2008; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Morhart et al., 2015). Since brand activism is focused on values, research into the perceived authenticity of brand activism should still focus on theories related to the perception of the fulfilment of those values, and indeed, the results of our study showed that the four selected antecedents based on such theories could explain a moderate proportion of perceived authenticity of brand activism. Nonetheless, considering the relevance of true-to-fact in other authenticity contexts, it might still be fruitful to explore that avenue in brand activism research. Thus, we recommend future research into the perceived authenticity of brand activism to examine antecedents and theories related to this aspect.

Secondly, some theoretical limitations were necessary due to the selected methodology. In the study, only the presence of relationships between antecedents and authenticity was tested, not causality. As a result, antecedents that would have required a causal design were excluded from the study and are recommended to consider for future causal studies. Such antecedents can, for example, stem from Feelings-as-Information Theory (Schwarz, 2012), which Brashier and Marsh (2020) claim influences consumers' perceptions of truth. Feelings-as-Information Theory (Schwarz, 2012) states that people use emotions and other experiences as information in their decision-making process. This leads to two potential antecedents of perceived authenticity of brand activism that would be interesting to investigate in further research. The first antecedent, based on Feelings-as-Information Theory, might be the consumers' emotional affect towards the brand or the social cause. Affect would be most interesting for the perception of true-to-fact, but relevant for true-to-ideal, and true-to-self as well. However, while Feelings-as-Information Theory (Schwarz, 2012) suggests that affect leads to perceived authenticity, theories such as the halo effect – the principle that our evaluation of one aspect of something affects our evaluations of other aspects of the same thing (Kahneman, 2013) – suggest that it might be the other way around. Hence, affect might be an outcome rather than an antecedent and we cannot conclusively deduce the nature of the relationship from theory. Causal research would, therefore, be needed to conclude the nature of a relationship. The second antecedent might be cognitive fluency. Fluency is a metacognitive experience that refers to the ease with which people process information and consumers tend to perceive statements as more true if they are easier to process (Brashier & Marsh, 2020). This is because of the Referential Theory of Truth (Unkelbach & Rom, 2017), which states that prior exposure to a statement leads to more coherently linked references in memory, which in turn leads to fluency and a repetition-induced truth effect. Consequently, as people are repeatedly exposed to a brand's activism actions and statements, they should process them with greater fluency and perceive them to be more true-to-fact and to the brand's values, and, thereby, as more authentic. Repetition is, however, difficult to capture in a survey design, and as a metacognitive experience, fluency is difficult to reliably measure in a survey. The effect of repetition on the perception of authenticity is, however, appropriate to test in with experimental design with a fictional brand and controlled exposure.

Thirdly, while this study focuses on antecedents, some authors refer to these antecedents as attributes. For example, heritage and uniqueness are called antecedents by some authors (e.g., Morhart et al., 2015; Moulard, Raggio & Folse, 2016; Schallehn, Burmann & Riley, 2014) and attributes by others (e.g., Bruhn et al., 2012; Ilicic & Webster, 2014; Napoli et al., 2014). Due to this inconsistency in labelling, a distinction between antecedents and attributes was necessary in the study since they were used for different purposes. However, this was only our perspective and not a new suggestion for a conceptualization. Thus, we encourage future researchers to focus on the distinction between attributes and antecedents of authenticity and provide a holistic conceptualization. This would allow for a consistent use of antecedents and attributes and would thereby make studies more comparable.

Finally, this study's definition of the authenticity of brand activism is based on Alhouti, Johnson and Holloway's (2016) definition, which investigates CSR authenticity. As explained above, since authenticity in brand activism is nascent, this definition was helpful for defining and measuring the authenticity of brand activism. However, since there is an inconsistency in literature in the definitions of authenticity in both the branding and the CSR contexts, it is difficult to compare studies. As mentioned above, a more coherent conceptualization of attributes could also allow for more consistency in the use and understanding of the term authenticity. Additionally, future research could focus on defining authenticity for, and distinguishing between, concepts like brand activism, CSR, and brand authenticity. Another alternative would be providing an overarching definition of authenticity that applies to all contexts, which would make studies more comparable.

