



SCHOOL OF  
ECONOMICS AND  
MANAGEMENT

# Perfectly imperfect

*A comparison of female millennial consumers' perceptions towards  
'Brand Activist Aspirants' and 'Authentic Brand Activists'  
in the lingerie market*

by

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# Abstract

**Title:** Perfectly imperfect - A comparison of female millennial consumers' perceptions towards 'Brand Activist Aspirants' and 'Authentic Brand Activists' in the lingerie market.

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**Keywords:** Social brand activism, consumers' perceptions, authenticity, female millennials, Authentic Brand Activist, Brand Activist Aspirant

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to comprehend female millennial consumers' perceptions towards lingerie brands that are categorised as 'Brand Activist Aspirants' compared to 'Authentic Brand Activists'.

**Methodology:** As this research focuses on studying consumers' perceptions, a subjective social constructionist view was taken. By using an abductive approach, an exploratory qualitative research was conducted.

**Theoretical perspective:** To understand the overall classification of brands into brand activism categories and the consumers perceived brand authenticity, this study reviewed and applied two theories. One of these was extended upon to include the new category 'Brand Activist Aspirant'.

**Empirical Data:** 11 semi-structured interviews were carried out with female millennial lingerie consumers who are involved in or familiar with brand activism. These were selected by applying purposive sampling. Additionally, three lingerie brands served as an example of 'Authentic Brand Activists' and 'Brand Activist Aspirants' for our study.

**Findings/Conclusion:** The findings suggest that consumers prefer activist over non-activist brands but only when their efforts are genuine which is especially important if they are shifting towards such an approach and become 'Brand Activist Aspirants'. While such aspirants are lacking authenticity as they have only recently taken a stance and are still working on incorporating the key characteristics (purpose, values, marketing messaging, corporate practices, track record), 'Authentic Brand Activists' perform well as they follow sincere intentions and have integrated brand activism into their core for a long duration.

**Practical implications:** The results from this study showcase what brands need to consider when aiming to adopt an activist approach, making them 'Brand Activist Aspirants'. By aligning the five key characteristics, marketing practitioners are able to lead their brands to an 'Authentic Brand Activist' approach.

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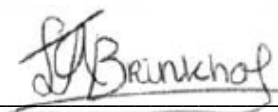
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# 1 Introduction

This first chapter introduces the reader to the thesis by elaborating upon the phenomenon of brand activism and the lingerie industry which this paper is focused on. Followed by the background information of the studied topic, the problematisation addresses limitations of the current research and the thereby identified research gaps. Beyond that, the overall objectives and purpose of this study are further explored, leading to the posed research question. Lastly, the outline of the thesis provides an overview of how this study is structured.

## 1.1 Background

*“Shouldn’t you have transsexuals in the show? No. No, I don’t think we should. Well, why not? Because the show is a fantasy. It’s a 42-minute entertainment special.”*

– Ed Razek (interviewed by Phelps, 2018)

This controversial statement by the former CMO of Victoria’s Secret created a huge backlash in society and the media when being asked about including transgender and plus-size models in the firm’s annual fashion show in an interview with Vogue in 2018 (Hanbury, 2020; Phelps, 2018). This was not the first time that the brand was criticised for its image of lacking inclusivity and showcasing seemingly ‘perfect’ women without any flaws, solely wearing size zero. However, resulting from years of losing sales and market share as well as experiencing yet another immense wave of criticism after this dubious commentary, Victoria’s Secret appointed two new female board directors and made a call to challenge the brand’s perception in order to change its reputation (Hanbury, 2020). When looking at their stores and online presence today, the lingerie brand includes a more diverse model portfolio than previously, attempting to promote body positivity and inclusivity (Elan, 2020).

Observing this example, it is questionable if lingerie brands like Victoria’s Secret follow genuine intentions and are perceived to be credible by consumers corresponding to their adapted actions, particularly after these kinds of scandals. Such an approach of initiating a shift towards a more inclusive and diverse brand image while publicly communicating and actively taking a stance can be seen as a social brand activism strategy (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a; Lin, 2018). Overall, social brand activism “includes areas such as equality – gender, LGBT, race, age, etc. It also includes societal and community issues” (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a, n.p.). Female empowerment can be viewed as a crucial aspect of achieving equality and as part of this, women are demanding companies to showcase a more realistic picture in their advertising, promoting diversity, inclusivity as well as a positive body image. (Breux, 2018; Drake, 2017; Swank & Fahs, 2017; Varghese & Kumar, 2020)

Many brands are known for taking such a stance in regard to political, environmental, economic or social matters, aiming to promote or restrain societal issues and causes. If done appropriately and if aligned with the company’s core values and purpose, these actions are referred to as



brand activism (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Taking a stance on controversial topics can evoke positive as well as negative reactions from a company's stakeholders and can be implemented in various ways such as publishing polarising statements or creating divisive marketing campaigns (Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). However, the motivation behind a brand activist approach is not always genuine, making it possible to distinguish different categories. Authentic Brand Activists stand out by practising what they preach since their establishment, having a sincere motive and incorporating it into their core. In contrast, brands that try to practise brand activism but neither show commitment nor fully align their actions with their purpose and values are mostly perceived as inauthentic, resulting into so-called 'woke-washing' (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry & Kemper, 2020). Within the scope of this thesis, we further include a newly established category named 'Brand Activist Aspirants' which refers to brands that so far do not have a well-defined brand activist strategy but are actively seeking to develop one in order to shift towards such an approach.

Overall, in recent years there has been a trend towards more brands showing that they are actively participating and engaging in sensitive conversations (Diderich, 2020). Research indicates that it is no longer acceptable for brands to stay neutral in pressing topics due to growing consumer demands (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Especially with the rise of social media, consumers have become more powerful advocates for change (Diderich, 2020). Looking at the fashion industry, fashion brands and particularly lingerie brands are increasingly taking over an active role in societal issues which is an enormous U-turn contrasting to the past when brands were committed to neutrality (Breux, 2018; Stoppard, 2020). Hereby, a shift from CSR and traditional product-centric campaigns to purpose-driven messages can be identified (Diderich, 2020) which aligns with the values- and society-driven approach of brand activism (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a). An example of this approach can be the diversity and inclusivity efforts of lingerie brands that progressively portray 'real' women with natural flaws, speaking to the majority of consumers who do not want to transform but identify themselves with a brand's appearance and image (Breux, 2018). Looking back in time, fashion has always been a way to express opinions or make a statement but today, it is essential for brands to contribute to the larger conversation and have a societal impact (Parker, 2019).

Also, from a consumer's perspective and especially for millennials, it gets more and more important that brands follow a meaningful purpose and engage in brand activism. As millennials are weighing not only the products but also the brand's principles, they are demanding companies to take a stance (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Hence, it is no longer sufficient for corporations to stand on the sidelines and not act upon their statements (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a; Vredenburg et al., 2020). This aspect is also reflected in several studies which show that millennials as well as other consumers are punishing a brand when it acts unethically by stopping to buy or even boycotting it (Albrecht, Campbell, Heinrich & Lammel, 2013; Klein, Smith & John, 2004; Lightfoot, 2019; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). For instance, about 80 per cent of 1.000 UK consumers would behave this way if they disagree with a company's attitude (Sobande, 2019). Beyond that, due to the common practice of researching and comparing brands' information amongst millennials (52 per cent), they become less brand loyal, hence have a low barrier to switch to other brands (McKinsey & Company, 2018, 2019).

Besides being price-sensitive, the generation demands fashion companies to be integrous and authentic as well as align their mission with their values, making them more concerned about brands' overall behaviour. This might also be traced back to their high presence on social media where millennials share relatively much information about their personal life, including their choice of fashion brands. This makes it more apparent that millennials want to be associated with authentic ones that have a relatable and genuine purpose and contribute to society (McKinsey & Company, 2018).

## 1.2 Problematisation

Brand activism is an emerging phenomenon that increasingly attracts attention from academics, marketers and brand managers (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Since more well-known, as well as smaller brands, are jumping on the bandwagon (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019), it is significant to comprehend the complexities of brand activism to continuously meet customer demands (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Sobande, 2019). Although the literature on brand activism is slowly expanding, the research remains limited and tends to principally discuss the brands' perspectives while the consumers' viewpoints are relatively unexplored (Bhagwat, Warren, Beck & Watson IV, 2020; Koch, 2020; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Moorman, 2020; Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Wettstein & Baur, 2016).

Up until now, most of the conducted studies have concentrated on how brands can be classified in terms of their activist practices referring to categories such as Inauthentic Brand Activism (Böhmer, 2021; Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020) and Authentic Brand Activism (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a; Lin, 2018; Moorman, 2020; Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). The brands' attitudes have also been analysed in terms of managerial implications, explaining how brand managers can best adapt their strategies to be positively perceived by their stakeholders while influencing society (Böhmer, 2021; Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a; Lin, 2018; Moorman, 2020; Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Prior research that did investigate the consumers' perspectives more extensively involve phenomena such as consumer activism and anti-brand activism by examining e.g., the reasoning behind boycott participation (Klein, Smith & John, 2004) or incentives to initiate anti-brand activism (Romani et al., 2015). These concepts have gained much attentiveness due to consumers' increasing awareness of their own consumption as well as growing concerns towards corporate practices (Klein, Smith & John, 2004; Romani et al., 2015). Especially millennials, born between 1980 and 2000 (Goldman Sachs, 2021), offer research opportunities as this target group is particularly sensitive towards social, political and environmental issues. To our knowledge, solely Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) have thoroughly examined millennials' perceptions of brand activism and how managers can implement appropriate strategies for them. Thus, we identify another potential gap to address in our paper by tackling this demographic group explicitly.

Moreover, most of the journal articles usually touch upon specific areas of brand activism, namely the political and social area (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Moorman, 2020; Vilá &

Bharadwaj, 2017). In this context, typically the same well-known brands that successfully implement brand activism are frequently mentioned such as Ben & Jerry's, Nike, TOMS, Oatly and Patagonia. Hence, previous studies are rather focused on showcasing this variety of outstanding brands to demonstrate best practice examples instead of scrutinising the topic in more detailed circumstances (Koch, 2020; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Wettstein & Baur, 2016).

Since prior academics have predominantly reviewed such successful cases, we believe that there is a lack of research assessing companies that are not particularly renowned for engaging in brand activism. Therefore, we aim to gather an insight into these brands taking a stance in order to extend the overall scope of social brand activism. More specifically, we evaluate companies that can be included in our new intermediate brand activism category, which we coin as 'Brand Activist Aspirants'. These aspirants are brands that have not yet engaged in brand activism, being so-called newcomers, and are thus shifting from a non-activist to an activist approach. We expect these organisations to be more exposed to criticism since consumers may question their intentions to become an activist. Consequently, the consumers' perceptions towards such a company can either positively or negatively affect the aspirants' future success.

The Brand Activist Aspirant is inspired by the concept of social-purpose immigrants created by Vilá and Bharadwaj (2017). The authors refer to these immigrants as companies that have previously grown their business by simply focusing on profit-oriented goals without adhering to a social purpose and now adapt their behaviour to integrate a society-focused purpose. The difference between their social-purpose immigrant and our aspirant is that we specifically focus on the context of brand activism. Our concept also touches upon various factors such as corporate practices and marketing messaging (Vredenburg et al., 2020), whereas Vilá and Bharadwaj's (2017) immigrant solely concentrates on the social purpose. Consequently, we argue that our newly developed category fills a significant gap as, thus far, brand activists have been solely classified into four categories based on their absent, silent, inauthentic or authentic characteristics (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Furthermore, we aim to analyse brand activism in one specific industry to create a focus area and compare brands operating on the same market, instead of previous research which concentrated on brand activists across different industries (e.g. Oatly and Nike). This enables us to investigate brands with a similar product range that engage in brand activism. For this study, we focus on the lingerie industry which is further argued for in the research aim (chapter 1.3).

Considering the above, we contribute to the literature regarding the consumers' perspectives of brand activism since this scarce area provides multiple gaps to exploit. This dissertation also allows us to investigate our coined 'Brand Activist Aspirants' category by scrutinising the existent literature and gathering empirical evidence to draw connections and either validate or falsify the concept. Beyond that, we utilise two existing theories which have not yet been applied to a similar context, thus extending the associated literature. Ultimately, our study provides additional knowledge as well as a deeper understanding in terms of millennial consumers' perceptions of brands that seemingly engage in activism at different stages.

## 1.3 Research aim

Resulting from the identified gaps in the literature, the purpose of our study is to comprehend female millennials' perceptions towards lingerie brands that are categorised as 'Brand Activist Aspirants' compared to 'Authentic Brand Activists'. Moreover, we investigate if and how these perceptions are influenced whilst considering aspects such as the credibility and authenticity of lingerie brands. Consequently, we propose the following research question:

*How do female millennial consumers perceive lingerie brands that are categorised as 'Brand Activist Aspirants' compared to 'Authentic Brand Activists'?*

The relevance of answering this research question can be traced back to the reasons hereinafter.

To our knowledge, no prior studies have focused on transitioning brands that are shifting from a non-activist approach towards an activist approach. As mentioned previously, some businesses have only recently taking a stance and are unfamiliar with engaging in brand activism, making it appealing to study how female millennial consumers are generally perceiving this transformation. Thus, we examine and scrutinise such Brand Activist Aspirants to discover how and if this may affect the brand's perception from the eyes of the female millennial consumer.

Our research solely concerns females since the majority of lingerie brands are marketing their products to women and increasingly manifest themselves as being feminist, diverse, inclusive, etc. In addition, women represent the world's most powerful consumers while simultaneously being the largest, fastest-growing market (Belleau, Haney, Summers & Garrison, 2008). Their global consumer spending was estimated at US\$ 31,8 trillion in 2019 (World Data Lab, 2020 cited in Catalyst, 2020), with 83 per cent of all consumption in the US being driven by women (Morgan Stanley, 2019). The female perspective is even more relevant regarding brand activism since gender can influence the behaviour towards the cause of the brand. It appears that females tend to be more in favour of cause-related marketing and are generally more positive towards such campaigns. Subsequently, brand activists have a higher probability to attract and affect females compared to men (Chéron, Kohlbacher & Kusuma, 2012; Moosmayer & Fuljahn, 2010; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Hence, our research is relevant as we further explore how women perceive brand activists.

As previously mentioned, we are targeting millennials because this age group tends to be more socially and politically aware as well as expects brands to act upon societal concerns. Brands are thus pressured to react to their demands by implementing an activist approach (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Studying this target group enhances the relevance of this dissertation as these individuals are more aware of societal issues nowadays, therefore making it interesting to analyse their perceptions towards shifting brands.

Moreover, we limited our research scope to the lingerie market as we identified that generally fashion brands are choosing to shift towards a more purpose-driven approach and take on an active role (Stoppard, 2020). Especially in the lingerie market, consumers prefer companies showcasing 'real' women, including various body types and ethnicities which brands in return

are trying to adhere to (Breux, 2018). Hence, this identifiable change is explored throughout our study.

To date, the amount of research conducted on authentic brand activism is relatively small. This is particularly the case regarding the fashion and lingerie industry as there are, to our knowledge, no studies focusing on the phenomenon of brand activism from this angle and will thus be the first of its kind.

Beyond that, this research is valuable due to its theoretical and managerial implications. Overall, we aim to observe a theoretical pattern regarding the consumers' motivations and perceptions towards Brand Activist Aspirants as well as compare these to an Authentic Brand Activist. Furthermore, our study presents a theoretical explanation for how and if the female millennial consumers' perceptions towards brands transitioning into activists are affected. With our insights, we provide a theoretical contribution by extending existing literature.

From a managerial perspective, our research offers brand managers guidance on how they could potentially optimise their brand activist strategy. By comparing an authentic activist to activist aspirants within the lingerie industry, our results can outline recommendations for managers to help them direct their brands towards a prosperous and meaningful future. Our study aims to be generalisable within this industry as we concentrate on perceptions towards diverse brands with similar product offerings which can thereby be applied by various lingerie managers.

To summarise, our purpose is to investigate female millennial consumers' perceptions of Brand Activist Aspirants compared to Authentic Brand Activists.

## **1.4 Outline of the thesis**

Overall, this thesis comprises six main chapters. This first chapter provides a brief insight into the studied topic itself and the motivation behind it as well as explains the importance of why the phenomenon of brand activism in the lingerie market should be explored. Followed by this introductory chapter, the second chapter forms the substantial base of the topic by presenting a literature review including background information, key concepts, relevant theories and a clarification of terminologies. In the third chapter, the methodological approach of this thesis is presented. After explaining the research philosophy, approach and design, the data collection method and data analysis are elaborated upon to demonstrate the procedure of this study. Furthermore, the research' ethics in terms of trustworthiness, authenticity and reflexivity, are illustrated. Subsequently, the fourth chapter focuses on showcasing the empirical findings resulting from the data collection. These findings are further discussed, evaluated and analysed in chapter five, drawing connections to the previously introduced theories and concepts of the second chapter. To round it off, chapter six is concluding this thesis by summarising the main findings of the research, referring back to the initial research question. Beyond that, the theoretical contributions as well as managerial implications are outlined. Finally, the limitations are displaying the constraints to the overall study while suggestions for future research are given.

## **2 Literature review**

This literature review portrays and summarises the essential literature on brand activism and the related concepts in order to build a solid foundation to comprehend this thesis. The chapter is divided into three sections, focusing on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), brand activism and our key takeaways from the literature. As brand activism is originating from CSR, the background and distinction is elaborated upon as well as a connection to purpose-driven marketing drawn. Subsequently, the concept of brand activism is explained extensively and narrowed down to the vital elements that are particularly important to our research. To round it off, two relevant theories are introduced which are applied at a later stage and relate to perceived brand authenticity as well as the classification of brand activists.

### **2.1 Corporate Social Responsibility**

Overall, this chapter gives an insight into the area of CSR which brand activism predominantly derives from. Starting with a definition and background, CSR is further described and delimited from the phenomenon of brand activism. Beyond that, the meaning behind purpose-driven marketing is characterised as well as the term social-purpose immigrants explained.

#### **2.1.1 Definition and background**

The public has always made demands of companies, relating to different societal issues which have varied over time. Hence, the desire for social responsibility is not completely new (Chandler, 2019). Nevertheless, the term CSR was only coined by Howard Bowen in 1953 when he discussed the power and impact of companies' decision-making on society (Bowen, 1953). According to him (1953, p.6), CSR "refers to the obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society". From that time on, discussions around CSR accelerated from internal and external stakeholders (Carroll, 2008). One reason for this is the increased pressure on firms to respond strategically as there are high expectations to react appropriately to economic and social issues which, subsequently, do good for the corporation as well as the cause (Kotler & Lee, 2007).

The necessity of CSR is clearly highlighted by Chandler (2019) who points out that consumers are a vital part of society, making it possible for firms to earn profits and operate in the given marketplace. Thus, CSR can be understood as a collusive interdependent relationship between companies and society. To remain authentic and credible, it is important for businesses to integrate CSR matters into their strategy which can simultaneously serve the purpose of differentiation to build a competitive advantage (Chandler, 2019). Beyond that, Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) emphasise the economic imperative besides the ethical and ideological one, focusing not only on 'the right thing to do' but also on 'doing better' while having a positive effect on society. These effects and impacts are also much more endeavoured by consumers as

they seek for the purpose behind companies' actions in order to identify with them (Marín Rives & Ruiz de Maya, 2007). Thus, corporations cannot merely focus on creating wealth and providing products or services but also have to provide a meaning behind them (Vallentin, 2002).

Agreeing with the aforementioned definition, McWilliams and Siegel (2001, p.117) further emphasise the voluntariness of following CSR as it includes the companies' "actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and what is required by law". This aligns also with Kotler and Lee's (2007) definition where they further highlight the fact of implementing 'discretionary business practices'. These practices are not referring to the ones that society naturally expects from companies to follow (legal, ethical, moral) but exceeds these by the ones that are chosen on a voluntary basis. Corporations with a CSR strategy in place take the initiative and contribute in several ways to causes regarding the community health, safety, education, environment, economic development or basic human needs and desires. These causes can be supported by for instance sponsorships, donations, publicity or expertise (Kotler & Lee, 2007).

In order to establish a credible CSR strategy, it is essential to match the supported causes to the corporations' identity and purpose when choosing a social issue and building policies (Golob & Podnar, 2019; Vallentin, 2002). To avoid a deceptive impression from the consumers' and public's perspective, the commitment should be seen as a long-term involvement and not only used for public relations (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Keys, Malnight & van der Graaf, 2009; Marín Rives & Ruiz de Maya, 2007). Hence, the CSR strategy needs to be integrated into the core of the firm's strategy, making it trustworthy and sincere (Golob & Podnar, 2019; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Marín Rives & Ruiz de Maya, 2007).

## **2.1.2 Distinction of brand activism from CSR**

The phenomenon of brand activism can be identified as an emerging concept from cause-related marketing and particularly CSR, going beyond these practices (Figure 1) (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a). According to Kotler and Sarkar (2018a), CSR is simply not enough anymore as the world troubles social unrest, inequality, environmental collapse and pandemics. The authors highlight that what matters now is action instead of solely following a purpose. Hereby, the focus lies on what a company is actually doing and not simply what it is saying (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a). Deriving from this, Kotler and Sarkar (2018a, n.p.) state that "What we need now is activism – inspired by the great movements of the past – for the Common Good". This common good is at the centre of attention for brand activists by aiming for justice while being concerned about "the biggest and most urgent problems facing society" (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a, n.p.). In addition to this, Wettstein and Baur (2016) suggest that companies need to adjust their focus from their core activities to their core values, thus to a holistic value-driven view. However, in order to be a value-driven brand, corporations cannot neglect society (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). Vredenburg et al. (2020) take up Wettstein and Baur's (2016) understanding in their article once more and thereby differentiate brand activism from CSR with two main arguments. Firstly, while CSR underlines the actions taken as well as their effects, brand activism is pointing out the actual business values. Secondly, CSR is mostly seen as beneficial

by society, contrasting brand activism which “lacks this type of consensus because there is often no universally ‘correct’ response to the [...] issues involved” (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p.446).



Figure 1: Distinction of brand activism according to Kotler and Sarkar (2018b)

Agreeing with Kotler and Sarkar (2018a), Vredenburg et al. (2020) see brand activism as a progression from CSR. While CSR has recently been a rather basic requirement for brands to pursue, brand activism as a rather novel concept is less expected and can thus function as a differentiator for brands (Vredenburg et al., 2020). As CSR efforts have matured over time with its rather marketing- and corporate-driven concept while building upon good citizenship (Kotler & Lee, 2007), businesses now become more society-driven (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a) and actively use societal issues as a power platform to position themselves in an authentic and socially conscious manner (Figure 2) (Lin, 2018).





*Figure 2: Evolution of brand activism (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a)*

A clear distinction of brand activism compared to CSR is highlighted by Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) who explain that brand activists do not hesitate to also address controversial topics which might evoke negative reactions amongst consumers. Instead of practising philanthropy, brand activism rather focuses on making public statements via marketing campaigns, press releases or CEO comments, and major decisions regarding business practices in order to influence policies or regulations (Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020). To showcase the distinction between the overall responses of consumers towards CSR and brand activism practices, Hydock, Paharia and Blair (2020) conducted a study with several examples of companies' actions. About 77 per cent indicated that they support the CSR actions whereas consumers were much more divided over the practised brand activism which only 33 per cent agreed to support (Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020).

Beyond that, brand activism can occur ad hoc or even accidental as brands decide to take a stand in an ongoing event or debate (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). In contrast, CSR is rooted in the business strategy and hence not as reactive to current occurrences. These two aspects particularly showcase that brand activism implies a higher uncertainty and risk for businesses but therewith also the chance of greater outcomes (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Another reason for the differing risk levels is that CSR, on the one hand, may involve non-optimal monetary investments that have no real connection to the firm from the shareholders' perspective. This entails a much lower risk of corporate idiosyncrasy compared to activism (Bhagwat et al., 2020). On the other hand, brand activism may involve much lower financial expenditures and rather vocal promotions of values and ideals, such as press releases, but thereby put the company in danger because of potential employee backlash, consumer boycotts or legal penalties (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Wettstein & Baur, 2016).

Furthermore, brand activism is a way for corporations to demonstrate their moral identity and attitude that might be divisive and polarising. This is why brands are advised to ponder the consequences of its activism as it is difficult to diminish negative effects after taking a stance. However, this also implies that companies need to fully embrace brand activism, regardless of their consumers' reactions (Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2020). These aspects are also shared by Bhagwat et al. (2020) who compare the level of partisanship and publicity of CSR, Corporate Political Activity and Corporate Sociopolitical Activism. In their conceptual distinction matrix, CSR is classified with a low level of partisanship, aiming to improve stakeholder relationships, whereas activism is highly polarising. For the latter, the stakeholders' responses can differ due to their own values and viewpoints on the addressed issue (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

## **2.1.3 Purpose-driven marketing**

Within this chapter, the concept of purpose-driven marketing is closely explored, and an insight is given into why a purpose is of high importance for a brand itself and a brand activism strategy. Furthermore, the social-purpose immigrants are introduced which serve as a foundation for the establishment of our new brand activism category later on in chapter 2.2.4.3.

### **2.1.3.1 Definition and background**

A brand's purpose defines the 'raison d'être', the reason for being (Kapferer, 2012). It means that a brand is driven by an internal requisite and "conveys the emerging conception of the brand, seen as exerting, a creative and powerful influence on a given market" (Kapferer, 2012, p.42). Hence, the brand purpose is strongly related to serving society and highlights the deeper meaning behind a company, contrasting CSR which focuses more on providing economic, social and environmental advantages for the stakeholders (Pontefract, 2017). Therefore, a purpose is rather interlinked with the phenomenon of brand activism as it defines 'why' the brand exists while activism takes it even one step further and concentrates on 'what' the brand will actively do about it (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a).

Over the past ten years, the concept of 'purpose' has gained more attentiveness (Hajdas & Kłeczek, 2021; Ignatius, 2019; O'Brien, Main, Kounkel & Stephan, 2019; Swaminathan, Sorescu, Steenkamp, O'Guinn & Schmitt, 2020). In purpose-driven branding, companies focus on how they perceive the world and what it ideally should look like (Quinn & Thakor, 2018). Thus, such organisations approach their purpose as something that is deeply rooted in how they view the social or market reality and how they could potentially reshape this (Hajdas & Kłeczek, 2021). As defined by Moore (2018, n.p.), purpose-driven marketing "takes your brand's cause and makes it available to your customers, helping them to connect more fully with the brand as a whole".

Especially commercial brands have presented an increasing interest towards purposeful branding as it potentially provides them with beneficial marketing outcomes, such as a competitive advantage. Therefore, many aspire to associate themselves with a societal concern or valuable cause. Contrastingly, non-profit organisations are already innately purpose-driven but could still exploit this further (Mirzaei, Webster & Siuki, 2021). These insights are also

reflected by another study from O'Brien et al. (2019), verifying that purpose-driven organisations usually encounter increasing market share and are inclined to grow three times faster compared to their competition. However, having a purpose-driven strategy does not guarantee success nor a competitive advantage (Quinn & Thakor, 2018). Instead, a purpose requires profound nurturing and brands have to be wary that it continues to align with their brand's core (O'Brien et al., 2019).

### **2.1.3.2 Social-purpose immigrants**

From a brand manager's perspective, a social-purpose strategy can be adopted to either communicate their company's CSR activities or to establish a more attractive brand. However, this is often pursued without carefully considering how they create value and whether it even aligns with their brands. Hence, such an approach may possibly harm the brand if these strategies are not thoroughly contemplated (Vilá & Bharadwaj, 2017).

