The Captivated Brand Consumer

How consumers cope with conflict of values following brand activism

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Abstract

Keywords: The Consumer-brand Relationship, Brand Activism, Conflict of values, Brand Captivation

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to understand what effects socio-political brand activism has on consumer-brand relationships. This study is especially interested in understanding the effects when brand activism leads to conflict of values between the consumer and the brand. In addition, the study aims to investigate how prior consumer-brand relationships impact the consumer in such a situation.

Methodology: This study follows an interpretive approach with a qualitative research design undertaken in order to achieve the purpose of this study. Through a mix of purposive and snowball sampling strategies, ten semi-structured interviews with citizens from the United States were conducted to gather the empirical material needed for this study.

Theoretical perspective: To fulfill its purpose, this study uses the theory of consumer-brand relationship and looks at it through the lens of brand activism. Moreover, the concept of moral reasoning is integrated in order to create a more in depth understanding.

Findings/Conclusion: The findings of this study reveals a darker side of the consumer-brand relationship that has not been fully understood before. Conflict of values between consumers and brands following brand activism has incarcerating effects on consumers. They become imprisoned in their consumer-brand relationships and prior consumer-brand relationships exacerbate this effect. As a result, following perceived transgressed brand activism, consumers stay in unhealthy bad relationships with brands instead of leaving them because they have become addicted to the brand. We call this concept *Brand Captivation.*

Practical Implications: The study highlights some concerning effects brand activism can have on consumers. The blurred lines between consumption and politics that brand activism creates might be a result of the polarization in today's society, where consumers have urged brands to engage in socio-political issues. However, as this study shows, it is the consumers themselves that suffer from the consequences when the consumer culture becomes more politicized.

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The Respondents

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To Each Other

For pushing each other to achieve greatness.

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Linus Svensson

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1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the topic of brand activism, how it has evolved in recent years and what the reasons behind this are. We argue for the importance of investigating this topic further and from the perspective of consumer-brand relationships. Moreover, we present the purpose of this study and how it can contribute to research. This chapter ends with delimitations in order to clarify the focus of our study and a short outline of the thesis.

1.1 Background

You are on your way home from the voting booth in your new favorite Patagonia jacket. When you step inside the door and take your jacket off, you recognize a hidden message on the washing tag of the jacket; "Vote the assholes out". You instantly realize that the message is directed towards the party you voted for; you are the asshole. How would this affect your relationship and your feelings towards Patagonia?

This example is just one of many that illustrate the increased tendency of brands to engage in socio-political discussion by manifesting their views and standpoints. In contemporary society, people are becoming more concerned about socio-political trends and people's opinions are more and more polarized. Statistics show that the gap between ideologies has reached a historic level of divisiveness and is greater than ever before (Drutman, 2016). At the same time, globalization and the standardization of products and services have made brands work as a symbolic framework for consumers and as an important reference point in one's self-construction (Palazzo & Basu, 2007). Belk (1988) argues that consumption both creates and reveals individual identity. He claims that consumers are what they consume and simultaneously consume to communicate what they are. Therefore, the combination of consumers' more polarized opinions and brands' position as a symbolic way for consumers to express these opinions, means an intensified landscape for companies and their marketing activities. However, when a brand takes a stand and expresses opinions on socio-political topics, some of the current and potential consumers will have contradicting values. Therefore, understanding how the consumer-brand relationship is affected, developed and maintained throughout this is crucial.

It is no longer enough for companies to only market for a cause, but instead, new communication practices have emerged in order to modernize the way of doing business in this intensified landscape (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Brands do not only work as an important reference point in consumers' self-construction, research also shows that consumers build relationships with brands through interactions. Fournier (1998), developed a relationship model to evaluate the strength of different relationships consumers have with brands. Relationships are dynamic concepts that change over time through different interactions. When brands engage in brand activism, it creates a new context for consumer-brand relationships that we aim to further explore and research.

The majority of consumers want to know brands' stand on political issues in order to know what they support when consuming a brand. In fact, according to a Sprout Social study, two-thirds of consumers responded that it is important for brands to take a stance on socio-political issues (Oster, 2018). Additionally, the Marketing Science Institute predicted in 2016 that whether or not brands should take a stand is the next big issue in the field of marketing (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). As more consumers emphasized the importance of brands taking a socio-political stand and when more brands started taking an activist stand, Sarkar and Kotler (2018) coined the term *brand activism* in their book *Brand Activism: From Purpose to Action.* In this book, they define the concept of brand activism as "business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society" (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018, p.465).

There is currently an intense debate among practitioners whether or not brand activism is strategically preferable. Many still believe that the risks are greater than the potential rewards (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Nonetheless, what is clear is that the landscape and incentives for brands to show a socio-political stance have changed. Going back to the '90s, Michael Jordan famously said "Republicans buy sneakers too" when being asked to publicly show support for the democratic leader of his hometown in order to refrain from involving Nike in a political debate. However, in modern times, brands that take a socio-political stand have increased immensely. This shift in marketing activities highlights the prominence of the political sphere in

today's marketplace (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Some argue that connecting political and social interest with corporate activity can create broader social benefits (Den Hond et al, 2014) whereas others claim that brand activism rather is an imposture that depoliticizes and undermines the actual causes for commercial winning (Zeisler, 2016).

Large brands such as Nike, Patagonia and Ben & Jerry's have all actively involved themselves in socio-political brand activism in recent years. For example, in contrast to the Jordan example, Nike actively decided to support Colin Kaepernick when he became the first player to take a knee during the national anthem to protest the systematic racial inequality in the United States (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Nike created the campaign "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything" with Kaepernick's face at the front of the campaign to support him and therefore taking a socio-political brand activist stand (ibid.). Patagonia is another example of a brand that is perceived as a brand activist. Patagonia has always tried to create an image where their main focus is on sustainability and fighting climate change. During the 2020 U.S. election, Patagonia took a political brand activist stand by adding a clothing tag that said "Vote the assholes out" in a new pair of shorts (Roth, 2020). In both of these cases, the feedback was divided. The opposition to the Kaepernick campaign created the hashtag #BurnYourNikes, whereas other people supported Nike's stand (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Patagonia also experienced critique, but at the same time grew awareness and sales as their shorts with the new tag "Vote the assholes out", were quickly sold out (Roth, 2020).

1.2 Research Problem

Even though consumer-brand relationships are a well-researched topic within the literature, brand activism creates a new context for which relationships exist, are created and maintained. In this particular setting, the consumer-brand relationship is yet to be fully understood. However, since brand activism addresses controversial topics and usually favors particular values and beliefs, many of the brand's consumers feel that their values are misaligned with the brand's. In this regard, brand activism works as a phenomenon that will extend and advance the knowledge on how consumer-brand relationships work.

Going back to the initial scenario, when you are standing in your hallway and thinking about the tag you just saw in your new Patagonia jacket. How would you cope with a brand that goes against your values and opinions? Would it be possible for you to keep using that brand or would the relationship deteriorate completely? Does your reaction towards the brand's stand depend on what type of relationship you have with the brand prior to them taking a stand? These are the sort of questions that this study aims to further investigate.

We argue that this type of research is especially important now since the socio-political landscape is more polarized than ever, meaning that people are more concerned about their certain socio-political views. This makes consumers demand clear positioning on certain topics from the brands they purchase and have a relationship with. Especially, as research has long shown, since consumers create relationships with brands and incorporate brands in their identity building (Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998). Hence, when a brand takes a stand on a controversial topic, the dynamic of the relationship between that brand and the consumer is affected. Moreover, there should be factors that are intertwined and decisive as to what the outcomes are, for example, depending on the quality of the prior relationship a consumer has with that brand and the degree of alignment in values. Therefore, the main focus of our study is to investigate these factors and how they affect the consumer-brand relationship post-brand activism. Moreover, research on brand activism seems to mainly be conducted through quantitative methods. Of the papers reviewed prior to this study, only one included a qualitative method element. This suggests that there is a need to approach the phenomenon with more variety since differentiation in research strategy may lead to the creation of new knowledge from other perspectives. Further, this opens up opportunities to acquire a deeper understanding of the complex phenomenon of consumer-brand relationships.

1.3 Research Purpose

The purpose of the research is to extend and advance the understanding of both the relatively new phenomenon of brand activism as well as the consumer-brand relationship and how these two are interrelated. This will be done by studying the consumer-brand relationship through the lens of brand activism from a consumer perspective and examine the effects when brands engage in socio-political brand activism. We are particularly interested in how consumers maintain relationships and cope with brands that have taken a stand that contradicts their values and beliefs. We also aim to understand what role prior consumer-brand relationships have in such a situation. Thus, we have formulated the following research questions:

How are consumers' relationships with brands affected when a brand engages in brand activism and takes a socio-political stand that contradicts the consumers' values, and what role does the quality of prior relationships have?

How do consumers cope with these effects in the consumer-brand relationship following brand activism?

1.4 Contribution Aim

By answering our research questions, this study aims to contribute to consumer-brand relationship and brand activism literature by deepening the knowledge on how they are both connected from a consumer perspective. Furthermore, it is crucial for companies to understand how to act in the market and how their actions regarding brand activism affect the consumers-brand relationship. In this regard, the result from this study might work as a guiding light for future managers when evaluating the effect of engaging in brand activism. However, this study also aims to contribute with an understanding of brand activism in terms of wider societal actors. As brands become more prominent and influential in society it is important to understand how their actions affect both the consumers and the consumer culture. Our study could help understand what factors in brand activism affect consumer-brand relationships negatively or positively. Furthermore, our study could also contribute to literature streams such as brand loyalty as it plays an important role in the maintenance of any kind of relationship.

1.5 Delimitations

One of the main delimitations of this study is to focus on what effects brand activism has on consumer-brand relationships only from a consumer perspective. The aim is not to understand the effects of brand activism from a management perspective even though the findings might help managers with decisions around brand activism. While there are many different areas of brand activism, this paper solely focuses on socio-political brand activism, as an attempt to increase the focus of the paper. In recent times, the most prominent examples of brand activism have been from companies in the United States. Therefore, another delimitation of the research is to solely focus on consumers from the United States in order to be as close to the phenomena as possible. Further, this allows for an investigation of real-life experiences of brand activism in a context where both the company and the consumers are active. Another important factor is to only include brands that in fact have engaged in brand activism in order to steer clear of analyzing hypothetical scenarios.

1.6 Outline of Thesis

1. Introduction
2. Literature Review
3. Theoretical Framework
4. Methodolgy
5. Analysis
6. Discussion
7. Conclusion

2. Literature Review

This chapter aims to offer an overview of consumer-brand relationships and an in-depth explanation of the concept of brand activism. Firstly, a definition of brand activism as a concept is presented and thereafter a clarification of what field within brand activism this paper will focus on. Secondly, we assess what has been done in prior brand activism research, criticize it and highlight the gaps. The chapter concludes by reinforcing the need for this study.

2.1 Consumer Brand Relationships

An essential part of people's identity development is building strong and meaningful relationships that add value to their lives (Fouriner, 1998). Both Aaker (1997) and Fournier (1998) developed the idea that consumers have relationships with brands that are similar to the relationships between people, this is something called consumer-brand relationships (CBR). In this regard, they mention how consumers see brands as imaginary people and therefore interact differently with certain brands depending on the relationship they have with them. Strong consumer-brand relationships are built through continuous interactions with a brand (Fournier, 1998), through self-identification and brand experience (Belk, 1988; Trudeau & Shobeiri, 2016). By building strong consumer-brand relationships, consumers feel closer and more connected to a brand which in turn creates benefits to both the brand and the consumer. When consumers are more connected to a brand, the loyalty and the interaction with a brand are affected positively and consumers feel more willing to support the brand (Trudeau & Shobeiri, 2016).

While brand loyalty and consumer-brand relationship quality are two similar concepts that try to visualize the strength of the connection between a consumer and a brand, consumer-brand relationships add richness on top of the existing loyalty (Fournier, 1998). Since consumer-brand relationships are regarded as similar to real relationships, this concept also includes research on how relationships deteriorate or dissolve over time. Moreover, consumer-brand relationship research provides an in-depth understanding of how different relationships have distinct characteristics. In turn, these different characteristics explain the interactions that are made in the relationship (Fournier, 1998). The interactions with the brand are affected by situational factors

and new branding practices that change the dynamic of the relationship. Brand activism could be regarded as one of these practices.

2.2 Defining The Concept of Brand Activism

To understand how brand activism affects consumer-brand relationships, it is crucial to first understand what brand activism is and what has been done in prior research of the topic. Brand activism is a relatively new concept and there are different established definitions and streams of brand activism. We aim to establish how we use the concept of brand activism in our research and what specific streams within brand activism we will focus on to create clarity and increase understanding of our perception of the phenomenon.