### 6.3.2. *Methodological limitations and research suggestions*

There are several methodological limitations that affect the generalizability of the study's findings and provide opportunities for further research. Firstly, a convenience and snowball sampling method were used, and as a result, the sample was skewed and not representative of a pre-determined population. As such, generalizations from the results must be made carefully, especially since cultural and demographic factors might have affected people's responses. Therefore, we encourage researchers to replicate the study in other countries, preferable with a probability sampling approach.

Secondly, this study was limited to only one case, that is, Nike's engagement with the Black Lives Matter movement, which further challenges the generalizability of the findings. While the results showed that Nike was a good choice for the study since almost all respondents were familiar with the brand and their opinions about different aspects were mostly normally distributed, it is not certain that consumers evaluate other brands the same way. Furthermore, since the survey focused on Black Lives Matter, it naturally also excluded some other types of brand activism. While Black Lives Matter is mainly a social issue, Kotler and Sarkar (2018) noted that brand activism can also focus on, for example, environmental issues. Although the characteristics of brand activism stay consistent regardless of the type of activism and the brand behind it, it is possible that the antecedents of authenticity, or at least the importance of the different antecedents, vary. For example, *impact* might be more important for environmental issues, and *continuity* for political ones. Future research could investigate whether the results of this study can be generalizable to other types of brand activism and industries as well.

Thirdly, it is worth noting that, while the measurement model achieved all the validity and reliability criteria, the inclusion of only one item in the *heritage* scale makes it difficult to assess the reliability of the *heritage* construct. This should be addressed in further studies. Additionally, explanations for why the *heritage* scale did not show reliability and validity in our study even though it did in Spiggle, Nguyen and Caravella's (2012) original study also need to be further examined as well. Overall, this finding was unexpected for several reasons. Firstly, although the scale was first proposed for the context of brand extensions, it should still translate well into the context of brand activism since there is a conceptual similarity between brand

extensions and engaging in brand activism. Indeed, engaging in brand activism and extending the brand to the activist context might even be viewed as a brand extension. Secondly, even though the items were reformulated for the brand context, this reformulation was minimal (see in Table 2 in Appendix 1: Additional tables) and should not be significant enough to impact the reliability of the scale. Another explanation that could be investigated in future research might instead lie in the differences in the samples. The use of probability sampling and country comparisons in future studies might be particularly helpful to investigate this. Nonetheless, since the full *heritage* scale adopted from Spiggle, Nguyen and Caravella (2012) showed insufficient reliability in this study, it is worth underlining that our results do challenge the reliability of the scale overall. Hence, more research is needed to evaluate the reliability of the scale – not only in the brand activism context but also in the brand extension context where it was originally proposed.

Finally, like mentioned above, this study only looks at relationships between antecedents and authenticity. While the theory makes it reasonable to assume causal directions of those relationships, a causal research design is necessary to test them. For example, an experimental design could be used with a fictional brand, where antecedents are manipulated to evaluate their effects on the perceived authenticity of brand activism. Nonetheless, our study still provides a solid foundation for this type of research by confirming that there are relationships between the suggested antecedents *impact*, *uniqueness*, *heritage*, and *continuity*, and the perceived authenticity of brand activism. These insights help guide the design of causal studies investigating antecedents of the perceived authenticity of brand activism in the future.

## 7. Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to examine which antecedents influence consumers' perceptions of the authenticity of brand activism. To this end, the study confirmed the positive relationship between the perception of authenticity of brand activism and four such antecedents – perceived relative impact on the cause, perceived uniqueness of activism actions, perceived heritage connection, and perceived continuity of recent activism actions. The study contributes to the emerging research stream on brand activism and helps to fill the gap between brand activism research and authenticity research. More specifically, the study provides value to the research on the authenticity of brand activism as one of the first studies covering this topic, thereby paving the way for further research.

The study also continues building on the idea that the perception of authenticity is connected to the perception of truth or, more specifically, that the brand activism is true to its ideal and itself. Thereby, the study shows how cognitive theories about the perception of truth and social psychology theories about the attribution of causes to behaviour can be used to explain the perception of authenticity. Founded on this idea, the study suggests the development of a general theory of perceived authenticity based on cognitive processes of truth perception. This call is also supported by the fact that many antecedents of perceived authenticity seem to be generalizable in many different contexts such as brands, CSR, and brand activism.