Nonetheless, some brands have adhered to a distinctive social purpose from the beginning which is therefore rigorously incorporated in their business model. Coined by Vilá and Bharadwaj (2017), these organisations are named 'social purpose natives' who are naturally and strongly interlinked with the products or services that they offer. In addition, the authors (Vilá & Bharadwaj, 2017, p.96) also introduce another group of brands termed as 'social-purpose immigrants' which are defined as "established brands [that] have grown without a well-defined social-purpose strategy and are now seeking to develop one". Such organisations are usually behaving as ordinary citizens while still focusing highly on their functional benefits which are irrelevant to greater societal initiatives. This is also reflected by Mirzaei, Webster and Siuki (2021) who argue that brands should pursue a higher purpose to create a valuable impact in the world. Moreover, they emphasise that more brands are shifting towards integrating such a higher social purpose. This has resulted in companies adopting a new tone of voice causing potential scepticism amongst stakeholders. Especially commercial brands are scrutinised as consumers are concerned that these brands only integrated their higher purpose for profit-oriented reasons, hence lacking authenticity and relevance (Mirzaei, Webster & Siuki, 2021). As stated in the report by Globescan and Sustainable Brands (2016), authenticity is in fact exceptionally critical to purpose-driven brands in order to engage with consumers and generate evident value for their customers as well as society overall.

The next rational step for purpose-driven companies is brand activism as actions are more valuable than words and tend to carry a stronger message. If a business does not behave according to its purpose, having a higher vision becomes meaningless (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a). Therefore, a brand should first of all deeply integrate their purpose and align it with their core identity as this is essential for a brand activism strategy. Progressing from a purpose-driven company to a brand activist can be accomplished by connecting the company's 'why', reason of existing, with the 'way' they take a public stance. This can be done by finding the intersection between what the company stands for and offers, what the world requires as well as identifying the consumers' needs (Schoeneck & White, 2020).

To conclude, brands that adopt a higher social purpose can expect to attract criticism to a certain extent if they initially did not engage with one (Accenture, 2018a; Alcañiz, Cáceres & Pérez,

2010; Mirzaei, Webster & Siuki, 2021; Vilá & Bharadwaj, 2017). Hence, brands should initiate an open conversation with their key stakeholders to ensure that everyone is on board as some might not embrace the proposed approach (Vilá & Bharadwaj, 2017). Beyond that, brands with a higher purpose should also ensure to behave accordingly by taking evident actions, leading them to brand activism. How and why an increasing number of businesses are currently adopting an activist approach will be further elaborated upon throughout the remainder of this literature review.

## **2.2 Brand activism**

In this chapter, the fundamentals of brand activism are thoroughly explained. Besides providing general information about brand activism itself, the area of social brand activism is examined in more detail since this type constitutes the centre of this research paper. Furthermore, three categories of brand activism are described, namely Authentic Brand Activism, Inauthentic Brand Activism and the newly established Brand Activist Aspirants. Since this thesis focuses on the topic of social brand activism within the lingerie market, we look into the context of brand activism within the industry of fashion and lingerie. Finally, the marketing outcomes outline the positive and negative consequences of brand activism for both consumers and brands.

### **2.2.1 Definition and background**

As previously mentioned, brands higher purposes do no longer suffice nowadays if their purpose-driven behaviours do not align with their core identity or if their promises are merely words and not followed by actions. Since today more and more customers, especially progressive ones such as millennials, demand brands to take active measures, the requirements for brand activism are rising (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a).

Many authors have defined the concept of brand activism in various ways. Kapferer (2012) argues that brand activists are catalysts for their entire product/service category and beyond. These activists are known for initiating discussions as well as probing issues. Other characteristics are that these brands represent energy, care for the future of their marketplace as well as for the welfare of their consumers. Furthermore, Kotler and Sarkar (2018a, n.p.), refer to the phenomenon as brands' actions to "promote, impede, or direct social, political, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society". Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) draw upon a similar definition but additionally emphasise the connection to the company's core by discussing that taking such a stance should also appropriately align with the brand's values and vision. Lastly, Vredenburg et al.'s (2020, p.444) definition is similar to Kotler and Sarkar's (2018a) but sums up the most important factors of all the previously mentioned interpretations by defining it as "an emerging marketing tactic for brands seeking to stand out in a fragmented marketplace by taking public stances on social and political issues". They also argue that nowadays it has never been riskier and more disruptive for brands taking such a public stance (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the number of brands engaging in brand activism is increasing with well-known companies such

as Nike and Ben & Jerry's sharing their voices in expressive ways (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a; Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Moreover, a brand activist can never really be shielded from any potential backlash and controversy, regardless of the company's transparency level. The controversial issues that these brands are tackling are catalysts for other mainstream companies who are consequently stimulated to also do more social good (Vredenburg et al., 2020). These types of socio-political brand initiatives are slowly becoming the status quo as consumers continue to expect such behaviour. Thus, brands that fail to meet these expectations will most likely struggle to remain relevant in the future (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a).

According to Kotler and Sarkar (2018a) brand activism consists of six areas, each focusing on substantial issues relevant to a certain area of society. These include social, workplace, political, environmental, economic and legal activism. Since the focal point of this thesis is particularly on social brand activism, we decided to solely provide a more detailed explanation regarding this area as the others appear irrelevant to our topic (chapter 2.2.2).

Besides these six areas of brand activism, Kotler and Sarkar (2018a) established a distinction between regressive and progressive brand activism. Regressive brand activism is defined as "company actions that go against the common good" whereas progressive brand activism involves brands that support the common good (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a, n.p.). When brands do not perform in any type of activism, it is referred to as brand neutrality (Ubermetrics Technologies, 2019). Such brand neither actively harm the common good, nor support actions that could possibly improve it (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a). Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) stress that brands nowadays can no longer remain on the sidelines as a neutral party due to the increasing demands of customers who want to identify themselves with socially responsible brands. These expectations appear to be even higher regarding multinational corporations as they actually have the capacity to make a difference, contrasting smaller brands who might not have the resources to do so (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019). Nonetheless, these consumers force businesses of all sizes to rethink their strategy and consider how they can contribute to the common good (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). It is important for brands to adhere to these desires, as consumers with a neutral attitude towards a particular brand may also result in a loss in sales or decline in loyalty as they are more likely to develop a positive attitude towards competitors that opt for a more progressive approach (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). Therefore, as argued by Vredenburg, Spry, Kemper and Kapitan (2018), brands that remain neutral are rather prone to criticism since various consumer groups are more inclined to perceive their lack of activism as a disappointment instead of an advantage.

Overall, brand activism can be characterised by the extent of intangible and tangible commitment of an organisation to a socio-political movement whereby intangible commitment is referring to a brand's messaging and tangible engagement to its actual practices (Vredenburg et al., 2020). There must be an alignment between a brand's practices and the purpose as well as the values that it is advocating for since the better the alignment, the greater the impact. Therefore, brands that aspire to have a meaningful influence on society as a whole will have to be prepared to be fully committed in the long run (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

## 2.2.2 Social brand activism

In the 1980s, social activism manifested itself as environmental concerns as well as geopolitical issues regarding businesses in repressive circumstances (United Nations, 2008). Slowly but steadily the focus of social activists shifted from stimulating governments to opt for stronger policies towards challenging businesses to change and improve their industrial code of conducts (Dyke, Soule & Taylor, 2004; Walker, Martin & McCarthy, 2008). From the 1990s on, social activists adopted a more expressive strategy by approaching organisations more directly in order to encourage greater adjustments. These activists aspired to have a larger impact on society and stimulate better corporate behaviour (Guay, Doh & Sinclair, 2004; Rehbein, Waddock & Graves, 2004). As a result, they have been trying to force businesses that did not have any prior relevant policies in place, to adopt new strategies that are more societal and environmental conscious (Spar & La Mure, 2003).

Previously, businesses were urged by social activists to make an effort contributing to society (Dyke, Soule & Taylor, 2004; Fombrun, 2005; Guay, Doh & Sinclair, 2004; Lin, 2018; Rehbein, Waddock & Graves, 2004; Spar & La Mure, 2003; Van Cranenburgh, Liket & Roome, 2013; Walker, Martin & McCarthy, 2008) whereas nowadays, societal activism is expected from them, hence incorporated by businesses themselves (Alcañiz, Cáceres & Pérez, 2010; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Lin, 2018; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Contemporary social activism is therefore different compared to decades ago. Reasons for this include the rise of social standards and expectations about brands' behaviour as well as the rise of technology. For example, social media has a substantial impact on how social expectations are shaped these days. Furthermore, calls for boycotts and/or protests against companies are more easily spread online and can raise awareness for social concerns across the globe (Lin, 2018).

According to Kotler and Sarkar (2018a, n.p.), social brand activism “includes areas such as equality – gender, LGBT, race, age, etc.”. Since female empowerment, or feminism, is an essential aspect of equality (Swank & Fahs, 2017), it can be viewed as a form of social brand activism. According to Varghese and Kumar (2020), female empowerment has become an increasingly important matter and is crucial for raising awareness in terms of gender equality. More specifically it is about encouraging women to be confident about themselves and take charge of their lives by standing up to their identity and choices (Alcoff, 1988). Hence, research indicates that women have been evolving in terms of their careers and society which made them more attracted to brands that are representing their aspirations (Sivulka, 2009 cited in Drake, 2017).

Besides the matter of equality being related to social brand activism, Moorman (2020) discusses other societal concerns that are being challenged such as profiling coloured people. According to Salinas (2020a), ‘Diversity and Inclusion’ (D&I) efforts are becoming increasingly significant to various stakeholders and appear to be one of the key drivers of a brand's strength. One example as to why this is more important nowadays is the Black Lives Matter movement which has stimulated nations across the world to actively change how they mistreated certain marginalised cultural groups (Taylor, 2020). Being initiated in 2013, this movement aims to

eliminate white supremacy and combat police brutality, black discrimination and racial violence against black people (Black Lives Matter, n.d.).

Fighting racial injustice is a responsibility that concerns everybody, and many brands are using their reach to create significant change. Especially companies in the marketing industry have a wide platform to increase awareness and address societal issues such as diversity and inclusion. An example is Procter & Gamble who has been evaluating their media to ensure that their advertisements are not harmful or discriminating in any way (Taylor, 2020). Boldly promoting topics like racial and gender inclusivity could also be classified as a sub-area of social brand activism. Thus, brands engaging in this area of activism should be wary of reinforcing D&I in their brand strategy. Businesses focusing on a D&I stand should rather invest in global and consistent advertising to create more awareness instead of communicating their initiatives solely locally and more silently which prevents an international reach (Salinas, 2020b).

### **2.2.3 Consumer perception of brand activism**

Depending on how brand activism is practised and how genuine the stance taken is, the perception towards activism can vary greatly amongst consumers. Several factors can determine how stakeholders are perceiving these efforts which does not always resonate with how the brand actually wants or plans to be perceived. Prior research by Edelman (2019) shows that consumers are rather suspicious and sensitive towards the genuineness of actions taken as 56 per cent express their concerns about too many firms using their societal stance as a marketing tool to increase sales. As a result, it is apparent that brands engaging in brand activism do not solely elicit positive but also negative emotions that could drive consumers away. Hence, in brand activism, a company's ultimate goal is to be perceived authentic although there might not be genuine intentions behind their strategy (Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020).

According to Vredenburg et al. (2020), brand activism can be perceived authentic if the company aligns their purpose and values with their marketing messaging and corporate practices. If these four characteristics are properly coordinated, it is more likely for consumers to perceive a brand's position as relevant, reliable and trustworthy (chapter 2.2.4.1). Nevertheless, this is no guarantee for a corporation to actually be perceived authentic as it also highly depends upon their customers own views of the social norms and issues that are challenged by the public stance. If their own opinion and values do not resonate with the ones from the company, it is difficult for a brand to win them over (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Hence, "the distinction between the authentic and inauthentic tends to be subjective and socially or personally constructed" with the personal experience being "self-authored and self-determined" (Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland & Farrelly, 2014, p.1091).

In contrast to sincere intentions, there are also brands that engage in brand activism but neither show genuine interests nor pay attention to aligning the four characteristics, resulting in Inauthentic Brand Activism (chapter 2.2.4.2) (Vredenburg et al., 2020). From a consumer's perspective, such inauthentic activities can also affect their overall identification with the particular brand by neutralising possible positive associations that they had before due to the company not staying true to their values and personality. Another factor that can negatively

influence the consumers' perceptions is the number of companies taking the same social stance as it can appear that these are only feeling pressured to take actions and follow a trend, trying to copy others (Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2018). This makes consumers scrutinise a brand's motivations behind the activism efforts (Moorman, 2020).

Beyond that, consumer trust plays a vital role in brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Overall, consumers are trusting brands that stay true to their position (Moorman, 2020) and have a clear purpose that is carried out with sincere intentions (Napoli et al., 2014). 81 per cent of consumers state that they must be able to trust a brand to do what is right, being a crucial factor in their purchasing decision. Yet, only 38 per cent actually do trust a brand based on its impact on society (Edelman, 2019). Such distrust, generated by other companies' unclear marketing messages or woke-washing, can also have a severe impact on the genuine and authentic brand activism efforts that truly aim to create societal change. Thus, consumers are expecting brands to not make empty promises and walk the walk by taking actions that make a real difference (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

This trust as well as authenticity and credibility are particularly at risk when consumers do not expect a brand to engage in brand activism. As this unexpected activism can overwhelm consumers, their interpretations of such efforts tend to be more extreme. Fundamentally, their reaction is dependent upon "how benign the viewer perceives the violation of social norms to be" (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p.453). While disputed social norms in brand activism can be seen as a personal threat to the consumers' identities and well-being by some, others may perceive it as harmless and favourable. Thus, brands that do not have a (long) track record of brand activism are operating on a fine line between consumer delight and outrage. The chances and risks to elicit a more extreme reaction in either direction are quite high, resulting in total support or allegations of deception (Vredenburg et al., 2020). A generation that is particularly concerned and sceptical towards brand activism claims and practices are millennials. They are not only paying attention to the actual products but go beyond this by observing the companies' (un)ethical behaviour. This is why millennials do not hold back in regards to rewarding and supporting (buycotting) or punishing (boycotting) companies, depending on how they resonate with the brand's ethos (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019).

As highlighted in the literature, the perception of brand activism can differ across consumers. Due to authenticity being key to this concept as well as finding an answer to our research question, we want to measure the consumers' perceived brand authenticity (PBA). In order to do so, Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin and Grohmann (2015) have developed a framework called the 'PBA-scale'. In this context, they (2015, p.203) define PBA as "the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful toward itself (continuity), true to its consumers (credibility), motivated by caring and responsibility (integrity) and able to support consumers in being true to themselves (symbolism)". Continuity makes a brand authentic as it refers to the company's timelessness, heritage and the high probability of the brand's future existence (Beverland, 2005; Morhart et al., 2015). A brand's credibility depends on its willingness and competence to stand by its promises as well as their ability to be transparent and sincere towards customers (Morhart et al., 2015). This dimension can also be related to brand quality as this concerns how a business' efforts fulfil customers' expectations (Frazier & Lassar, 1996). Furthermore, integrity determines the extent of authenticity by addressing how



well a brand adheres to their values and examines whether they truly care for their customers. More specifically, an authentic brand should not have a commercial agenda and is rather actively talked about by people who feel intrinsically encouraged to do so (Morhart et al., 2015). Lastly, symbolism is defined as “the symbolic quality of the brand that consumers can use to define who they are or who they are not” (Morhart et al., 2015, p.203). This dimension may represent a variety of values, responsibilities and relationships. Table 1 provides an overview of the 15 items that each dimension consists of.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Item</b>
<b>Continuity</b>	• A brand with a history
	• A timeless brand
	• A brand that survives times
	• A brand that survives trends
<b>Credibility</b>	• A brand that will not betray you
	• A brand that accomplishes its value promise
	• An honest brand
<b>Integrity</b>	• A brand that gives back to its consumers
	• A brand with moral principles
	• A brand true to a set of moral values
	• A brand that cares about its consumers
<b>Symbolism</b>	• A brand that adds meaning to people’s lives
	• A brand that reflects important values people care about
	• A brand that connects people with their real selves
	• A brand that connects people with what is really important

*Table 1: The dimensions and items of the PBA-scale (inspired by Morhart et al., 2015)*

According to Morhart et al. (2015), it appears that when consumers assess a brand’s authenticity, they closely examine the organisation’s communication and search for cues that insinuates that the brand is actually walking the walk. As we are examining the perceived level of authenticity in the brand activism context, the four dimensions of PBA seem to be suitable for this thesis and thus will be applied and implemented throughout our discussion in chapter 5. These dimensions serve as a guideline and overlap with the other mentioned factors (e.g. trust, intentions) that determine the perceived authenticity of brand activism (Morhart et al., 2015).

## 2.2.4 Brand activism categories

As mentioned previously, brand activism can be perceived in various ways. Hence, it is important to clearly distinguish between the level of authenticity of brands' practised activism by elaborating upon the most essential categories of brand activism.

In their theory-driven typology of brand activism, Vredenburg et al. (2020) actually explain and differentiate between four categories of brand activism, namely absence, silence, authentic and inauthentic. Two of these were further focused on in this thesis while all four of them serve as a fundamental base to establish a new category later on (chapter 2.2.4.3). Each of Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) categories are represented by one of the quadrants in the formed two-by-two matrix (Figure 3). In order to position brands in the suitable quarter, the typology considers four key characteristics that brands should ideally fulfil and align which include a brand's prosocial purpose, values, marketing messaging and corporate practices (Vredenburg et al., 2020).



Figure 3: Typology of brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020)

In this context, a brand's purpose is one of the key indicators as to whether a brand is seen as an authentic activist and focuses on how the business contributes to the society and community (The British Academy, 2019). A purpose can be perceived as a supportive tool to educate society while it can also give brands a sense of responsibility to induce change (Moorman, 2020). In terms of a business' values, it is crucial to align these with the values of the socio-political stance that they are taking. Some consumer groups can therefore be more attracted to a brand whereas others might feel disconnected and no longer resonate with the company's values anymore. Messaging as a key characteristic can be defined as the activist's marketing messages, communicating a certain vision which can determine customers' purchase-decisions. When the other three factors are coherently adhered to, the messaging can help to establish positive brand equity. Finally, the practices of brands refer to how they actively support the

prosocial cause and how this is interpreted by their stakeholders. These actions should also represent the established purpose and values (Vredenburg et al., 2020) and can be perceived subjectively in regards to the public stand (Eisenberg, 1982). The extent of the societal impact varies depending on how deeply the practices are integrated into the brand as a whole. When either one of these four characteristics is lacking or missing, brands have a higher risk to be perceived inauthentic. Overall, these four characteristics can help measure a brand's authenticity level and identify its brand activism category (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the relationship between such factors is often obscure or might overlap in practice (Wettstein & Baur, 2016). Therefore, it can be difficult to classify a brand into one specific quadrant.

In the typology matrix (Figure 3), each quadrant embodies a distinctive category of brand activism. Quadrant one (Q1) entails 'Absence of Brand Activism' and refers to companies that have not implemented any of the four components as well as are also not likely to do so in the near future. Hence, customers do not have high expectations for the respective brands to engage in any form of activism. However, since nowadays society continues to pressure companies to take a stance, such corporations are making an effort to become more involved in activism (Vredenburg et al., 2018, 2020). In these cases, transparency is key to convince customers to trust the brands and that their efforts to develop activist characteristics are genuine (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010). This can be challenging as these brands have no suitable reputation or track record relating to brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

The second quadrant (Q2) covers 'Silent Brand Activism'. The corporations positioned in this quarter are actively supporting societal issues by integrating them into their core and purpose. Mostly, they have a reputation of a long-term commitment to prosocial practices but behave rather discreetly and behind the scenes. These brands are generally smaller with a low influence on the marketplace. Merely the 'messaging' characteristic is missing as they do not actively communicate about their commitment and actions. The risk of a silent brand activist to become an authentic one is rather low as it solely involves adjusting and increasing their marketing messages. Furthermore, these brands have already been loyal to their purpose, values and practices over a long timeframe which also decreases the threat of scepticism (Vredenburg et al., 2018, 2020).

Quadrant three (Q3) is focusing on 'Authentic Brand Activism'. This quadrant includes brands that have been able to truly align all four characteristics and are therefore perceived to be authentic. Authentic brands are the most superior ones compared to other types of brand activists as these can provide the strongest brand equity results as well as act like catalysts for societal issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020). These brands also have a lower risk to evoke negative feelings amongst consumers as they have an appropriate track record to justify their actions. The messages of such brands are rather precise and straightforward instead of making general and inadequate claims which can be complicated to substantiate (Vredenburg et al., 2018, 2020). Authentic Brand activism is further elaborated upon in chapter 2.2.4.1.

'Inauthentic Brand Activism' which is located in Q4, refers to companies that intentionally communicate their support of societal issues. However, their values and/or purpose do not correspond with the societal cause as their corporate practices often do not reflect their efforts,

or they actively hide them. As a result, consumers can be provoked to perceive the brand's activism as deceitful, inauthentic and phony, consequently evoking negative brand equity. Such companies act unethically and can thus harm or delay the process of making positive societal changes as they may confuse consumers to trust any type of brand activism, even the authentic one. As further described in chapter 2.2.4.2, Inauthentic Brand Activism can also be categorised as 'woke-washing' (Vredenburg et al., 2018, 2020).

Deriving from this typology (Vredenburg et al., 2020) and other authors' research (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a; Morhart et al., 2015; Sobande, 2019), we focus on three key categories of brand activism during the remainder of this study. On the one hand, one of these is 'Authentic Brand Activism' as this perception is the one that companies strive and aim for the most when intentionally engaging in activism. On the other hand, the aforementioned 'Inauthentic Brand Activism' or so-called 'woke-washing' is another central category as such brands are lacking genuine practices and interests, making it important to be recognised and comprehend their perception. Finally, we contribute to the research by adding on a new category of brand activism, namely our so-called 'Brand Activist Aspirants', which refers to brands that shift their efforts from a non-activist towards a brand activist approach. This category can also not be found in Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) matrix yet. Hence, from our perspective, such brands have so far been neglected by previous research, making it apparent and of high interest to be studied. Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) 'Silent Brand Activism' and 'Absence of Brand Activism' are of no further interest in this thesis as these types are either not easily identifiable by consumers or, in the latter, basically brands that do not practise any form of brand activism. Hence, the perception of these two were not considered throughout the rest of this paper.

### **2.2.4.1 Authentic Brand Activism**

Within brand activism, authenticity is vital for companies in order to be able to achieve marketing success as well as to create an impact or change that they want to achieve with their commitment. Moreover, as consumers are confronted with an enormous amount of content, they look for authenticity in brands as a differentiator (Morhart et al., 2015). These demands are leading to brands feeling an increasing pressure to not only showcase their commitment superficially but also in an authentic manner, supported by meaningful actions (Sobande, 2019). This is also reflected in previous studies showing that consumers only identify themselves with a brand if its efforts and activities are observed to be authentic, believing it portrays its true values and character (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). Marketing scholars like Moorman (2020) and Kotler and Sarkar (2018a) also emphasise the significance of authenticity when taking a stance as well as the risks that come along with acting phony or bogus. Particularly Moorman (2020) believes that too many brands are too focused on the perils instead of concentrating on the possible progression and benefits of engaging in brand activism.

In the context of brand activism, authenticity is given when brands fulfil and align four key characteristics, according to Vredenburg et al. (2020) which are defined to be essential in order for a company's actions to be perceived authentic. Looking at these, the core purpose and values

are seen as a reflection of employees and the brand promise as well as how the stakeholders' interests are approached and integrated by the firm. Marketing messaging refers to all types of communication that circulates from and about the brand whereas the corporate practices include the stakeholders' perceptions towards these activities. If the purpose and values are matching with the corporate practices and marketing communication, it can be said that a brand engages in authentic brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Hence, "each of these four factors [...] influences, determines, and builds on one another in a holistic system to create authenticity" (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p.449). With this alignment of all four characteristics in place, stakeholders are prone to perceive the brand's commitment to be relevant, genuine and sincere (Vredenburg et al., 2020). To ensure and preserve this perception, brands should step into the consumers' perspective to understand their interpretations and expectations towards the support of the chosen cause (Morhart et al., 2015; Vredenburg et al., 2020). This also pertains to the comprehension of "the nature of authenticity of their branded products and services, as well as its drivers and consequences" (Morhart et al., 2015, p.201).

Lin (2018) coincides with Vredenburg et al. (2020) in terms of the importance to build a strong purpose as a solid foundation to authentically engage in brand activism. Hereby, he stresses that the purpose must be rooted in the core identity of a company as well as go beyond the overall goal of profit realisation, expressing the values and mission genuinely. This authentic depiction is also likely to have a positive effect on the company's stakeholders such as "employees to be more productive, customers to be more loyal, and investors to be more patient with the company" (Lin, 2018, p.1597).

#### **2.2.4.2 Inauthentic Brand Activism**

Unfortunately, not all brands are practising authentic brand activism and have a genuine interest in supporting issues and causes through a value- and purpose-driven marketing strategy. As previously mentioned, such inauthentic brand activism efforts are also referred to as so-called 'woke-washing' (Vredenburg et al., 2020). This practice derives from the African American term 'woke' which stands for being awake and aware of social injustice (Herbert, 2020). Hence, a company that is 'woke' is challenging structural and social injustices like privileges or oppression by showing solidarity or resistance (Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Contrary, firms are woke-washing when they are "attempting to market themselves as being concerned with issues of inequality and social injustice" (Sobande, 2019, p.2740) although not showing commitment to these and having an obscure, undetermined or even no track record of practices concerning social issues (Vredenburg et al., 2018). By adopting adequate political or social values and causes, brands aim to positively influence the position and marketing of their products or even hide exploitative business processes (Herbert, 2020). This imbalance points out the discrepancy between the communication and actual implemented practices (Vredenburg et al., 2018).

Referring back to Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) aligned characteristics of authentic brand activism (chapter 2.2.4.1), woke-washing is "exemplifying inauthentic brand activism in which activist marketing messaging about the focal sociopolitical issue is not aligned with a brand's purpose, values, and corporate practice" (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p.445). In addition, Morhart et al.

(2015) highlight that inconsistency as well as a lack of transparency and honesty can make a brand seem to be inauthentic. With such missing or detached factors, it is almost impossible to be perceived authentic and it takes time and effort to develop a positive association to brand activism. Also, for brands with little or no established record of previous corporate practices it is tough to build up an authentic image, especially when lacking appropriate messaging, purpose or values (Vredenburg et al., 2020). However, as mentioned in chapter 2.2.3, even actual authentic brand activism can also be perceived deceptive if many brands take a stance on the same issue, appearing to be a marketing ploy (Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2018).

As more and more brands seem to become brand activists, their underlying motives are increasingly scrutinised in terms of truthfulness and credibility (Vredenburg et al., 2018). However, for stakeholders it can be difficult to identify when brands are practising woke-washing as it is not always obvious and rather hidden in their marketing and PR practices (Ashton, 2020). Indicators for them to identify such brands can be the timing, type of actions and frequency of brand activist efforts. In terms of timing, it should be observed whether the corporation is only acting on trending topics that obtain high awareness at that moment or if it is also using its great influence to highlight other topics that are rarely talked about. Furthermore, the type of action can indicate the genuineness of a corporation as it is a big difference if a brand is only communicating their stance or if this is followed by concrete actions that are implemented in any case. Finally, the frequency clearly showcases if brands regularly act on issues that represent their values or if it is a one-off stunt (Böhmer, 2021). Such inauthentic one-off stunts are not sustainable and can have crucial negative impacts on the corporation in the long run as well as seriously damage and risk other brands' genuine commitments by destroying the trust in marketing (Christe, 2019; Mahdawi, 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Kotler and Sarkar (2018a) also highlight that inauthenticity is the greatest threat to brands as it has a negative effect on brand trust. This lack of trust which is due to vague marketing messages and business practices, results in brand activism efforts being less likely to generate actual social change (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

In the literature, Pepsi is named as a best practice example for Inauthentic Brand Activism. In 2017, one of the brand's campaigns with reality star Kendall Jenner backfired as "[t]he ad co-opted imagery of a peaceful protestor facing down armed troops and made light of the [Black Lives Matter] movement, as Jenner delivered a can of Pepsi to police and the protest turned into a block party" (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p.451). Without any relation of Pepsi's purpose or values as well as brand activist communication to this movement and the related history, (Vredenburg et al., 2020) the brand was publicly accused of an inappropriate representation by "play[ing] down the sacrifices people have historically taken in utilizing protests" (Victor, 2017, n.p.). After first publishing a statement supporting the intention of the campaign, Pepsi backed down and apologised for the controversial advertisement. As a consequence, the brand took down the campaign and paused the further rollout (Victor, 2017).