Sarkar and Kotler (2018) describe brand activism as a continuation or a sub-category of corporate social responsibility (CSR) with the difference being that brand activism addresses the biggest and most urgent problems in society where there is yet to be a consensus. Luo & Bhattacharya (2009) further elaborates how traditional CSR mostly includes showing support for topics that are generally accepted and therefore lack the controversial element that brand activism contains. Vredenburg et al. (2020) also explain how brand activism extends CSR beyond the impact on society to engaging in controversial, polarizing and contested socio-political elements. They further explain how these elements contain oppositional values and interests which entice strong and mixed emotions. In this regard, brands who engage in brand activism are comfortable with alienating a particular group of consumers because of the controversial element brand activism includes (ibid.). While Sarkar and Kotler (2018) describe brand activism as a business strategy, it is important to note that brand activism can also be coincidental. Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) explain that these instances usually happen when people, linked closely to a brand such as a brand representative, express private socio-political opinions publicly. Another defining characteristic of brand activism is that it usually adopts

progressive or conservative stances. Similarly, this also alienates certain consumers as it discusses socio-political issues from different political ideologies (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

As brand activism is becoming more prominent in contemporary society, it is crucial to understand what types of brand activism there are. In order to create a more detailed picture of brand activism, Sarkar and Kotler (2018) recognize six different areas (See Figure 1.) within brand activism that represent the main issues in society.

Social Activism	Includes issues in society such as culture, discrimination, equality and immigration.
Political Activism	Deals with issues regarding democracy, voting rights, political ideologies, legislation, etc.
Environmental Activism	Covers issues regarding climate change, environmental laws, circular economy, etc.
Economic Activism	Involves wage and tax policies, inequalities in income, employment, public transit, etc.
Workplace Activism	Focuses on worker compensation, governance, unions, etc.
Legal Activism	Includes laws and policies that affect companies, such as labor law, workplace safety, etc.

Figure 1: Six areas of brand activism identified by Sarkar and Kotler (2018)

However, while these six different areas of brand activism are equally prominent, we have decided to concentrate on two particular areas, social and political activism, in order to increase the focus of this paper. By combining these two areas, it is relatable to something Bhagwat et al. (2020) defines as corporate socio-political activism (CSA). They define CSA as "a firm's public demonstration (statements and/or actions) of support or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue" (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1). Furthermore, Nalick et al. (2016, p. 386) define socio-political activism as "salient unresolved social matters on which societal and institutional opinion is split, thus potentially engendering acrimonious debate among groups." As mentioned earlier, this also relates to the element of controversy that brand activism brings. However,

socio-political issues exist where time, politics and culture all intersect and the controversy around these topics can evolve and be resolved over time (Vredenburg et al., 2020). We use the term socio-political brand activism to establish what area and type of brand activism we aim to research. Therefore, when the term brand activism is used throughout the paper, we incline socio-political brand activism.

2.3 Prior Research on Brand Activism

In this section, a literature review has been conducted of the existing academic research on brand activism with the aim to get further knowledge of the concept and understand what has been done and what needs extended investigation. To find prior research on the subject the search term brand activism was used in the academic search engine Lubsearch. The number of articles found after eliminating the ones that were not peer-reviewed was 232, however many of these did not have brand activism as the main topic and were therefore also eliminated. There is also an element of different categories within the field of brand activism and as mentioned above, we have focused specifically on the socio-political area of brand activism. Since brand activism is influenced by the contemporary political landscape we emphasized recent publications, therefore another parameter in the search process was the year of publication. From these considerations, we will hereafter discuss the different streams of research conducted within the field of socio-political brand activism.

When reviewing previous papers written on brand activism there are typically three areas of focus; One that tries to increase the general knowledge of the topic and what types of activism brands participate in, another that wants to understand what the outcomes are for companies that take such an action and a third that focuses on how the consumer reacts. Some papers have multiple focuses and discuss several perspectives whereas others have a single focus. What is clear is that there is a lack of research in general that investigates brand activism regardless of what focus is of interest.

Prior research suggests that brand activism is a relatively new concept within the field of marketing. This is prominent in the stream of literature that tries to establish an understanding of the characteristics of brand activism (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). For example, Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) analyzed 45 marketing campaigns in an Anglo-Saxon context to further understand the different types of brand activism that companies partake in. Their findings suggest that as of late, many companies have urged people to vote which can be especially effective since such campaigns do not favor a specific ideology and therefore involve less risk. However, in general, activism brands tend to be associated with liberal views rather than conservative (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Vredenburg et al., (2020) review the characteristics of brand activism and suggests there is *value-driven* activism derived from the company's core value, *contested* activism where companies engage in controversial topics, *progressive/conservative* activism where brands can address any part of the political spectra and *messaging/practice* activism which relates to if the activist action is intangible (message) or tangible (practice). Moreover, Vredenburg et al., (2020) present four types of brand activism as a result of these characteristics: *Absence, Silent, Inauthentic and Authentic brand activism.*

The second stream of literature tries to understand the brand managers' perspective on brand activism and the outcome for the companies when they participate in brand activism (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Matos, Vinuales & Sheinin, 2017; Moorman, 2020). Moorman (2020) discovers that company leaders apply different perspectives when deciding whether or not to pursue an activism strategy. Some leaders justify brand activism since they view the brand as a powerful cultural actor and that it is in the DNA of the company to contribute to the world they operate in. Others have a more business mindset and believe brand activism can help attract employees, connect the company to target markets and increase the customer base (Moorman, 2020). However, Moorman (2020) also reported that in February 2020 only 27,7% of marketing leaders considered taking a stance on politically charged issues as appropriate. This suggests that even though there are benefits to reap and the fact that consumers more often inquire about it today, companies still feel hesitant to pursue such a strategic action. Maybe rightly so, since there are conflicting views on what the outcome may be. Some argue that the risks associated with such an approach are greater than the eventual benefits (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020) whereas others argue that it can be beneficial but that market shares are a deciding factor to whether or not it is (Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020).

According to Hydock, Paharia & Blair (2020), the potential (mis)alignment between a brand's position and the view of the consumer is crucial for the outcome of engaging in socio-political issues. Their study shows that even though consumers are more likely to choose a brand that aligns with their own view, the company is more likely to lose existing consumers that feel a misalignment. Similarly, Matos, Vinuales & Sheinin's (2017) study (mis)alignments effect on the self-brand connection which mediates the relationship between consumer and brands and influences purchase behavior. They show that misalignment weakens the self-brand connection more than alignment increases it. Therefore, one could conclude from these articles that the risk of engaging in brand activism is bigger than the potential gain. However, Hydock, Paharia & Blair (2020) further suggest that for companies with small market shares the benefits might outweigh the risks since they have few consumers to lose and many to gain whereas for large-share companies the opposite is true. Moreover, Bhagwat et al., (2020) study the effect of brand activism on company stock value and show that the outcome can be both positive and negative. They suggest that investors, in general, react negatively to brand activism and that it decreases the value of the company. However, if the stance of the company resonates closely with key stakeholders they show that the effects can be positive.

The third identified stream of literature applies a consumer perspective (Matos, Vinuales & Sheinin, 2017; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Shivakanth Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019) and try to understand how consumers react to brand activism, especially in regards to their purchase behavior. Shivakanth Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah & Anand (2019) studied how Millenials in India perceive brand activism. They show that brand activism is an important topic for Millenials and that they prefer to purchase brands that support a cause and are even willing to pay a higher price for such brands. Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) investigate how consumers' attitudes, intentions and behaviors are affected by factors like authenticity and alignment of values between a brand stance and its consumer. Similar to other studies (Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Matos, Vinuales & Sheinin, 2017) they show that brand activism has an asymmetric effect on consumer behavior, where consumer-brand agreement on a topic has little

positive effect but consumer-brand disagreement has a significant negative effect on brand attitude.

Another element that influences the reaction of the consumer to brand activism is authenticity. Shivakanth Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah & Anand (2019) find that for consumers to react positively, brands need to truly believe in the stands they take, otherwise there is a substantial risk of backlash and boycotts of the brand. Further, Vredenburg et al., (2020) describe how the perception of authentic brand activism depends on the alignment between the message and the brand's purpose, values and prosocial corporate practice. Lastly, Hydock, Paharia & Blair (2020) shows how authenticity works as a moderator of the asymmetric effect of brand activism discussed earlier.

2.4 Critique of Prior Research

From the literature review conducted in this paper, one could argue that the current state of research on brand activism is lacking in both width and depth which is manifested mainly by the fact that there is a significantly low number of publications. The first stream of literature reviewed in this paper highlights the increased presence of brand activism in today's society and tries to establish an understanding of the characteristics of brand activism (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). This is of course important but also shows that brand activism still is a phenomenon that academia has not yet fully investigated nor understood. Also, it shows that brand activism is an ever-changing phenomenon influenced by contemporary society and over the years has had different characteristics. This emphasizes the importance of research that, with up-to-date examples, investigates the effects of brand activism from various perspectives and with various characteristics at focus.

The second stream of literature has a heavy focus on the company's perspective and outcome (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Matos, Vinuales & Sheinin, 2017; Moorman, 2020). These articles often fail to investigate the effects of brand activism from a consumer perspective. Most papers emphasize the importance of authenticity for the potential success of brand activism. However, they fail to incorporate authenticity as perceived by consumers and rather focus on authenticity connected to internal factors of the brand. Mukherjee

& Althuizen (2020) argue that consumers' perceptions of brand activism are influenced by internal individual thought processes. This suggests that authenticity cannot be solely reviewed from a company perspective. Other factors can influence the evaluation of authenticity, for example, as we aim to investigate the mix of prior consumer-brand relationships and a conflict of values between the consumer and the brand.

What seems to be of consensus is that the outcome of brand activism often is characterized by an asymmetric effect and therefore is a risky strategy to carry out. However, there is limited investigation about possible factors that can mediate this effect. Hydock, Paharia & Blair (2020) is the only paper that offers such a review and finds that both authenticity and size of market share can have such an influence. Therefore, this suggests that more research is needed which studies other possible factors, especially from a consumer perspective.

Although most prior research focuses on the company's perspective on brand activism some papers included a consumer perspective (Matos, Vinuales & Sheinin, 2017; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Shivakanth Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). A lot of these papers have focused on the behavior of consumers after a brand engages in activism, especially purchase behavior. They all come to the conclusion of how consumer-brand relationships deteriorate when a consumer's values are misaligned with the brand's activist stand. However, we argue that there is a lack of research that, with an in depth understanding, investigates how the relationship between the consumer and the brand is affected. This incorporates more than just the aftermath purchase behavior of consumers as it involves effects on feelings towards, identification with and the quality of the relationship. For example, relationships between individuals are not necessarily built on alignments of values. Therefore, we aim to investigate whether or not the same dynamic could be applied to the consumer-brand relationship and if so, how is this done?

To conclude, some gaps and perspectives need investigation when it comes to brand activism in today's society. Many articles bring forward the lack of knowledge on how brand activism affects consumer-brand relationships, especially what factors might mitigate/increase these effects.

Furthermore, there is insufficient evidence about how consumers maintain a relationship with a brand that has taken a stand that goes against their values. This reinforces the need for our study as we aim to develop an understanding of these gaps and perspectives.

In order to understand how brand activism can affect consumers' relationship with brands, what role prior relationships have and how they might maintain relationships when there is a conflict of values, the next chapter offers an in-depth discussion about relevant theories. We will discuss elements in the theory of consumer-brand relationships and also cover different moral reasoning strategies that are relevant in order to understand how individuals cope with brand activism.

3.Theoretical Framework

This chapter provides relevant theories that will be used to analyze the empirical material and help to answer our research questions. We start by explaining the theory of consumer-brand relationships from two different perspectives. Thereafter, we discuss different moral reasoning strategies. By discussing these different theories, it helps us to later understand the empirical material better and analyze our findings by intertwining these.

3.1 Consumer-Brand Relationship Theories

Since one of the aims of our paper is to investigate the intangible concept of a relationship in the light of brand activism, we need to be able to visualize and conceptualize different types of relationships through theories and frameworks. We will use Fournier's (1998) BRQ model as an underlying framework while also using Attachment-Aversion (AA) relationships by Park et al. (2013) as a complementary framework to further understand consumer-brand relationships.

3.1.1 Brand Relationship Quality Model

Fournier (1998) developed the BRQ model to specifically understand and evaluate the strength of different consumer-brand relationships. She explains three main arguments that build the BRQ model. First, brands can act as reasonable relationship partners. Second, the level of the consumers' lived experiences validates the consumer-brand relationship. Third, by using both theoretically and managerially relevant vocabulary, a consumer-brand relationship can be expressed in multiple ways. Additionally, Fournier (1998) explains that consumers develop relationships with brands by imagining them as people, and these relationships have become an important part of consumer's identity development.