Overall, because the core of brand activism is supposed to be the intention of making a positive change in the world such as standing up against inequality, racism or environmental issues, authenticity is an indispensable dimension of it. The study enhances our understanding of what influences the perception of this authenticity. This should prove to be valuable to managers considering the polarized and emotional nature of the issues targeted by brand activism, and, thus, the severity of potential backlash. Given the ongoing trends of weakened consumer trust in several institutions, and growing expectations in brands to engage in socio-political issues, this research can be helpful to navigate this new landscape – to understand how to engage in brand activism in a way that consumers perceive it as authentic.

Research into the authenticity of brand activism is a novel topic. Given the emergence of the topic and its growing importance, we encourage future studies to investigate it further and are curious to see how the research develops henceforth.

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## Appendix 1: Additional tables

**Table 1.** Attributes of authenticity within the branding and CSR context.

Attributes	Definition	Studies	Scope
Physical attributes			
Actuality	a brand's actions being existing rather than imagined	Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway (2016)	CSR authenticity
Fact	a brand's actions being known or proven to be real or existing	Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway (2016)	CSR authenticity
Naturalness	a brand's products not being artificial	Bruhn, Schoenmüller & Schäfer (2012)	Brand authenticity
Rarity			
Originality	a brand's creativeness, innovativeness, and individuality	Bruhn, Schoenmüller & Schäfer (2012)	Brand authenticity
		Ilicic & Webster (2014)	Consumer-brand relational authenticity
Responsibility			
Benevolence	a brand's initiatives that are public-serving instead of self-serving (i.e. profit-seeking)	Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway (2016)	CSR authenticity
		Joo, Miller & Fink (2019)	
		Beverland (2006)	Brand authenticity
		Spiggle, Nguyen & Caracella (2012)	Brand extension authenticity
Commitment	a brand's dedication to socio-political initiatives	Joo, Miller & Fink (2019)	CSR authenticity
Community link	a brand's connectedness to the community	Joo, Miller & Fink (2019)	CSR authenticity
Trustworthiness	a brand's ability to be trusted, reliable and responsible	Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway (2016)	CSR authenticity
Quality commitment	a brand's promise to provide good quality products	Beverland (2006); Napoli et al. (2014)	Brand authenticity
Social attributes			

Credibility & Reliability	a brand's ability to keeping its promise	Bruhn, Schoenmueller & Schäfer (2012); Morhart et al. (2015)  Joo, Miller & Fink (2019)	Brand authenticity  CSR authenticity
Genuineness	a brand's realness and ability to being exactly what it appears to be, also in terms of the relationship with its customers	Ilicic & Webster (2014)  Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway (2016)	Consumer-brand relational authenticity  CSR authenticity
Honesty & Sincerity	a brand's quality of being honest and not trying to deceive people	Napoli et al. (2014); Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway (2016)	CSR authenticity
Integrity	a brand's virtue, based on its communicated intentions and values	Morhart et al. (2015)	Brand authenticity
Symbolism	a brand's ability to help customers' self-authentication	Morhart et al. (2015)	Brand authenticity
Transparency	a brand's willingness to share CSR information with the public for evaluation purpose	Joo, Miller & Fink (2019)	CSR authenticity
Truthfulness	a brand's ability to tell the truth instead of lies	Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway (2016)	CSR authenticity
<b>Stability</b>			
Congruence	a brand's alignment between its values and socio-political efforts or its values and the consumer's values	Eggers, O'Dwyer, Kraus, Vallaster & Guldenberg (2013)  Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway (2016) Joo, Miller & Fink (2019)  Vredenburg et al. (2020)	Brand authenticity  CSR authenticity  Brand activism authenticity
Consistency	a brand's ability to offer an experience at all stakeholder's contact points	Eggers et al. (2013)	Brand authenticity
Continuity	a brand's timelessness and stability, also in terms of the relationship with its customers	Bruhn, Schoenmüller & Schäfer (2012); Morhart et al. (2015)	Brand authenticity