As demonstrated in this example, inauthentic brand activism can have severe consequences and create a substantial backlash (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Research shows that inauthenticity in itself is enough to negatively affect the brand as well as its products. As a result, consumers might not wish to be associated with such hypocritical actions and companies

(Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020). With today's power of the internet and social media platforms, companies are facing an increasing pressure as their actions are constantly observed. For instance, they have to fear negative videos going viral or trending hashtags as these can reach billions of people globally within seconds (Lin, 2018). To penalise brands for their unethical or careless behaviour, practices and motives, consumers may even call for a boycott which translates into a loss in sales and decreasing stock prices (Albrecht et al., 2013; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019).

### **2.2.4.3 Brand Activist Aspirants**

As mentioned previously, many brands feel the need and pressure from society to take a public stance on societal issues. Thus, numerous corporations get involved in different public topics and position themselves by stating their opinions or taking corresponding actions. This has shed a light on brands that are authentically engaging in brand activism (chapter 2.2.4.1) as well as the ones that are wanting to be perceived this way but end up practising woke-washing. However, these definitions are only taking into account the brands that are doing a good job as well as the ones that are trying to but fail due to poor implementation. Besides these brands, we see many companies that only spoke up recently without having any track record of brand activism, indicating that these expressed beliefs have not been integrated into the companies' core initially. Hence, we believe that there is the need for a defined intermediate level of brand activism which refers to brands who are newcomers to brand activism and are shifting from a non-activist to an activist approach. Stemming from the idea and term of the social-purpose immigrants (chapter 2.1.3.2) (Vilá & Bharadwaj, 2017) we define such shifting brands as Brand Activist Aspirants.

According to the Cambridge English Dictionary (2021), an aspirant is "someone who very much wants to achieve something" as well as "seeking to attain a desired position or status" (Merriam-Webster, 2021). These definitions greatly describe our idea of a Brand Activist Aspirant as, in this context, we refer to brands that take a stance for the first time and by that want to achieve a certain perception and image on the market. More precisely, these aspirants are brands that have not yet implemented any activist engagement and/or aligned vital factors such as Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) four key characteristics (prosocial purpose, values, marketing messaging and corporate practices) but aim to engage in brand activism and adapt their behaviour accordingly. Hence, similar to the social-purpose immigrants (Vilá & Bharadwaj, 2017), Brand Activist Aspirants initially do not follow a value- and society-driven strategy as well as intentionally take a stance in regard to a societal issue. As the literature has shown (Morhart et al., 2015), consistency is key in brand activism, and enforcing such a strategy should be well thought through. Thus, it is vital to gradually implement these key characteristics, requiring endurance and persistence (Vredenburg et al., 2020). While being in this transitioning mode, Brand Activist Aspirants are vulnerable, and their commitments can go either way, depending on how well they implement their strategy.

Unlike social-purpose immigrants, Brand Activist Aspirants do not necessarily "belong to firms that are good corporate citizens and are committed to progress on environmental and social goals" (Vilá & Bharadwaj, 2017, p.96). Additionally, an aspirant's prior history as well as

image might have an effect on its level of perceived authenticity as, e.g., a negative track record of actions transmits a weak brand image.

How exactly and if this track record actually influences the perceived authenticity of Brand Activist Aspirants has not yet been proven. Thus, with our study, we want to further investigate and examine such shifting brands and scrutinise how this may affect the brand's perception and authenticity from the eyes of female millennial consumers.

## **2.2.5 The outcomes of brand activism**

Brand activism can lead to favourable outcomes for both brands (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019) as well as their customers (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). For brands, some favourable outcomes include positive impacts on marketing results, a possible competitive advantage (Alcañiz, Cáceres & Pérez, 2010; Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2007; Mantovani, de Andrade & Negrão, 2017) and increasing sales due to a higher consumer purchase intention (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore & Hill, 2006; Chang & Cheng, 2015; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Moreover, brands who align themselves with a worthy cause that simultaneously matches with their values are expected to experience an increase in positive word-of-mouth (Thomas, Mullen & Fraedrich, 2011). Beyond that, companies behaving socially responsible are inclined to portray a more satisfactory brand image (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2007; Ulke and Schons 2016, cited in Vredenburg et al., 2020). An improved image is also positively affected by a brand activist's actions that highlight their trustworthiness such as long-term responsibilities towards societal causes as well as donations. By presenting this dedication, a business is more prone to be perceived sincere and legitimate which consequently increases the likelihood of gaining a positive brand image (Alcañiz, Cáceres & Pérez, 2010).

Furthermore, Vredenburg et al. (2020) reflect upon a stronger sense of brand equity as a result of companies' long-term commitment regarding their societal stance(s) which resonates with the philosophy of Kotler and Sarkar (2018a). As stated by Keller (1993, p.17), "Customer-based brand equity occurs when the consumer is aware of the brand and holds some favourable, strong, and unique brand associations in memory". When consumers perceive such brands as ethical and sincere to their values, positive connotations of previous and future campaigns are connected to the consumers' knowledge of the brand (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Brand activism can also be used by businesses as a disruptive strategy. One example that managed to successfully implement this is the now-famous brand Oatly which, with the help of activism, evolved from a functional, ordinary brand into a socially significant (Koch, 2020) or even 'iconic' one due to its bold positioning in societal debates (Holt, 2004).

From a consumer's perspective, identifying with a brand activist who supports societal cause that aligns with their values, can help satisfy their fundamental personal needs such as their self-enhancement and self-continuity (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). The stronger consumers resonate with a brand, the greater their perception and willingness to advocate for it. Having a higher self-brand similarity therefore also impacts the extent to which consumers identify themselves with the brand. As a result of a more positive relationship between the brand and



the consumer, a company can attain better marketing results (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). For example, such customers are willing to pay a premium price for products or services from activist brands due to their high emotional bond with the brand, going beyond the pricing rationale (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019).

However, brands practising brand activism can also experience negative outcomes in case they do not properly align their behaviour with their core, therefore being perceived as sheer advertising and marketing efforts by customers. Such experiences can stimulate customer scepticism as campaigns might be perceived ethically doubtful and manipulative (Chang & Cheng, 2015; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). There is also a high probability that the company potentially alienates certain groups of consumers as they might not resonate with the corresponding cause (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). As previously mentioned, poor implementation methods can evoke boycotts due to contrasting norms, values and beliefs (Baek, 2010; Basci, 2014). Hence, unfavourable outcomes can damage the brand's reputation and/or image, affect customer perceptions and decrease purchase intentions (Klein, Smith & John, 2002). Misleading claims through marketing and advertising may also result in customer confusion (Vredenburg et al., 2020) and can negatively affect the consumer's moral foundation (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Thus, it is important to be concrete about statements and actions as well as set measurable objectives that clearly demonstrate the brand's future strategy to forge social change (Vredenburg et al., 2018).

## **2.2.6 Brand activism in fashion and lingerie**

Fashion is a powerful tool that can be used by individuals to make a political statement and can even unite people to raise awareness for a societal cause. As mentioned previously, this is especially relevant in today's society since it is essential for both brands and consumers to engage in the larger conversation (Parker, 2019). This conversation includes matters such as the cultural pressure to incorporate inclusivity, feminism and highlight activist activities like the 'Me Too' movement which shines a light on sexual harassment (me too., 2021). As many brands are standing up for such societal issues, not plenty enough are actually taking actions nor precautions to make sure that these situations are avoided in the future. Nonetheless, there is an increasing number of companies getting involved with similar matters by promoting, for instance, gender equality initiatives (Ferrante, 2019).

In the fashion industry, designers and bloggers have taken active approaches by creating, for example, numerous collections that are inspired by or dedicated to societal matters. Such issues are further reinforced by fashion consumers who are spreading awareness across social media to show support and drive change worldwide. Brand activism in fashion can even be used as a strategy to oppose a new government and therefore can help to advocate for a better future for an entire nation (Beltran-Rubio, 2019). Beyond that, fashion companies have to be persistently considerate of how they engage in brand activism and ensure that their promises are supported by ongoing actions to avoid being perceived inauthentic (Stoppard, 2020).

Advocating for equal fairness and social justice amongst fashion consumers has only increased further due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For examples, since the beginning of the virus' outbreak at the end of 2019, fashion consumers have been overall more conscious of low-paid fashion workers who struggle to pull through the crisis. Therefore, brands are pressured by customers to provide better work conditions and cease exploitation. Due to the pandemic, brands are also more flexible in their employment as many operate remotely which can provide an opportunity to adhere better to D&I objectives (McKinsey & Company, 2021). Beyond that, D&I is also seen important in terms of sizing as the outcry for body positivity in fashion increases. On the American market, most companies only sell clothing up to size 12, with everything above being defined as plus-size. Against that, actually 68 per cent of US women wear a size 14 or above, making the average female a 'plus-size woman'. Therefore, companies are urged to not overlook this large group of consumers and incorporate a wider range by adopting inclusive sizing to include females of every size (Plunkett, 2015).

Prioritising D&I is also particularly important in the lingerie market due to models being more exposed and only scarcely dressed compared to fashion models in general. This is reinforced by consumers who desire brands to showcase 'real' women of different body types over the ones that are portrayed by the perfectly looking, retouched models who wear size zero (Breux, 2018). These skinny models have been portraying an unhealthy beauty ideal which has remained almost the same over the past two decades. These beauty standards can be defined as slim women with a thin waist, flat stomach, small hips, skinny legs, flawless skin and large breasts (Groesz, Levine & Murnen, 2002; Harrison, 2003; Owen & Laurel-Seller, 2000). However, such stereotypes are no longer appreciated in today's society as consumers want to feel represented by more realistic women. This is especially the case for lingerie brands, with consumers prioritising those that highlight body positivity, comfortable products and a great fit (Rapp, 2019). One reason for this is a societal push towards more inclusive feminism, leading to women wanting companies to integrate a higher purpose by e.g., vouching for diversity and social activism (Breux, 2018). These rising consumer demands are further reflected by a survey with 1.500 American participants conducted by Accenture (2018b). Here, approximately 70 per cent of the surveyed millennials ranging from 21- to 37-year-olds stated that they tend to purchase from brands promoting diversity and inclusivity over the ones that do not (Accenture, 2018b). In fact, some lingerie brands recognise that the mindset of this younger generation is changing and that consumers expect to see various sizes and shapes, therefore making it their priority to showcase more diversity and inclusivity (Hunkemöller, 2021a).

An example of a lingerie brand that successfully showcases diversity and inclusion is Savage x Fenty, founded by the singer Rihanna in 2017. The brand actively touches upon societal topics such as feminism, body positivity and female empowerment by i.a. portraying models of all body shapes and nationalities (White, 2020). This point of view has contradicted various lingerie brands for many years as previous research presents that brands associate larger models with a negative brand image and that stereotypical thin models are often identified with social acceptance and success. However, besides brands and media arguing that 'thinness sells' there is a lack of empirical research actually supporting these claims (Watson, Lecki & Lebcir, 2015). Nevertheless, this vision is changing as an increasing number of lingerie brands is making an effort to represent their consumers in a more realistic and inclusive manner. Such brands are

providing a broader size range and show more racial and body diversity in their communication, tackling societal issues such as size and racial discrimination (Peters, 2018; Rapp, 2019).

These activist initiatives can also be viewed as a response to the social movement of body positivity. This movement drives upon the ideology that anyone merits a positive attitude towards their body. Its message has manifested itself by, for instance, individuals sharing their cellulite, stretchmarks and love handles on social media (Benberry, 2020). Brands adopting size appropriation contrast body positivity by providing a ‘safe’ image of curvier women while their target audience still remains ‘normal’ sized consumers. This implies that they do not actually adjust their sizing and grading systems, making it a marketing ploy (Peters, 2018). Another positive example of a strong supporter of the body positivity movement is the lingerie brand Aerie who incorporates this ideology in their own philosophy by focusing on realness and stopping to retouch their pictures (Benberry, 2020).

In response to consumers’ demands, many fashion and lingerie brands have now turned into body positive activists to communicate social acceptance for all body types and challenge the stigma of the old-fashioned ‘perfect’ body (Benberry, 2020). However, it is yet to become apparent whether these companies are actually creating new standards and adjusting their entire brands to it or if they are simply jumping on the bandwagon without making the necessary efforts (Peters, 2018).

## **2.3 Key takeaways**

Summarising the literature, brand activism is a phenomenon descending from cause-related marketing as well as CSR and is becoming an increasingly significant part of today’s society. Ever since CSR emerged in 1953, respective initiatives have continuously evolved over time due to higher pressure on companies to respond to economic and social matters. Nonetheless, CSR efforts still remain solely marketing- and corporate-driven actions whereas brands nowadays are becoming more society-driven, indicating that mere CSR practices do no longer suffice. Integrating a higher purpose is strongly associated with society-driven businesses and can therefore also be affiliated with brand activism. As the awareness towards societal issues increases, more and more brands are attempting to pursue a social-purpose strategy even though they have grown thus far without having such a vision. These companies are referred to as ‘social-purpose immigrants’. Such brands with a purpose concentrate on ‘why’ they exist in relation to society while brand activism emphasises ‘what’ actions should be taken to actively work towards change.

Overall, brand activism can be defined as a marketing strategy that helps brands to differentiate themselves in their marketplace by standing up for societal and political concerns. For brand activists, it is crucial to ensure a clear alignment between their actions and core identity when taking such a stance. Having an appropriate alignment also provides a higher chance to result in a greater influence on society which is ultimately the end goal. Nonetheless, adopting a brand activist strategy is perceived to be a relatively risky and disruptive approach, but neutrality is no longer an option for brands that aim to remain relevant in the future due to the rise in

customers' expectations and demands. Hence, to be successful, brands should be prepared to make a long-term commitment while remaining true to their purpose.

Some activists are more engaged in a particular area of brand activism such as social, workplace, political, environmental economic or legal activism. Especially the area of social activism experiences increased awareness in terms of social standards and brands' behaviours compared to previous decades. For example, brands who are publicly embracing diversity and inclusivity can be specified as social activists which is becoming extremely relevant in our society.

Besides these various areas of brand activism, activist brands can also be perceived and classified differently. Therefore, Vredenburg et al. (2020) established a theory-based typology classifying brands into four different categories of activism, including absence, silence, authentic and inauthentic. In order to determine which category represents a brand most appropriately, the framework utilises and weighs four identified key characteristics, namely the organisation's prosocial purpose, values, marketing messaging and corporate practices. When a brand appropriately aligns all four characteristics, it can be considered authentic. For this dissertation, solely two of these existing categories from the framework were focused on and investigated, namely Authentic and Inauthentic Brand Activism. Particularly authenticity is key for businesses to reach their brand activism objectives and can often differentiate a brand from its competitors. Therefore, the four dimensions of PBA (continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism) developed by Morhart et al. (2015) will be utilised in combination with Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) typology in chapter 5, allowing us to examine the consumers' perceived brand authenticity in the context of brand activism.

Apart from these two categories (Authentic and Inauthentic Brand Activism), we established a third category to fill the identified gap of transforming brands, namely Brand Activist Aspirants. These brands are similar to the social-purpose immigrants as they have not taken a brand activist approach before but are recently making an effort to take an active stance regarding societal issues. They are more prone to criticism due to their lack of experience regarding activist engagement and have not yet properly incorporated all of the aforementioned characteristics. The future of these aspirants is highly determined upon how well they integrate their activist strategy and align their core identity with the societal cause.

Nonetheless, if brand activism is implemented appropriately, brands can benefit from e.g., a competitive advantage, higher sales and positive word-of-mouth. It can also reinforce a company's brand equity in case they are genuinely dedicated to a societal cause for a longer period of time or used as a disruptive strategy. Therefore, in order to experience the advantages of brand activism, companies are required to carefully consider their strategy since misalignments could also lead to negative effects such as alienating consumer groups or provoking consumer boycotts.

Finally, put into context, brand activism is becoming increasingly popular in the fashion and lingerie market. Throughout the past years, fashion has been utilised to make statements and can therefore be seen as a significant part of today's societal conversation. There has been an identifiable trend of consumers demanding fashion brands to adopt a more inclusive and diverse approach. This has also been particularly important in the lingerie industry as consumers

strongly value representability and prefer brands standing up for body positivity and female empowerment. Hence, a growing number of lingerie brands are taking an activist approach in terms of body positivity and aspire to empower women by conveying social acceptance for all body types. However, time will show if these brands are acting authentically and in it for the long run or if they are merely adhering to society's demands without truly integrating changes and thus presenting inauthentic behaviour.

## **3 Methodology**

This chapter presents an outline of and justification for the methodological approach that has been taken in order to answer our research question. Adhering to the structure of the research onion by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009), we commence by introducing the research philosophy, approach and design, followed by the data collection method that gives an insight into the chosen method as well as the selected industry, participants and brands. While the data analysis explains the examination process of the collected material, the final two sections refer to the quality of our research, including the authenticity, trustworthiness and reflexivity of the study, as well as the ethical considerations.

### **3.1 Research philosophy**

The research philosophy is a significant facet of a research strategy as it reflects upon how knowledge is elaborated upon and where it originates from. The philosophy depends on how the researcher perceives the world as well as the relationship between knowledge and the process through which it is established. Consequently, it affects the remainder of the research project since the philosophy influences the selected methods and also supports the writer's assumptions that follow (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). These assumptions are determined by the scholar's ontology and epistemology which are both important features of a research strategy but are generally incorporated in the background (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The ontology focuses on "[The] philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.47) whereas the epistemology explains the nature of knowledge and what assumptions are considered acceptable in a particular field of research (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

As visualised in the four rings model (Figure 4) established by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015), the core of a research project is the ontology. This ontology consists of two aspects, namely objectivism and subjectivism. Objectivism represents the view that "social entities exist independent of social actors" (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p.110) while the subjectivist perspective contrasts this view, arguing that "social phenomena are created from the perceptions and consequent actions of social actors" (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p.111). The focus of this thesis is on subjectivism as this vision also suggests that perceptions shape phenomena and that these are constantly in a state of flux. Our study predominantly

concentrates on consumers' different viewpoints towards the phenomenon of brand activism; hence we ought the ontological subjectivism position to be appropriate.

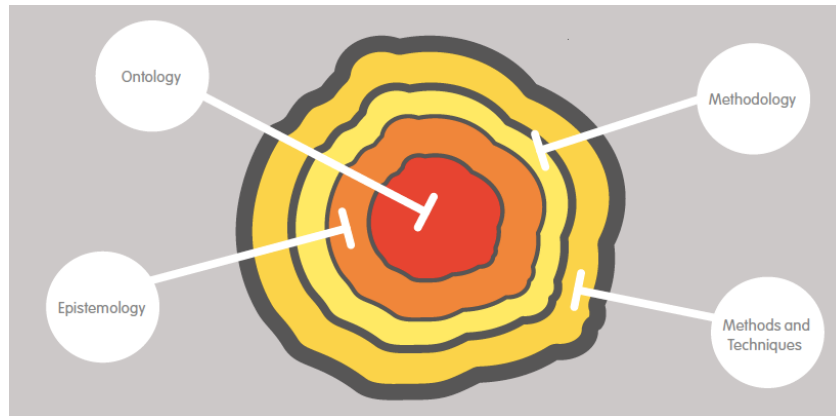


Figure 4: The four rings model by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015)

Epistemology is included in the second inner ring of the four rings model and can be defined as “the study of theories of knowledge; how we know what we know” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.51). There are two contrasting epistemologies, namely positivism and social constructionism (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). On the one hand, positivism concentrates on the ability to observe phenomena and tends to involve existing theory that aids the development of hypotheses (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). On the other hand, social constructionism refers to an approach that addresses how people influence the ‘societal reality’ by focusing on what and how individuals communicate with one another whilst considering that each person experiences a different reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Shotter, 1993; Watzlawick, 1984). Here, the behaviour of others is interpreted by and dependent on the scholar’s own view on reality whereas positivist approaches research in a ‘value-free’ way, meaning that they attempt to exclude their own values as much as possible (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Consequently, we approached the research as social constructionists since our objective is to gather diverse perspectives from various individuals and provide rich explanations about their behaviour. The epistemology is highly relevant as it allows us to comprehend individuals’ subjective experiences and gather data more naturally instead of artificially. However, data collected through the lens of a social constructionist can be fairly difficult to interpret as well as time consuming (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

To conclude, we determine this epistemological position applicable as we aspire to gather an in-depth understanding of how Brand Activist Aspirants and Authentic Brand Activists in the lingerie market are currently perceived by female millennial consumers.

## 3.2 Research approach

The research approach determines the relationship between theory and research and how it will be applied in a study (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Thus, this approach must be consistently implemented throughout our research project (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). There are three common strategies amongst researchers that affect this relationship, namely deductive,

inductive and abductive. Compared to deductive and inductive, the abductive process is a relatively new approach which has been proposed to overcome the limitations associated with the other two processes (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). A deductive strategy tends to focus on creating hypotheses from existing theory and is therefore more familiar in quantitative research. Contrarily, the inductive approach prioritises data collection and generates theory based on the data analysis, thus is more popular regarding qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Dubois and Gadde (2002) explain that the abductive approach is a mixture of the previous strategies and emphasises ‘theory development’ rather than ‘theory generation’. This seems suitable to our research project as we strive to research the phenomenon of Brand Activist Aspirants compared to Authentic Brand Activists by applying and extending existing theory. With this strategy, rich data can be collected to seek for the best possible explanation by alternating between theory and empirical data (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Beyond that, this study follows an abductive process as it allows us to unravel insights such as new relationships and variables.

Having conducted a pilot study prior to this research allowed us to use the gathered takeaways as a preparation for this thesis. The pilot was executed from January until mid-March and provides us with some practical findings on the studied topic. By complementing this preparatory work with an exhaustive literature review, we enhanced the theoretical foundation of this study that sets the groundwork for our data collection. Key theories that are utilised to support our data analysis and findings include the typology of brand activism by Vredenburg et al. (2020) and the four perceived brand authenticity dimensions established by Morhart et al. (2015). Other significant concepts that are highly relevant for our data collection include i.a. social brand activism and authentic brand activism. Nonetheless, we also revised and expanded upon these concepts and theories while we prepared, conducted and analysed the empirical data. For example, the literature review helped us optimise the interview guide while the collected material resulted in new discoveries. Hence, the empirical research contributed to our theoretical framework and vice versa, leading towards a rigorous outcome to our research question.

### **3.3 Research design**

As stated by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015), the research design is a section that comprises an explanation and justification as to what, how and from where data is collected. This phase is essential as it helps to convert the research question into an actual research project (Robson, 2002), covering the overall intentions for the remainder of the study (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). The quality of the research design will also highly influence the result of the ultimate project (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

For this dissertation, we gathered qualitative data which can be characterised as non-numeric data and tends to be interactive and interpretative in nature. In addition to collecting qualitative information, it is usually generated by the researchers themselves as the process requires thorough preparation, research must be conducted and often transcribed as well as other actions must be taken. Since this type of data can be perceived as subjective, the researchers should

also contemplate how their role could potentially influence the research process. Hence, making it important to (video)record the conversations to ensure that all (non)verbal communication is captured. Qualitative research involves a creative process and strives to establish an understanding of how participants make sense of the world (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Since the purpose of our study is to obtain a deeper understanding of female millennial consumers' perceptions towards brand activism, thorough data collection is necessary to generate valuable insights. Hence, the qualitative methodology was decided upon due to the nature of our research question as well as the selected ontology and epistemology.

Although qualitative research can provide scholars with rich data leading towards potential new ideas (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015), others have criticised qualitative data for being too subjective as well as impressionistic. The data often relies predominantly on the researcher's own perspective and can lack transparency as the qualitative information can be difficult to interpret in terms of how and what steps were taken to argue for the study's outcomes (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Nonetheless, the exhaustive data drawn from qualitative research can reinforce the understanding process which is useful to comprehend how individuals form their perceptions and responses. Moreover, the qualitative research process is naturally more flexible compared to quantitative methods since a researcher can adjust the research in correspondence with emerging ideas and concerns, allowing a progressive process (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The qualitative essence of this study contributes to the literature as there is a relatively scarce amount of research conducted on the phenomenon of brand activism, especially from the consumers' perspectives in one particular market, and therefore presents great value.

Beyond that, our research design followed an exploratory approach which tends to be an appropriate strategy when the aim is to discover new insights and examine phenomena from new perspectives (Robson, 2002). It also aligns with our qualitative research design as these methods are generally explorative by concentrating on open-ended questions, contrasting quantitative methods which prioritises pre-coded questions (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Furthermore, exploratory studies can be conducted through three common methods including a literature review, expert interviews and focus group interviews. When conducting such a study, a researcher must be open to adjust the direction as a result of new insights, consequently leading towards a more precise research focus (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). However, remaining open towards an increasing information load can be difficult and time-consuming which sometimes causes researchers to lose focus in the data's complexity (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

Thus, this qualitative and explorative approach allows us to comprehend underlying beliefs, thoughts and assumptions, leading towards the why and how female millennial consumers feel about Brand Activist Aspirants and Authentic Brand Activists.



## 3.4 Data collection method

This data collection method entails insights into our applied qualitative research method as well as the sampling decisions regarding the selected participants (chapter 3.4.1) and brands (chapter 3.4.2).

In order to answer our research question, this thesis relies on primary data collection complemented by secondary data sources. Generally, secondary data is generated for purposes other than the conducted research and can serve as an information source that provides written insights into the studied topic. This information gathering process favours the researchers by saving time and money. Also, quality is usually much higher, particularly when the data is published by companies, making it possible to gain an understanding of exclusive information that might not have been available otherwise. Nevertheless, it is vital to always carefully examine the sources' credibility before utilising them as well as ensuring that the gathered data fits to the research purpose (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Hence, to base our research on solid knowledge, we gathered complementary secondary data that focuses on the phenomenon of brand activism, connected concepts and theories as well as three selected lingerie brands, namely Hunkemöller, Victoria's Secret and Parade Underwear (chapter 3.4.2). This desk research mainly included textual data like journal and newspaper articles, company websites and reports as well as academic websites and non-academic sources.

Beyond that, primary data was collected by conducting interviews in order to gather valuable data, ensuring that the research aim could be accomplished. According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015), primary data tends to lead towards new insights and is gathered directly by the researcher, strengthening the outcome of the research while making it more credible and reliable. One primary research method is the execution of interviews which are planned conversations regarding particular topics whilst being guided by a series of prepared questions. Such discussions enable researchers to gain valuable knowledge and an understanding of the interviewees' viewpoints. By analysing the non-verbal communication such as facial expressions or gesticulations, interviewers can read important clues that might underline or contrast statements. Nonetheless, interviews need a substantial amount of preparation and are rather time-consuming as well as more personal, thus require a higher sensitivity regarding the interviewees' confidentiality and opinions (chapter 3.7) (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Also, interviews are subjected to bias, therefore researchers need to pay attention to try not to influence respondents in their answers. This research bias cannot be completely avoided but counteracted by carefully formulating the interview questions, eliminating own presumptions and preconceptions (Kvale, 1992).