The first part of constructing the BRQ model was providing a typology with different types of consumer-brand relationships. In this typology, Fournier (1998) gives fifteen different examples of relationships consumers might have with a brand and what kind of definition and requirements they have. For example, a "best friendship" relationship is defined as a voluntary association where both parties benefit from the exchange, this is characterized by disclosure of true self, intimacy and honesty. An example of such a type of consumer-brand relationship can be a runner and their beloved Nike running shoes (Bertilsson, 2017). On the other hand, a "secret affairs" type of relationship is defined as a risky, privately held and highly emotional type of relationship. An example of this would be a person sneaking Tootsie Pops at work (Fournier, 1998). To understand how these different types of relationships develop over time Fournier (1998) argues for six different alternative brand relationship development trajectories and how different relationships might play out (See Figure 1..)

ALTERNATIVE BRAND RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT TRAJECTORIES

Panel 1
Biological Life Cycle
(e.g., Vicki and Tetley tea)

Panel 2
Growth - Decline - Plateau
(e.g., Karen and Tide)

Panel 3
Passing Fling
(e.g., Vicki and Various Shampoos)

Panel 4
Approach - Avoidance
(e.g., Jean and Skippy)

Panel 5
Cyclical Resurgence
(e.g., Karen and Lender's, Eggo,
Cheerios and Kix)

Panel 6
Stable Maturity
(e.g., Jean and her sauce-making brands;
Karen and Gatorade)

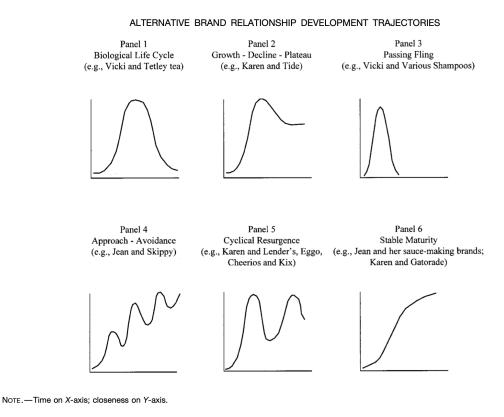NOTE.—Time on *X*-axis; closeness on *Y*-axis.

Figure 2: Alternative brand relationship development trajectories (Fournier, 1998)

Fournier (1998) also provides the stress model as a framework to understand how relationships deteriorate or dissolve over time. This model explains three different types of stresses;

environmental, partner-oriented and relational. Environmental stresses are defined by Fournier (1998) as *situational imposed stressors* meaning there is a relational disturbance that happens which results in the relationship's continuity being impossible or highly unlikely due to the physical situation (e.g. moving to a different geographic area where the brand is not available). Another environmental stress is *intrusion of alternatives* meaning other brand alternatives disturb and take over the relationship by providing more attractive and superior benefits. Moreover, partner-oriented stresses are defined as *personally-induced stressors* meaning that there has been a change in personality, values or needs and therefore making the consumer-brand relationship an "unacceptable" fit. Partner-oriented stresses also include *managerially imposed stressors* that are caused due to managerial decisions to terminate the relationship (manufacturer stops making a product line). The third and final stressor in Forunier's (1998) stress model is relational stressors which means that a brand breaks the unwritten relationship rules such as failure to keep a promise or breaching trust (e.g. the brand is inconsistent with the quality it delivers).

In the final step of constructing the BRQ model, Fournier (1998) developed a diagnostic tool in order to understand the consumer-brand relationship's depth, strength and quality. This tool provides six different relationship quality facets that explain many of the different consumer-brand relationships provided in the typology. This diagnostic tool illustrates that in order to keep a consumer-brand relationship alive and stable, there needs to be more than just positive feelings towards the brand, therefore this model and the six relationship quality facets are important and needed to construct and capture how brand relationships arise, develop and dissolve. The six relationship quality facets are love/passion, self-connection, commitment, interdependence, intimacy and brand partner quality. Fournier (1998) further explains that all types of relationships, based on the reciprocity principle, are developed through behavior interactions. Therefore, this means that consumer-brand relationships are also developed through behavior interactions and will affect the overall brand relationship quality. In regards to our study, the behavioral interactions we will research are the interaction between when a brand takes a political activist stand and the consumer's relationship with that brand.

Building on Fournier's relationship model and quality facets, Park et al. (2013) have developed another theory of consumer-brand relationships based on two concepts of brand attachment and brand love. This theory is called the Attachment-Aversion (AA) relationship, and it measures the approach/avoidance a consumer has with the brand while integrating the brand in their self-concept. Trudeau H. and Shobeiri (2016) explain how one of the main benefits of Park et al.'s (2013) theory is that it takes both affective and cognitive factors into account in consumer-brand relationships. This theory also provides a better understanding of consumers' closeness to the brand and the psychological consequences around the brand (Park et al. 2013).

The two opposite ends of the consumer-brand relationships spectrum in AA relationships are *brand attachment* and *brand aversion*. Brand attachment means that a consumer feels close and attached to the brand while using it for self-expansion. On the other hand, brand aversion means that a consumer feels distant from a brand and the brand is perceived as a threat to self-contraction. However, Park et al. (2013) mention how transitioning from one end of the spectrum to the other is possible over time through different interactions and that the relationship in the middle of the two ends is called *brand indifference.* This type of relationship means that the consumer lacks any motivational force against or for the brand meaning the relationship is neutral. Furthermore, AA relationships are measured through two conceptual properties; the degree of *brand prominence* and *brand self-distance.*

As studies have shown before, consumers use brands that reflect their self-concept and their identity construction (e.g. the me-ness of a brand) (Belk, 1988; Fournier 1998; Park et al. 2013). In this regard, the term brand self-distance (the first property of AA relationships) is used to understand the perceived distance between the self and the brand. This means that a close relationship is perceived as positive and a far/distant relationship is negative. The closeness of the relationship is determined by the self-relevance of the consumer's brand memory. This means that when someone has highly relevant brand memories in relation to one's self, they will experience that relationship as closer or further away depending on the emotional connection to

the memories. However, when someone lacks self-relevant and meaningful memories about a brand, the person will be indifferent to the brand.

The second property of AA relationships is brand prominence. Brand prominence is defined as "the perceived memory-accessibility of a brand to an individual" (Park et al., 2013, p. 231). For example, a brand can be highly self-relevant but at the same time not be easily accessible in one's memory, however, another brand with the same amount of self-relevance can be more easily accessible in memory (this could be due to more salient reasons such as self-identity-related, etc.). Therefore, Park et al. (2013) describe how the salience of a consumer-brand relationship is affected by how easy it is to access memories and thoughts about that brand. The more noticeable the perceived distance is between a consumer and a brand, the more prominent the brand-related thoughts are.

It is important to note that brand self-distance and brand prominence can be independent of each other and do not necessarily have to co-vary (Park et al., 2013). As mentioned earlier, brand prominence looks at the perceived memory-accessibility and therefore it adds crucial information about the psychological factors between someone and a brand. Therefore, Park et al. (2013) mean as two people may express neutral feelings regarding the self-distance about a brand, they may have different psychological stances with it. For example, one person's neutral feelings mean having no positive or negative feelings about a brand (e.g. indifference), while for another person's neutral feelings represents the mixed emotions they have about a brand, while psychologically that comes from positive and negative memories about the brand (Park et al., 2013).

3.2 Moral Reasoning

As noted in the previous section, brands can have human-like characteristics and consumers can create relationships with brands in the same way as they can with human beings. Since brand activism often addresses controversial socio-political issues with a lack of public consensus, and

because self-identification is an important role in the consumer-brand relationship, brand activism can create moral dilemmas for the consumer on how to react when a brand takes a stand (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Therefore, moral reasoning and moral judgment can play important roles in understanding the consumer evaluation process of brand activism and the effects of brand activism on consumer-brand relationships.

The process of moral reasoning divides academia. Some argue to follow a rationalistic model which suggests that moral dilemma starts a deliberate moral reasoning process that later arrives at a moral judgment whereas others follow the social intuition model and suggest that the moral reasoning process happens after the moral judgments (Haidt, 2001). The latter argument, made by Haidt can be explained as: "moral judgments arise through relatively automatic intuitive processes, and moral reasoning processes are employed post hoc to construct reasons that support the intuitive judgment" (Bhattacharjee, Berman & Reed, 2013, p. 1168). Moreover, moral reasoning and moral dilemmas are complex phenomenons that involve enough ambiguity to facilitate arguments for different reasoning strategies to be employed when faced with a moral dilemma (Bhattacharjee, Berman & Reed, 2013). Below follows a presentation of some of these moral reasoning strategies with the aim to later in this paper incorporate them into a consumer-brand relationship and brand activism context.

3.2.1 Moral Rationalization

Society at large values morality and because of this people create feelings of self-worth when upholding moral principles and similarly create feelings of self-condemnation when they go against them. Therefore, according to moral disengagement theory, there is a need for people to disengage from that thought process before behaving in an immoral way (Tsang, 2002). Moral disengagement is a self-regulatory process that helps people justify immorality by employing reasoning strategies, and here moral rationalization could be described as one of those strategies (Bhattacharjee, Berman & Reed, 2013).

Moral rationalization is a strategy that aims to reduce the negative effect of a perceived immoral act on oneself. Tsang (2002) refers to moral rationalization as a psychological phenomenon and defines it as: "the cognitive process that individuals use to convince themselves that their

behavior does not violate their moral standards" (Tsang, 2002, p. 26). Similarly, Bhattacharjee, Berman & Reed (2013) claims it is a process where one reconstructs a perceived immoral action as less immoral in order to maintain support for the immoral action. Simply put, it is a strategy that facilitates people to be hypocrites towards their own moral principles. Tsang (2002) created a model to visualize the moral rationalization process that is based on the assumption that people value morality and that people need to perceive that moral principles are relevant to the situation in order to pursue the strategy. What moral rationalization essentially boils down to, and whether or not it will be applied in a given situation, depends on the cost vs benefit ratio of acting in line with your moral principles. Acting in line with your moral principles can be beneficial, for example, make you obtain praise from both yourself and others, but there might also be motivational factors in play that are perceived more as a cost of acting morally. The higher the cost of acting morally the higher the incentives to go against one's moral principles and instead act immorally. Hence, employing a moral rationalization strategy to cope with that choice (Tsang, 2002). People can use moral rationalization to reduce the tension between moral principles and desired outcomes and to justify transgressions and essentially avoid the feeling of guilt (Bhattacharjee, Berman & Reed, 2013). From a consumer perspective, prior studies have shown that brand transgression does not necessarily have a negative impact on consumer evaluation and that the greater the demand is for the product, the more likely people are to justify immorality from companies (Aaker, Fournier & Brasel, 2004; Paharia, Deshpande & Vohs, 2009). This shows the prominent role that motivational factors have in consumers' moral behavior, evaluation and process.

3.2.2 Moral Decoupling

Moral judgment is rooted in the concept of self and self-evaluation. However, to a large extent, it also incorporates social comparison, which has consequences for moral rationalization as a strategy. The problem is that even though moral rationalization justifies immorality it still requires people to overlook acts that normally would be seen as immoral. When supporting an

immoral action, even if justified by oneself, others might still view it as immoral. This means that people display moral information that might be seen as negative in the eyes of others (Bhattacharjee, Berman & Reed, 2013). Therefore, people need another moral reasoning strategy in order to overcome this problem; *moral decoupling*.

Moral decoupling differs from moral rationalization in the sense that it does not include condoning immoral behavior. Instead, moral decoupling is the process of separating judgment of morality from judgment of performance. It can be defined as "a psychological separation process by which people selectively dissociate judgments of performance from judgments of morality" (Bhattacharjee, Berman & Reed, 2013, p. 1169). In other words, moral decoupling is about separating the act from the actor and is an especially useful and prominent strategy in the context of consumption. Dissociating morality and performance enables individuals to support an actor that has transgressed but at the same time prevent that same individual to feel self-reproach about justifying that actor. Since moral decoupling does not include condemning immoral behavior in the same way as moral rationalization does, it becomes an easier strategy for people to employ. Further, studies show that moral decoupling becomes a prominent strategy when an individual identifies with the actor of the transgression or when the immoral act is unrelated to the general performance of the actor (Cowan & Yazdanparast, 2021).

3.3 Summary of Theoretical Framework

We have identified different theoretical frameworks that we believe are highly relevant to understand how brand activism affects consumer-brand relationships. In addition, we believe these frameworks will help us thoroughly answer our research question. In order to understand brand activism from a consumer perspective, we first need to understand the dynamic and the foundation of consumer-brand relationships which the BRQ-model (Fournier, 1998) and the AA relationship model (Park et al., 2013) allows us to do. By looking at consumer-brand relationships through the lens of brand activism, it creates a new situation where the dynamics of the relationships are put to test. In that sense, brand activism can be viewed as a novel external stressor in the BRQ model.