Heritage	a brand's connection to its origin and time in terms of values	Beverland (2006); Napoli et al. (2014)	Brand authenticity
		Spiggle, Nguyen & Caracella (2012)	Brand extension authenticity
		Ilicic & Webster (2014)	Consumer-brand relational authenticity
Preserving brand essence	a brand's ability to maintain its fundamental values, which makes it unique	Spiggle, Nguyen & Caracella (2012)	Brand extension authenticity
Stylistic consistency	a brand's consistency in terms of product image and aesthetic provided by a uniform design	Beverland (2006)	Brand authenticity
		Spiggle, Nguyen & Caracella (2012)	Brand extension authenticity

**Table 2.** The scales and items used to measure each variable.

Variable	Source for scale	Items (as formulated in the source)	Items (reformulated for brand activism authenticity)
Authenticity of Brand Activism	Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway (2016)	The company's CSR actions are genuine.	Nike's activism act is genuine.
		The CSR action preserves what the company means to me.	The activism act preserves what Nike means to me.
		The CSR action captures what makes the company unique to me.	The activism act captures what makes Nike unique to me.
		The company's CSR action is in accordance with the company's values and beliefs.	Nike's activism act is in accordance with its values and beliefs.
		The company is being true to itself with its CSR actions.	Nike is being true to itself with the activism act.
		The company is standing up for what it believes in.	Nike is standing up for what it believes in.
		The company is a socially responsible company.	Nike is a socially responsible brand.
		The company is concerned about improving the well-being of society.	Nike is concerned about improving the well-being of society.
Impact	Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway (2016)	I believe that the company donates a fair proportion of its resources relative to its success.	I believe that Nike donates a fair proportion of its resources relative to its success.
		The company's CSR acts have a long-term impact.	Nike's activism act has a long-term impact.
		A large monetary commitment appears to have been made to the cause the company donates to.	A large monetary commitment appears to have been made to the cause that Nike supports.
Uniqueness	Schallehn, Burmann & Riley (2014)	The way how [X] fulfills its brand promise is very different from competing brands.	The way Nike engages in this activism act is very different from competing brands.
		The way how [X] fulfills its brand promise is unique.	The way how Nike engages in this activism act is unique.
		[X] fulfills its brand promise in a distinct way.	Nike engages in this activism act in a distinct way.
Heritage connection	Spiggle, Nguyen & Caracella (2012)	This extension appears to connect with what I know about LEGO's origins.	Nike's activism act appears to connect with what I know about the brand's origins.

		There is no link between this extension and what I know about LEGO's legacy.	There is no link between Nike's activism act and what I know about the brand's legacy.
		LEGO seems to have abandoned its roots with this extension.	Nike seems to have abandoned its roots with its activism act.
Continuity	Schallehn, Burmann & Riley (2014)	In the past, brand [X] has already fulfilled its brand promise.	In recent years, Nike has already engaged in this type of activism acts.
		The previous behavior of [X] fits to its current brand promise.	The recent behaviour of Nike fits to its current activism act.
		The brand promise of [X] and its past actions are in line with each other.	The activism act of Nike and its recent actions are in line with each other.

**Table 3.** Results for the measurement model including the full list of items for all constructs.

Construct	Item	Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE	VIF	
Authenticity	A1: Nike's activism act is genuine.	0.826	0.925	0.939	0.657	2.814	
	A2: The activism act preserves what Nike means to me.	0.81					2.858
	A3: The activism act captures what makes Nike unique to me.	0.791					2.398
	A4: Nike's activism act is in accordance with its values and beliefs.	0.82					2.92
	A5: Nike is being true to itself with the activism act.	0.844					3.291
	A6: Nike is standing up for what it believes in.	0.852					2.961
	A7: Nike is a socially responsible brand.	0.753					2.577
	A8: Nike is concerned about improving the well-being of society.	0.782					2.806
Impact	I1: I believe that Nike donates a fair proportion of its resources relative to its success.	0.848	0.731	0.848	0.65	1.987	
	I2: Nike's activism act has a long-term impact.	0.915					2.728
	I3: A large monetary commitment appears to have been made to the cause that Nike supports.	0.918					2.793
Uniqueness	U1: The way Nike engages in this activism act is very different from competing brands.	0.886	0.86	0.914	0.781	2.232	
	U2: The way how Nike engages in this activism act is unique.	0.901					2.393
	U3: Nike engages in this activism act in a distinct way.	0.863					1.991
Heritage	H1: Nike's activism act appears to connect with what I know about the brand's origins.	0.947	0.48	0.638	0.43	1.123	
	H2: There is no link between Nike's activism act and what I know about the brand's legacy.	0.597					1.305
	H3: Nike seems to have abandoned its roots with its activism act.	0.194					1.178
Continuity	C1: In recent years, Nike has already engaged in this type of activism acts.	0.821	0.875	0.923	0.8	1.485	
	C2: The recent behaviour of Nike fits to its current activism act.	0.812					1.414
	C3: The activism act of Nike and its recent actions are in line with each other.	0.786					1.437