For our study, the most applicable interview technique is semi-structured interviews (SSI). These are guided open interviews that gather rich information and allow to compile a list of flexible questions that encourage a dynamic discussion (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). With the mix of closed- and open-ended as well as follow-up questions (how and why), interviewees can elaborate on their thoughts and the researchers are able to open a natural dialogue while guiding through the studied topic. Due to this flexibility, it is vital that the interviewers are well-read and familiar with the issues to guarantee the maximum outcome

(Adams, 2015). Having this in mind, an interview guide should be prepared for the researchers to outline a rough structure to avoid getting lost in the conversation but to loosely focus on the relevant information. This guide, however, should not be seen as a constraint. Such a guide is established by reviewing the research question, design and sampling method to ensure that the purpose of the interviews is clear (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). When establishing the questions, researchers must be mindful of the respondents' reactions and avoid abstract theoretical concepts and language to guarantee an easy understanding. Beyond that, leading questions should be kept to a minimum to assure honest responses. In terms of structure, the guide should be roughly organised into opening questions, questions about key topics, and closing questions. An icebreaker question at the beginning of an interview can loosen up the atmosphere and eases the beginning of the conversation (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

Based on the aforementioned and our previously held pilot study, we established an interview guide, focusing on questions related to our research problem to serve the research aim. These questions are linked to different topics that are included in our research question such as consumers' perceptions of brand activism in the lingerie market. By the means of the literature as well as the theory (Morhart et al., 2015; Vredenburg et al., 2020), we base the posed questions upon respective concepts including the brands' trustworthiness, values and their contribution to society. The final question catalogue consists out of the three previously mentioned sections with a total of 25 questions, including four supporting sub-questions (Appendix 1). As we wanted to make the three brands comparable and ensure that each brand was equally focused on, eight out of the 21 questions were repeated per brand. To give every interviewee a similar impression about the brands, complementary to their previous experience (if existent), we sent them the links to the brands' websites and Instagram presences prior to asking corresponding questions. These two platforms are the brands' main distribution channels and provide a thorough insight into their marketing communication. Here, they had a few minutes to scroll through the pages before continuing with the brand-focused discussion. During this brand-related talk, we also presented each of the brand's values to capture their understanding on these which is an essential insight to answer the posed research question. In addition to the extensive interview guide, we created a shortened version with only 17 questions including four sub-questions to receive a valuable understanding about the most important aspects from interviewees with only a limited timeframe (Appendix 1). Besides having this established guide, our semi-structured approach also enabled us to go beyond these pre-identified questions and ask follow-up ones which arose naturally from the discussions. Hereby, the laddering up technique was useful as it allowed us to encourage the interviewees to elaborate more upon their values and thoughts when being rather factual and descriptive (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

In order to get a thorough insight and deep understanding of the conversations, we decided to attend each interview with the both of us. Hereby, one took over the active interviewer role while the other took a rather passive one, keeping track of the question catalogue, stepping in if something was left out or to add on with a question for the interviewee to further elaborate upon a thought. These roles were switched prior to each interview. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as physical distance of the participants, all interviews, except two, were

conducted remotely over the video call platform Zoom. For the other two face-to-face interviews it was essential to ensure the respondents' safety by adhering to the recommended social distancing regulations. With the interviewees' explicit consent, each interview was audio recorded and transcribed into written text with the support of the specialist software 'otter.ai' to assure a detailed analysis.

Every interview was kicked off by us introducing ourselves, explaining our roles and once more thanking the interviewees for taking their time. After asking them to share a bit about themselves, we ensured again that the consent form was signed and understood in order to proceed with the interview. Moreover, we highlighted that it is possible to refuse questions or end the conversation at any point. Hereafter, the recording as well as the interviews were started which lasted around 30 to 70 minutes, depending on the expertise, elaborations and availability of the interviewees. During these conversations, we attempted to avoid and minimise the previously mentioned biases. Nevertheless, due to our lack of experience as interviewers we might still have unintentionally impacted the consumers' responses.

To round off the interviews, we asked the participants if there were any questions left open to discuss as well as informed them that we would send a follow-up e-mail with a link to a short survey. This survey consisted out of five questions and solely served the purpose to gather their demographical information such as age, nationality and occupation.

### **3.4.1 Sample and participant selection**

In order to prepare the data collection process, a sampling strategy needs to be decided on which implies "the selection of potential research participants and methods for data collection" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.137). After the evaluation of several sampling methods, a non-probability sampling design was applied with a focus on female millennial lingerie consumers. For the preceding pilot study, convenience sampling was chosen which focuses on the selection of participants based on the accessibility of these sample units. This method was particularly suitable due to the limited timeframe, with the four interviewees being selected from our nearer surroundings (Appendix 2). Although there is no way to ensure that the chosen sample reflects a specific population, it still provides value for data collection (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

In this thesis, however, we narrowed down the scope of the sampling and applied purposive sampling. For this method, the researchers know what sample units are required based on the studied purpose and are then specifically approaching potential participants, ensuring that the sample accomplishes the aim of the research (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Hence, we contacted female millennials that are highly involved in brand activism to get even richer data. After thorough research on finding suitable candidates, we approached them via LinkedIn, e-mail and WhatsApp. These interviewees have different connections to brand activism; they either work for companies that engage in brand activism such as Nike, Ben & Jerry's and Dopper, did research on and/or are generally interested and involved in the topic. In terms of the sample size, there are no specific guidelines as the size is dependent on the research question and purpose of the study. Nevertheless, it is suggested to collect data until

saturation is achieved, meaning that additional data collection does not gather new insights (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). In our case, data saturation was reached after conducting eleven interviews.

We chose female millennial lingerie consumers due to several reasons. First of all, most lingerie brands are only offering products for women, making them the key consumers. Furthermore, studies show that women seem to be more interested and affected by brand activism and cause-related marketing compared to men (Chéron, Kohlbacher & Kusuma, 2012; Moosmayer & Fuljahn, 2010; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Millennials, or Generation Y, are a much more sceptical and progressive generation than previous ones, demanding companies to engage in social issues, make a difference and take a stance (Barton, Fromm & Egan, 2012; Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). 83 per cent state that it is “important for the companies they buy from to align with their beliefs and values”, having high expectations of these to show transparency, articulate their purpose and walk the walk (5W Public Relations, 2020, p.12). Hence, they are more likely to scrutinise brands’ authenticity and motives behind their practices with nine out of ten consumers wanting to switch to brands supporting a cause (Chong, 2017). Regardless of this scepticism, millennials are overall rather optimistic in terms of believing that companies can have a positive impact and initiate change (Barton, Fromm & Egan, 2012). Being one of the largest demographic group (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a), millennials own a huge purchasing power and were expected to spend about 1.4 trillion US\$ in 2020 (5W Public Relations, 2020). Due to this, Generation Y has the ability to impact the marketplace and make corporations critically rethink their ways of conducting business (Goldman Sachs, 2021; Maggioni, Montagnini & Sebastiani, 2013).

In our context, millennials are referred to the generation of people being born between 1980 and 2000 (Goldman Sachs, 2021), sharing the same values, attitudes, morals and characteristics towards ethically driven companies (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Thus, they choose brands that they can identify with and that align with their social values (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019).

Overall, after setting the guidelines and identifying our sample, we conducted the eleven in-depth SSIs between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> of April 2021. These were held in English, with the respondents being from different nationalities and age groups within the selected generation (Table 2), making the study more generalisable and trustworthy. However, we do not consider the different nationalities to be a determining factor as we do not intend to investigate how the interviewees’ cultural backgrounds influence their perceptions of brand activism. Due to the sensitivity of the studied topic, their anonymity is kept by utilising pseudonyms instead of their actual names (chapter 3.7).

Master thesis					
Respondents Pseudonym	Age range	Nationality	Country of residence	Highest level of education	Current profession
Alicia	20-24	German	Sweden	Bachelor's degree	Student
Kate	20-24	Swedish	Sweden	Master's degree	Out of work and looking for work
Holly	20-24	German	Germany	Master's degree	Employed for wages
Charlotte	25-29	Danish	Denmark	Master's degree	Employed for wages
Iris	25-29	Finnish	Sweden	Master's degree	Employed for wages
Sophie	20-24	Dutch	The United Kingdom	Master's degree	Employed for wages
Nelly	25-29	Dutch	The Netherlands	Bachelor's degree	Employed for wages
Martha	20-24	German	Germany	Bachelor's degree	Employed for wages
Rebecca	20-24	American	The United States of America	Bachelor's degree	Employed for wages
Judy	30-34	German	Germany	Bachelor's degree	Employed for wages
Vera	25-29	Austrian	Sweden	Master's degree	Student

Table 2: Overview of interviewees for this master thesis

### 3.4.2 Brand selection

As we aim to analyse the perceptions of female millennial consumers towards lingerie brands that engage in brand activism, we decided to limit our scope and focus on only a few brands that seem to fit into the categories Brand Activist Aspirants or Authentic Brand Activism. The selection of this industry and brands has several reasons. As mentioned in chapter 2.2.6, D&I efforts are particularly important in the lingerie market. In recent years, there has been an increasing number of consumers requesting brands to change their representation and include a more diverse model portfolio while taking a stance (Breux, 2018). Hence, we consider it interesting to study the behaviour of lingerie brands in terms of these demands and their efforts to embrace diversity and inclusivity. Contextualising this, to our knowledge, no previous research has been done on lingerie brands engaging in brand activism. In terms of the brand

selection, we base our research on lingerie companies that seem to follow an activist approach or are changing and adapting their image in order to be perceived as one. As a result, we chose three seemingly progressive brands, namely Victoria's Secret, Hunkemöller and Parade Underwear, which are further looked at in the following.

### *Hunkemöller*

The Dutch lingerie brand Hunkemöller is the market leader in its field in many European countries. Envisioning to “always stay in touch with our customers, offering passionate service and sexy products in an inspiring and fun environment” (Hunkemöller, 2019, p.9), the company places its focus on their main target customers, the so-called ‘Sheros’. They describe the Shero as a millennial or Gen Z who is in touch with herself, fun, positive and always online (Hunkemöller, 2019). With its five values in touch, fun, inspiring, sexy and passionate, Hunkemöller follows its mission to “be a much loved, social and inclusive brand” (Hunkemöller, 2021b).

Not particularly having incorporated diversity into their strategy before (Hunkemöller, 2016), the corporation published a report in 2019, announcing that they aim to adapt their strategy and key pillar to become a more diverse and inclusive brand. They further elaborated upon this future journey with which they want to redefine sexy in order to adapt everything “From cultural and body shape differences to how we recruit and from our marketing to the size ranges and fits we offer” (Hunkemöller, 2019, p.65). With their recently published 2021 report, they even go a step further and introduce the additional value ‘inclusive’<sup>1</sup>, showcasing their sincere intentions as they continue to incorporate their efforts into their core. Moreover, the newest report further addresses that they specifically “strive to be inclusive for all body shapes, ethnicities and LGBTQ+ communities” (Hunkemöller, 2021a, p.49). By publishing these reports, Hunkemöller appears to be quite transparent about disclosing their strategy and future ambitions to be a size-inclusive brand. Furthermore, these aspirations also appear to be implemented in their marketing communications such as in their spring 2021 campaign ‘Celebrating Every Woman’ (Figure 5). Hence, the brand seems to be a good fit for our study, making it a potential Brand Activist Aspirant.

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<sup>1</sup> As the ‘Our Journey 2021’ report has not been published at the start of our primary data collection, the newly incorporated value ‘inclusive’ could not be considered in our study.



Figure 5: Hunkemöller's 'Celebrating Every Woman' spring 2021 campaign (Underlines, 2021)

### ***Victoria's Secret***

Victoria's Secret is the largest and most well-known American lingerie retailer, providing a luxurious shopping experience with extravagant interiors and passionate employees (Rose, Cho & Smith, 2016; Victoria's Secret, 2021). The brand is particularly popular for its iconic fashion shows, being viewed globally, that have been taking place yearly until 2018 (Hanbury, 2020; Lamare, 2020). By focusing on their values of being a sexy, iconic, powerful, passionate and exquisite brand, Victoria's Secret aims to provide a captivating experience (Limited Brands, 2015, 2021; The Retail Appointment, 2021). As the brand belongs to the 'Limited Brands' corporation, they share their mother company's mission of being "committed to building a family of the world's best fashion brands offering captivating customer experiences that drive long-term loyalty and deliver sustained growth for our shareholders" (Limited Brands, 2021).

In the 1990s and 2000s Victoria's Secret experienced an explosive success, creating a hype "which enabled the company to achieve blockbuster sales and reach global status" (Hanbury, 2020, n.p.). With their skinny and perfectly looking Victoria's Secret Angels, the corporation defined a beauty ideal that portrays feminine and sexy women (Silver-Greenberg, Rosman, Maheshwari & Stewart, 2020). However, this image started to fade in the mid-2010s as the brand missed out on the major body positivity trend "by failing to be aligned with women's evolving attitudes towards beauty, diversity, and inclusion" (Hanbury, 2020, n.p.). Hence, they faced widespread criticism for being non-realistic, outdated as well as for scandals related to their CMO Ed Razek, making controversial statements about e.g. transgender and plus-size models. This exclusive approach was also evident in their marketing communication with some ads being particularly criticised such as the 'The Perfect Body' campaign which only portrayed the 'perfect, white, skinny' woman (Figure 6) (Hanbury, 2020; Silver-Greenberg et al., 2020).



Figure 6: Victoria's Secret's 2014 controversial marketing campaign 'The Perfect Body' (Wan, 2016)

To catch up on the diversity and inclusion trend, the brand has adjusted its communication strategy in the past years from solely showcasing the typical, slim models with a 'perfect' shape to a more inclusive image, including curvier women and transgender (Figure 7) (Elan, 2020).



Figure 7: Victoria's Secret's spring 2020 campaign with trans, plus-size and older models (May, 2020)

Noticing this shift, we propose that the brand might be a candidate for our newly established Brand Activist Aspirants category.

### ***Parade Underwear***

Parade Underwear is a young American start-up that was launched in 2019, focusing on offering comfortable, sustainable and inclusive lingerie with a wide size range from XS to 3XL. As a newly established company, the brand quickly gained high popularity on Instagram due to its



recycled materials, disruptive marketing strategy and bold body positive approach (Connors, 2020; Leighton, 2020). In doing so, the only 23-year-old founder Cami Téllez made it on the 2021 ‘Forbes 30 Under 30 Retail & E-Commerce’ list (Debter, 2020). On the brand’s website, she describes how she grew up with a specific definition of sexy, seeing the typical supermodels in the storefronts (Parade Underwear, 2021b). She argues that sexiness is not one-dimensional and aims to change the way how women see themselves as well as “rewrite the American underwear story” together with the brand’s consumers (Connors, 2020; Parade Underwear, 2021b, n.p.). Beyond that, Parade is committed to the social good and donates one per cent of their revenue to non-profit organisations as well as raises awareness about sensitive topics such as body positivity (Leighton, 2020; Parade Underwear, 2021a). Besides clearly showcasing their bold approach in their marketing campaigns (Figure 8), the efforts are rooted in their values of being creative, sustainable, inclusivity, expressive and bold<sup>2</sup>.



*Figure 8: Examples of Parade’s diverse marketing campaigns (Leighton, 2020)*

Due to the brand following such a society-driven and inclusive approach since their establishment, we believe that Parade is a great example for the Authentic Brand Activism category.

Table 3 provides an overview of the three brands, including their values and mission.

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<sup>2</sup> As these values have not been stated clearly by the company itself, we compiled the most used key words by the founder Cami Téllez from several sources (Connors, 2020; Davis, 2020; Leighton, 2020; Parade Underwear, 2021b). This was necessary in order to make the brands comparable.

Brand	Origin	Founding Year	Values	Mission
<b>Hunkemöller</b>	The Netherlands	1886	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In touch</li> <li>• Fun</li> <li>• Inspiring</li> <li>• Sexy</li> <li>• Passionate</li> </ul>	“Being a much loved, social and inclusive brand.”
<b>Victoria’s Secret</b>	The United States of America	1977	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sexy</li> <li>• Iconic</li> <li>• Powerful</li> <li>• Passion</li> <li>• Captivating experience</li> <li>• Exquisite</li> </ul>	“To be committed to building a family of the world’s best fashion brands offering captivating customer experiences that drive long-term loyalty and deliver sustained growth for our shareholders.”
<b>Parade Underwear</b>	The United States of America	2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creative</li> <li>• Sustainable</li> <li>• Inclusivity</li> <li>• Expressive</li> <li>• Bold</li> </ul>	“With you, we’re rewriting the American underwear story — in full-spectrum color.”

*Table 3: Overview of the three selected brands*

Besides all these differences, the three brands are connected by showing (some) diversity and inclusivity in their marketing communications. We chose different-sized brands on purpose to highlight the impact that all companies can have on society, no matter if they are large or small, as well as drawing a coherent picture of the lingerie market by not only focusing on the well-known best practice examples. This variety ensures an insight into the female millennial consumers’ perceptions of several brands and their efforts, making them comparable throughout and after the process. Overall, this aspect makes our study more generalisable within this industry. As mentioned previously, based on our conducted secondary research, the brands appear to fit into two of the three identified categories which remains yet to be proven in our findings and analysis. Hence, these three brands showcase different stages of brand activism as per our understanding.

### 3.5 Data analysis

After finalising the data collection through the SSIs, the process is followed by the analysis which, according to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), consists out of three main steps: sorting, reducing and arguing. During the sorting process, researchers deal with the problem of chaos, meaning that they need to roughly organise and structure the collected data (Rennstam &

Wästerfors, 2018). Simultaneously, it is vital to get familiar and engage with the data by thoroughly reading through and highlighting important content. Consequently, meaningful data can be organised, and recurring content can be identified which might turn into a code or label, indicating a relevant topic. This coding process starts with initial coding that often concerns broader subjects to link similar aspects which subsequently evolve into more focused codes once a clearer direction is gained (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

After coding all relevant material, the reducing phase commences. At this stage, researchers encounter the challenge of representing the most interesting information, hence needing to reduce and contextualise it to create a focus. This is done by organising all established codes and allocate them to suitable (sub-)themes. Hereafter, all of these must be reviewed in order to then select and omit the most important themes amongst them which support answering the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Finally, in the arguing phase, the data is used and interpreted in the particular context to discuss and analyse the findings (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Here, it comes down to strong, logical and coherent arguments relating to the literature and research question as the readers need to be convinced of the contribution and validity of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Throughout this process, the findings should be related to other concepts or even establish new ones, thus increasing the theoretical relevance. Besides, this phase deals with the ‘authority problem’, meaning that it is vital to preserve an independent position in regard to the collected data (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Applying this process to our study, the interviews were thoroughly analysed, applying the grounded theory analysis approach. This approach “aims to derive structure (i.e. theory) from data in a process of comparing different data fragments with one another, rather than framing data according to a pre-existing structure”, enabling us to understand the data in our context as well as to be open for new discoveries (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.191). After finishing the transcription process of the interviews, we carefully and repeatedly read through the empirical material which consisted out of a total of 207 pages. This way, we familiarised ourselves with the collected data and first identified reoccurring aspects. Concentrating on two interviews each, we independently created initial codes by marking and commenting on all relevant information and collected them in a shared Excel sheet. Bryman and Bell (2015) see such an overview as a helpful tool to organise the coded data. While establishing these initial codes, the extensive literature review was considered to take key concepts into account such as the importance of trust and giving back to society. After conducting this first examination, we compared our codes and adjusted, added on as well as eliminated some in order to build a coherent analysis. According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015), this comparison to identify patterns and concepts is referred to as conceptualisation. This led to us needing to reread and reshuffle the already evaluated interviews to align to the agreed and focused codes. Subsequently, the other interviews were coded in the same manner while staying open to newly arising codes. Finally, the Excel file comprised all codes from each interview with one sheet showing a holistic overview, including all participants’ suitable statements.

Followed by the coding, the identified codes were assigned to sub-themes which were then allocated to three main themes, namely ‘The fading of a beauty ideal’, ‘Less perfection, more realness’ and ‘Skin deep or deeply rooted?’. The use of sub-themes in addition to the main themes were useful as it supported the structuring of the large and complex main themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The names of the main themes were chosen based on our key takeaways that derived from the corresponding sub-themes and codes. In the first theme ‘The fading of the beauty ideal’, the allocated codes mostly address the dilemma of the existing beauty standards and how the consumers identify and wish for more diversity in the lingerie industry. The codes within the second theme ‘Less perfection, more realness’ mainly describe the consumers’ perceived authenticity of the three selected brands which relate to the demand for the use of more realistic and less perfect models within the industry. The last theme ‘Skin deep or deeply rooted’ relates to the interviewees scrutinising the aspirants’ genuineness in terms of whether their actions are deeply rooted in their core or only exist on a surface-level, making them only ‘skin deep’. An overview of these themes, sub-themes and codes is depicted in Appendix 3.

### **3.6 Quality of research**

The quality of research can be examined by researchers based on various criteria. For example, validity and reliability can be applied to qualitative and quantitative research (Kirk & Miller, 1986; Lecompte & Goetz, 1982) but have been primarily implemented and evolved in quantitative studies (Mason, 2002). However, Guba and Lincoln (1994 cited in Bryman & Bell, 2015) suggest that qualitative research should, in fact, be assessed on different criteria. They provide two key criteria that would substitute reliability and validity, namely trustworthiness and authenticity. Since our dissertation follows a qualitative research approach, we will focus predominantly on the criteria provided Guba and Lincoln (1994 cited in Bryman & Bell, 2015) as these are widely adopted by qualitative studies (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The focus of this chapter is solely on the procedures we utilised to enhance these criteria as the limitations of the overall dissertation will be included in chapter 6.3.

Trustworthiness comprises four criteria, namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. The clarification of the credibility criterion is twofold; the study should be appropriately conducted according to the research standards as well as the researcher should confirm the outcomes with the research participants to ensure an accurate alignment between the researcher’s results and the respondents’ actual perceptions. The latter is also referred to as ‘respondent validation’ (Bryman & Bell, 2015) and can provide a research study with a great level of congruence between the theoretical framework and empirical data (Lecompte & Goetz, 1982). In order to increase the credibility of this dissertation, we notified our interviewees that they can request a summary of the interview and our outcomes. As mentioned previously, we also continued to conduct interviews until reaching data saturation which also enhances this study’s credibility by reducing the chances of missing out on new insights relating to this specific context.

Since qualitative research tends to concentrate on small groups or individuals with particular characteristics, the focus of gathering insights is usually on providing depth instead of breadth.

Therefore, the research outcomes often relate to a contextual uniqueness and the importance of the topic being studied (Bryman & Bell, 2015). It can be argued whether the research is generalisable and can be applicable to different contexts and settings, hence the criterion of transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985 cited in Bryman & Bell, 2015). To enhance the research' transferability, it can be suggested to establish 'thick' descriptions by being more explicit throughout the data collection (Geertz, 1973). In our study, we utilised purposive sampling to ensure that the participants were representative for the variety of perceptions that we required. We also included participants' quotes in the empirical findings to strengthen our arguments and have been specific in the details about the reasoning behind the selected participants (chapter 3.4.1) as well as brands and industry (chapter 3.4.2).

Furthermore, all the steps of a research process should be thoroughly documented in terms of the problematisation, sampling, transcriptions, data analysis, etc. This way it can be identified if all procedures were appropriately adhered to and, as a result, strengthen the study's dependability. This criterion depends on the extent to which other researchers can carry out an equivalent study under similar circumstances and achieve the same outcomes (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Thus, we have conducted rigorous research ourselves and described the entire process in rich detail. Other than that, we store all of the transcriptions and recordings anonymously and in accordance with the GDPR regulation on our devices.

The criterion confirmability depends on whether "the researcher can be shown to have acted in good faith" (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p.403). Even though researchers recognise that absolute objectivity is unachievable, they can still make it apparent that they strived to remain unbiased by suppressing their personal values from affecting the research process and its outcomes (Bryman & Bell, 2015). We attempted to improve our study's confirmability by actively listening to the interviewees and solely interfering when necessary, such as requesting for an elaboration or example. After conducting the interviews, we jointly executed the analysis thoroughly to limit the amount of bias as much as possible.

The confirmability can be related to reflexivity as this type of approach is also open to various viewpoints and analyses the data in a flexible and dynamic manner (Alvesson, 2003). Nonetheless, reflexivity increases a study's transparency and therefore the openness of the quality (Dodgson, 2019). Reflexive researchers are also more aware of their role in the study and acknowledge that they obtain information from discussions and observations with other individuals and subsequently communicate this knowledge to an audience (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Therefore, it encourages an interplay between interpreting the knowledge from the participants as well as challenging those and exploring the phenomena through multiple sets of meanings (Alvesson, 2003). For this research project, we tried to remain conscious of reflexivity by examining the topic from various perspectives while gathering and interpreting the data. Taking such an approach also means that we analysed the findings in a flexible and dynamic manner (Alvesson, 2003) which consequently stimulates creativity and helps to reduce 'harmful' details of the research resulting from insufficient reflexivity (Alvesson, Hardy & Harley, 2008).

Beyond these four criteria of trustworthiness as well as reflexivity, Guba and Lincoln (1994 cited in Bryman & Bell, 2015) argue that authenticity is another key criterion that should be considered in qualitative research. This can be connected to whether the research presents a fair representation of the various perspectives towards a phenomenon and if it provides others with an appropriate understanding of the topic. Moreover, the authenticity depends on how well researchers can transmit the feelings and emotions of their respondents in their results (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The quotes that we utilised in this paper contribute to the authenticity as they demonstrate evidence and thus a clear alignment with the ultimate findings. Beyond that, the thorough literature review and detailed documentation of the remaining parts of this study enhance the authenticity of our thesis.

### **3.7 Ethical considerations**

When seeking for participants as well as collecting, analysing and communicating data, a researcher can experience ethical concerns. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009, pp.183–184) define ethics as “the appropriateness of your behaviour in relation to the rights of those who become the subject of your work, or are affected by it”. Some ethical issues might arise related to the participants’ privacy, their consent, voluntary nature, right to withdraw at any point as well as the confidentiality of their data (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Since our study explores a social phenomenon, it was essential to gather a personal understanding from diverse individuals by having deep conversations about their perceptions. Therefore, the ethical considerations are even more significant to be carefully considered throughout all steps of this research project.

To limit the possibility of any ethical issues with our participants, we drafted a detailed consent form including our topic, request to record, the approximate time that was expected from them, the right to withdraw at any point as well as anonymity (Appendix 4). Even though these forms were sent and signed before each interview, we repeatedly emphasised at the beginning of each interview that we incorporate pseudonyms to protect their personal identities. We then asked once more if they agree to recording the conversation as we required these for transcribing and analysing the data appropriately afterwards.

As previously mentioned, we also increased the transparency of our data collection by informing our interviewees of the possibility to ask for a summary of the conversation and/or of our research findings. Furthermore, we conducted desk research prior to the interviews to identify some guiding principles significant for researchers to correctly adhere to them and minimise ethical complications. Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) classified ten key standards that are common in research ethics which are summarised in Figure 9.

1	Ensuring that <b>no harm</b> comes to participants.	} <i>Protection of research participants</i>
2	Respecting the <b>dignity</b> of research participants.	
3	Ensuring a fully <b>informed</b> consent of research participants.	
4	Protecting the <b>privacy</b> of research participants.	
5	Ensuring the <b>confidentiality</b> of research data.	
6	Protecting the <b>anonymity</b> of individuals or organizations.	
7	<b>Avoiding</b> deception about the nature or aims of the research.	} <i>Protection of integrity of research community</i>
8	Declaration of affiliations, funding sources and <b>conflicts</b> of interest.	
9	Honesty and <b>transparency</b> in communicating about the research.	
10	Avoidance of any <b>misleading</b> or false reporting of research findings.	