By using consumer-brand relationship theories and connecting them to moral reasoning strategies, it allows us to analyze the phenomena of brand activism's impact on consumers at two different levels. At the first level, the BRQ and the AA-model allow us to understand what factors of the consumer-brand relationship that are relevant and prominent in the situation of brand activism. Hence, we can understand what impact the quality of the prior consumer-brand relationship has when brands take a stand and why the dynamics of the relationship changes. Thereafter, the second level analyzes what effects and implications the change of the dynamic has. As we know, brand activism can lead to misalignment of values between the brand and the consumer. As a result, we need to understand how consumers cope with this new situation. Here, moral reasoning strategies work as an exploratory framework that could explain how the practical manners of consumer-brand relationships are affected and how the consumer copes with the value contradiction. By using these theoretical frameworks and analyzing brand activism at two levels, it creates structure and allows us to first understand the what and why, and second understand the how.

4. Methodology

This chapter introduces the methodological approach undertaken for this study. First, by presenting the research philosophy that has been followed. Second, a description and justification of the research design and the methodological choices that are connected to this are presented. Lastly, this chapter offers an explanation of how the material has been analyzed and why this study should be regarded as a quality study.

4.1 Research Philosophy

In order to better help the reader understand our methodological choices and increase the general understanding of why we believe this study, and the research strategy that follows, is justified we will clarify our perspective on both ontology and epistemology. Ontology relates to the assumption researchers have about the nature of reality and epistemology refers to how one believes one best can acquire knowledge about that reality (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

The aim of this research is not to reveal a single truth about the phenomenon of brand activism since there is no such thing. Instead, we believe there are many truths about this topic and that no truth is superior. Moreover, each respondent included in this research will have their own description and impression about brand activism which will generate many different truths. We then aim to synthesize and make sense of these truths in order to increase understanding of the topic. This suggests that we will adopt the ontological position of relativism which holds the belief there are many truths and that facts depend on the viewpoint of the observer (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p. 50). The implication for this study is therefore that depending on the perspective (our different respondents) we observe brand activism from, we might discover different truths. Therefore, we will focus on including as many different perspectives as possible in this study to create a rich and holistic understanding of the phenomenon. But also to obtain research validity, since within relativism that is measured by the number of included perspectives (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p. 103).

The main focus of this study is to understand how consumers interpret and react to different examples of brand activism and to examine how this in turn affects the consumer-brand relationships. Therefore, one can argue that our epistemological approach and understanding of knowledge are close to the concept of social constructionism. This concept is categorized as one of the interpretive methods and is based on the idea that "reality" is socially constructed by people and how they interpret and draw meaning from their lives and experiences (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p. 53). Within social constructionism, the analysis and interpretation of the data are dependent on and affected by the previous and tacit knowledge of the researcher (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p. 56). Therefore, it is important to reflect upon what effect this has on our study. In this case, our prior knowledge within the field of consumer-brand relationships was limited. However, we believe that this worked as an advantage since we could approach the research with an open mind and not be tied to our pre-understandings. Further, this reduced the risk of the material being affected by biases and also enabled us to be flexible and apply different perspectives on our empirical material.

4.2 Research Design and Strategy

The nature of our research question aimed to create an understanding of people's feelings and perceptions and how they were influenced by brand activism. A qualitative research design tends to be explorative and includes open-ended questions to collect in-depth empirical data (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, pp. 129-130). Explorative studies aim to acquire insight of a phenomenon from new perspectives in order to understand the phenomenon in a new context (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). To fulfill our research aim and to answer the research question we needed to acquire primary data that arrived out of non-numerical statistics, which is one of the definitions of qualitative research (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, pp. 129-130).

Furthermore, Rennstam & Westerfors (2018, p. 19) describes how one motive for engaging in qualitative research is to broaden a meaning of a particular topic by placing it in a new context

and another one is to illustrate how people and organizations perceive each other. Both of these motives relate closely to the aim of this paper. We applied established theories on consumer-brand relationships in a new context as brand activism and saw *how* the relationships were affected because of this phenomenon. Therefore, a qualitative method approach was the most appropriate. It helped us to define "how" and not only whether or not brand activism has influenced consumers. Another motive of this paper was to gather empirical material about people's feelings and emotions from which ideas and concepts could be induced. This further reinforced our choice to adopt an interpretive method from a social constructionist point of view.

We quickly realized that flexibility was going to be an important element of this research. Neither a deductive approach; where one creates hypotheses based on theory or the inductive approach; to rely on the empirical material to generate theory was a suited approach for us. Instead, we wanted to be able to simultaneously shift between theoretical perspectives and our gathered empirical material. This is often referred to as an abductive approach where one lets the interaction between theory and empirics guide the study forward (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). This interplay allowed us to create a dynamic understanding of our research material and to be flexible when new insights were found.

4.3 Data Collection

To conduct this research we decided that qualitative interviews would be the most appropriate method since "interviews provide opportunities for mutual discovery, understanding, reflection, and explanation [...] and elucidate subjectively lived experiences and viewpoints" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p. 134). Since our research aimed to understand and explain how (and if) relationships are affected/changed when a brand takes a socio-political stand, we needed to have insightful conversations with consumers where they could talk openly about their lived experiences and their viewpoints of certain brands. By doing so, we allowed for a deeper understanding and a reflection of the respondents' lived experiences with different brands, and especially when a brand had taken a socio-political stand. Moreover, it enabled an understanding of both what the viewpoint of our respondents was but also why they held that viewpoint. Denscombe (2018) elaborates how interviews are appropriate when there is a need to gather deeper and more comprehensive empirical material of people's experiences and

perceptions about certain phenomena. This was aligned with the aim of our paper and therefore qualitative interviews were a suitable method to use.

4.3.1 Semi-structured Interviews

It was important to use the right techniques and be sensitive to the respondents' views, which is why we choose semi-structured interviews as the approach. According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson (2015, p. 135), this approach is suitable when the step-by-step logic of a situation is not clear and the researcher wants to understand the respondents' world and opinions. Using semi-structured interviews allowed for a more discovery-oriented approach and was, therefore, more appropriate since the situation was less clear and we wanted to gain a better understanding of the respondents' views. Since our research covered a sensitive topic such as socio-political stands, it was important for us to reflect and act upon the context of the interviews as well as to have respect for the respondents' situation. This was done by communicating the sensitive topics we would bring up before the interviews were conducted and that the respondents had the option to stop the interviews whenever they wanted to. In turn, this increased the trustworthiness of the respondents' replies and the trustworthiness of our study.

Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson (2015, p.135) explains that when the subject of an interview is highly confidential, where the respondent may be hesitant to be truthful, a semi-structured approach is appropriate. To add reflexivity when conducting the interviews, it was important to listen to the respondent and refrain from using our own opinions and feelings in the interview and therefore letting the respondent come up with their personal views and opinions while not being affected by us. This was done by eliminating our personal views on the topics and by not asking leading questions. However, since one way of gaining trust is to empathize with the respondent (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.142), it was important that we found a balance between not using our own opinions and emphasizing with the respondents. This was done by listening to respondents, giving signs that we understand where they are coming from and asking relevant follow-up questions.

To add trustworthiness and to conduct the interviews more reliably, we followed Kvales' seven stages of interview studies; thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, verifying and reporting (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). First of all, we created themes that we wanted to cover in our interviews. These were (1) life experiences on how the respondent use and feel about certain brands in their daily life and (2) their feelings, reactions and experiences when the brand had taken a socio-political stand. After that, we designed the interviews by creating an interview guide (see Appendix A) that would give structure to the interviews. We used the same interview guide for all the interviews which enabled us to have a focused conversation with the respondents and create deep, thick insights. However, since we wanted to gain knowledge and create meaningful conversations with our respondents we sometimes deviated from the interview guide and asked relevant follow-up questions that would create a better understanding of the respondents' views and opinions. Being able to deviate from the interview guide is a benefit of using a semi-structured approach to interviews.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and that respondents live in different countries than the authors, the interviews were conducted remotely over Zoom. Remote interviews lack immediate contextualization which made it harder to catch non-verbal communication (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.76), at the same time it gave us more flexibility when it came to scheduling the interviews and also made it easier to record them. Moreover, the fact that most people interact over the internet at this moment meant that people were more used to this type of interaction and therefore we believe the empirical data was not affected by this.

4.4 Selecting Respondents

There were several challenges for this study in regards to choosing respondents. It was important to interview people that consume brands that engage in brand activism to create empirical material based on their real-life experiences and feelings. Therefore, prior to selecting someone to interview we needed an understanding of that person's consumption pattern. Two of the most prominent examples of brand activism in recent years from big companies are Nike and their marketing campaign with Colin Kaepernick and Patagonia with the "vote the asshole out" campaign before the 2020 US election. We primarily chose to focus on these two companies and campaigns because we felt that would be the examples of brand activism that most people likely

had knowledge about and could relate to, even if we did not limit our study entirely to these brands. Both of these campaigns targeted and addressed socio-political issues in the United States and can be interpreted as foremost going against republican values (the Patagonia campaign directly and the Nike campaign in a more indirect way). Therefore, we choose people from the United States as our respondents as we believed they would have the most relevant insights since they have experienced it closely. Moreover, since a person's experience and feelings about these campaigns are likely to be affected by their position on the American political spectrum, we wanted to include people from both sides. Another challenge was the characteristics of the topic we researched.

Brand activism often addresses sensitive topics where societal consensus is yet to be reached. Hence, it became important for us to select respondents that could comfortably express their feelings and experiences in order for us to gather credible and trustworthy empirical material. We understood it would be hard for our respondents to talk with us without showing parts of their political opinions. This made it important to select people that were comfortable with their political opinions but also to make them aware of the topic of the interview beforehand. To manage these challenges we choose to apply a purposive and snowball sampling strategy. By doing so it allowed us to first choose a few respondents that we thought would be suitable for the study and thereafter let them steer us towards other suitable respondents. Using these strategies allowed us to interview relevant respondents that were close to and had a real experience of the phenomena we studied. This created an important precision and richness to the empirical material while simultaneously increased trustworthiness. However, we were aware that the precision snowball sampling creates can also be of a disadvantage as the respondents are likely to share similar traits. Therefore, we tried to include people from different backgrounds and upbringings.

Purposive sampling is suitable when the researcher has a clear idea about what sampling units are needed to reach the purpose of the study and snowball sampling helps the researcher when it is hard to find and identify suitable respondents (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.

82). The fact that the research was conducted in Sweden but was focused on consumers in the United States had obvious challenges connected to finding respondents. However, since one of the authors of this study had previously studied in the United States it helped us to select four suitable respondents that meet our criteria; being American, being comfortable with expressing their political views and consuming brands that engage in brand activism. These four respondents were a mix of both democrats and republicans which made us cover the entire political spectrum in the United States. Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson (2015) explains how the guiding principles of purposive sampling might change during the process of a study and especially after analysis of initial empirical material. In line with our abductive approach, we realized after interviewing our initial group of respondents that we wanted to focus our study on people that identified as republicans to investigate the conflict of values that often occurred in regards to the campaigns we focused on. Therefore, the first four respondents guided us forward to people within their network that they knew were republicans while still meeting our initial other criteria.

In total, we interviewed ten people that all used to or are attending Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota which came naturally since that was the college that one of the authors had previously attended. Even if we only choose the first four respondents and thereafter let them guide us forward, all the respondents were a part of our social environment beforehand. By including respondents that had a prior connection to us we addressed the challenge of making people feel comfortable with discussing the topic freely and without hesitation. Therefore, we regard the prior relationship we had with the respondents as a positive factor that increased both credibility and trustworthiness to our empirical material. Below follows a table (table 1) with general information about our respondents where we have changed their names in order to maintain anonymity.

Respondent (Anonymous)	Age	Nationality	Political Identification	Interview Duration (in minutes)	Number of Transcribed pages
Pam Beesly	22	American	Democrat	42.16	9
Jim Halpert	25	American	Democrat	49.44	8

Dwight Schrute	26	American	Republican	48.25	8
Toby Flenderson	23	American	Republican	41.03	7
Michael Scott	21	American	Republican	43.35	9
Stanley Hudson	24	American	Republican	46.36	7
Kevin Malone	26	American	Republican	48.19	8
Ryan Howard	21	American	Republican	41.32	7
Oscar Martinez	25	American	Republican	39.57	6
Andy Bernard	25	American	Republican	48.52	10

Table 1: Information about respondents

4.5 Empirical Analysis

According to Rennstram and Wästerfors (2018), qualitative empirical material should be analyzed using three key activities; sorting, reducing and arguing. They further explain how sorting the empirical findings is important to create structure and also getting to know the findings better. After the ten interviews were conducted and transcribed, we found that there were two prominent recurring themes in the empirical material; these were prior relationships and conflict in values. We then *sorted* our material by adding categories/strategies under each theme. For example, prior relationships consisted of categories such as strong and weak prior relationships and conflict in values included strategies consumers used to cope with the conflict.