**Table 4.** Results for the measurement model including the full list of items for all constructs, except for *heritage* where H3 is excluded.

Construct	Item	Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE	VIF
Authenticity	A1: Nike's activism act is genuine.	0.826	0.925	0.939	0.657	2.814
	A2: The activism act preserves what Nike means to me.	0.81				2.858
	A3: The activism act captures what makes Nike unique to me.	0.791				2.398
	A4: Nike's activism act is in accordance with its values and beliefs.	0.82				2.92
	A5: Nike is being true to itself with the activism act.	0.844				3.291
	A6: Nike is standing up for what it believes in.	0.852				2.961
	A7: Nike is a socially responsible brand.	0.753				2.577
	A8: Nike is concerned about improving the well-being of society.	0.783				2.806
Impact	I1: I believe that Nike donates a fair proportion of its resources relative to its success.	0.821	0.731	0.848	0.65	1.485
	I2: Nike's activism act has a long-term impact.	0.812				1.414
	I3: A large monetary commitment appears to have been made to the cause that Nike supports.	0.786				1.437
Uniqueness	U1: The way Nike engages in this activism act is very different from competing brands.	0.886	0.86	0.914	0.781	2.232
	U2: The way how Nike engages in this activism act is unique.	0.901				2.393
	U3: Nike engages in this activism act in a distinct way.	0.863				1.991
Heritage	H1: Nike's activism act appears to connect with what I know about the brand's origins.	0.956	0.477	0.758	0.624	1.109
	H2: There is no link between Nike's activism act and what I know about the brand's legacy.	0.579				1.109
Continuity	C1: In recent years, Nike has already engaged in this type of activism acts.	0.848	0.875	0.923	0.8	1.987
	C2: The recent behaviour of Nike fits to its current activism act.	0.915				2.728
	C3: The activism act of Nike and its recent actions are in line with each other.	0.918				2.793



## Appendix 2: Survey

### Section 1 of 10

Thank you for participating! It means a lot to us :)

This survey is a part of a master's degree thesis in 'International Marketing and Brand Management' at Lund University (LUSEM) in Sweden. It is about brand activism and authenticity and should take around 5-7 minutes to complete.

By participating, you have the chance to win one out of two 25€ Amazon gift cards. All participants who want to compete for these are given the chance to enter their e-mail addresses at the end of the survey. Two e-mail addresses will be randomly selected as winners. We have fraud detection enabled. Any fraud attempts will disqualify the participant from the lottery.

Please read through the following information before continuing!

- You need to be 18 or older to participate in the study.
- Your response is anonymous. If you choose to enter your e-mail address to participate in the gift card lottery, this e-mail address will only be used for the gift card selection and not the study itself. The e-mail address will be deleted once the study is over.
- While responses remain anonymous, the findings of the thesis will be public together with the thesis.
- You may withdraw from the survey at any time without giving reasons and will not be penalised for doing so. However, if you choose to withdraw, you will not be eligible to win a gift card.
- If you have any questions about the survey or the data, please contact us on [ja4077fes@student.lu.se](mailto:ja4077fes@student.lu.se).

Q: I am 18 or older, I agree to participate in the study, and I understand what the study is about and how the data will be managed. [yes/no]

### Section 2 of 10

This survey focuses on the brand Nike (logo below).