Figure 9: Key principles in research ethics (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015)

## 4 Empirical findings

The following chapter presents the empirical findings deriving from the semi-structured interviews. This empirical data has been scrutinised and sorted into three key themes namely, ‘The fading of a beauty ideal’, ‘Less perfection, more realness’ and ‘Skin deep or deeply rooted?’. Different codes are allocated to each of these themes. Theme 1 consists of the overall perceptions towards brand activism overall as well as our selected Brand Activist Aspirants, Hunkemöller and Victoria’s Secret, and Parade as an Authentic Brand Activist. The second theme provides an insight into how trustworthy these brands are being perceived by the interviewees and how they potentially contribute to society. The last theme focuses on why the respondents believe the chosen aspirants are becoming more activist and how this affects their perception towards these brands. Hence, this chapter sets a valuable foundation to gather a coherent impression of the participants’ subjective perceptions, feelings and assumptions which is imperative for the analysis that follows subsequently.

### 4.1 Theme 1: The fading of a beauty ideal

This first theme elaborates upon the interviewees’ perceptions towards brand activism in general as well as their perspectives on the selected brands. It summarises the participants’ expressions on their overall expectations and assumptions about brand activists. In addition, the consumers shared their opinions about whether they can identify themselves with the three lingerie brands and how they perceive their level of diversity.

## 4.1.1 Perception overall

To gather an understanding of the female millennial consumers' perceptions of lingerie brands and more specifically of (potential) lingerie brand activists, it was significant to get an insight into their overall expectations of brand activism. As most of the participants noticed, there is an apparent increase in brands taking a stand nowadays which they identified to be of importance. Nonetheless, some argued that a few companies are not even actively acting on their taken stance and merely communicate their support for a societal cause. Some therefore mentioned that they ought it essential that an organisation is actually making an effort to prove that they are not solely doing it as a marketing stunt to gain attention. The majority stated that they expect businesses engaging in brand activism to remain authentic by integrating it in the core of their brand identity and live up to what they preach. Charlotte made this aspect clear:

*“Well, I mean, by now, because I have seen it, I'm gonna expect them to keep doing it. I think it's quite important that if you do engage in brand activism, that you stay authentic, that it's something that's part of your brand identity at the core of your brand. And it's not just something you're doing once in a while, because in that way, it becomes inauthentic.”* - Charlotte

Moreover, brand activists have been overall perceived to be quite bold and brave in their communication and are expected to go the extra mile for their consumers. Beyond that, Charlotte and Vera emphasised that they have higher expectations towards bigger corporations as they explained that these brands have the resources to engage in activism and that it is their responsibility to use these wisely. This aspect is also reflected in the literature (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019). To put it in Vera's words:

*“And like I said, I think for brands it is, especially for bigger brands, you should definitely participate in brand activism because they also have the resources to do so. However, I also feel like for smaller brands, who don't do any brand activism, I mean, one, at least they're honest, probably. So I think it's better than if do during, like, not woke-washing. [...] But as I said, in the beginning, I think it's just kind of also the responsibility, if you're a bigger brand. And you have the resources to use them wisely.”*  
- Vera

Regarding the preference of brand activists or non-activists, most of the respondents argued that they favour activists as they, for example, hold more brand value and make them feel better about their purchase. Although most of them would appreciate to see more companies taking this approach, they acknowledged that these brands should not feel required to take any stand, especially if they are only attempting to follow the trend and jump on the bandwagon. This is elaborated upon by Iris:

*“As I said, I think like, I think it's fine either way, I like companies, they can stay to extend if they want. And that's really they do. But I don't think that companies are obliged to do it. I think like, they shouldn't be forced to do it. Because then it becomes like, okay, I'm doing this because everybody else is doing and then it's maybe not so.”*



*Yeah, then they're just like jumping on the on the wave you know, not doing it so I don't expect companies to do it. So I think it's fine if they don't do it and so forth.” - Iris*

Overall, there seemed to be a mutual agreement that it might be better when organisations do not engage in any activism at all if the societal cause does not align with the brands' values and if the brands have no intention to stick to it. Instead, many interviewees mentioned that activism should come more naturally by integrating it into the brand's core to avoid being perceived insincere.

When connecting brand activism to lingerie, the majority of interviewees would relate activism to size, body and racial inclusivity, body positivity as well as female empowerment. Rebecca made an interesting statement regarding this topic as, to her, size inclusivity should not be a “big, crazy thing”. From her perspective, brands should not define the standards of what is and is not normal such as what most of the mainstream lingerie brands are doing. She perceives body inclusivity to be a vital part of social brand activism:

*“In my thesis, I remember writing something to the effect of like, social activism is no longer a subculture. It's its culture, it's like, there's sort of examples of micro activism everywhere you look. And I think body inclusivity is one of the strongest examples of that. It's something that used to be in the domain of like, activism people, but now it's something that everybody can talk about. Everyone has that vocabulary, and it's, it's just, like, more mainstream than it's ever been.” - Rebecca*

The awareness of brands that incorporate such forms of ‘micro activism’ within this industry is relatively low. Holly, Iris and Charlotte argued that activism definitely requires more development in the lingerie market and Iris highlighted that she noticed a more traditional way of marketing in lingerie, portraying very slim and fit individuals. Together they agreed that particularly the lingerie market could use some improvements, as Charlotte also expressed: “[...] if the lingerie industry is not about female empowerment and embracing different kinds of women, then who is?”. Even though most of the respondents could not recall any lingerie brand activists, some still mentioned a few lingerie brands that came to mind when discussing brand activism such as Savage x Fenty, Lara Intimates, Aerie and Hunkemöller. Nevertheless, these brands were not labelled as activists but known for e.g., their sustainability, size inclusivity, diversity or relatability.

In general, wanting to purchase comfortable, good-fitting and appealing lingerie is the main reason why the interviewees buy underwear. In addition, lingerie can make some respondents feel more confident and greater about themselves, however the majority does not have a specific relation to any lingerie brands. Some of the participants indicated that their relationship really depends on the brand, but they generally do not relate to any particular lingerie brand. Nelly, Martha and Charlotte explained why, by stating that most people would want to see themselves reflected in society to realise that there is not only one body type that is perceived attractive. They discussed that when brands portray real people, it is easier for others to identify themselves with the respective companies and hence establish a better connection. Alicia and Charlotte strongly agreed with this and shared their visions:

*“Because in lingerie like models are more naked, like you weren't for like when I buy a bra I want to feel like good, I think for me, it's like different than buying some jeans or a T-shirt. You want to feel different if you buy, you don't want to look at someone that looks like 10,000 times better than you.” - Alicia*

*“You know, we all, we all want to see like ourselves in society. Yeah. So I mean, if we can see that piece of reflection on multiple women, then maybe we stop thinking that there is only one type of body and one type of appearance that is that is attractive.” - Charlotte*

These statements align with what Rebecca mentioned when talking about the subculture of body inclusivity which should be something that everybody talks about as well as it being normal to portray different sized models.

The overall perception of the participants towards the diversity of lingerie brands appears to be improved over the previous years. In the past, lingerie brands were known for portraying skinny, white, tall and fit models whereas the majority now identifies a shift of these brands showing a wider range of body types, ethnicities and skin tones:

*“So, I guess it was usual to use that. The given body image was, till now, like the very skinny one and tall and white usually as well. So that wasn't very diverse. But I think this body positivity movement is quite growing, that even bigger brands use more diverse models. So I think that's a really nice development, because it is true that not every woman has the same body, and then you're represented in the media or in advertisements, then you feel more, yeah, you're you can identify much more than if you see models that don't look like yourself.” - Martha*

*“But I think it's improving. before they were all very skinny. Well, yes. very skinny girls mostly. Yeah, who look perfect with perfect smell and perfect hair and the perfect settings. And, of course, there was never any nudity. So I think it's definitely improving.” - Nelly*

However, this diversity is still lacking as, for example, Alicia illustrated that she often notices that brands either offer all sizes or almost none at all. She recognised that some brands make an attempt to target more curvy women for commercial purposes, so they display diversity and bigger models. However, these types of women often have ‘normal’ body types and are not even identified to be plus-size. Alicia strengthened her point by stating:

*“But in general, I mean, like, I think with like skin tones and ethnicities, it's like quite good from what I know it's like more appealing to consumers and nowadays, but still not perfect but with like sizes I think it's like mainly always all or nothing like in some cases there's like I mean, are not fully nothing but like there's like you know 100 extremely skinny trained models and then like one plus-size model for representation, or it's very, very diverse so it's like there's nothing really in between I feel like...” - Alicia*

Kate has a similar opinion as she stated that she is very opposed to lingerie companies having a separate plus-size category besides the usual classifications of men and women, making it seem as if they're not human:

*“But I want to think that there are some brands that maybe care a little bit more about different size. Because I was thinking of Nelly.com or something. But I still feel like they are making bigger people seem like, you know, like, oh, this is a group. And then you have the skinny ones and everything fits them. Like I don't like the fact for example, that they have this plus-size category, you know, yeah, you have men, women on H&M, for example. And then plus-size. Men or women or plus-size? They are not very, not counting as humans?” - Kate*

Instead, as Holly mentioned, it is even more important that brands make women feel strong and independent in this industry by showcasing diversity and inclusivity as most of the population is not the perfect ‘90-60-90’ type. Iris stressed this point as well, declaring that solely five per cent of women perhaps truly reflect that image, hence, companies are exhibiting a wrong picture of the reality. Sophie highlighted that this is one of the reasons why the lingerie market is especially troublesome for women since this sector is more vulnerable. Hence, most of the respondents highlighted the importance to spread more body positive awareness and encourage brands to demonstrate real, imperfect women:

*“I think, like most of the population, isn't the perfect 90-60-90 girls, so I think it just comes to a point where this is something that you need to address because it's, it gave a lot of people the wrong impression of what the perfect body is like.” - Holly*

*“I think is it gives, it gives a very wrong picture about like, their reality because I guess like this, I don't know. 5% if even that people look like that. You know, it's not, it's not it's not a natural way of I don't know, we it just feels so unnatural.” - Iris*

*“So I think the lingerie market is especially very troublesome for women. And I think a lot of issues arise when it has to do with body positivity and skin colour and accepting different body types.” - Sophie*

Beyond that, all women emphasised that the need for diversity is even more important in the lingerie market since models are showing a lot of skin and it is therefore crucial to make everybody feel included. Martha added on to this saying that lingerie is something that should empower you and make you feel comfortable in your own skin instead of being faced with flawless women which can lower your self-esteem. Furthermore, Rebecca contemplated that it would be smart of brands to continue to embrace more diversity and inclusivity as this “should be the new normal rather than something innovative, radical and activist”. She additionally emphasised that inclusive brands provide a better consumer experience but is also realistic in terms of how it can affect the brand’s stance taking by saying:

*“But the more brands that join the party, the less it's really like radical activism. And the more it's just meaningful change, which is a good thing, because it's actually going to make imagery in the lingerie category better for everybody. But there's like a diminishing return for brands who are kind of piling on to the trend.” - Rebecca*

Nonetheless, Rebecca views this as a positive development as she explained how body inclusivity is becoming more mainstream and therefore a frequent topic of discussion, normalising realistic bodies. Sophie and Judy stated that particularly the newer, smaller lingerie brands have manifested a greater inclusive and diverse image. At the same time, Charlotte

argued that she still noticed an overrepresentation of “the tall white girl with a perfect body”. Yet, she has been observing an uprise in the way women want to be illustrated as businesses used to be focused on drawing the perfect picture while today, females are pushing for imperfections. Therefore, as Judy highlighted, time will tell whether these brands are in it for the long run or not.

## 4.1.2 Perception of Brand Activist Aspirants

### *Hunkemöller*

Hunkemöller is known amongst ten out of the eleven interviewees; solely Rebecca was unfamiliar with the company. Out of these ten, Judy and Kate have never actually purchased something from the brand, Iris only received their products as a gift and four of the others used to go there when they were younger whereas Vera and Holly both are still loyal customers of the brand and purchase items regularly. The reasoning behind the respondents’ (lack of) purchase differs per person as on the one hand, Vera and Holly argued for the good quality and variety of sizes and items, whereas Charlotte actually felt like the quality did no longer live up to her expectations. Charlotte generally had a rather strong, negative opinion about Hunkemöller as she stated:

*“I would probably not buy from them. And I don't know if it's something to do with the fact that I'm a woman myself, but I don't like that they are pushing this very. I don't know, unhealthy vision on women, kind of almost like male dominated vision of women when they are a brand for women.” - Charlotte*

In terms of the perceptions towards Hunkemöller, most of the participants mentioned similar key words when describing the brand, including sexy, young, girly and pretty. The majority disagreed with the brand’s own values of being fun and inspiring as e.g., Alicia stressed that the brand is not very inspiring since they are not really innovative or acting out of the ordinary. This was complemented by Iris, stating that the brand lacked inspiration:

*“I'm not super impressed. Like I, I don't think it is super inspiring somehow. I don't know. It felt like, as I mentioned, it felt like they tried to be like super. I don't know they had some some models that were curvy and so on, but they were like, you know, fit curvy if I can say it like that? Yeah, so I was like, okay, you're trying but ehm not really there yet?” - Iris*

Nonetheless, Sophie was actually surprised about their degree of diversity but also not blown away by the brand. She further elaborated that their values appear to be rather outdated as well as generic since these follow the old-fashioned beauty ideals instead of incorporating modern and diverse aspects. Judy agreed and added onto this by stating that the brand is “not really inspiring, it’s nothing that’s really deep, just women in underwear posing in broadly, pretty similar sketches”. Combining Iris’, Sophie’s and Judy’s perceptions, they imply that the brand claims to include plus-size and curvy models; however, according to them, these ‘upsized’ models still do not portray a wide range of body shapes and seem to remain close to the stereotypical type of women.

Moreover, one third of the interviewees perceived a misalignment between the brand's Instagram page and website as they generally gained a more positive impression and image on Hunkemöller's Instagram channel. For Sophie this misalignment was more visible between the brand's values and their digital communications as she argued that, based upon their values, she would have expected it to look differently. Solely Vera associated the brand with positive characteristics such as strong, charming, empowering and caring. She seemed enthusiastic about the brand, arguing that they aspire to make everyone feel beautiful and that they manage to keep this promise rather well.

*“Yeah. Also with these empowering women, so kind of that they just feel strong and feel like they can do anything. [...] Yeah. Also, because I think it's still kind of hard for women in some kind of industries. So I like this um, empowering women. Yeah, so I think also not only that, I like the lingerie but also their statements that women should be strong and feel confident in the body.” - Vera*

In terms of identifying with Hunkemöller, the majority of the respondents argued that they perceive it difficult to resonate with the brand. For Iris, this has to do with the fact that she considers it hard to relate to an underwear brand in general as she does not value underwear very highly. Similarly, Judy believes identifying with the brand would be too big of a step for her. This correlates with Sophie's opinion who mentioned that she rather feels disconnected from the brand due to her being out of touch and no longer exposed to their advertising efforts. On the other hand, Holly expressed that she could resonate with the business, but it also would not be the first name for her to recall when thinking of brands that she relates to. In general, she thinks that it is difficult to identify herself with the lingerie market. This aligns with Rebecca's opinion who stressed that she mostly tends to search for functional lingerie instead of the 'glamour and trendy' items from Hunkemöller. Therefore, she felt as if the brand was not the right fit for her since she rather identifies herself with being creative and inclusive which is reflected in her following statement:

*“It's hard to say but I mean, when I'm shopping for lingerie, I'm looking for something a little more functional. I guess the one that they were selling is less, like glamour and trendy for me. And, you know, kind of going back to the body positivity and inclusivity thing, it really felt like there was kind of one kind of girl that was for that we're all supposed to want to be. And I'm not that girl, nor do I particularly aspire to be her.” - Rebecca*

Someone who does resonate with the brand is Vera. She stated that she both appreciates their products as well as their messaging in which they stimulate women to be strong and feel confident in their bodies. Martha partly agreed to this as she acknowledged that “on some days, I can identify with that but not all of my days I'd say”, implying that her level of confidence varies from day to day and depends on her state of mind and how she feels. Alicia complements Martha's point of view as she noticed that Hunkemöller is also expanding more towards her body type, or 'category' as she called it herself, making her feel more targeted by the brand. This allows her to relate and connect better with the brand. Nonetheless, she still perceives their representation not ideal and the diversity that the brand represents is solely the minimum of

what they should be doing as it remains within the ‘norm’. Kate even believes that the company’s effort to present more diversity and inclusivity is solely a part of their marketing:

*“Totally, because the society is expecting them to do that so we use the word [turncoat behaviour] because they just turned their code after the wind. You know, if they say this, you do that, in the society. And then oh, no, this is trendy. So let’s do that. And that, yeah, I think that’s why they’re doing it. And on one hand, it can be a thing, like, because you have the right to change and to improve, right? But it depends on in what way you’re doing it. Because if you just do it for because of money, then yeah, you can see it is noticeable. For example, with Hunkemöller. I think that’s just a part of the marketing to appear more diverse and inclusive, but actually it’s just to create more money and to be appealing to customers.” - Kate*

However, almost half of the participants were surprised by the diversity displayed on Hunkemöller’s website and Instagram. An exception was Holly who has been loyal to the brand for years and therefore highlighted that the brand works with plus-size models and thinks they have a diverse size range, including many different body shapes and coming across inclusive. Comparably, Vera responded by arguing that they also collaborate with influencers who are perceived to be approachable which provides her with a more extensive, realistic picture of women. Nelly also acknowledged that she could see the company’s efforts to try to include more ethnicities and body types such as including a lesbian couple on their website. Nonetheless, Sophie stated that they still could attempt to be more inclusive, considering that we are living in 2021. Even Vera observed that Hunkemöller’s sports category could be more diverse as all of the models demonstrate an athletic physique. She claimed that “everybody can do sports” regardless of their appearance. Hence, most of the participants were surprised by the brand’s diversity and inclusivity as they expected worse, but the majority agreed that there is still plenty of room for improvement considering that a diverse representation should be the bare minimum for a lingerie brand.

### ***Victoria’s Secret***

Victoria’s Secret has been known amongst all of the interviewees and with the exception of three females, all of the others have a history of purchasing products there. However, most of these women used to purchase the brand years ago when they were younger and have not bought anything over the previous years. The overall opinion entails that most of the participants bought Victoria’s Secret due to the hype that surrounded the brand a couple of years ago. For example, Alicia mentioned that it showed that you fit in to society and that you have been abroad as in most cases the brand does not have stores in the respective countries. Nelly agreed by stating that there is great awareness for the company while Iris also acknowledged their popularity. They both explained that their friends were into the brand, thus influencing them to purchase there as well. Nonetheless, some of the respondents never really got into the ‘Victoria’s Secret hype’ such as Martha who does not identify herself as a fashionista which she thinks Victoria’s Secret customers are.

Although some used to be Victoria’s Secret consumers, Vera shifted her loyalties to Hunkemöller as the brand no longer resonated with her, perceiving it rather childish due to lots of pink colours. Sophie is also not a customer anymore as she mentioned that she no longer

identifies herself with their values. A vital part in taking this decision was also due to Victoria's Secret's involvement in scandals, relating to their CMO making transphobic comments:

*"Because I think I really don't agree with their brand values and you know, Ed Razek their old CMO, some of the things like he's been saying some really transphobic things, there was a lot of issues. I think body positivity, I think they haven't done anything to make women feel included. And I think they really contributed to a negative body image for a lot of young girls, and I think it's, it's really something that they've contributed to."*  
- Sophie

In addition, Alice ceased her shopping trips to the brand when she started experiencing a decrease in their products' quality and thus no longer appreciated the price-quality ratio. However, she candidly stated she could perhaps be persuaded if she would come across something particularly nice-looking, but she argued that there are better alternatives to choose from nowadays. For Judy these alternatives would focus highly on sustainability as this is one of the main reasons why she no longer purchases from Victoria's Secret.

When asking about the interviewees' perceptions, the vast majority associated the brand with their extravagant fashion shows, picture-perfect models and great store experience. This perceived image was overall also conveyed through the brand's values, being sexy, passionate and exquisite. Still, Alicia and Charlotte argued that these values are rather generic and consist of buzzwords with Charlotte saying that it sounded as if they were describing food. Other associations that came to mind were arrogant, American, expensive and unattainable as they are "trying to sell a dream" according to Sophie. She had quite negative affiliations with the brand name since she thinks it is not inclusive or modern anymore. Rebecca also has a negative perception towards the brand as she used to hate going to Victoria's Secret, but her friends always convinced her to join, making her feel uncomfortable. Additionally, she caught wind of various scandals surrounding the brand. Adding onto Rebecca, Holly argued that she cannot identify herself with Victoria's Secret:

*"For me, it's like such a, I don't know, like, it's a model brand. And I don't really, I don't really spend like I'm rather I'd rather come from like the surfing lifestyle where I kind of also want to identify with the culture of the brand. And Victoria's Secret is definitely not my culture."* - Holly

Due to their perceived image of the brand, the majority of the interviewees does not identify themselves with Victoria's Secret. Solely, Charlotte and Nelly felt represented by the brand as they perceived them to have a wide range of models, showing quite a good representation as they are portraying 'real people' on Instagram. Kate also mentioned that she could at least resonate more with this company than with Hunkemöller. Nevertheless, she holds mixed feelings about their diversity as they still seemed too focused on skinny body types with a plus-size model here and there. Other than that, most of the participants expressed to be rather surprised about the amount of diversity that they viewed on the brand's digital media. As Alice stated, their ethnicity and size representation definitely improved, however when she dived deeper into the website, she still noticed a great number of skinny models, making the brand, again, more stereotypical. Thus, she does not identify herself with the brand nor with its values. Holly also seemed very surprised that, on top of the increased amount of diversity, they touched

upon the topic of gender equality as the brand stated that it does not matter what their customers identify as. Although she appreciated the brand's direction towards more inclusivity, she is still not able to identify herself with them as, in her opinion, this is simply not what they stand for and represent. Sophie reflected on this similarly and would not associate herself with the brand as their actions do not match with the things that she believes in. She sums up her opinion of the brand in the following statement:

*“Because I think their values kind of misalign with mine. And I don't think the things they've been putting out there have been particularly positive, especially to like younger, insecure girls or girls that have different skin colours, different body types. Transgender girls, I think they haven't been inclusive at all to these people. And I think that's been a problem, that that just misaligns with the things that I believe in. So I think I wouldn't associate myself with the brand for that reason.” - Sophie*

Besides contemplating about the diversity of models, Martha considered the type of customers who shop at Victoria's Secret. She argued that she perceives the image of their consumers as “these typical women that love shopping and then go to Victoria's Secret and throw out a lot of money” which, frankly, does not resonate with her. In addition, Rebecca did not personally connect with the brand either as she strongly associated it with the objectification of women which is something she disagrees with and that has led her to obtain a very negative image of the business.

### **4.1.3 Perception of Authentic Brand Activists**

Parade has been an unfamiliar brand to almost all the interviewees. Rebecca was the only exception who heard about Parade before which might be due to her being from the brand's origin, the US. She even tried to remember the start-up earlier in the conversation when talking about lingerie brands in general that engage in brand activism but was unable to recall the brand's name. She has been meaning to try out their products ever since she was exposed to them but has not purchased anything there yet. The majority of the remaining ten participants stated that they would be interested in trying out their products. Alicia emphasised that the brand seems very activist by following good causes, being inclusive and having good values. She likes the appearance of their products which is why she would enjoy trying them out. Vera, Nelly, Martha and Charlotte all agreed upon testing Parade's products with the purpose to obtain more every day basic underwear. Corresponding with the others, Sophie also said:

*“I think the aesthetics look really nice. Looks very modern, like Gen Z, millennial kind of vibes. I can tell it's a new brand [...], they've always kind of been doing this type of style that has been trending for the last couple of years. And I saw, like, different type of body shapes, different skin colours I saw. Yeah. And the I think the underwear seems to focus on comfort a lot, which looks really nice. And yeah, they have some nice colours, like nice aesthetics on their Instagram and website. So yeah, it looks good.” - Sophie*

Kate and Holly mentioned that they simply do not like the style of Parade's underwear and would definitely want to support them if they would offer more appealing lingerie. Although the underwear was not particularly Judy's style either, she would still consider purchasing the



products due to the way the brand operates such as being sustainable, comfortable and offering inclusive sizing. Iris is a bit hesitant as she would prefer to investigate the brand beforehand and would decide whether to purchase or not based on that.

Generally, there seems to be a similar perspective in terms of the overall perception towards Parade, being inclusive, diverse and sustainable. Most of the respondents also reasoned that their values were conveyed appropriately and truly fitted the brand. Furthermore, Alicia viewed the brand as authentic and appreciated the brand being bold and for showing so many different models of various sizes. She compared Parade to other lingerie brands by stating:

*“So their plus-size models were really, really plus-size, not just the plus-size models other brands usually show but really a larger size, which is normal in society.” - Alicia*

Rebecca also acknowledged how Parade stands out in comparison to the other two brands and summarised her point of view:

*“I think that they seem to be really leaning into being very realistic in some senses, but they're also playful and vibrant. Like they don't take themselves too seriously.” - Rebecca*

In contrast, Kate did not perceive the brand as positively as the others. Particularly the webpage made a negative impression as she associated the design with a cheap Chinese webpage. Still, she appreciated Parade for their sizes, ranging from XS to 3XL and creating more awareness in these regards. Holly also mentioned Parade approaching the inclusivity and diversity topic with lots of fresh content and diverse contexts on their Instagram by, for example, showing males in underwear and high heels. Nonetheless, she would not identify herself with the brand as it has too many “crazy US attitudes”. Kate neither relates to the brand but still likes their representation as she stated that it is much better than in comparison to the other two brands. Contrastingly, their amount of representation actually allowed Alicia to be able to identify with them as their models are not very photoshopped or airbrushed but rather photographed realistically. She highlighted how well they put their product in focus instead of the models:

*“Like also when they showed the products, they only showed the butt cheeks. So it's only just the part that matters and it doesn't matter what the people look like in their face or you don't even know if it's a man or a woman or someone who maybe doesn't identify as a man or woman or even someone who's transgender. That doesn't really matter.” - Alicia*

In terms of identifying with Parade, Iris and Nelly both perceived it difficult to relate to the brand because of their products but still appreciate their level of diversity. Iris also mentioned that they showed a wide variety of women who are even displayed with stretchmarks and to her, the brand appeared more transparent than the other two. Nelly added onto this by stating that she also saw that picture of a man in heels which she enjoys and said that “it feels like everyone’s welcome on the page”. This aspect surprised Vera as well since she thought Hunkemöller and Victoria’s Secret were already quite diverse, but Parade shows that the representation can, in fact, be even more inclusive. In her opinion, these two other brands seem to be following the diversity trend, taking Parade as an example, while this new brand actually

appears to be leading it. For Judy, this is the reason why she identifies herself more with Parade as she stated that Parade aims to fulfil a market gap:

*“Interesting, why it is more, that they're trying to do the right thing and trying to serve women, rather than like to say, it seems they're trying to address women who don't feel represented in the classic traditional brands and feel like they're trying to dress that, I wouldn't call it niche. And probably they're trying to fill that gap. Yeah, maybe. And to start a new conversation around underwear.” - Alicia*

Rebecca is one of the women who feels represented by Parade, matching the brand's values:

*“Because I think of myself as being somewhat creative and expressive. I just felt like I could see myself and my friends more in the Instagram presence and looked more like their kind of vibe.” - Rebecca*

Beyond that, Charlotte seemed particularly impressed by the brand and strongly identifies herself with them as they are going beyond just simply showing sexy underwear. She argued that there are too many expectations that women walk around in pretty lingerie each day while “let's face it, we also most of the days just wear normal comfortable underwear”. Hence, she highly appreciated that the brand is not building a stereotypical image but instead showcases women with stretchmarks and cellulite and integrates this image in a natural way. Corresponding with Charlotte's perspective, Sophie also resonates greatly with Parade due to their accepting approach. She made a clear statement about how other lingerie brands are lacking in places where Parade is not:

*“With a lot of brands, especially lingerie brands, what I always miss is when they have diverse body shapes. They either have a very skinny model, or a very plus-sized model and there's never something in between. And I think it's always a bit of a shame, because there's a lot of young women with like an average body type. And they would also like to be represented.” - Charlotte*

In sum, Parade has a “whole cast of models in different shapes, sizes and colours”, as stated by Sophie, which has been noticed and appreciated by all of the interviewees.