Furthermore, we sorted all the relevant quotes into what category/strategy they best exemplified. The next step was to *reduce* the material in order to increase focus. This was done by highlighting quotes that we considered to be an especially good representation of the themes and in relation to the other interviewees' responses. As the last step of the analysis method, we had to *argue.* Rennstram & Wästerfors (2018) explain that when you argue by relating empirical findings to the theoretical framework the argument becomes theoretical, something known as theorizing. First, we followed this approach and connected the empirical material to our theoretical framework to visualize relationships our respondents had with certain brands. Second, this created a foundation for arguing how these relationships had changed in the context of brand activism. By theorizing, one contributes to previous theory by presenting and proposing a new perspective on that concept (Rennstram & Wästerfors, 2018).

In line with the abductive approach of this study, we allowed the empirical material in combination with our theoretical framework to guide us forward. After sorting the empirical material, we went back to the literature to find new theories that could help us make sense of our findings. This paper stems from brand activism and consumer-brand relationship theories but after the initial sorting, we added a moral reasoning theory in order to further analyze the empirical material. This allowed for a richer analysis where we could extend our theoretical framework even more and contribute to existing theory better while simultaneously helping us to reduce the empirical material and increase focus.

4.6 Ethical Consideration

Bryman & Bell (2011) suggest that there are four critical areas of ethical principles in business research: *Harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy* and *if deception is involved* (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 128). This study considered all of these areas and took suitable measures to follow these. Research can create both physical and psychological harm to the participants of a study. By offering anonymity, ensuring willingness to participate and offering the participants to end the interview at any time we reduced the possibility of exposing our respondents to harm. Furthermore, we ensured confidentiality of all the recordings and transcribed material and handled the material carefully.

Lack of informed consent is often a problem within research as there is a fear of contamination of respondents' answers (Bryman & Bell, 2011). However, since brand activism can be a sensitive topic we wanted to be as transparent as possible in order to stay ethical towards our respondents. We did inform our respondents that we were interested in socio-political issues connected to recent marketing activities of some famous brands. That way the respondents knew the main and most sensible parts of our research while we still managed to ensure that their answers were not contaminated.

After the analysis of the respondents' answers was done we allowed all participants to review our interpretation of their answers in order to increase trustworthiness further. By being transparent about the aim of the study we simultaneously related to the third area of ethical principles, *invasion of privacy*. Being truthful about the aim of a study allows the participant to create an understanding of what the interview will entail and therefore at the same time acknowledge and justify the level of privacy involved. Lastly, we pledged to the respondents to solely use the empirical material for the purpose of this study which ensured that there was no level of deception involved in our study. All these initiatives were taken in order to protect the interest of our respondents. In the next section follows a discussion about how this study has protected the integrity of research in general by ensuring transparency, lack of bias and essentially the quality of this study.

4.7 Quality of Study

When assessing the quality of a study there are many factors to account for. Within a constructivist research design which this paper aimed to follow, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson (2015) explain how reassuring quality often is connected to authenticity, plausibility and criticality. The former involves showing evidence for deeper understanding of the subject, the second that the research is covering a timely and relevant topic within academia and the latter that the study makes the reader question their assumption, is partisan and creates novel understanding. By conducting a thorough literature review that covers different perspectives within the field, using relevant and well-established theories as well as using the most suitable

technique for acquiring empirical material we argue that an in depth understanding has been created. We also believe that we have found novel insights that are of interest for academia going forwards since the area of brand activism that we focus on has not been researched from the perspectives we apply. Our topic is highly relevant at this time and it is prominent that others within academia, as well as society in general, agree. During the writing process, we made sure to discuss our analysis and interpretation with other colleagues, especially those who researched brand activism. By doing so we could critically examine our interpretation and increase both reflexivity and quality of the analysis (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, 214). It further gave us an understanding for the relevance of our research since many showed great interest in discussing it with us.

Creating trustworthiness is a vital part of ensuring quality in any research. Building on Lincoln & Guba (1985), Wallendorf & Belk (1989) discusses five criteria for which trustworthiness can be assessed: *credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and integrity*. Hereafter follows an assessment of our study from the perspective of these criteria. *Credibility* refers to if the construction of the reality studied is adequate and believable (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). Since this study follows a social constructivist approach we believe that reality is constructed by how people interpret and draw meaning from their lives and experiences. By conducting interviews as the method of obtaining our empirical material, we managed to acquire knowledge about our respondents' experiences and thoughts and therefore we consider our empirical material to be an adequate and believable representation of the reality we wanted to research. The fact that we let colleagues critically assess our interpretations of the material during the process as well as letting the respondents comment on the work further reinforces the credibility of this study (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989).

Wallendorf & Belk (1989) defines *transferability* in this context to be whether the findings can be transferred into another context or acquired by using other respondents. This study has limitations connected to the issue of transferability in the sense that it solely covers insights from American consumers which suggests the need to understand the results within that situational context. However, this study covers discussions about some of the biggest fashion brands in contemporary society which reinforces the transferability because of the familiarity of those brands around the globe. Moreover, this study discovered saturation in regards to how certain

respondents felt about their favorite brands when values contradicted which suggests that those findings could well be transferred into a similar situation with other brands for example. It is however important to note that brand activism is closely tied to the context, timing and how it is conducted which suggests that it is rather the overall conclusion and structure than the detailed findings that can be transferred.

The third criteria for trustworthiness is establishing *dependability* which Wallendorf & Belk, (1989) argues should involve a discussion about the time and change processes of the findings. We believe that a longitudinal approach where empirical material was gathered over a long period of time would be the best alternative for establishing trustworthiness for this study. Even if neither the time, resources or scope of this study allowed us to do so we do not reject dependability as we believe we did conduct this research in the second-best way possible by acquiring our respondents' memories and experiences of our topic. Further, we have been completely transparent about our methods regarding data collection and analysis which reinforces the likelihood for someone to replicate our study which according to Lincoln & Guba (1985) increases dependability.

The fourth criteria is *confirmability:* how can one determine that the findings are actually based on the respondents and the conditions around rather than influenced by biases from the researcher? We are under the belief that there can be no absolute objectivity in research but we have nonetheless, and to the best of our ability, tried to reflect on our position in the context and how we affect the process and outcome. By doing so, we increased reflexivity in our work and could analyze the data from different perspectives (Alvesson, 2003). Another factor that increased confirmability was the fact that both members of this research participated in all interview situations and took separate notes before discussing with each other in order to create triangulation in the data collection (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). In regards to the *integrity* of this research, we believe that this was obtained in several ways. By including respondents from our social environment we established a sense of trust between researchers and respondents. By using semi-structured interviews, following established techniques for conducting the interviews

and following ethical principles of research we established a sense of security which reinforced the likelihood that our respondents truthfully disclosed their feelings.

Lastly, to secure quality in a study it is important to be transparent (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015; Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). This chapter has aimed to address transparency and showcase how the research has developed over time. To show both the thought process behind our methodological choices and to bring forward arguments for them.

5. Analysis

In the following chapter, the empirical material is analyzed and synthesized with the theories chosen for this study. The analysis is divided into two levels where the second level aims to build onto the first level. The first level explores the consequences of prior brand relationships in the context of brand activism whereas the second level highlights the practical implication of these consequences from a consumer perspective.

5.1 The Effect of Prior Relationship in Brand Activism

As Fournier (1998) and Belk (1988) have previously found, consumers incorporate brands in their identity construction. In our empirical material, we found strong empirical support as our respondents emphasized how wearing a brand can give them social capital and make them recognized in their social environments. For example, one of our respondents, Andy Bernard, explained how good it feels when he shows his friends clothing that fits him well and that they seem to like. He explained:

> *"It makes me feel good even though I'm spending money. But you know you get excited, I can wear this, it will look good and you know I'm excited to show the guys and we got some of the guys here… But it is nice when you show the guys a pair of pants or a shirt and it kind of makes you feel good about yourself when they take interest in what you enjoy so" (Andy Bernard)*

As we can tell from the quote above, it is evident that consumers value brands that will make them feel good about themselves and that will get them recognized in society. While brands have worked as an identity constructing piece for consumers for a long time, new phenomena occur frequently that change the dynamics of how consumer-brand relationships work. For example, our empirical data shows that the phenomenon of brand activism complicates consumer-brand

relationships and also affects the consumption behavior of consumers. Kevin Malone, another respondent, shared an interesting story in how brand activism has changed his relationship with Nike after they engaged in brand activism. He said:

> *"It was a Wednesday night at Hammers, and I wore a Nike something and someone called me out for it and immediately I was like fuuuck they are right. I didn't even think about putting it on at first and ever since then...I've started paying attention to what brands I wore out" (Kevin Malone)*

In the story above, Kevin Malone expresses how he felt uncomfortable wearing a brand that he felt he could no longer identify with, because of brand activism. From the quote, we understand that Kevin did not think about the brand activism from Nike while putting on his clothing, however, he realized the meaning of wearing that brand when he got called out for wearing it in public. This, in turn, affected his relationship with Nike and other brands that goes against his values and opinions. Drawing upon the AA model by Park et al. (2013), we understand that depending on the brand self-distance (the perceived distance between the self and the brand) and the brand prominence (how easy it is to access memories and thoughts about that brand, the quality of the relationship is affected. In Kevin's case, since Nike engaged in brand activism that went against his values and opinions, he experienced the brand self-distance as further, which Park et al. (2013) explain as a more negative relationship. However, it was not until Kevin got called out in public when his relationship with Nike changed more directly. From understanding brand prominence, we can conclude that this situation for Kevin created a negative memory around the brand that was easily accessible for him and therefore resulting in a more negative consumer-brand relationship.

Drawing upon Fournier's (1998) relationship typology, we looked at relationships that were regarded as high quality and high involvement. For example, Kevin Malone expressed how he has always worn Nike shoes and when he got a little older it turned into all their clothing and athletic gear. This is something that Fournier (1998) would classify as a "Best Friendship" type of relationship. She explains this relationship as a long-term and high intimacy relationship that becomes an important part of constructing the consumer's identity.

As we can see, brand activism complicates consumer-brand relationships. However, does conflict of values between consumers and brands automatically lead to deterioration of a relationship, as prior research points to (Matos, Vinuales & Sheinin, 2017; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Shivakanth Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Our findings suggest that depending on the prior relationship a consumer has with a brand that engages in brand activism, taking a socio-political stand, the outcomes vary.

5.1.1 Brand Captivation

Fournier (1998) provides a stress model that explains how consumer-brand relationships deteriorate or dissolve over time through different stressors. For example, a partner-oriented stressor is when a brand undergoes a change in personality, values or needs and is misaligned with the consumer which makes the consumer-brand relationship an "unacceptable" fit and therefore the relationship deteriorates or dissolves (Fournier 1998). It could be argued that brand activism is a partner-oriented stressor as the brand establishes/changes their personality with values when taking a socio-political stand which should therefore lead to deterioration. However, our findings suggest that consumer-brand relationships are more complex than this. Rather than being a factor of deterioration, brand activism visualizes a dark side of consumer-brand relationships that Fournier (1998) fails to recognize. We argue that the better the quality of the relationship and the higher the involvement, the more "stuck" a consumer feels with that brand which complicates the process of deterioration, even if the brand misaligns with the consumer's values through brand activism. For example, Kevin Malone's relationship with Nike became complicated after they took a socio-political stand that went against his values and opinions. He elaborated:

> *"I don't like their marketing to be honest. I mean I still wear their shoes because I have worn their shoes my entire life so I'm kind of stuck with that. But as far as the other stuff goes, I haven't really bought from them..." (Kevin Malone)*

In Kevin Malone's relationship with Nike, as stated above, we can see that even though Nike went against his values, they still share a relationship with each other. As he explains, since he has worn Nike shoes his whole life, he will not be able to switch to another brand. He further explained that he did not want to give Nike money and support them that way, however when it comes to running shoes he felt that he had to. This means that the relationship has not deteriorated or dissolved as Fournier (1998) suggests, rather it has highlighted the fact that there is a darker side of consumer-brand relationships whereas Kevin feels he has no other option than to support Nike even though he does not want to. It seems as if he feels stuck in the relationship with Nike and as the relationship has progressed over time, this feeling has increased. It could be interpreted as if the consumer-brand relationship in this situation has a captivating effect over Kevin. In this sense, following brand activism, Nike has locked him up in a relationship that violates traditional relationship agreements. Fournier (1998) argues that one factor of a good relationship is acting in the best interest of the partner which Nike, in this situation, no longer seems to do. Therefore, Kevin's relationship with Nike could be interpreted as a bad relationship.