**Figure 1.** Nike's logo: Swoosh (Nike, 2021)

Q: Are you familiar with the brand Nike? [Yes, No] If no → Section 10

Section 3 of 10

Before we start, we need some demographic information.

Q: Age [18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65+]

Q: Gender [Female, Male, Prefer not to say, Other]

Q: Highest completed or ongoing education [Primary education, Secondary education (High school), Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree, Doctorate's Degree, Other]

Q: Nationality [Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States, Other]

Section 4 of 10

Please read this information carefully!

Brand activism is when a brand takes a vocal stance on a socio-political issue. This statement can, but does not have to, be accompanied by actions such as donations.

Below is some information about a brand activism act that Nike did in 2020. After reading this, you will be asked how much you agree or disagree with 20 short statements about the brand and the activism act. The main purpose is to get your overall impression of both. You will not be tested on the information provided below.

On the 30th May 2020, in response to police brutality against the black community in the U.S., Nike (2020a) released an activist statement, saying: "For Once, Don't Do It. Don't pretend there's not a problem in America. Don't turn your back on racism. Don't accept innocent lives being taken from us. Don't make any more excuses. Don't think this doesn't affect you. Don't sit back and be silent. Don't think you can't be part of the change. Let's all be part of the change." Nike also announced a "\$40 million commitment over the next four years to support the Black community in the U.S." (Nike, 2020b).

In this case, Nike's 'brand activism act' refers to both their statement and their donation.



**Figure 2.** Nike's activist statement "For once, Don't Do It." (Nike, 2020a)

Section 5 of 10

Questions 1-8 / 20

Q1: Nike's activism act is genuine. [1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly agree]

Q2: The activism act preserves what Nike means to me. [1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly agree]

Q3: The activism act captures what makes Nike unique to me. [1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly agree]

Q4: Nike's activism act is in accordance with its values and beliefs. [1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly agree]

Q5: Nike is being true to itself with the activism act. [1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly agree]

Q6: Nike is standing up for what it believes in. [1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly agree]

Q7: Nike is a socially responsible brand. [1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly agree]

Q8: Nike is concerned about improving the well-being of society. [1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly agree]

Section 6 of 10

Questions 9-11 / 20

Q9: I believe that Nike donates a fair proportion of its resources relative to its success. [1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly agree]

Q10: Nike's activism act has a long-term impact. [1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly agree]

Q11: A large monetary commitment appears to have been made to the cause that Nike supports. [1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly agree]

Section 7 of 10

Questions 12-14 / 20

Q12: Nike's activism act appears to connect with what I know about the brand's origins. [1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly agree]

Q13: There is no link between Nike's activism act and what I know about the brand's legacy. [1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly agree]

Q14: Nike seems to have abandoned its roots with its activism act. [1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly agree]

Section 8 of 10

Questions 15-17 / 20

Q15: In recent years, Nike has already engaged in this type of activism acts. [1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly agree]

Q16: The recent behaviour of Nike fits to its current activism act. [1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly agree]

Q17: The activism act of Nike and its recent actions are in line with each other. [1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly agree]

Section 9 of 10

Questions 18-20 / 20

Q18: The way Nike engages in this activism act is very different from competing brands. [1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly agree]

Q19: The way how Nike engages in this activism act is unique. [1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly agree]

Q20: Nike engages in this activism act in a distinct way. [1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Somewhat agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly agree]

Section 10 of 10

The questions are over now. In this section you may enter your e-mail address to be informed about the outcomes of the study or/and to participate in the lottery to win one out of two Amazon gift cards with a value of 25€. This is not mandatory. We have fraud detection enabled. Any fraud attempts will disqualify the participant from the lottery.

If you fill in your e-mail address, it will be stored for these purposes only and will be deleted once the study is completed. The e-mail address will not be shared in any way.

After you have answered these questions, just select submit and you are done!

Q: I want to compete for a 25€ Amazon gift card and understand that only two participants will be randomly selected to win. [yes/no]

Q: I want to be informed about the outcomes of the study. A mail will be sent when the study is completed at the beginning of June. [yes/no]

Q: If you have answered 'Yes' on either of the two questions above, please enter your e-mail address here! [short answer text]

Thank you for helping us out, it means a lot! :)