## **4.2 Theme 2: Less perfection, more realness**

The second theme focuses on the interviewees' perceived authenticity which relates to their perspectives on trustworthiness and contribution to society. While the participants gave an insight into their opinions on what makes them trust a brand and how companies give back to society in general, they also elaborated upon these aspects when it comes to Hunkemöller, Victoria's Secret and Parade.

### **4.2.1 Authenticity overall**

In terms of overall trustworthiness, the interviewees agreed on the fact that brands engaging in brand activism are not perceived equally authentic which is clearly stated by Alicia and Holly

who said that it depends. This dependence is based upon the brands' genuineness towards the taken actions and how long these have been implemented already. Particularly the duration is of great importance as all of the participants highlighted that they find it difficult to trust a company if brand activism is something they have not done initially or at least long-term:

*"I think there it depends. I think. If I know the actions of the activist brand are genuine. Yes. But I think in the beginning, I would probably be more critical of the activist brand, just because there's so many brands that just communicate something but don't don't actually do something. But if I wouldn't know, the brand is like, truly genuine, like the actions be high and the activism are genuine, then I would trust the activist brand more."* - Alicia

*"It depends, like that's really the thing that I think is the most important thing about brand activism or generally choosing a communication strategy for a brand it just needs to suit the brand as well. [...] So it always comes from like, going all the way back to your roots and where you started."* - Holly

Consequently, the participants perceived it easier to trust businesses who implement these intentions since their establishment of the business and throughout their whole existence as it takes time to build a strong stance and evolve towards authentic brand activism. Another factor influencing the respondents' perception of the credibility towards brand activism is the way of communicating their stance as it can quickly seem to be merely done for marketing purposes, thus not following sincere motives. Kate thinks that raising their voices regarding societal issues is good to create awareness but in order for organisations to really make a difference they have to live up to their statements, let actions follow their words and need to fully commit to it 100 per cent. Furthermore, brands can predominantly gain the interviewees' trust by aligning their actions to their values. If the taken stance does not fit to the brands' values, there is a high chance to be perceived deceptive and suspicious according to Iris. However, the values of the consumers themselves are also crucial in terms of trust as Judy pointed out that the following:

*"I guess it can lead to you trusting it more but it can also lead to trusting less Yeah, because if it's different values that you do not actually share. It might also result actually in the opposite or it can become even dangerous if a brand puts their power for something they like subjectively believe in but would just maybe, I mean it also has a lot of power. But that does not mean I would trust them or any point agree with any of these, you know, then you can go both ways. But if it's a values that I believe into, and the brand incorporates those values, then for sure I trust them more."* - Judy

Deception and woke-washing are not only issues when it comes to credibility and trustworthiness but also overall, have an impact on a brand's perceived authenticity. The interviewees generally acknowledged that woke-washing has a negative effect on the brand. Iris emphasised that "it's very important that you stick to it [the taken stance], otherwise it becomes deception" which also aligns with the previously mentioned impression of Kate. Sophie thinks that many corporations conduct some sort of performative activism instead of a genuine one, making her think that it is better for them to not engage and take a stance at all. Rebecca strongly agreed to this:

*“So sometimes, the pressure for brands to do something or participate in brand activism is very high. And consumers are saying that they want it. But also, in my mind, this is not a scientific number, but I feel like a good 90% of brand activism is useless if they also, if it doesn't help the movement, it doesn't help the brand. It's just a mess. And brands don't execute it very well. [...] I think brands feel like they have to do something, but then it falls flat because they're doing brand activism just to do it.” - Rebecca*

In Vera's opinion this also happened when the Black Lives Matter movement peaked in May 2020 when many brands published statements to support the black community but, in the end, only a few really took actions. Nevertheless, Nelly discussed the fact that every brand has to start somewhere and that such behaviour is only the beginning for some brands. She thinks that this is important to consider and a good starting point but understands that, from the first impression, it can be perceived negative.

When talking generally about contributing to society, Rebecca stated that when brands are fixing a societal problem they are able to contribute to society in this way, especially when it is something that they have done wrong in the past. Holly adds on to Rebecca's thoughts and emphasised that many brands have taken up the discussion about body positivity, including different-sized models which is a great way of giving back to society as more consumers feel included. However, in her opinion, brands could address the gender discussion much more, meaning that they should include a diverse range of people and involve the LGBTQ+ community. She also looked at this from a sales perspective as she mentioned that by incorporating more consumers, profits could be positively influenced as a wider range of people is approached.

## **4.2.2 Authenticity of Brand Activist Aspirants**

The authenticity of Brand Activist Aspirants reflects the interviewees' perspective towards Hunkemöller and Victoria's Secret regarding their trustworthiness and contribution to society.

### ***Hunkemöller***

When it comes to trusting Hunkemöller, the interviewees expressed mixed feelings. Overall, they are not 100 per cent convinced and think that there are different levels of trust which depends upon what part of the brand they consider. For example, some said that they can trust the quality of the products as the brand has constantly delivered a high standard. However, looking at the diversity efforts of the brand, most are not sure about their level of trust. Judy summed it up quite well:

*“I think there's also different levels of trust. Do I trust they stand up for what's right in the world? I've no clue. I don't know. Do I trust they have a good quality? Probably. Do I trust that the way how they make their product is ethical? I don't know. Probably not.”*  
- Judy

Rebecca, on the other hand, compared her trust in Hunkemöller to a person:

*“I mean, it looked like I could trust it to sell me lingerie, but if it were a person, I'm not sure if we would be super close friends.” - Rebecca*

Amongst the rest of the participants, the opinions were split. Holly stated that she can trust Hunkemöller as it is a brand that she is familiar with as well as it being generally popular. For her, the brand has always included different sizes and bodies, so the diverse representation was no surprise to her as “it comes natural with them” and “is very closely related to their core values”. Alicia is not as positive as Holly but believes that their attempt to show diversity is “at least a bit genuine, because it’s like throughout every category a bit. So, it's not just, I don't know, in the front page showing one plus-size and one black model”. Nelly also picked up this thought as she identified their improvements regarding inclusivity, making them more trustworthy. Although seeing that they are struggling with finding their own way of communicating this diversity, she still thinks that there is some sincerity behind their actions. Martha justified her trust into the brand by explaining that she has not heard anything negative about them. Vera “definitely” trusts the brand due to seeing that Hunkemöller is “going the extra mile” while also still implying that she would not believe everything they say. In contrast, Charlotte, Sophie and Iris were rather leery declaring that they do not really trust the company. Sophie also agreed with Martha in not having heard anything negative but considered that, in order to convince her to trust Hunkemöller, the brand has to prove themselves over time. Charlotte expressed her opinion strongly saying that “there is nothing about them that would suggest any kind of trust for me” and that she cannot take the brand seriously. While indicating that Hunkemöller has super low credibility for her and does not consider them to be trustworthy, she highlighted:

*“I mean, I think this maybe doesn't even have to do with the fact that I have knowledge about brand activists. But as I mentioned earlier, we're the ultimate bullshit detectors. Like I see this [inauthenticity] instantly. When I when I look at it, I don't even have to think that hard about it.” - Charlotte*

Such a critical view also dominated when asking about Hunkemöller’s contribution to society. All interviewees expressed their concerns about this aspect and agreed that they do not really give back much or not even at all. The most frequently mentioned topic that the brand might contribute to and set a positive example mainly referred to the inclusion of a diverse range of models which makes women feel accepted, confident and more comfortable in their own skin. This overall perception is also reflected in Holly’s statement:

*“Sustainability, I don't know. I don't think that Hunkemöller is very sustainable brand, at least for me, but the body positivity for sure. Because also like, first of all, by the way of marketing that they also include different kind of body shapes in their marketing campaigns. Also that they have all the different sizes I think it's also one of the few brands which basically goes up to like, super high I don't know like E, F, double E whatever there is. So I think they go up to quite like some different body shapes and also what I think about positive body positivity or like feeling comfortable or confident with yourself because they also they don't only focus for example on like super sexy and super erotic lingerie but they also then have like, super comfortable pyjamas, for example. Like it's just a good mixture, not only concentrating on, let's say the male aspect of*

*buying sexy underwear, but also that you should feel yourself and that you should be comfortable in it.” - Holly*

However, Charlotte perceives these efforts to be rather forced as well as the brand to be part of the problem of women not feeling happy about their body shapes. Rebecca agreed by indicating that “it seemed kind of surface level, like pretty trendy, playful. Like they weren't very, like serious”. Beyond that, Sophie and Kate highlighted that, in the end, Hunkemöller is a capitalist brand that aims to drive consumption and make profits. Another aspect that aroused was the contribution in terms of sustainability which was also mentioned by Holly in the statement above. Similarly, Martha agrees with Holly and is not sure if they actually do while Vera noticed that the brand has been engaged in sustainability initiatives.

### ***Victoria's Secret***

The opinions about Victoria's Secret's trustworthiness can be summarised to be rather missing amongst the interviewees as most of them have a negative image and correlate the brand with a history of scandals. When talking about this history, most of them referred to the annual fashion shows that were held until 2018. They associate these with the famous Victoria's Secret angels who are known to be super skinny, wearing size zero. Martha criticised that the brand was a major part of shaping the existing perception of general beauty standards:

*“I feel like this Victoria's Secret angels, these fashion shows, they contributed a lot to how the beauty ideals were established in our society, so they kind of contributed to the evil picture. I guess. And now they're trying to reverse it with just diversity on their social media channels, and whatever. But with their history, and they, in the back of my mind, it's not a brand that I would trust too much.” - Martha*

Sophie took this discussion even further and stated that “the brand needs to go” due to their history and being so outdated. The fashion shows remind her of the early 2000s but not of today's modern world. She also suggested a drastic change and rebranding strategy:

*“I think they need to do a complete rebrand, where the name changes, the leadership team changes, the communication changes, I don't think they can even use the name Victoria's Secret anymore, because by default, people have this traditional type of image in their heads. So I think if they really want to change, they need to change the boardroom, the brand name, and then maybe they can regain trust. I think it will be more difficult for a brand like that, as they have had so many scandals.” - Sophie*

Generally, everyone was quite surprised when looking at the online presences to see a much more diverse portfolio of models than they used to have. Identifying this shift while having the previous portrayal and history in mind, made a lot of them question the intentions and authenticity of Victoria's Secret's actions. Holly mentioned that even though they include some diverse images on their website and Instagram, it does not make them trustworthy as they have not followed this strategy since the establishment of the brand. As the brand always stood for something completely different, she would not relate or contextualise it with body positivity and plus-size; thus, she would never trust it. Alicia voiced her scepticism by assuming that they only use it as a marketing and communication tool “because otherwise, the backlash nowadays would be, would be way way too big”. Charlotte highlighted that with this adapted

representation they appear to be more trustworthy than they used to be, but it does not completely convince her. In order to win her over they have to show consistency throughout the whole brand and add that “piece of extra information”. It is a good attempt but not sufficient to turn her perception around. Iris agreed to this and emphasised that she would need to do some additional research before judging the brand’s authenticity. Rebecca, Judy and Vera also hinted again at the importance of context as they would trust the shop experience and quality of the products but beyond that they would not feel too confident about the company. Contrasting this, merely Nelly stated that she is trusting Victoria’s Secret as she perceives the current representation to be identifiable which showcases diverse body types and ‘real’ people.

Victoria’s Secret’s representation also plays a vital role in the given statements when asking about the company’s contribution to society. Similar to Hunkemöller, the interviewees were uncertain about the ability of the brand to give anything back and stayed rather critical. It can be said that the brand contributes to a sense of raising awareness for different body types and “moving away from that, like, unhealthy picture, they had of girls” as expressed by Iris. Particularly Nelly emphasised that Victoria’s Secret is setting a beauty standard and is giving back to society:

*“Well, I think in a way you're giving back to society, if you make sure that you're you're inclusive in your campaigns, yeah. Because you're making, you're making the standard and especially when you're a big brand, like Victoria's Secret, and they're really doing it well.” - Nelly*

Charlotte even believes to some extent in the authenticity of the brand’s new direction and that the contribution could encompass some kind of validation for all women to make them feel like they are good enough, no matter how they look. Thus, once more these efforts of taking a step in the right direction are recognised by the interviewees, however, according to Rebecca “everything they're doing is playing catch up for bad things they've done in the past. [...] it's like a band aid rather than like a proactive contribution to make things better”. Judy hopes for the brand to have genuine intentions as she thinks that “a lot of girls look up to those models and have complexes”. Nevertheless, Martha appreciated their change as it is much better than sticking to their Victoria’s Secret angels’ image, helping people to see new beauty ideal.

### **4.2.3 Authenticity of Authentic Brand Activists**

According to our interviewees, Parade seems to be a trustworthy brand. This is particularly attributed to seeing a red thread in their representation as well as following a diverse and inclusive communication strategy from the start of the business on. Sophie highlighted this aspect particularly as when she was looking at the brand’s Instagram page, she scrolled all the way down to the first postings, identifying that:

*“I can see that they've started this narrative from the day they started, even though it's a new brand. They've always been this type of way. And they're not trying to rebrand trying to keep up with activist trends. But they've started with this type of narrative. So that's why I feel like I can trust this brand more than a brand that is trying to rebrand themselves just trying to keep up with society's expectations and the consumer's*

*expectations. So it tells me a little bit about like the CEO and the creative director of this brand and like, I think they've always had these values, even though it's new brand, it seems more authentic to me.” - Sophie*

Alicia and Kate used similar words and are believing in the brand’s genuine intentions, not only following a sales purpose but incorporating their values. As Parade is staying true to their core and actively engages in what they are saying, it makes the brand seem to be authentic. Charlotte agreed on that and pointed out that she likes the brand’s consistent presentation throughout their website and Instagram because “the image starts cracking if I see that they have tried it like in a few posts but I'm not seeing a constant throughout everything”. Beyond that, to Vera it seems like that the brand is not afraid to be honest and address controversial issues. Holly even described the brand to be disruptive as they bring in “some new content and some new contexts as well to seeing and approaching that topic [of inclusivity]”.

The only reason for most of the participants to be a bit hesitant about trusting Parade is the fact that the majority did not know it before we introduced them to the brand. Hence, the judgement of trust is mostly based on their first impressions. Nevertheless, due to this being rather positive, the interviewees tend to be able to trust Parade. One of these first impressions was described by Alicia:

*“I think I would, to fully answer I would need to like, maybe Google them a bit. But like, from just looking at the website, and Instagram, they seem like, quite trustworthy, especially because you said like, they're quite new in the startup. So like, it doesn't seem like they've changed the values of the like, three months after not having sales and they're doing that for sales. So it seems quite authentic. And also, like, it's not, like overall, like the sustainability aspect as well. It doesn't seem like PR and communication, but like, seems a bit more, like genuinely trying to do something. Something good.” - Alicia*

Merely Rebecca was familiar with the brand before the interview, so her statements are also based on her previous knowledge. While being relatively cynical about brands generally, she thinks that the company is walking the walk and thus trustworthy.

Also, in terms of sustainability which the brand states to be, a few of the interviewees get sceptical and would not blindly rely on that. To do so, Iris and Rebecca would want to do more research. However, if this research turns out to indicate that Parade is sustainable, their trustworthiness increases, and it would make them give back to society in their opinion. Contrasting, Vera, Charlotte, Alicia, Judy and Holly trust the statements about being sustainable without any further information gathering although not knowing the brand very well.

Furthermore, again what stood out most for the interviewees was that Parade can contribute to society in a way by showing a diverse portfolio of models, also representing people outside the norm. With this body positivity they create a more realistic picture of women and how they look in underwear. According to Sophie, this enables Parade to set a positive example and help shape the industry as well as make women feel confident and comfortable. For Rebecca, the way of Parade embracing diversity is distinct as she emphasised:



*“They'll [other lingerie brands] be like, now featuring people who aren't thin. And it's like, they made a huge deal out of it. [...] Whereas Parade, I think, does a nice job of just quietly being inclusive. So, they're, they're not really making a statement about what is or isn't normal. Not not great, like not being like, look at us, like we're so inclusive, which I just find a bit annoying. So I think they're contributing in that sense.” - Rebecca*

Although Martha is having a positive impression of the brand by trusting it and believing in their contribution to society, she questioned Parade's unique selling point by wondering why there is the need for “another female empowering, sustainable lingerie brand if a few exist already”. Judy, on the other side, understands that the start-up tries to fill a gap in the market and want to “start a new conversation around underwear”.

### **4.3 Theme 3: Skin deep or deeply rooted?**

This last theme is aiming to summarise the interviewees' points of view in regard to why brands are shifting towards a brand activist approach and how their perception might be affected by this.

As identified in the literature review (chapter 2.2.1), many brands start shifting towards a brand activist approach. Our interviewed respondents have described several motives that might encourage brands to engage in brand activism and take a stance overall. Alicia highlighted that brands need to expand their responsibilities beyond solely making profits. Thus, with their money and reach, brands can do something good like addressing societal issues. While many follow such a genuine approach, wanting to make a difference, others are just following a trend and jump on the bandwagon. According to Rebecca, this reaction can be due to “the pressure for brands to do something or participate in brand activism”. She implied that this movement might also be traced back to social media because:

*“I think people today are more aware than they've ever been of the way images are manufactured. Like, because we can now edit and filter and take pictures of ourselves and curate our own versions of ourselves on places like Instagram, we're collectively more critical about the way that brands do that. Specifically, with women's bodies, and I think, on you know, in another way, social media has allowed conversations about objectification of women to spread much farther than they had in the past and to move outside of just feminist circles into kind of mainstream conversation. And at the end of the day, brands have to reflect mainstream perceptions and conversations in order to relate to their consumers.” - Rebecca*

Charlotte further agreed as she thinks that it is “going to be really hard for companies to get away with not being involved or engaged with brand activism to some extent”. This also aligned with Holly's statement, saying:

*“I think that a brand nowadays can not only stay out of everything, but they should definitely have an opinion which they also openly communicate and support.” - Holly*

This shows that it is vital for a brand to assure that the reasons why they want to engage in brand activism are genuine and specifically coordinated. However, for brands to be actually

perceived this way depends on the interpretation of their consumers. Hunkemöller and Victoria's Secret as an example of such shifting brands, namely Brand Activist Aspirants, are also facing the interviewees changed perceptions after having observed their current online presence.

Regarding Hunkemöller, the perception was generally influenced positively as the interviewees recognised the brand's efforts of including more diversity. Although still identifying room for improvement, Nelly thinks that it is good that they take their time to shift slowly, making them and their actions seem more credible:

*"I think that's also why Hunkemöller, still kind of try to be inclusive and not to push it too much. I think there really has been with, like, in a way they have to be inclusive, and the other end, they don't want to be like, look at me, I am inclusive. Yeah. So I think it's really good that they're shifting, and it's really good that they're not doing it all at once. Because that would definitely demonstrate credit and credibility."* - Nelly

Judy emphasised that she did not expect Hunkemöller to be as diverse as they are today whereas Iris has a similar picture, with her perception not really being impacted from our conversation. Holly, on the other side, stated that to her, the brand has always been quite diverse, offering a wide range of sizes. Hence, she does not feel like they have changed although she also conceded that they might have made some adjustments over time.

The reactions towards Victoria's Secret's shift were rather mixed with the perceptions being influenced to some extent. Most of the interviewees were really surprised when they looked at the brand's online presence, not expecting it to be so diverse. Thus, the perception has been affected to the extent that they can see that the company is trying to change their image, from being a brand that is focused on representing the perfect body to one that shows body positivity and diversity. Iris admitted that her impression about the brand now "is better than I thought". Although acknowledging these efforts and being positively surprised, Charlotte could not shake off the negative image and perception she has in mind when thinking about Victoria's Secret with their perfectly looking, skinny models that the brand was standing for over so many years. Also, Nelly is kind of hesitant to trust the shift of the company as well as Rebecca who stated that if they truly wanted to change their behaviour and earn their consumers' trust, the brand will first need to critically assess their own image:

*"But I think that it would take a lot of time for a brand to, for a brand like Victoria's Secret to first repair its image, and then be seen as an actual leader in social impacts, they have to repair their image first, before that they can be perceived as a voice for women's empowerment or something like that. You can't just flip that switch overnight."*  
- Rebecca

The change in society and consumer demands are identified to be the main drivers for brands to shift towards a brand activist approach according to the interviewees. Everyone mentioned this aspect to be of high importance and that brands have to adapt to consumers' expectations in order to stay competitive. Charlotte put it in a nutshell:

*“They [brands] used to just set the agenda, but nowadays consumers are so disloyal. So for them to keep, you know, top of mind and keep appealing to consumers, they need to make sure that they know they're living up to our expectations.” - Charlotte*

Particularly the trend towards more ‘realness’ and the body positivity discussion have gained a lot of attention, with consumers demanding brands to include a more diverse range of models. This pressure from society makes the participants doubt the genuine intentions whether the stance is taken due to following sincere or solely profit reasons. This makes the authenticity lack as expressed by Alicia. Kate thinks that it is noticeable if brands do it with the wrong intentions such as simply making money. Martha also picked up this aspect and believes that they mainly want to engage in brand activism to jump on the bandwagon and make money out of the current trends. For example, Victoria’s Secret is identified by Sophie to only adjust their representation in order to save the company from going bankrupt. She does not believe in the company’s values and them wanting to have a positive impact. Nevertheless, Martha also acknowledged the fact that by engaging, companies are at least changing and contributing in a better way. Furthermore, Holly highlighted that also the main marketing channels have changed in the past years with social media getting bigger and gaining importance. According to her, “you don't really shoot the product anymore, just to put it online, but you also represent a whole community with it”. Such a community can have a lot of power and companies are risking creating backlash in case they do not adapt to consumer demands. But not only consumers but also employees have an impact on the brands to take a stance. Martha reflected on this internal push from employees on the brands as they seek to incorporate their own values which “bring[s] purpose to your job”. Another reason for brands to shift towards a brand activist approach is that they become more aware of their social responsibility and place in society. Sophie elaborated this thought as with such behaviour they are “trying to minimise the harmful effects they have on society” so they can compensate for their wasteful practices.

## 5 Discussion

In this discussion chapter, the previously summarised findings of the empirical material are analysed according to the literature and theory that were presented in chapter 2. By means of the theoretical foundation, we aim to examine and contextualise the studied consumers’ perceptions of brand activism and thereby answer our research question. Commencing with Morhart et al.’s (2015) model to comprehend perceived brand authenticity, we apply the authors’ four dimensions to the two categories Brand Activist Aspirants and Authentic Brand Activism. These dimensions are important in order to make a statement about consumers’ overall perceived authenticity of lingerie brands engaging in brand activism. Hereafter, we refine our definition of the Brand Activist Aspirants in relation to the empirical findings as well as to Parade as an Authentic Brand Activist. Subsequently, we validate the concept based on the perception of the selected brands in the aspirant category, namely Hunkemöller and Victoria’s Secret. Beyond that, we extend Vredenburg et al.’s (2020) typology of brand activism with our Brand Activist Aspirants category as well as the track record characteristic that we have identified to be of great importance in the perception of practised brand activism.

## **5.1 Perceived brand authenticity**

As part of their PBA-scale, Morhart et al.'s (2015) have investigated consumers' perceived brand authenticity by utilising four dimensions, namely continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism. Each of these dimensions contain several items which determine whether a brand fulfils the dimension or not. Applying this theory to our research, we are able to examine the empirical findings in correspondence with these dimensions. Resulting, we are able to draw a conclusion and judge about the three selected brands' authenticity as well as generalise it to the wider context of authenticity in brand activism.

### **5.1.1 Continuity**

As stated by Morhart et al. (2015), the dimension continuity relates to the extent to which consumers perceive brands to remain true to themselves. This is connected to their track record and ability to cope with trends in order to stay relevant. When applying this dimension to our three selected brands, it appears that each of them have a different history. On the one hand, Hunkemöller seems to have a steady track record with no harmful associations whereas on the other hand, Victoria's Secret has a rather negative history due to previous scandals. Contrasting, Parade is identified to be at the other end of the spectrum as the company was only founded a few years ago, therefore having no evident history yet. Nonetheless, the consumers clearly noticed that Parade remained true to their diverse, inclusive approach since their establishment in 2019. This has led to an overall positive impression of the brand. These results align with Vredenburg et al. (2018) who explained that brands are more likely to attract positive perceptions when their track record is appropriate and justifies their efforts. Although Parade has a rather short history, their actions have so far been consistent and purpose-driven, hence the positive assumptions.

Beyond that, brands are encouraged to stay up to date on current trends (Morhart et al., 2015) and have significant values that align with their core (Vredenburg et al., 2020). However, according to the consumers, adjusting to trends is not always viewed to be the right decision. They noticed that while brand activism is trending nowadays, it is senseless to get involved when a company has no sincere intentions to stick with it. The literature also suggests that when numerous businesses decide to take a similar stance they can also appear as imitators which would negatively influence their reputation (Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2018). This explains the reasoning why some of the consumers were hesitant about believing in Hunkemöller's and Victoria's Secret's efforts as they contemplated whether these brands have genuine motives or if they are solely following the diversity and inclusivity trend that Parade appears to be leading.

Instead, the consumers prefer brands that remain true to their brand identity even though this might mean that they do not take a societal stance at all. They also want brands to possess modern values that they can resonate with since this can negatively affect their loyalty otherwise. This occurred to Victoria's Secret as their values were perceived rather outdated and generic which, according to Vredenburg et al. (2020), can make it more difficult for a brand to

win back their customers. Accordingly, the consumers found it challenging to identify themselves with Victoria's Secret because some of them felt that the brand did not grow up with their values seeming to no longer fit today's society. Therefore, the company still needs to prove its relevance in order to also persuade their old consumers who were into the brand years ago. In order to do so, Victoria's Secret has to be patient as Vredenburg et al. (2020) also stated that it requires time and effort to foster a positive and authentic relationship with consumers. This is especially applicable when a brand has a history of negative publicity (Vredenburg et al., 2020), being the case for Victoria's Secret. Hunkemöller evoked similar perceptions regarding their values and actions. Generally, the consumers agreed that there is still much more improvement needed in terms of their level of diversity and inclusivity. Nevertheless, Hunkemöller is preferred over Victoria's Secret due to their neutral track record as well as continuous efforts in portraying a more inclusive portfolio of models.

Beyond this aspect, the consumers discussed that Parade is successfully attempting to fill a market gap in a disruptive manner which distinguishes them from more traditional brands such as Hunkemöller and Victoria's Secret. Koch (2020) argued that taking such a disruptive approach has been getting increasingly common amongst brand activists. In the case of Parade, their strategy has positively influenced the consumers' perceptions as the company seems to be standing up for an important social matter. Since Parade adhered to the same approach from the beginning, they demonstrate that they are not simply following a trend. Contrastingly, Hunkemöller and Victoria's Secret were perceived less genuine compared to Parade due to their attempting activist strategies to move away from stereotypical models and switch to a more diverse and inclusive portfolio which was not incorporated from their origins on. As argued by Morhart et al. (2015), it can therefore take more time and effort for consumers to develop a positive association to brand activism with these type of brands.