From theory (Fournier, 1998), we understand that we have similar relationships with brands as we do with humans, however, not all human relationships are good. What about a toxic love relationship, where the partners keep coming back to each other even after one of the partners has treated the other one badly. Perhaps, they are scared of leaving each other since they have always been together. Therefore, staying in the relationship becomes the only option even though the right thing would be to move on. Similarly in Kevin's reasoning towards Nike, he believes Nike has violated the relationship agreement but because of his prior relationship with the brand he feels captivated in the relationship and deterioration is not an option. Another respondent, Dwight Schrute elaborates similarly when discussing Nike and how they endorsed Colin Kaepernick after he took a knee during the US national anthem in order to show support for the Black Lives Matter movement:

> *"I think it is partially the way I was raised, I was raised in a military family. Even*
> *though Kaepernick was kneeling for different reasons I think there are better and*
> *other ways of expressing your beliefs than the way he did it. But did it make me*
> *think otherwise of Nike? No, I have always worn Nike before and that kind of stuff*

would not prevent me from buying Nike in the future. Also, I have spent good money on it so I'm gonna wear it. (Dwight Schrute)

Dwight reasons similarly to Kevin when it comes to how the prior relationship affects his reaction but he also visualizes another dimension of why he feels stuck with Nike. He has not only invested himself in the brand but also his money, which suggests that there are both emotional and monetary barriers that increase the feeling of captivation. In both Kevin and Dwights case, the brand locks them up in a relationship they have a hard time escaping from. It is almost as if they are imprisoned. Therefore, this incarcerating effect that brands have on consumers is something we call *Brand Captivation.* In this situation, the relationship becomes a high wall where the exit barriers, both emotional and monetary, are so high that the consumers have a hard time climbing over and escape. While monetary barriers are straightforward because you want value for your money, the emotional barriers need further exploration as they contain several layers of complexity. We suggest that the emotional barriers are affected by the quality of prior relationships, which in turn are decisive for the cognitive prominence of consumers' brand memories as well as their ability to forgive a brand, as illustrated below.

5.1.2 Brand Captivation linked with Brand Memories

As noted, consumers are captivated in relationships with certain brands. Drawing upon Park et al.'s (2013) AA relationships framework we can understand the underlying factors and the emotional barriers that make consumers still want to continue a relationship with a bad relationship partner, one that transgresses the relationship agreements. In the AA model, Park et al. (2013) explain how brand attachment makes consumers feel close and attached to the brand while using it for self-expansion and self-expression. Typically, when talking about brand attachment, it is linked to a positive relationship. However, in the context of brand activism, a darker side of brand attachment becomes prominent. You are captivated in the relationship with a brand because of the attachment to the brand which explicates the link between attachment and the feeling of being trapped.

To further understand brand captivation we need to dig deeper into brand attachment in the AA model by looking at brand self-distance. Park et al. (2013) explain how the closeness of a consumer-brand relationship is determined by the self-relevance of the consumer's brand memory. We argue that the self-relevance of the consumer's brand memory is linked with brand captivation. For example, when asked about Nike, Michael Scott shared a highly relevant brand memory with the brand, and because of that memory, he experiences his relationship with Nike more closely. He said:

> *"I didn't have a job back then but I would always ask my mom to buy me Nike shoes." (Michael Scott)*

As we can tell from the quote above, Michael Scott's memories with Nike are closely tied to his past, when he did not have a job and his mom would buy him shoes. He feels that Nike has always been by his side so perhaps he senses a moral obligation to return the favor. This means he is experiencing a deep emotional connection to the memories and therefore experiencing the relationship with Nike as closer. Another example of a deep emotional connection with brand memories is Ryan Howard's memory with Nike. He said:

> *"Pretty much through my whole sports career, I have gravitated towards Nike. Like even if I see someone wearing Nike in competition or something, and they are similar to mine, I kind of assume they know what they are doing...The spikes that I wear are on another level when it comes to competition." (Ryan Howard)*

Ryan's memories with Nike are closely tied to his athletic career and the success he has had while wearing the brand and therefore experiencing closeness with the brand. However, in these cases, both Michael Scott and Ryan Howard expressed how dissatisfied they were with Nike when they took an activist stand. Ryan said:

> *"Yeah I definitely wasn't a huge fan of that...I have a brother that serves in the military so for me that was pretty disrespectful. Like yeah he was trying to stand for something but he could have done it in a different way that doesn't necessarily downplay what other people are doing for our country as well. So for me, it was a little bit painful I guess to see that. In my mind, it was a disrespectful act towards our flag that represents my brother… However, it didn't necessarily stop me from*

buying their products obviously since I use them in track and field and I have bought some in the past year."(Ryan Howard)

Even though Nike went against Ryan's values and opinions, the stand did not affect his consumption of the brand as we can see in the quote above. This behavior could be understood through Park et al. 's (2013) AA model and their concept of brand prominence which explains the accessibility of memories and thoughts about a brand. Ryan has experienced both positive (using Nike throughout his athletic career) and negative memories (disrespecting his brother because of brand activism) with Nike, but what memories determine the continuation of the relationship? From the empirical material, it seems as if the positive memories outweigh the negative memories in the situation of brand activism. Ryan's brand memories are closely tied to his athletic success which suggests they are more easily accessible and linked to a more positive brand self-distance. These emotional connections create stronger prior relationships, which in turn captivates him in the relationship. When Nike engaged in brand activism, he reflected upon the fact that they were disrespecting his brother but since he uses the brand in athletics he will continue to buy Nike. Ryan experiences a form of addictiveness towards Nike where they are more important than his brother. In that sense, brand captivation emphasizes the superiority of consumer-brand relationships over human relationships, which exemplifies the darker side of consumer-brand relationships that we argue for, where a continuation of the relationship can be more important than personal moral principles.

5.1.3 Staying In a Bad Relationship

When consumers experience conflicts of socio-political values following Nike's support for Colin Kaepernick they do not work in the best interest of their consumers. Therefore, Nike becomes a bad relationship partner as they transgress what constitutes the quality of a good relationship (Fournier, 1998). Even though brand captivation mitigates consumers' reactions towards such a brand transgression following brand activism, it does not completely eliminate reactions. Some consumers might initially react strongly by not consuming that brand *for a*

while. However, due to the element of addictiveness surrounding brand captivation, eventually, our empirical material indicates that consumers rather stay in bad relationships than to not be in them at all. The consumer-brand relationship may well be put on hold instead of deteriorating and consumers might initially be able to break free from the brand that has transgressed in the relationship but later due to addictiveness comes back to the brand. For example, as noted by Ryan Howard when talking about Nike's brand activism:

> *"But after they released the ad I would say that I bought a lot less, but in recent*
> *years...during the past year...I haven't really thought much about it and started to*
> *buy more again" (Ryan Howard)*

We learn from the quote that Ryan's initial feelings towards Nike's brand activism were negative and that his consumption of the brand changed. However, it is evident that when time passes and the initial reactions from Ryan have cooled down, he goes back to Nike and the bad relationship. By looking at the concept of brand prominence in the AA model by Park et al. (2019), we understand how the accessibility of brand memories can change. When Nike had just taken a stand, the accessibility of the transgressed brand memory was more prominent than any other memory. This means that the emotional barriers, or "the prison walls around him", for the moment were reduced. Therefore, he initially could buy less clothes from them. However, as he explains, when the accessibility of the brand activism memory was declining and his prior and positive brand memories became more prominent he started to buy Nike again. This could be interpreted as the wall around him once again rose and he was forced to come back to the brand as he fell back into the feeling of captivation. Much like many prisoners in captivity when they first experience freedom, they miss the security within the prison walls and want to go back. We suggest that consumers can experience similar feelings in relationships with brands which makes them return to bad consumer-brand relationships.

5.1.4 Brand Captivation, Can One Break Free?

Through the empirical material, brand captivation has been a dynamic concept that can be influenced by many factors. So far, the analysis has shown how factors such as prior consumer-brand relationships, emotional and monetary barriers as well as brand memories can

increase the effects of brand captivation and make it more prominent. However, on the other end of the spectrum, the most prominent factor that reduces the effects of brand captivation is *brand alternatives*. For example, when asked about the continuation of his relationship with Nike, Stanley Hudson said:

> *"I only wear like a couple of things they do....like their hoodies but other than that I found alternatives....when I went to college we always had Under Armor...and Adidas is there..ehm...I like their shoes now, I don't know if that directly related to all that happen with Nike but it could of just because I found alternatives...and Nike compared to Under Armor and Adidas...Nike is a bit more political active." (Stanley Hudson)*

While Stanley still shows evidence of brand captivation because he is purchasing Nike's hoodies, he has managed to reduce the effects of the brand captivation by finding alternatives. These alternatives create new consumer-brand relationships for Stanley. Drawing upon Park et al.'s (2013) AA model we understand that brand self-distance and brand prominence facilitates the quality of a consumer-brand relationship. In Stanley's case, he has found alternatives where he is experiencing a closer brand self-distance because they are not as politically active as Nike. Stanley also relates Under Armor to his college times, therefore he is experiencing higher brand prominence than with Nike. When both the brand self-distance and the brand prominence become more positive with an alternate brand, the effects of brand captivation are reduced, or in some instances eliminated.

While alternatives might reduce the effects of brand captivation, the quality of the prior relationship a consumer has with a brand might impact the chances of finding alternatives. If the quality of the prior relationship is so strong that the consumer can not consider any other alternatives, the consumer is fully captivated in the relationship. When consumers experience such a degree of brand captivation, it is crucial to understand what strategies consumers use to cope with it.

5.2 Coping with Conflict of Values Between Consumers and Brands

Brand activism has a tendency to put matters on its head. When brands take a stand on socio-political issues, they establish values and opinions that were not necessarily visual before. Therefore, there is a risk of sudden conflict of values between the brand and its consumers. In combination with what we have learned so far in the analysis, that depending on the quality of the prior consumer-brand relationship consumers can become imprisoned in their relationships, coping with brand activism can be complex. Therefore, it is relevant to analyze how consumers react when they feel captivated in a consumer-brand relationship and highlight different strategies that these consumers apply when they stay in a relationship with a partner harboring conflicting values.

5.2.1 Maintaining Consumer-Brand Relationships through Moral Rationalization

According to theory (Tsang, 2002; Bhattacharjee, Berman & Reed, 2013), feelings of self-worth occur when acting morally while feelings of self-condemnation are the result of acting immoral. Before acting immoral individuals deploy moral reasoning strategies in order to disengage from their immoral actions which allows them to evade feelings of self-condemnation. As our study has shown, brand activism can create misalignment of values between brands and consumers which can lead to brand captivation depending on your prior relationship. In this case, rather than stop consuming that brand, consumers need to justify a continuous relationship with that brand and this study argues that one way consumers do so is by deploying moral reasoning strategies. One of our respondents, Stanley Hudson, explained how he became negative towards Nike following their activism campaign while simultaneously participating in the interview in a Nike hoodie. When asked about it, he explained:

> *"I would say from the stuff that I own that when I put it on I don't think, oh this is what I represent unless it is something that has the name written prominently across the chest, then I know I represent that… But I don't have anything that says NIKE like that because I don't want to represent that. This hoodie I got from Gustavus and I liked it and started wearing it. I don't think I would ever buy a hoodie that says strictly Nike on it, like the Nike hoodies I have has a different*

eye-catch of other brands than "the brand brand" if you know what I mean"
(Stanley Hudson)

This quote shows evidence of a form of indirect consumption of Nike which for Stanley justifies his continuous consumption of the brand. It seems to be okay to consume Nike products where Nike is the secondary representation and the main message is something other than Nike. By doing so, Stanley managed to justify and maintain a relationship with Nike by reconstructing the perceived immoral action of consuming Nike. Stanley perceives the indirect consumption of Nike as less immoral than the direct consumption. However, one could argue that the benefits for Nike remain unchanged since it is still a Nike product but for Stanley, it helps him justify his consumption of a brand that he perceives to go against his moral values. In this case, Stanley's moral reasoning is similar to the process of moral rationalization. Tsang (2002) describes moral rationalization as the cognitive process that individuals use to convince themselves that their behavior does not violate their moral standards. Deploying moral rationalization strategies could therefore be viewed as one way of coping with conflicting values in the consumer-brand relationship. In this example, it is done by not using a prominent logo of a brand that is interpreted to go against your moral standards. But why would consumers want to act and justify personal immortality for the sake of a brand?