Moreover, the consumers stated that they are quite disloyal to brands in general since there are so many to choose from nowadays. This explains why it is even more important for companies to meet their consumers' expectations which can be achieved by integrating brand activism (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a). In addition, the consumers emphasised that when companies out of a sudden try to take a more activist approach, they are also more wary of their intentions. This does not incentivise brands to shift to such an approach as they are already facing the risk of repercussions when integrating brand activism (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). However, some consumers also mentioned that these businesses have to start somewhere and people should be open to let them rectify their mistakes. Thus, brands will have to be transparent in their communication and avoid making misleading claims as this can cause negative consequences (Vredenburg et al., 2020). As also stated by Du, Bhattacharya and Sen (2010), transparency is, in fact, critical to convince consumers to trust that the brand's intentions are genuine.

In consideration of the aforementioned, the empirical data strengthens the definition of our coined category 'Brand Activist Aspirants'. Such brands are characterised as either neutral brands with no previous history in any activist remarks, or those with a track record of unintentionally expressing positive or negative comments related to public issues. It appears that our studied consumers perceived Victoria's Secret more negatively due to their troubling history and bad publicity, making it therefore difficult to judge their intentions. On the other

side, Hunkemöller had no specific history with any type of brand activism or negative associations which potentially made the brand appear more positive and sincere. Hence, we argue that the track record can in fact influence the perceived authenticity of Brand Activist Aspirants, depending on how positive or negative their previous actions are being viewed.

## 5.1.2 Credibility

According to Morhart et al. (2015), credibility is essential in terms of perceived brand authenticity as it includes features such as the honesty of a brand as well as its ability to convey its values. As stated by Vredenburg et al. (2018, 2020), trust and credibility in brand activism are only established over time as these merely evolve when brands adhere to their values and taken stance. This is also confirmed by the consumers who see the need for a long-term strategy and acknowledged the slow shift of Hunkemöller towards a brand activist approach, making their efforts more trustworthy. Although such a slow shift is not a guarantee for brands to be perceived credible with other components paying on to this, it seems to be beneficial. Thus, taking time and being conscious about implementing an activist approach can be identified as an important aspect for Brand Activist Aspirants.

Another factor impacting the level of perceived credibility is the number of brands taking a stance at the same time, relating to the same topic. Both, the consumers and the literature (Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2018), addressed that acting on trending issues can be perceived negatively. Hence, it is recommended to have an eye on future involvements as well as previous ones to determine the genuineness of the actions and how well these are integrated into the companies' core. This also aligns with the declaration that consistency is key in brand activism in order to be perceived trustworthy as stated by the consumers as well as researchers (Morhart et al., 2015). Having this in mind, Hunkemöller and Victoria's Secret have yet to prove over time if they keep a consistent diversity level, showing that they do not betray the consumers and by that being able to gain their trust. Hunkemöller is actually on a good way as they are improving their portrayal of diverse models as well as integrated inclusivity as a new value since 2021. They show this commitment not only in their marketing campaigns but also in their published strategy reports over several years (chapter 3.4.2).

When it comes to brand activism in the lingerie market, one of the consumers argued that the movement towards more body inclusivity could be perceived as a form of micro activism being a part of brand activism. From her perspective, companies taking a bold and inclusive approach should be seen as a necessary and logical requirement which is agreed upon by the other consumers. While examining the online presences of the three brands, the consumers also repeatedly emphasised that they noticed the increased use of diverse models, representing different sizes. This adjustment to include more real and imperfect models instead of the overly represented size zero ones is highly appreciated, with this trend also being indicated in the literature (Benberry, 2020; Breaux, 2018; Rapp, 2019). As a result, as soon as consumers can identify themselves with a brand's representation, their trustworthiness towards it increases.

The credibility of a brand's engagement also varies depending on the level of expectation that the consumers have towards it (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Victoria's Secret serves as an example with many consumers being surprised about how the brand represents itself online. Instead of the expected perfect models, the consumers were astonished but also confused when seeing a more diverse portfolio, showcasing more imperfection. This elicited a few positive but rather negative reactions as the brand followed a very different approach for years, being known for scandals that specifically excluded particular looks and genders. These scandals also made it difficult for the consumers to trust Victoria's Secret which is also confirmed by researchers' statements. They claimed that brands with a track record of little to no activist behaviour have a hard time to gain consumer trust, particularly when already having such a negative perception beforehand (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Beyond that, a few consumers also argued that they can identify with the brands depending on whether they are engaging in brand activism sincerely or if they are only doing it for profit and marketing purposes. In the literature, this is an indicator for woke-washing as such brands do not follow genuine intentions such as wanting to have an impact and contribute to society (Vredenburg et al., 2020). However, against these consumers' statements, Ashton (2020) claims that overall, it can be rather challenging for consumers to assess woke-washing due to being hidden in the said marketing practices. Deriving from this, it can be said that the perceived sincerity of brand activism depends on how well consumers know the brands as well as their history and values. In addition to the woke-washing aspect, the pressure from society, which is pushing brands to make statements regarding societal issues, was examined by the consumers to be a reason for brands to engage in brand activism. This influenced their perceived authenticity rather negatively since it seems like brands might simply jump on the bandwagon, wanting to be part of the crowd, especially when they have not taken actions previously (Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Therefore, the honesty of brands in terms of their brand activism should be assessed by carefully judging the companies' intentions.

According to Morhart et al. (2015), credibility is also based on how and if brands accomplish their value promises. Looking at the three examined brands, the self-imposed values have not always lived up to the consumers' perceptions. This misalignment between the consumers' perceptions of the values and the actual ones builds a poor foundation for authentic brand activism. As per the literature, the brands' values have to be matching the corporate practices, purpose and marketing messaging (Vredenburg et al., 2020). However, if already the values themselves are off or even outdated, it implies that the practised activism is not perceived credible. In sum, the studied consumers disagreed to several of Hunkemöller's as well as Victoria's Secret's values whereas Parade's were mostly conveyed. Therefore, we can draw the conclusion that these consumers are inclined to distrust the brands that fail to match their values.

Comparing the three selected brands for this study, Parade seems to be the most credible one. The brand was identified to not hold back in addressing controversial topics and taking a bold approach when it comes to their communication and representation. They are perceived to walk the walk and, by that, act authentically. In essence, this is what brand activism is about as it describes companies that do not back off from taking a stand and with that, aiming to make a difference and having an impact (Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Summarising, in order for brands to be perceived trustworthy and credible, the consumers stated that they need to be convinced of their genuine intentions that are implemented over a long period of time, ideally since the establishment of the business (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Beyond that, they stated that it is essential to incorporate activism into the core of the brand and practise what they preach. Hereby, it is vital that the actions align with the true purpose and position as well as values and vision of the brand (Moorman, 2020; Napoli et al., 2014; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Overall, the consumers seemed to not blindly trust the three brands, scrutinising their actions and rationales which aligns with the general scepticism that the literature highlights (Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2018). Therefore, the level of credibility varies from brand to brand and from consumer to consumer. While Hunkemöller and Victoria's Secret are looked at with scepticism, Parade has rather positive connotations. Nevertheless, the latter is also not trusted to the fullest as an essential component for credibility is the familiarity with a brand which has not been given for the majority of the consumers.

### **5.1.3 Integrity**

The integrity dimension refers to “the moral purity and responsibility of the brand” (Morhart et al., 2015, p.203) and the extent to which they properly align their values and care for their consumers. The dimension contrasts commercially oriented companies and is one of the decisive components that affects the perception towards brands' authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015). Integrity appears to be increasingly important since the consumers nowadays can no longer be satisfied by brands who are simply integrating some CSR initiatives to demonstrate responsibility. Instead, companies are encouraged to integrate brand activism in order to become more society-driven (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a).

The consumers are also highly supportive of businesses that actively contribute to society and tend to prefer activists over non-activists. These consumers expect brand activists to go the extra mile for them and generally perceive them to be rather bold and brave in their communication strategies. Beyond that, Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) argue that brand activism allows organisations to showcase their moral identity which can in some cases lead to polarisation amongst their consumers. Although brands can face serious consequences when taking a societal stance, the authors still recommend to fully integrate the activism in their identity, regardless of their consumers' responses. However, this is easier stated in a theoretical setting than it is executed by companies in practice. Multiple consumers emphasised that they definitely have high expectations of bigger, well-known companies to fulfil their social responsibility to make a positive change. Nonetheless, they stress that this could not be as feasible for smaller businesses as these might not have the resources to properly pursue an activist approach whereas larger brands have the capacity to stay true to their word. This has also been reflected in the literature as Hoppner and Vadakkepatt (2019) have stated that the consumers' demands have increased, especially regarding multinational corporations due to their financial resources. Furthermore, Klein, Smith and John (2004) stated that the potential backlash can really damage a brand's reputation and/or image. Hence, consumers make a valid point that this can be perceived as an additional boundary particularly for smaller brands to become a brand activist. Perhaps this explains the consumers' overall enthusiasm towards



Parade since the start-up has shown that also a brand with limited resources can still have a substantial impact on society. However, their success might be related to the fact that they have integrated the same activist strategy since their establishment.

In terms of contributing to society, one of the consumers argued that Hunkemöller is causing the opposite effect by portraying a rather negative stereotype of women. According to this person, the brand is harming the social good which would imply that it is a regressive brand as defined by Kotler and Sarkar (2018a). In contrast, one highly loyal consumer of Hunkemöller emphasised that the brand actually has a history of collaborating with plus-size models. However, the consumers appear to have different definitions of 'plus-size models' since most of them did not perceive the brand's previous models to actually be plus-size. Today, the general perception of Hunkemöller is that they are showing relatively genuine efforts to incorporate a more realistic picture in order to communicate that they care and listen to their consumers. Nonetheless, the actions to prove their sincerity remain quite limited. Therefore, it could be argued that, according to Morhart et al.'s (2015) definition of integrity, the brand is giving back to its consumers to a certain extent but they could still communicate their moral principles and values more explicitly in order to increase their integrity. Still being focused on the overall perspective of Hunkemöller, it could also be argued that their actions to promote body positivity seem to be supporting the common good and the company could therefore be perceived relatively progressive (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018a).

At the same time, almost all the consumers have known Victoria's Secret for setting a particular beauty ideal in society that has led to troublesome beauty standards, especially for younger, insecure girls. Therefore, their image has a negative connotation as consumers associate the brand with these traditional, unattainable ideals that are no longer appreciated today. The literature also provides an insight into this societal push which highlights the demand for body positivity and inclusivity as a part of a new, realistic beauty standard (Benberry, 2020; Breaux, 2018; Peters, 2018; Rapp, 2019). This shifting ideal seems to be especially required in the lingerie market since the consumers argue that this is a particularly vulnerable industry and should therefore be strongly focused on female empowerment. Breaux (2018) also stated that diversity and inclusivity efforts should be even more evident in this sector and observed that more women want organisations to adopt a higher purpose and get more involved in diversity and social activism. Hence, it appears that both, Hunkemöller and Victoria's Secret, are trying to follow this shift and strive to move away from the unhealthy image that has been negatively affecting society.

Parade on the other side has been significantly praised for showcasing their diverse portfolio of models as well as real images with stretchmarks and cellulite, presenting women in an empowering setting. When examining the brand in terms of integrity as defined by Morhart et al. (2015), it seems to be relatively higher compared to the other two brands since the consumers perceive the start-up as an excellent example that helps to shape the industry into a better one. Besides following a disruptive strategy, Parade is a sustainable brand and supports charities with donations which is why the brand was valued even more and certainly contributes to society according to the consumers. This also implies that they are adhering to their moral principles and truly care for their consumers, reinforcing the company's integrity (Morhart et al., 2015). In addition, if businesses establish an appropriate alignment between their activist

efforts and their identity, they also have a greater possibility to impact society (Vredenburg et al., 2020). This appears to be applicable to Parade since they are following up on their promises and are not afraid to embrace their values.

To conclude, even though the integrity of these three brands appears to be perceived differently, the consumers argue that they are all becoming increasingly aware of their social responsibility and place in society. While Hunkemöller and Victoria's Secret are both rather at the beginning of making small contributions to society and giving back to their consumers, Parade seems to be more actively tackling current issues by facing size and racial discrimination.

### **5.1.4 Symbolism**

Symbolism is focused on how well consumers can use the symbolic quality of the brand to define who they are and what they identify with. Important aspects of symbolism are a brand's relationships and values as these can support individuals in finding their true selves. If the symbolic quality is high, consumers are more likely to perceive a brand to be authentic. In order to assess this dimension, items such as the added value to a person's life, the ability of the brand to mirror people's values and the connection between brands and consumers, are examined (Morhart et al., 2015).

One way for brands to add meaning to consumers' lives via their brand activism engagement is the ability to contribute to society, making consumers feel like doing something good with their purchase as well as comfortable to buy there. According to Rapp (2019), consumers value lingerie brands that espouse for diversity and body positivity as this is a big part of society that needs to be addressed accordingly. Since every individual has a different body type and size, companies play a vital role in portraying, enhancing, and contributing to that diverse and real picture. Hence, they are assigned to make consumers feel more represented next to all the perfectly looking models that are usually depicted. This was also reflected in our conducted interviews where the consumers positively pointed out the use of different-sized models in the representation and communication of all three brands. Thus, all of them were mostly associated with giving back to society in terms of raising awareness for inclusivity. Parade stuck out particularly, as compared to Hunkemöller and Victoria's Secret, the company showcases a distinctive size range with people outside the norm as well as seemingly non-retouched images. This implies that the consumers were able to see themselves represented by the brand, consequently empowering them and building a stronger connection with Parade. Nonetheless, the efforts of the other two were also appreciated as these show that they are stepping away from the existing beauty standards. This allows the consumers to resonate better with Hunkemöller and Victoria's Secret, subsequently strengthening the symbolic quality that they serve (Morhart et al., 2015). In doing so, it can make women feel more comfortable and confident about their own bodies.

The increased social acceptance and empowerment of women was also identified by Benberry (2020) who states that there is a growing number of lingerie brands that take a stance in these regards, aligning once more with the statements of the studied consumers who noticed the same development. However, even though they observed this demand for more diversity and

inclusivity, they also argued strongly that the efforts of most brands are not sufficient. The majority of companies are simply showcasing the bare minimum and therefore still have a long road ahead if they want to enable their consumers to properly identify themselves with them.

Symbolism also entails the aforementioned ability of brands to reflect values that consumers care about. The 'right' values cannot be generally defined as consumers' acceptance of social norms are subjective and each individual perceives them differently (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Napoli et al., 2014; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Nevertheless, an overall tendency can be determined, showing that Parade's values were the ones that the consumers mostly resonated with. These were conveyed well, with particularly 'inclusivity' and 'sustainable' sparking the consumers' attention as both are something that all of them highly appreciate and care about. Contrastingly, the values of Hunkemöller and Victoria's Secret are rather superficial, not addressing any particular matters that could contribute to the wider public. As previously mentioned, this has now been taken into account by Hunkemöller who recently introduced their inclusivity value. The aspect of not including such values that contribute to society has not been clearly stated or identified by the consumers. However, overall, the alignment between their own values and the ones from Hunkemöller and Victoria's Secret seemed to be rather poorly in comparison to Parade. Hence, we argue that when brands' values address societal issues, such as inclusivity in this context, consumers appear to perceive a brand more caring and thus authentic. Resulting, Brand Activist Aspirants should prioritise and review their values in order to proceed shifting to an authentic approach.

This alignment of brands' and consumers' values are also said to benefit the connection and relationship between them (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001) which Morhart et al. (2015) also name to be an item of the symbolism dimension. Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) added on to this by claiming that the more a consumer connects to a brand, the better he/she can identify with it. This again, is only given if they perceive the companies' brand activism efforts and activities to be authentic (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). Arising from the empirical data, this aspect seems to be correct at the first glance as it appears overall to be easier for the consumers to identify with the brand when it portrays values they care about. Against that, it does not necessarily apply to Parade as, according to the consumers, the brand is perceived to be acting authentic and resonating with their own values. Nonetheless, some of the consumers were still not able to identify themselves with the brand. For them, identification is quite a strong sentiment which appears to be a general problem as most of the consumers have troubles resonating with lingerie brands overall. Knowing this, it is difficult to draw a conclusion that makes this aspect generalisable. We claim that even if the consumers' values, reflecting their own beliefs, align with the ones from brands it does not necessarily mean that they also identify themselves with the brands. Hence, in order for consumers to build a connection to brands, companies have to build a strong relationship and prove their efforts over time.

Concluding, it can be said that when brands add meaning to their consumers' lives by contributing to society as well as stating and integrating this into their values, consumers are likely to perceive the practised activism as authentic. Furthermore, the consumers' ability to identify themselves with the brands plays a vital role in their perceived authenticity as it strengthens the relationship between the two. Contrary to the literature, we could not confirm the positive correlation of the consumers' connection to a brand's values and their capability to

identify with the corresponding one. This indicates that it requires more than a mere overlap between the consumers' and brands' values for the company to become a valuable resource for their consumers' identity construction. Therefore, businesses will need to improve their symbolic quality which can be done by building strong relationships and ensuring that the values are relevant and resonate with their target audience.

### **5.1.5 The essence of perceived brand authenticity**

Deriving from the aforementioned, Parade appears to be the most continuous brand since they have remained true to their bold approach since their establishment. Their track record demonstrates that they are not merely adapting to a trend but have their taken stance integrated into their core. This resulted in positive first impressions from the consumers and strengthened the perceived credibility of Parade. Contrasting, Hunkemöller and Victoria's Secret are both perceived less trustworthy due to their shifting behaviour of portraying more diversity and inclusivity which has solely been incorporated recently. However, since Hunkemöller had no history in actively interfering in societal issues nor attracted any specifically negative publicity, the brand can be viewed neutral in terms of their continuity. As for Victoria's Secret, they appear to be less continuous due to their problematic track record, consequently lowering their credibility. Although Hunkemöller and Victoria's Secret are seemingly less authentic compared to Parade, the latter can also still improve their credibility by familiarising more people with the brand itself, strengthening their popularity.

Regarding the integrity of the brands, it seems that they are all becoming more aware of the importance to take a societal stance. Nevertheless, the extent of this differs per brand since Parade is perceived the most integrous due to their contributions to society and moral principles whereas Hunkemöller and Victoria's Secret are only starting to give somewhat back to the public. If these brands were to integrate this more into their values, they could become a significant addition to their consumers' lives, subsequently increasing their authenticity. A good example is actually Hunkemöller themselves, as they have incorporated the new value 'inclusive' as of 2021 (chapter 3.4.2); however, the impact on the consumers' perception remains to be seen. When it comes to symbolism, Parade particularly manages to have a high symbolic quality due to their bold approach of showcasing a great variety of people outside the traditional beauty standards. This enhances their authenticity as it allows consumers to identify themselves with the company, hence build a stronger relationship. The symbolic efforts from the other two brands have not gone unnoticed but could still be enriched in order to resonate better with their consumers.

To conclude, Morhart et al.'s (2015) four dimensions can be utilised as an appropriate tool to evaluate consumers' perceived authenticity by closely examining a brand's communication to assess whether they are actually walking the walk. Since the framework is applicable to various contexts, we have related it to brand activism. In order to determine the level of authenticity of our categorised Brand Activist Aspirants, we consolidated the perceptions of Hunkemöller and Victoria's Secret whereas we examined Parade for the category Authentic Brand Activism. In general, consumers perceive aspirants only slightly authentic in terms of their continuity and credibility as they have only recently adopted an activist strategy and thus consumers are unsure

whether they will continue this new direction and if their intentions are trustworthy. Moreover, consumers could only identify themselves with aspirants to a limited extent, thus leaving room to improve their symbolic quality. Beyond that, we argue that both aspirants and authentic brands are quite integrous as brands are becoming increasingly conscious of their place in society and how they aspire to contribute to it which is also one driver for brands to adapt an activist approach. The difference is that Authentic Brand Activists are also inclined to be perceived more authentic regarding the other three dimensions which contrasts aspirants who are only complying with a few of the corresponding items, indicating that they are not fulfilling each dimension, hence lacking authenticity. For example, we recognised that Authentic Brand Activists are perceived to be more credible and continuous as they have deeply integrated brand activism into their core over a long period of time. Nonetheless, we claim that these authentic ones do not necessarily have to completely fulfil all dimensions, but they generally perform quite well in each of them, making them perceived authentic.

## **5.2 The shift that matters – extending upon the typology of brand activism**

Having identified that Hunkemöller and Victoria's Secret both lack authenticity as well as that Parade represents an appropriate example of an authentic brand, we hereafter focus more specifically on our coined concept of Brand Activist Aspirants and integrate this category in Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) typology of brand activism.

Referring back to our definition of the Brand Activist Aspirants in chapter 2.2.4.3, it seems appropriate to further refine this newly established category based upon the empirical data that we have gathered. The necessity to introduce this intermediate level is related to the fact that, thus far, solely successful and poor implementations of brand activism have been considered in academia. Besides these examples, we observed that an increasing number of companies have only recently taken a stance without demonstrating a history of engaging with any form of activism. These brands are activism newcomers, adjusting their behaviour to shift from a non-activist to an activist strategy and, in doing so, aim to establish a certain image on the market. While aspirants are adapting their approach, they appear more vulnerable than usual as they have to find their new position in the market. Therefore, it is significant to consider implementing this strategy rather slowly in order to let consumers incrementally adjust to their shift and by that avoid overwhelming them. Subsequently, aspirants must be prepared to be patient and show they are persistent in the actions supporting their claims. Beyond that, they have not yet properly aligned the four key characteristics as defined by Vredenburg et al. (2020) which entail the brand's purpose, values, messaging and corporate practices. In the case of Brand Activist Aspirants, these characteristics are all existent; however, their capacity is not yet fulfilled and could therefore be enhanced to reach their maximum potential. For instance, a brand could have adopted a higher purpose but not yet fully aligned this with their taken stance which could affect the perception of the sincerity of their intentions. In other words, an aspirant has included these characteristics neither successfully nor inadequately at this stage. Instead, they are incorporated at a moderate level as such brands are located in the phase of improving them. In the end, aspirants (should) aim to appropriately align all four characteristics since the

ultimate objective of companies engaging in brand activism is to be perceived authentic (Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020).

On top of these four factors, we argue that, as a Brand Activist Aspirant, it is also important to carefully consider a brand's own overall track record. As examined in our empirical data, the brands' histories as well as their perceived images were frequently mentioned. It emerged that especially when an aspirant is known for negative publicity and/or scandals, their troublesome image appears to stay on top of the consumers' minds. This subsequently affects the trustworthiness negatively. In contrast, if a Brand Activist Aspirant has no particular history, the brand is more likely to be perceived trustworthy after a longer period of time, proving their genuineness. Hence, we believe that the track record should be taken into account when opting for a brand activist approach in order to consider the chances of being viewed (in)authentic in the long run.

Deriving from the correlated aspects above, we propose the following definition of Brand Activist Aspirants:

“Brand Activist Aspirants are brands that are newcomers to brand activism and in the process of shifting from a non-activist to an activist approach by working on integrating and aligning the five key characteristics, namely prosocial purpose, values and corporate practices as well as marketing messaging and track record, which are, at that stage, not yet exploited to their full potential.”

Overall, we believe that an aspirant's track record and history play a vital role in the perception of the brand activism efforts from such companies. Beyond that, we claim that this track record can not only have an impact on this category but also on the other four categories established by Vredenburg et al. (2020). Examining the statements of the interviewed consumers, it is apparent that their first reaction towards the studied brands were based on their own connection to them as well as their perceived brand image. This influenced their overall attitude towards them, making it an important factor when judging a brand in general. Thus, we can assume that a brand's history influences the perceived authenticity of its actions as this is also rooted in Morhart et al.'s (2015) continuity dimension of the PBA. Looking at Parade as an example, it is interesting to distinguish the consumers' attitudes towards the brand as the majority of them has not been familiar with it, hence not knowing any previous or related history. In such a case, consumers base their judgements on their first impressions which, depending on how the brand presents itself, can favour or averse the perceived authenticity of actions taken. Therefore, we argue that even if a brand fulfils the four characteristics, making it authentic (Vredenburg et al., 2020), the perceived track record might have such a negative impact that it influences the consumers' perceived authenticity. As a result, this could mean that the brand scores lower in the typology matrix, hence risking a shift into another category. This also applies to other categories and can go either way. Thus, we suggest to extend the characteristics of Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) typology by adding a fifth characteristic, namely a brand's overall track record.

When examining Hunkemöller in accordance with Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) four characteristics and the empirical data, we conclude that Hunkemöller can, in fact, be identified as a Brand Activist Aspirant. This is determined upon the notion that we first scrutinised the brand and its communication before selecting it as a case and hereafter gathered empirical

material to validate this claim. After thoroughly scrutinising their digital media communication, we noticed that they have adopted an inclusive purpose and are making efforts to empower women and encourage females to be proud of their identities and accomplishments. These efforts were also recognised by the interviewed consumers who observed how the company transitioned from displaying traditional, size zero models to including a wide variety of women with diverse shapes, sizes and ethnicities. Nonetheless, even though the consumers could recognise the efforts, the prosocial purpose could be more publicly communicated and highlighted to emphasise their improvements in these regards. This goes hand in hand with Hunkemöller's marketing messaging, as they could be more explicit about the progressive purpose on their communication platforms. As for the values, these were perceived rather superficial by the consumers, who seemed to share the opinion that most of them were properly conveyed but were still lacking depth. Therefore, the company should strive to also include prosocial values that are more society-driven to incorporate their aspired purpose. This has actually been realised now with their newest value 'inclusive' which was announced in their 2021 brand report. Again, as this report was only published after conducting our research, the value could not be taken into consideration but showcases the sincerity of Hunkemöller's intentions. Finally, Hunkemöller has also engaged in several corporate practices but solely a few consumers were actually aware of these initiatives and could see them reflected in their communication. Besides, most studied consumers had the impression that the brand is slightly contributing to society, solely by raising awareness for body positivity but nothing beyond that. Hence, to show how Hunkemöller is giving back to society, their practices should be more highlighted in order to increase the perceived level of authenticity. Considering Hunkemöller's track record in addition to these four characteristics (Vredenburg et al., 2020), the brand's history is recognised to be neutral, having no specific, negative connotations. Having such a neutral track record, it depends how well the other four characteristics are integrated to determine whether the consumers' perceived trustworthiness will be positively or negatively affected.

Against our initial presumption of Victoria's Secret being identified as a Brand Activist Aspirant, our research has shown that the brand actually cannot be classified as such. This can be explained by the means of Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) four characteristics in combination with the interviewees' perceptions. According to our studied consumers, Victoria's Secret's values are outdated and do not convey a deeper meaning, being perceived as rather shallow. As the brand also does not seem to have any plans of adapting and implementing updated prosocial values, this is a vital part that is missing in the core of the brand (Vredenburg et al., 2020). On top of that, our research has shown that Victoria's Secret's mission is solely profit-driven (chapter 3.4.2), not showing any kind of society-related purpose. These two factors make the brand already quite implausible. In terms of corporate practices, the commercially oriented course of the company is once more highlighted, this time by the interviewees who primarily stated that Victoria's Secret does not seem to be giving anything back to society. Merely the inclusion of diversity in their communication has been appreciated which might be a way of the brand contributing by distancing themselves from the existing, unhealthy beauty ideal. This marketing messaging is also the only aspect that the brand is partly fulfilling in order to be classified as a Brand Activist Aspirant. Contrary to the interviewees' expectations, the company has included a wider range of body types into their communication. However, the consumers

see room for improvement as this seems to be rather surface-level and not genuine, with the portrayed women still being somewhat ‘perfectly looking’. Furthermore, the brand is scoring rather low on this activist messaging as the incorporation of such models is rather done silently. Finally, the track record of Victoria’s Secret was particularly perceived negative, with most of the studied consumers highlighting the previous scandals and negative image that they have of the corporation. This negative perception casts a cloud over the brand’s reputation, making it difficult for the consumers to trust and perceive it credible. Hence, due to all these characteristics lacking, we can no longer consider Victoria’s Secret to be a Brand Activist Aspirant, but merely a brand that tries to catch up with the missed trends and amend their troublesome history.

After this discussion and analysis as well as reconfirming our concept of Brand Activist Aspirant, we aim to expand Vredenburg et al.’s (2020) typology by including this new category in the existing matrix. As aforementioned, their typology currently consists of four brand activism categories, namely absence, silence, inauthentic and authentic. While brands have thus far been classified into a quadrant based on how high or low the characteristics score, the Brand Activist Aspirants will be placed at the centre of the matrix (Figure 10). The positioning of this category appears relevant as here, the four characteristics score neither high nor low since the respective brands are still in the process of adjusting and improving these. Moreover, as an aspirant it is also unclear how the brand will ultimately be perceived based on the alignment of the factors and their own track record. This is another reason for us to place the aspirant at the heart of the matrix as time also determines the perception of what kind of activism the brand ultimately practises, hence which one of the four quadrants the aspirant shifts to. Since the absolute goal of brand activism is to be perceived authentic and hence in the Authentic Brand Activism category (Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020), brands within this category (Q3) do not have the aspiration to move back to the Brand Activist Aspirants category (Q5).



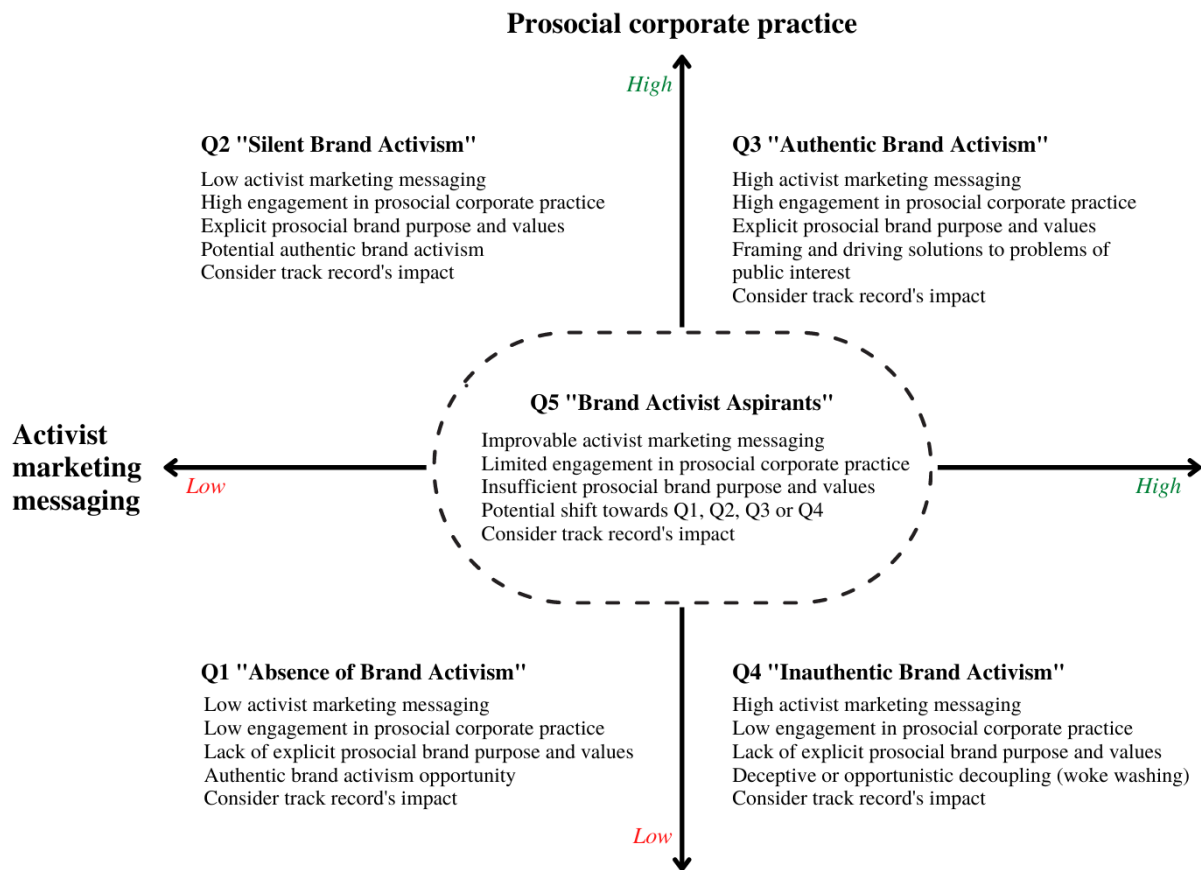


Figure 10: Extended typology of brand activism (own illustration based on Vredenburg et al., 2020)

To sum up, Brand Activist Aspirants are newcomers to brand activism who are working on integrating and aligning the five key characteristics (purpose, values, marketing messaging, corporate practices, track record). Furthermore, this track record is determined to be an additional characteristic to be considered in all brand activism categories. Applying this to the brands, Hunkemöller can be classified as a Brand Activist Aspirant whereas Victoria's Secret does not match the criteria and thus cannot be categorised as one. Parade, on the other hand, is identified to fit in the Authentic Brand Activism category. Beyond that, the typology of brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020) is extended by placing the Brand Activist Aspirants category at the centre of the matrix. Visualising this, an aspirant (Q5) strives to be perceived authentic and be placed in the Authentic Brand Activism category (Q3). Depending on how well a company engages in brand activism by incorporating and aligning the characteristics as well as managing to include these in their core, the Brand Activist Aspirant moves to one of the four established quadrants (Q1, Q2, Q3 or Q4). This overall shift is taking up a considerable amount of time which then eventually determines how authentic the company's intentions will be perceived by its consumers. Thus, this process is demanding patience and endurance of the respective brands.

## 6 Conclusion

This concluding chapter outlines the key takeaways of our findings and discussion as well as the answer to our research question. Subsequently, we touch upon the theoretical contributions and managerial implications. We close the chapter by presenting the limitations of this study and propose suggestions for future research.

Throughout this thesis, we have studied the phenomenon of brand activism, investigated the consumers' perspectives on it and shed a light on the different areas it consists of. For the limited scope of this paper, we decided to focus more specifically on the area of social brand activism. Resulting from this, we contextualised it to the fashion industry and, in doing so, more specifically to the lingerie market. This sector demonstrated a lot of potential due to the numerous brands which are incorporating more diversity and inclusivity in their marketing communication as well as the increasing demand of consumers to take a stance in this matter. Therefore, we focused on the lingerie industry by scrutinising two particular brand activism categories in this area of interest. One of these categories, namely Authentic Brand Activism, was established by Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) as part of their theory-based typology of brand activism which originally comprises four categories. Each category is interpreted according to how well the typology's four key characteristics (prosocial purpose, values, corporate practices, marketing messaging) are integrated and aligned to determine which category an activist brand can be placed in. The other category we look at was established by ourselves and is the focal point of our research, namely Brand Activist Aspirants. This intermediate level of brand activism includes companies who are newcomers to the phenomenon and have only recently taken a stance without demonstrating a certain history of engaging in brand activism. Thus, such corporations are adjusting their behaviour and core to shift from a non-activist to an activist strategy in order to build a particular image on the market. Finally, we examined three selected brands (Hunkemöller, Victoria's Secret, Parade Underwear) from the consumers' point of view, with the first two brands being initially classified as aspirants and the latter as an authentic activist. Concentrating on female millennial consumers, we investigated their perceptions towards these brands in relation to their social brand activism efforts and authenticity. To evaluate these perceptions in terms of authenticity, we utilised Morhart et al.'s (2015) four dimensions of continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism.

As a result of scrutinising these consumers' perceptions, we concluded that Hunkemöller can indeed be classified as a Brand Activist Aspirant whereas Victoria's Secret is no longer considered to be one due to them failing to integrate the key characteristics. On the other side, we validate Parade to be an Authentic Brand Activist as the brand, overall, manages to incorporate Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) characteristics quite well. Following these outcomes, we recognised that there is another important factor that should be added to the four existing characteristics as it can strongly affect how brands' activism is perceived, namely the track record. Our results presented that even when brands manage to reach the full potential of all four factors, indicating that they are authentic (Vredenburg et al., 2020), their perceived track record might still have an impact on them. For instance, a brand's history could have such a negative influence that it possibly affects the consumers' overall perceived authenticity of the

brand. This implication can also be related to Morhart et al.'s (2015) dimension 'continuity' which showcases how the history of a company can impact the perceived brand authenticity. Based on all these insights and results, we propose the following definition for our coined concept 'Brand Activist Aspirants':

“Brand Activist Aspirants are brands that are newcomers to brand activism and in the process of shifting from a non-activist to an activist approach by working on integrating and aligning the five key characteristics, namely prosocial purpose, values and corporate practices as well as marketing messaging and track record, which are, at that stage, not yet exploited to their full potential.”

With that being said, we are now able to answer our research question:

*How do female millennial consumers perceive lingerie brands that are categorised as 'Brand Activist Aspirants' compared to 'Authentic Brand Activists'?*

The findings of our study showed that there has been a fair difference in female millennials consumers' perceptions towards these two categories. On the one hand, consumers perceive aspirants only slightly authentic as they are more prone to question the aspirants' intentions to recently take a stance. This can also be traced back to the continuity and credibility dimensions from Morhart et al. (2015), referring to the sincerity of their actions and for how long they have integrated these. Adding onto this, the female millennials could solely identify themselves with the aspirants to a certain extent, leaving opportunities for such brands to improve in the symbolism dimension (Morhart et al., 2015). On the other hand, the Authentic Brand Activist was perceived authentic by the consumers as it mostly fulfilled all four dimensions from Morhart et al. (2015) which is in alignment with our expectations and Vredenburg et al.'s (2018) description. Such brands are viewed to be more credible compared to the aspirants as they have integrated brand activism into their identity and core for a long duration.

Moreover, it can be said that brands in both categories overlap in terms of the consumers perception regarding the dimension of brands' integrity (Morhart et al., 2015). This is due to companies continuing to be more conscious of their societal impact as well as searching for ways to contribute to it. Contributing to society has also been viewed as an important driver for companies that want to transition towards an activist strategy, thus become Brand Activist Aspirants. Nonetheless, as an aspirant, they should aim to implement their activist approach rather slowly to allow consumers to gradually get accustomed to their shift and prevent them from being overwhelmed. Also, too quick of a change could result in being perceived inauthentic. Hence, this shift can generally be expected and is also suggested to take a long period of time, making it crucial for aspirants to consider consistency and transparency when incorporating these characteristics (Vredenburg et al., 2020) and dimensions (Morhart et al., 2015).

To conclude, all of these aspects combined will ultimately determine how consumers perceive and feel about brands' intentions in terms of taking a stance and engaging in brand activism. Consequently, depending on how well these elements are integrated and aligned, consumers view Brand Activist Aspirants fairly positive as these brands overall aim and are willing to adapt their behaviour and core to support the common good. Nonetheless, compared to the

perception of Authentic Brand Activists, aspirants are left with room for improvement and can still grow beyond their aspirations.

## **6.1 Theoretical contributions**

The forthcoming section will elaborate upon our theoretical contributions by relating our findings to various gaps in academia. We particularly contribute by extending Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) typology with a fifth characteristic (track record) and new category of brand activism (Brand Activist Aspirants). Moreover, we provided in-depth insights into an, up until now, obscure industry as well as expanded the general theoretical knowledge regarding consumers' perceptions towards the phenomenon of (social) brand activism.

As the main focus of this study was to examine consumers' perceptions of lingerie brands within our own established category, 'Brand Activist Aspirants' as well as Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) category, 'Authentic Brand Activist', we claim that validating our activist aspirants is our most vital theoretical contribution. We identified this intermediate level of social brand activism as, thus far, academia predominantly assessed successful and unsuccessful implementations of brand activism. Therefore, there was no category focusing on companies who have only recently taken a stance regarding societal issues and are transitioning into activists. With the development of this new aspirant, we simultaneously contribute and extend Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) theory-based typology which originally comprises four brand activism categories. Hence, we have added our fifth category 'Brand Activist Aspirants' in the typology by placing it at the heart of the matrix. This is due to these aspirants being able to progress into either one of the four categories (Q1, Q2, Q3 or Q4) but ultimately aspiring to evolve into Authentic Brand Activists (Q3). The typology initially places brands in one of the four categories based upon how well they integrate and align the four existing characteristics with some being non-existent. However, in the case of the aspirant, each characteristic is existent but has yet to reach its maximum potential, thus still being in the process of improving them. As a result, such brands will eventually shift to another category, depending on how effectively they coordinate and fulfil the characteristics' capacity.

We further contribute to Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) existing typology by adding a fifth characteristic, the track record. This is an important factor that should be considered in all five categories as it touches upon a brand's history and how this can possibly influence their perceived authenticity. In the case of aspirants, the track record can be viewed even more critical as it can determine into which direction the brand may shift. The track record is also deeply rooted in the continuity dimension established by Morhart et al. (2015) to measure perceived brand authenticity, hence reinforcing the claim that the authenticity and history of a brand are strongly interrelated. Resulting, the extension of Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) typology with this track record as well as our 'Brand Activist Aspirants' can be considered as our key contributions to the literature, being thoroughly explained in detail in chapter 5.2.

Beyond that, we have extended prior research regarding the area of social brand activism, more specifically within the lingerie industry. In doing so, we demonstrated an in-depth perspective into this particular market which is especially relevant today as lingerie brands are becoming

increasingly aware of the importance to stand up for and integrate diversity and inclusivity in their representation and behaviour. This resulted from the increasing consumers' demands who expect lingerie brands to concentrate more on body positivity and female empowerment (Breux, 2018). By focusing on one industry, we were able to scrutinise the topic more thoroughly due to its limited scope whereas this market, to our knowledge, has also not been investigated before in relation to brand activism, hence strengthening our theoretical contribution. Adding onto this, we investigated three brands in this sector that are not explicitly known for taking a stance and/or engaging in brand activism instead of the frequently mentioned success cases (e.g. Ben & Jerry's, Nike or Patagonia). As a result, we make a theoretical contribution by providing insights related to an unexplored industry and less studied brands within this area of interest.

Other than that, we want to highlight that research from the consumers' perspective of brand activism has been relatively scarce, with the emphasis on millennial consumers, which, as far as we are concerned, only Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand (2019) have examined. Therefore, we extend this area in the literature by gaining a deeper understanding of these consumers' perceptions towards brand activism in general and more specifically regarding Authentic Brand Activists and our Brand Activist Aspirants. Consequently, our study also contributes to the limited research concerning authentic brand activism by utilising Morhart et al.'s (2015) four dimensions measuring perceived brand authenticity and relating this to the context of brand activism which, to our knowledge, have not been linked before.

To conclude, this dissertation contributes to existing literature by providing detailed insights of female millennial consumers' perceptions towards Brand Activist Aspirants and Authentic Brand Activists in the lingerie industry.

## **6.2 Managerial implications**

In addition to the theoretical contributions mentioned above, our research provides brand managers and marketers with valuable insights that can help them gather a deeper understanding of what should be examined in order to engage successfully in social brand activism and be perceived authentic. This thesis is especially relevant for marketing practitioners who want to help their brands shift from a non-activist to a more activist approach as they can extract information regarding the consumers' perceptions of Brand Activist Aspirants and adjust as well as optimise their strategy accordingly. Such brands should focus on aligning the four key characteristics (purpose, values, messaging and corporate practices) established by Vredenburg et al. (2020) as well as try to reach their maximum potential in order to be viewed authentic in the long run. In terms of authenticity, Morhart et al.'s (2015) four dimensions can also help corporations to be more conscious of the aspects that can influence their perceived authenticity such as their integrity and symbolism. In doing so, it is essential for companies to be consistent and transparent when integrating these characteristics and aspects as they determine how the organisations' intentions will ultimately be perceived. Hence, brands should be aware that this transition can take a substantial amount of time and thus have to be patient throughout their strategy.

Besides, we have expanded the typology of Vredenburg et al. (2020) by adding the characteristic ‘track record’ which can also aid managers. Our findings present that a brand’s history can play a significant role as to how consumers will perceive their intentions. Therefore, this study helps companies to carefully review the possible influence of their track record when considering shifting to an activist approach or adjusting the existing one. In doing so, brand managers will have to pay close attention as to whether this new direction is even feasible and favourable or if the potential backlash could damage the brand too much.

Furthermore, our dissertation highlights important topics within the lingerie industry, showcasing the consumers’ increasing demands for more inclusivity, diversity, female empowerment and body positivity. Our empirical findings showcase that many brands in this market continue to play it safe regarding these matters by staying within the boundaries of the existing beauty standards and therefore mostly fail to truly fulfil their consumers’ wishes. Consequently, this paper provides marketers with an insight into what these expectations entail and how these can be further exploited to improve their representation and accurately portray a realistic picture. For example, the consumers elaborated how they appreciate brands showing untouched pictures featuring stretchmarks and cellulite as well as using actual plus-size and curvy models instead of demonstrating models who are only slightly upsized.

Lastly, the chosen demographic for this paper, millennials, also provides managerial implications as this age group has shown to be particularly interested in brand activism and is even inclined to favour activist brands over non-activists. Additionally, Gen Y is one of the biggest demographic groups and possess substantial purchasing power which makes adhering to their desires even more crucial. As a result, marketing practitioners can take advantage of the millennials’ perceptions towards brand activists, subsequently learning what does and does not appeal to this generation as well as apply these insights to their branding strategy. For instance, the interviewees stressed that they rather want brands to stick with their commercial-oriented approach if such companies are not genuinely interested in engaging in brand activism.

In sum, since we have compared Authentic Brand Activists to Brand Activist Aspirants within the lingerie industry, our results outline various recommendations for brand managers and marketing practitioners which can help strengthening their (social) brand activist strategies to accomplish a more meaningful and prosperous future.

## **6.3 Limitations and future research**

After highlighting the theoretical and managerial contributions of our study, we also acknowledge that there are limitations to it, which, on a positive note, provide opportunities for potential future research.

First of all, the benefit of conducting our research merely in one industry, namely lingerie, also limits its applicability to others. Although enabling to make the consumers’ perceptions of social brand activism comparable within one market, our results can only fill a niche with little transferability. This is also particularly due to us focusing on body positivity as well as diversity and inclusion which is an important topic in the studied industry but can merely be seen as a part of social brand activism.

Beyond that, the concentration on solely three brands within such a large industry that counts an enormous number of vendors, leaves room for other brands to be examined in this context. The brands were selected and categorised based on our secondary research and own knowledge. Since Parade is a rather new and unknown American start-up, the majority of the consumers were unfamiliar with it. This could be seen as a limitation as the interviewees could only judge the brand based on their first impression, contrasting Hunkemöller and Victoria's Secret who are knowingly more popular due to their company size and widespread locations. In addition, until today, Parade solely distributes its products across the United States, meaning that our mostly European participants could most likely not have the chance to try their products. Even though we selected such different-sized brands on purpose, it might also have impacted the research as they have different resources, structural hierarchies as well as expectations from shareholders to fulfil. Furthermore, since Hunkemöller published their most recent brand report where they highlighted the integration of their newest value 'inclusive' only after we already conducted the interviews, we could not include it into our interview guide. Thus, the outcome of the brand's perception might have been unintentionally impacted, particularly as it refers to a highly relevant value for our studied topic.

Another restriction to our study worth mentioning is that the interviewees had merely a limited amount of time to look at the brands' online representations. This made them judge the companies based on their short impressions during the interview as well as their own affiliations that they had prior to that. With a longer timeframe, they could have noticed more aspects favouring or opposing their perception of the brand. This again particularly applies to Parade since the majority of consumers did not know the brand.

Beyond that, the limited amount of time to conduct our study could have impacted the complexity of this research as a longer time frame would have allowed us to include more participants and brands as well as explore aspects that have solely been touched upon briefly such as the reaction of boycotting when a brand (activist) does not adhere to their expectations. This also implies that a bigger sample size may be able to pay onto proving the generalisability of our study.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic only allowed us to mainly conduct remote interviews which restricted us to build rapport as well as capture most of the non-verbal communication that face-to-face interviews provide.

Nevertheless, these limitations also present potential for future research.

One aspect to build upon is that further studies could include a wider range of (lingerie) brands to further validate and prove our coined concept of the Brand Activist Aspirants. Also, it would be interesting to apply the category to other industries. As we focused on social brand activism, we suggest exploring the concept of the aspirant in other areas like political or environmental brand activism, if even existent.

Moreover, since our study took a qualitative approach, it could be interesting to view the topic from a quantitative perspective as well. A supporting quantitative analysis could build upon our ideas and potentially reveal additional aspects and perspectives on our results as well as validate the research further with a bigger sample.

In terms of showcasing the companies' online representations, multiple platforms such as YouTube and Facebook could also be considered as the respective brands might focus their marketing and distribution on other mediums. These main marketing channels may vary for other industries depending on their target consumers. Furthermore, an expanded range of platforms can widen the consumers' impressions of the studied brands.

On top of this, we encourage to conduct further research on the men's underwear market by selecting corresponding Brand Activist Aspirants and Authentic Brand Activists to examine the males' perspectives on (social) brand activism and towards the selected companies. Even though research (Chéron, Kohlbacher & Kusuma, 2012; Moosmayer & Fuljahn, 2010; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019) shows that female millennials are more attentive to and influenced by brand activism than men, we still think that this area is of interest and might uncover hidden desires that could also be related to how males are currently portrayed.



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# Appendix 1 – Interview guide

Hey, thank you for taking your time today and participating in our study. We are Lieke from the Netherlands and Eileen from Germany and are master students at Lund University. We are currently writing our master thesis in the programme International Marketing and Brand Management which is about brand activism overall as well as brands engaging in it in the lingerie market. So maybe you can also tell us a bit about yourself?

Thank you again for signing the consent form. Your participation is completely voluntary and, if you feel uncomfortable at any point of the conversation, you can stop the interview or refuse to answer the question. We would like to record our discussion, but only so we can better remember it and to use the information at an aggregate level. Your identity will be kept confidential at all times. The only persons that will hear the tape will be us and our professor if she has particular questions. The recording will be erased at the end of the project. Do you have any further questions about this study or this interview?

Okay, *Lieke/Eileen* will take over the role of the interviewer and *Lieke/Eileen* will be taking notes or jump in if anything was left out or she thinks is worth elaborating upon. So then we would like to start!

## Brand activism questions:

1. How are you connected to brand activism (and why)?
2. Can you give examples of brands that come to mind when you think about brand activism?
3. What do you think of brands engaging in brand activism?
4. What are your expectations about these types of brands? (*only long interviews*)
5. How do you feel about brand activists compared to brands who don't engage in activism?
6. Are you familiar with any brand activists within the lingerie market and could you give us an example?

## Lingerie questions:

7. How do you feel about buying lingerie? (*only long interviews*)
8. In what way(s) are you relating to a lingerie brand? (*only long interviews*)
9. What do you think about the diversity of models used by lingerie brands?
  - a. Is this particularly important in the lingerie sector?

Questions to be asked per brand (Hunkemöller / Victoria's Secret / Parade Underwear):

(Here the website and Instagram pages are shown before continuing)

10. Were you familiar with *the brand* before we showed you any media?
  - a. If yes/no, what are the reasons for (not) buying there?
11. How would you describe *the brand* in about five words?
12. What do you think about the actual brand values?
  - a. *Hunkemöller's values: in touch, fun, inspiring, sexy and passionate*
  - b. *Victoria's Secret's values: sexy, iconic, powerful, passion, captivating experience, exquisite*
  - c. *Parade's values: creative, sustainable, inclusivity, expressive, bold*
13. Would you associate/identify yourself with *the brand* and why?
14. What do you think about the representation of *the brand*? (*only long interviews*)
15. Can you trust *the brand* and why/why not?
16. When thinking about *the brand* in relation to society, in what way might the brand be giving anything back to it?
17. *Only Hunkemöller/Victoria's Secret*: Did you always have the same impression about *the brand*? Or did it change in the past and for what reason? (*only long interviews*)

Closing questions:

18. The brands (*Hunkemöller / Victoria's Secret*) have actually not always presented themselves this way -
  - a. What do you think about this?
  - b. Knowing this, what would you say about their credibility and trustworthiness?
19. What do you think are the reasons for this change?
20. With which one of these three brands do you feel most connected to and why? (*only long interviews*)
21. After this discussion, would you (still) purchase from one of these three brands and why?

Thank you for your participation! We will send you a short follow up e-mail with a [link to a short survey](#), where we would like to ask you about some demographical information, we hope that's okay!

## Appendix 2 – Overview of participants for the pilot study

Pilot study					
Respondents Pseudonym	Age range	Nationality	Country of residence	Highest level of education	Current profession
Regina	35-40	Dutch	Sweden	Bachelor's degree	Student
Nora	25-29	South African	Sweden	Bachelor's degree	Student
Celine	25-29	German	Sweden	Bachelor's degree	Student
Fiona	20-24	Swedish	Sweden	Bachelor's degree	Student

# Appendix 3 – Overview of the identified themes, sub-themes and codes

Theme 1: The fading of a beauty ideal			Theme 2: Less perfection, more realness			Theme 3: Skin deep or deeply rooted?
Perception overall	Perception of Brand Activist Aspirants	Perception of Authentic Brand Activists	Authenticity overall	Authenticity of Brand Activist Aspirants	Authenticity of Authentic Brand Activists	
Overall perception lingerie	Familiarity HKM	Familiarity Parade	Overall trustworthiness	Trustworthiness HKM	Trustworthiness Parade	Reasons for shifting lingerie brands
Overall Expectations of lingerie brands	Reasons to purchase HKM	Reasons to purchase Parade	Overall contribution to society	Contribution to society HKM	Contribution to society Parade	Changed perception HKM
Overall identification lingerie brands	Perception HKM	Perception Parade	Woke-Washing	Trustworthiness VS		Changed perception VS
Overall expectations of brand activists	Identification HKM	Identification Parade		Contribution to society VS		Reasons for brands to engage in activism
Overall diversity lingerie brands	Diversity HKM	Diversity Parade				
Brand preference	Familiarity VS					
Lingerie brands engaging in brand activism	Reasons to purchase VS					
Connection of brand activism to lingerie	Perception VS					
General reasons to purchase lingerie	Identification with VS					
	Diversity VS					

# Appendix 4 – Consent form for the interviews



LUND UNIVERSITY  
School of Economics and Management

## Perfectly imperfect

*A comparison of female millennial consumers' perceptions towards 'Brand Activist Aspirants' and 'Authentic Brand Activists' in the lingerie market*

by Lieke Brinkhof and Eileen Kersten

### Interview Consent Form

I have been given information about the master thesis "*Perfectly imperfect - A comparison of female millennial consumers' perceptions towards 'Brand Activist Aspirants' and 'Authentic Brand Activists' in the lingerie market*" and discussed the research project with Lieke Brinkhof and Eileen Kersten who are conducting this research as a part of a Master's in International Marketing and BrandManagement supervised by Fleura Bardhi.

I understand that, if I consent to participate in this project, I will be asked to give the researchers a duration of approximately 30 to 60 minutes of my time to participate in the process and that the interview will be recorded.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time.

By signing below, I am indicating my consent to participate in the research as it has been described to me. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for thesis and journal publications, and it will remain anonymous; I consent for it to be used in that manner.

Name: .....

Email: .....

Telephone: .....

Signed: .....