Why consumers use moral reasoning strategies to cope with conflicting values could be understood through the lens of Tsang's (2002) moral rationalization framework, which is based on a cost vs benefit ratio. If the cost of acting in line with your moral values is perceived as bigger than the possible benefits, then you are more likely to deploy moral rationalization (Tsaang, 2002). Therefore, in order to understand the full moral dilemma process, the factors and incentives that affect consumers' choice to consume brands like Nike after they engage in brand activism need to be understood. 5.1 introduces the concept of brand captivation which relates to the problem consumers experience with departing from a long-term brand relationship. Brand captivation allows us to understand the incentives, or the costs, that consumers experience are present and connected to the dilemma of ending a consumer-brand relationship after a perceived

immoral brand activism action has occurred. As an example, Kevin Malone described why he would not change from Nike even though he felt they disrespected important patriotic values of his:

> *"I just don't wanna give Nike more money and support them that way, unless I need running shoes hahaha… I won't change from Nike shoes just because I have been wearing them my whole life and they are the best shoes for running. I don't wear them for something else, it's just strictly running. Also, I don't like how Adidas goes and fit my foot, I told you I don't fuck around with New Balance, what else is there, Puma, that is a European thing, I would never wear that"* (Kevin Malone)

Here we can find several indications of cost factors as well as how he moralizes his consumption of Nike. Similar to Stanley, Kevin also uses a moral rationalization strategy to justify his consumption of Nike. In Kevin's case, it seems to be by strictly using their shoes and only while running. Moreover, he considers Nike to be the superior brand for running shoes, he has worn Nike his whole life and all the alternatives for various reasons are not valid options. These are examples of factors that could be classified as perceived costs.

The fact that there is a lack of alternatives and that he has a strong prior relationship with Nike reinforces the brand captivation which makes the costs of acting on his moral principles greater than the perceived benefits. Therefore, Kevin has incentives that make him deploy moral rationalization strategies. This justifies his transgression and creates the desired outcome of his consumption without him feeling guilty about it (Bhattacharjee, Berman & Reed, 2013). Hence, prior consumer-brand relationship in this context creates perceived costs for consumers which complicates the process of acting along with their moral principles. Instead, it facilitates continued support for the brand, regardless if the values align or not. In contrast to previous studies (Belk, 1988; Fournier 1998; Park et al. 2013) which suggest that consumer-brand relationships are related to, and facilitated by, the level of self-identification one feels towards a brand, our findings suggest that prior consumer-brand relationships could have the opposite effect. Through the lens of brand activism, prior consumer-brand relationships make consumers feel the need to act hypocritically towards their moral principles, which could be argued to

prevent self-identification rather than increase it. Simultaneously, this further reinforces the concept of brand captivation.

So far, the examples provided of how consumers use moral rationalization strategies to justify the consumption of brands that go against their socio-political values have been connected to their consumption patterns of those brands. However, there are other ways this could be justified than changing consumption behavior. Ryan Howard provides us with an interesting explanation of why he feels okay with consuming Patagonia even after they publicly showed support for the opposite political party than his:

> *"But to be honest, if they know me, you are not gonna be thinking I supported Biden, ehm, that's a pretty known fact around. If you follow me on Instagram you are not gonna think that, so I think that if people know me, they are not gonna see me wear Patagonia and be thinking that: oh he supported Biden, no one who knows me would say that, so in that sense, I don't really care a ton because I feel that my personality and integrity kind of vote for themself" (Ryan Howard)*

Ryan feels comfortable consuming Patagonia since he believes his image is strong enough to resist eventual external confusion about his political values. Ryan is aware that what he consumes communicates clues about his identity to others, as theory suggests (Belk, 1988). However, he moralizes his consumption of Patagonia by emphasizing the prominence of his "true values" through other channels. This suggests that communicating your values clearly, through other channels than consumption, facilitates and rationalizes consuming brands that go against those values. Tsang (2002) describes how acting in line with your moral principles earns you praise from others. However, in Ryan's case, it is clear to him that people around him know that he follows his moral principles in the sense that he is a good ambassador for his political principles despite consuming Patagonia. Returning to the cost vs benefit ratio (Tsang, 2002), in contrast to Stanley and Kevin (where the costs were too big), it is rather the lack of benefits that makes Ryan deploy moral rationalization towards his consumption of Patagonia. It becomes easier for him to transgress his moral principles because it is a known fact among his social

environment what his moral principles are and wearing Patagonia products can not change that. This could be viewed as an external factor that affects the justification of consuming brands that contradict your values. Therefore, our findings show that even though one would imagine that having strong political values and being vocal about those externally would complicate the consumption of brands that contradicts those values, it seems to have the opposite effect and make it easier.

To conclude, our findings suggest that both internal and external factors affect how consumers react and cope with brand activism and the value contradiction that might follow. Internal factors, in the sense that prior relationships could be viewed as internal characteristics of the consumer-brand relationship, whereas by external factors we imply the role of image and the prominence of personal values in the eyes of others.

5.2.2 Maintaining Consumer-Brand Relationships through Moral Decoupling

The analysis has visualized how consumers react to brand activism by deploying moral rationalization as a moral reasoning strategy to justify perceived partnership transgressions from some of their favorite brands. However, this study has found other reactions and strategies that are not related to moral rationalization. Instead, another moral reasoning strategy that consumers find effective to use when brands display values that misalign with personal values is moral decoupling.

Moral decoupling is the process of separating the act from the actor and judging morality as separated from performance (Bhattacharjee, Berman & Reed, 2013). There is an important difference between the two moral reasoning strategies. Moral rationalization incorporates justification of behavior that otherwise are deemed immoral, whereas moral decoupling on the other hand does not require the individual to justify any immoral actions. Instead, moral decoupling involves not ascribing the action to the actor in the first place (Bhattacharjee, Berman & Reed, 2013). As a consequence, moral decoupling facilitates the possibility to support an actor while simultaneously condemning the behavior of the same actor. Toby Flenderson explanation of his consumption is a good representation of moral decoupling:

"The best way I can put it is like, I separate the art from the person. So I separate the material goods from anything that they have supported. That's the best way I can put it, I separate the two… I can disassociate myself with what they stand for and recognize what they put out materialistically… Like do I want to support them for being racist? No, but I like buying their clothing because it fits me" (Toby Flenderson)

Toby can stay with a bad relationship partner that holds conflicting values by deploying moral decoupling, separating the brand from the stand. As he claims himself, this is done by disassociating himself from the company's stand while still recognizing their products. For Toby, the performance of the products is separated from the moral values of the company behind the products. This correlates with Bhattacharjee, Berman & Reed's (2013) explanation of moral decoupling as a separation between the judgment of performance and morality. Furthermore, within the field of brand management, there is a general understanding that the brand should be characterized as a holistic representation of the whole organization and with a clear identity. However, in the context of brand activism, our findings suggest that the brand as a holistic representation might complicate the situation. When consumers use moral decoupling to justify a continuous consumption of brands that misalign their values, the opposite is favorable.

Toby's quote suggests that post-brand activism there could be a need for consumers to break down the symbolic representation of the brand into smaller parts to then separate unwanted values from the brand in order to maintain the consumer-brand relationship. Therefore, it might be harder for consumers to use moral decoupling in situations where the brand's identity and values are highly interwoven. As a result, our findings point to the fact that having a brand with a more unclear identity and symbolic meaning, might facilitate moral decoupling, which in turn could generate better responses from consumers to brand activism from a company perspective. This means that it creates an allowance for continuous consumer-brand relationships as it helps consumers stay in bad relationships caused by brand activism. Hence, in contrast to prior research (Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Shivakanth Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah &

Anand, 2019), this suggests that in the context of brand activism the typical characteristics of "a strong brand" could in fact be unfavorable. Brand activism increases the importance for consumers to be able to consume parts of the brand rather than the full brand and moral decoupling helps to achieve this.

According to the empirical material, moral decoupling after brand activism is not only about separating the brand from the stance. Oscar Martinez elaborates:

> *"Uhm I would say me personally, no, because I still wear Nike stuff and I wouldn't want someone to look at me and be like, oh just because he is wearing Nike he agrees with exactly everything they say because I don't necessarily. I got my own views and opinions and in turn, I would never want to think that about someone else" (Oscar Martinez)*

Here, Oscar suggests that it is possible to consume a product without being ascribed with all of the symbolic values of the brand behind it. In contrast to the previous quote where Toby separated the brand from the product, Oscar essentially separates the consumer from the consumption. Therefore, this could be viewed as another form of moral decoupling that occurs more closely connected to the consumer. Oscar decouples Nike's brand activism transgression in the sense that he believes that his consumption of Nike is separated from his values and that this is clear from the outside. Moral decoupling strategy from this perspective allows a form of *self-disidentification* in the consumption process where the consumer distances themself from parts of their consumption. Thus, brand activism is viewed as only a part of the brand and moral decoupling allows you to not necessarily be part of "the whole" brand you consume. Hence, brand activism changes important factors in consumption which suggests that in this context, prior understanding of the self-identification process in consumption (Belk, 1988) could be questioned.

One could argue that brand activism creates a situation where the consumer experiences a simultaneous increase of both brand attachment and brand aversion. According to the AA-model (Park et al. 2013) brand attachment refers to consumers feeling of closeness and self-expansion while brand aversion relates to feelings of distance and threat for self-contraction. When brands transgress in relationships through brand activism, consumers' unconscious attachment to the

brand becomes prominent (through brand captivation) which increases the feelings of brand attachment. At the same time, brand activism facilitates brand aversion since it creates the need for moral decoupling in order to cope with the value contradiction.

Prior research argues that the more an individual identifies with the actor of a transgression, the more prominent moral decoupling as a strategy becomes (Cowan & Yazdanparast, 2021). This suggests that self-identification is in fact an important part of moral decoupling. However, our findings suggest that while self-identification may be an important hygiene factor in deploying moral decoupling, the actual process of such a strategy rather leads to self-disidentification. Lastly, if consumers deploy a moral decoupling strategy similar to Oscar's, it allows a form of cherry-picking of perceived brand values where consumers decide which values to incorporate in their consumption. However, whether or not this strategy is successful is decided through the eyes of the spectator as the external perceptions can not be affected. Nonetheless, as an internal strategy, moral decoupling of brand values facilitates the consumption of brands that misalign personal values.

6. Discussion

This chapter presents a summary of the key findings and a discussion about how they relate to prior research. Moreover, an attempt is made to visualize a holistic picture of the findings and how they connect to each other. In addition, this chapter presents the practical and theoretical implications of our findings.

6.1 Overview of Key Findings

At the beginning of this study, two research questions were presented in order to specify what we wanted to investigate. The first question was: *How are consumers' relationships with brands affected when a brand engages in brand activism and takes a socio-political stand that contradicts the consumers' values?* This study found that when this is the case, consumers are faced with a dilemma. Even if the consumer experiences brand activism as a transgression of the principles of a good consumer-brand relationship, they stay in the relationship because they feel stuck. Due to the quality of the prior consumer-brand relationship, our study has found that consumers can feel monetarily and emotionally captivated by brands. We call this incarcerating effect *Brand Captivation* which highlights a darker side of consumer-brand relationships.

As presented in the existing literature and found in this research, brand activism complicates consumer-brand relationships. The better the quality and the involvement of the prior relationship is, this is particularly evident. For example, The emotional factors that are linked with brand captivation are established from brand memories. The brand self-distance and the brand prominence of these memories determine the quality of the relationship and therefore facilitate brand captivation. Our study finds that consumers' positive memories could outweigh the negative as the consumers connect easier with the positive memories while the negative memories appear more distant in the consumers' minds. It seems as if the positive brand memories have an addictive effect on consumers that makes them locked up in the relationship with the brand. As a result, brand captivation highlights both how consumer-brand relationships can be superior to human relationships, and how consumers stay with bad relationship partners rather than following their moral principles.

Our research further found that some consumers initially react strongly towards a brand's transgression in the relationship. However, because of brand captivation, consumers often find themselves trapped in captivity and staying in bad relationships becomes the only option. As the negative brand memories become less prominent over time and the positive memories are becoming more prominent again, the positive memories create a feeling of being captivated in the bad relationship. We note that staying in this type of relationship following brand activism is not always based on genuine feelings of actually wanting to stay with the brand. Instead, we argue for a form of artificial forgiveness where consumers often use it as a solution in order to maintain the relationship with the brand. Moreover, brand captivation creates incentives for consumers' to stay with a brand, which means they need to learn how to cope with conflict in values when a brand has transgressed in the relationship.

The second research question of this study related to understanding how the captivating effects impacted the consumer, more specifically: *How do consumers cope with these effects in the consumer-brand relationship following brand activism?* We found prominent evidence that moral reasoning strategies are deployed by consumers when they experience a conflict of values with a brand they have a prior relationship with. This means they are faced with a moral dilemma and the quality of the prior relationship makes it more evident. Because of the characteristics of a high-quality prior consumer-brand relationship (which includes prominent brand memories as well as brand incorporation in self-identification), consumers become captivated in those relationships and therefore need to find a solution to overcome the contradiction without dissolving the relationship. Moral reasoning strategies, especially moral rationalization and moral decoupling work as tools to solve this problem.

Consumers use moral rationalization by internally convincing themself that their immoral actions are in fact moral which facilitates continuous consumption of brands despite the contradiction of values. We found practical outcomes of this strategy where individuals justified their continuous consumer-brand relationship by changing the consumption behavior of the brand. For example,

by not purchasing products where the brand logo is prominent or by only consuming products that the consumer convinces themself they can not be without.

Moral decoupling was visualized when the respondents separated the actual brand activist opinion from the brand and its products. The respondents also argued that their consumption of the brand was not related to their views and values which highlighted another form of moral decoupling. In practice, we found evidence that consumers, when captivated, separate the performance of the products they purchase from the values and morality of the brand that produces the product. Moreover, another way consumers use a decoupling strategy, to justify the consumption of immoral brands, is by separating themself from their consumption. Consumers believe they can decide what parts of the brand they consume and what parts they do not consume. Furthermore, this suggests that having a weak brand with unclear symbolic value could facilitate moral decoupling for consumers as a weak brand is more fractionated and therefore easier to separate.

It is important to note that our findings suggest that the use of moral reasoning strategies is closely connected to the prior relationship between consumers and their brands and whether or not the consumer feels captivated. We found that brand alternatives could mitigate the feeling of brand captivation. If the consumer experiences that there is an acceptable alternative to the brand in question, they are more able to break free from captivation. If that is the case, it allows the consumer to dissolve the relationship. Therefore, brand alternatives work as an important way out of brand captivity.

6.2 Interrelations of Key Findings

We argue that prior consumer-brand relationships in the lens of brand activism make consumers stay in bad consumer-brand relationships due to the creation of brand captivation. Simultaneously, we believe that the result of perceived transgressed brand activism increases the gap between consumer-brand identification but does not dissolve the relationship.

From a consumer perspective, brand activism highlights a darker side of consumer-brand relationships and pushes them towards the limit. As in real life, it is when relationships are put under pressure that their true color shows. We argue that consumers, following brand activism,

experience a realization of both conscious and unconscious willingness to support. Conscious willingness to support in the way prior consumer-brand relationships may emphasize the willingness to support the brand no matter what. However, suppose you have a desire to stop drinking alcohol. It is probably when you actually try to quit that you first realize just how addicted to it you are. We believe that brand activism highlights a similar dynamic in consumer-brand relationships. What we imply with unconscious willingness to support is the consumer's realization that ending a certain relationship with a brand is not that easy, one can be more addicted to a brand than one first thought. Even if the brand has transgressed in the relationship, there can be a sense of addictiveness to the brand due to the historical bond between the consumer and the brand. As a consequence, brand addictiveness along with brand captivation forces the consumer to deploy moral reasoning strategies in order to cope with value contradiction and maintain the relationship. As a result, the characteristics of these strategies suggest that the consumer-brand relationship induces a form of self-disidentification.

As seen in the analysis, when consumers justify staying with a bad relationship partner following brand activism through moral reasoning strategies, the solution often includes various ways of internal distancing from the brand or at least parts of the brand. Therefore, we argue that the dynamics of the consumer-brand relationship in the context of misaligned values through brand activism have other characteristics than the traditional understanding that Belk (1988) and Fournier (1998) have established. Belk's (1988) famous line "you are what you consume" contradicts the feelings consumers need to sense in order to maintain such a relationship. Rather, we argue that a more suitable quote could be "you can be you despite what you consume" which then with more precision would explain the situation of incarcerated consumers that deploy moral reasoning strategies. To conclude, our study highlights a darker side of consumer-brand relationships in two ways. First, by visualizing the captivating effect consumer-brand relationships can have. Second, by creating an understanding of the coping strategies that consumers deploy in order to handle a transgression by a brand relationship partner which leads consumers to break their moral principles as well as dis-identify with the brand.

6.3 Contribution to Prior Research

Through Fournier's (1998) BRQ model, many researchers have been able to visualize and conceptualize different consumer-brand relationships and how they are developed and dissolved over time. However, by researching the effects of brand activism on consumer-brand relationships we have been able to further understand and contribute to Fournier's (1998) theory. Fournier (1998) explains how relationship stressors, such as partner-oriented stressors, lead to dissolvement or deterioration of the relationship. Our research suggests that consumer-brand relationships are more similar to real relationships where stressors do not always mean deterioration and that there is a dark side of consumer-brand relationships just as in real relationships. For example, think of a toxic love relationship where the two partners always seem to find a way back to each other even after someone has treated the other badly. We argue that this is the case in consumer-brand relationships as well, where consumers keep finding their way back to a brand that has gone against their values and broken some of the relationship principles. The stronger the relationship is before the brand takes a stand, the more stuck the consumer feels which leaves the consumer with no other option than to continue the relationship. In this regard, we are contributing to consumer-brand relationship literature by adding a darker side of consumer-brand relationships that stems from addiction to other partners and the feeling of captivation in the relationship. Therefore, the term *Brand Captivation* has been constructed which adds to Fournier (1998) as brand relationships are not only formed in a positive light to enable and empower identity projects. Just as in real life, not all relationships are good and brand captivation highlights some of these bad relationships. Hence, to build upon Fournier's (1998) relationship typology, one could call this type of relationship *The Captivated Addict* which we define as a relationship that stems from addictiveness and captivation.

However, while this study has shown that brand activism increases the complexity of consumer-brand relationships, we also contribute to brand activism literature. Previous research within brand activism suggests that when brands take a socio-political stand, consumers who do not share the same values and opinions as the brand deteriorate the relationship with that brand (Matos, Vinuales & Sheinin, 2017; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Shivakanth Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). However, the findings in this paper suggest that brand activism which leads to conflict of values between brand and consumers does not always lead to

deterioration. Instead, it highlights the need for consumers to deploy moral reasoning strategies to continue using a brand since consumers are captivated in the relationship through irreplaceable memories and experiences with brands. Therefore, while this paper contradicts prior brand activism research, it is in line with brand loyalty literature as it seems to be more painful to abandon a brand than sticking with it, even if the brand is not acting in the best interest of the consumer.

The general understanding within brand activism literature is that having a strong brand identity is preferable when engaging in brand activism as it is perceived as more authentic in the eyes of the consumer (Shivakanth Shetty, Belavadi Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). While this very well could be true, this paper suggests that when brand activism leads to conflict of values between brands and consumers, having a weak brand identity could be a positive factor as it becomes easier for consumers to deploy moral decoupling strategies to continue using the brand. Therefore, these findings add to prior brand management research by providing a different perspective on the strength of brand identity linked with brand activism and authenticity.

7. Conclusion

This chapter presents the general conclusion of the study. First, by connecting it to the aim of the study. Second, by relating it to contemporary consumer culture and the broader knowledge contribution of this study. The chapter ends with a reflection of this paper's limitations as well as suggestions for further research.

The purpose of this research was to extend the understanding of the relatively new phenomenon of brand activism and how it affects consumer-brand relationships. The aim was to investigate what impact conflict of values had on the consumer-brand relationship and what role prior interactions between the consumers and the brand had. This study has shown how brand activism as a marketing activity complicates and often has a negative effect on the life of the consumer. Even if it is the consumers themselves that have urged companies to engage in socio-political brand activism, our study finds that it is the consumers who are suffering in the end. Brand activism may well highlight companies' values and make it easier for consumers to understand what values they support with their consumption. However, the problem is that many times consumers do not want to know what they consume, as it complicates the relationship. This is relatable to the famous line "ignorance is bliss".

Furthermore, this research has implications on contemporary consumer culture as we present a darker side of consumer-brand relationships. When consumers' are feeling stuck with consuming a brand, despite the conflict of values, the consumer-brand identification process in consumer culture is questioned. Consumers cannot identify with their brands the same way and building the identity through consumption can therefore become problematic. Socio-political brand activism in this sense creates a consumer culture where individuals are hypocrites towards their own values, and the brand becomes more important than their morals. This means that brand activism as a new branding paradigm in marketing does not only highlight a darker side of consumer-brand relationships but also a darker side of consumer culture as a whole. Consumers are left in a dilemma where they either have to leave a relationship they actually want to be in, or break their moral principles and values to stay in the relationship. This darker side of consumer

culture could be linked to Holt's (2002) idea on how brands cause trouble through branding paradigms. Brand activism creates tension and causes trouble for consumers. Within this new paradigm, will it be possible to not be a hypocrite towards your moral principles? What brand is exactly like you?

As brands play a more important role in our society and as the political landscape has intensified, our research indicates that the lines between the two have become more blurred. It has become harder for consumers to understand what it truly means to wear a brand. For someone, wearing a particular brand means you have a certain political ideology, while for another, the brand and politics are two separate matters. Perhaps in the future, branding and politics become so closely linked together that consumers feel they are expressing their political ideologies through their consumption of brands. What would the implications be if it is on the market, and via brands, that individuals are exercising their democratic right instead of engaging in proper political movements to attain substantial political change? From this position, the combination of brand activism and the consumer-brand relationship captivates consumers not only in relationships, but rather in a consumer culture paradigm where consumption becomes politics and politics becomes consumption. In such a situation, where the lines have been erased and the dimensions have merged, how could consumers escape the market, or move from one dimension into the other? Brand activism becomes a branding tool for capitalism to use to eat its way into the political market and conquer the world just a bit more. Escaping the market through Burning Man festivals (Kozinets, 2002) is then becoming more and more of a conceited idea.

7.1 Limitations and Future Research

This study provides valuable insight for several different fields of research. However, there are aspects which provide limitations as well. First, the timeframe of this paper created limitations regarding the data collection. As noted in the methodological discussion, gathering the empirical material in a more longitudinal way over several months would have created more certainty in

the material. Therefore, we suggest that future research approaches a similar field of study but over a longer period of time. For example, following consumers in a brand relationship before the brand engages in brand activism until after taking a stance. Another limitation connected to the method is the decision to focus the study solely on a United States context. Connecting political issues with marketing activities becomes somewhat situational-based since every country has different political conditions. Moreover, there might be both cultural and social aspects that are hard to transfer over borders. Therefore, the findings provided in this paper are mostly relevant in the context it was gathered. Even if the authors of this study claim that the findings tell something about contemporary consumer culture in society at large, future research should conduct a similar study in another setting in order to reinforce that claim.

This paper has approached brand activism from a consumer perspective which was and still is needed, according to prior research. However, another focus that, to the best of our knowledge, is yet to be investigated is the effect of brand activism from an employee perspective. What effects does brand activism have on the company culture, the attractiveness of the workplace and what happens if the employees find themself in a sudden conflict of values with the workplace? These are examples of topics that would be interesting to further investigate. Lastly, so far there are few examples of brand activism campaigns that support conservative values. As a result, another limitation is that the conflict of values investigated in this study mainly is between Republicans and "Liberal brands". As it is important to create several perspectives, we suggest future research to try and investigate an opposite situation, where liberal values of the consumers are in conflict with conservative brand values. Such an approach might make discoveries that this study failed to find.

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Appendix A - Interview Guide

Intro of Interview

- Go through the ethical principles
- Describe the general theme and structure of the interview

Easy questions to start the conversation and making the respondent feel comfortable

- What are some of your favorite brands?
- How often do you consume X?

Relationship with brands that have engaged in brand activism

Create an understanding for the prior relationship with the brands

- What do you think about and what associations come up in regard to X?
- Can you describe the last time you purchased/consumed X?
    - How did it make you feel?
    - Why do you think those feelings were created?
- What makes you consume (use, wear, eat) X?

Create an understanding of how they view their marketing activities

- Do you stay updated with their marketing activities?
    - What is some marketing you have seen from the brand?
    - Do you think that it's important to do so? Why?
    - If they bring up brand activism:
        - Can you talk about that and how did it make you feel?
        - Do you think brands should engage in socio-political issues?

Discussion about X as an activist

- Can you describe how this stand makes you feel?
    - Are you surprised? Why? Why not?

- This action that was made from X….What does it mean for you? Are you affected by it?
- What do you think X is trying to radiate and achieve with this stand?
- Do you agree or not? Why?
    - Can you explain how these brand values resonate with our own values?
        - Can you motivate why this is important/not important?
        - What if there is a misalignment?
            - how would you react if that was/was not the case?
- Can you describe how this affects the associations/perception you have of X?
    - Can you describe how this affects your consumption of X?
- Do you feel you can relate more or less with X after this?

End questions/General reflection

- Do you consider the brands discussed to be authentic in their activism? Why?
- Is it important that brands show their position on socio-political issues?
    - Why/why not
    - Do you expect brands to engage in activism?
- Does it affect your purchases or consumption in general when brands do so? Why?