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**Closing the loop: A study of Brand
Activism in the Fashion Industry**

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Closing the loop: A study of Brand Activism in the Fashion Industry

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper aims to analyse how brand activism is performed in two fashion companies: H&M and Patagonia. Additionally, it examines if there is a gap between brand vision and brand image of these brands regarding activism.

Methodology: A mixed approach is adopted, where we focus on a qualitative case study of the two brands' activism and a quantitative customer survey. The case study follows a deductive approach, using a mix of two theories ('progressive vs. regressive' and core value gap) as the basis to develop arguments. A survey is also sent out, to analyse customers' perception of brand activism within these two brands.

Findings: We found that both companies have a proactive and progressive brand activism approach, yet H&M has a more negative customers' perception compared to Patagonia. It was found that there is a value gap between brand vision and brand image, whereas in Patagonia's case these values align.

Original/Value: This paper contributes to the narrow body of research on a complex phenomenon: brand activism and customers' perception. It presents a new framework for analysing the relationship between the brand vision and brand image. Furthermore, it compares and contrasts the brand activism of two different fashion companies.

Implications: The study provides practical implications for brand managers at fashion companies that wish to improve their branding and sustainable strategy while aligning with consumers' value. The proposed framework recommends several strategies for handling image-vision gap.

Keywords: Brand Activism, Brand Image, Brand Vision, Brand and Market Orientation, Core value gap

Paper type: Research paper

Problem formulation

The fashion industry is infamous for being unsustainable both in environmental and social aspects. It stands for 8-10 % of global CO₂-emissions, 35 % of oceanic microplastic pollution, and 20 % of industrial water pollution (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Sweatshops with questionable working conditions and low wages are widely used by the industry and even child labour is common (Moulds, 2015). Still many fashion brands, e.g. H&M, often claim to be sustainable and fair which has raised accusations of greenwashing (Minhaj, 2019; Ramaniah, 2019), and most costumers are sceptic towards companies' sustainability claims, despite them often being true (Hughes, 2020; Peloza et al., 2012). Other brands seem to have succeeded better in earning customers' trust and support, e.g. Patagonia (Tom & Jerry, 2021; Wolfe, 2020). Activism is a cornerstone in Patagonia's identity and has been so for the past 40 years. They have been described as an example of brand activism, which is an emerging concept in marketing and is often described as brands that take a stand in current (e.g. social or environmental) issues (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017).

Even heavily criticized H&M seem open to become a brand activist, they say themselves that they are committed to leading the change by inspiring sustainable actions. They describe it as: "Encouraging people across our value chain to make more sustainable choices. An important part of our approach is openly engaging with decision makers on policy issues such as wage setting mechanisms, labour law, climate change, due diligence, circular economy and biodiversity." (H&M Group, 2021a).

The importance of brand activism has grown rapidly, where more and more companies are beginning to consider it as vital to their operation and their

permanence in market over time (Shetty, v & Anand, 2019). Yet, as activism is a complex phenomenon, brands should look into customer behaviours and market expectations before delving into the movement (Shetty, v & Anand, 2019). A possible misalignment between the stakeholders' image and the management's vision of a company's values, a so called image-vision gap, is bound to lead to trouble for the brand (Hatch & Schultz, 2001).

While both H&M and Patagonia seem to strive to engage changemakers in their industry, we want to investigate how they do this and to what degree this is perceived by consumers. We will focus on environmental and social issues, as they are the most relevant for the industry.

Aim

Firstly, the paper seeks to gain a deeper understanding of brand activism initiatives of two fashion brands, H&M and Patagonia, based on their company information, activities, and communication. We will use the literature review to analyse these data.

Secondly, we aim to examine the consumer's perspective of brand activism of these two brands. From this, we will identify if there is a gap between organizational values and consumer's perception of brand activism of the two aforementioned brands.

This leads us to the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the fashion brands H&M and Patagonia perform social and environmental brand activism?

RQ2: Does the corporate vision of these brands align with their brand image regarding brand activism?

The study can contribute to a deeper understanding of brand activism within the fashion industry. It can also benefit the society, as we need more activist brands that bring about positive social and environmental impact. The insights gathered from the study will allow fashion brands to create more value for consumers and identify key factors in improving their brand activism.

Methodology

Research Design

The paper has two aims: to evaluate the degree of brand activism and examine if there is a gap between the company goals and values and consumer's perception regarding brand activism. It uses a mixed approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods.

For an in-depth analysis of the practice of brand activism in two fashion brands, qualitative case study is used. Case study approach is useful for this study as it responds to the 'how' question about a new phenomenon: brand activism (Meyer, 2001). The main advantage of the method is the holistic view of the phenomenon, yet the disadvantage is lack of generalization of the result (Meyer, 2001).

To study consumer's perception of brand activism, quantitative method is applied. This is because we are examining the relationship between two variables: consumer's perception and brand vision regarding activism.

Data collection method

The data in this study consists of both primary and secondary sources. The primary data was collected through an online survey about consumers' perception of brand activism of H&M and Patagonia. In this survey, 151 responses were collected and analysed. The secondary data collected is based on research into brand activism activities on company websites, marketing

campaigns, sustainability reports and relevant articles. These activities specifically refer to the brands' environmental and social contributions.

The data collection was conducted in four stages. To begin, relevant academic articles from Google Scholar and Lund University database was reviewed. We found a lack of research about brand activism and the core value gap in fashion companies and there was not yet a study that compares two brands' activism. From the analysed literature, we proposed a theoretical framework that specifically addresses this topic. We then also look at two companies' websites, social media channels, relevant articles to examine their degree of brand activism and identify common themes.

Secondly, a survey consisting of 19 closed-ended questions were sent out via social media. The topic of the survey is concerned with the respondents' general attitude towards brand activism and their perception of brand activism being performed in H&M and Patagonia (Appendix A). The questionnaire is posed on a Likert-scale (from 1: lowest to 5: highest). The main benefit of the Likert-scale is reliable data and the specific measurement of affective variables such as motivation and self-efficacy (Nemoto & Beglar, 2004).

Lastly, the primary and secondary data were compared to one another to identify whether there is a difference between two variables ('brand vision' and 'brand image').

Sample selection and sample size

We adopted a convenience sampling method for the survey – the method for selecting available participants as it was an inexpensive and accessible option (Taherdoost, 2016). The sampling method is suitable as the research does not have a specific target participant. A sample of 151 respondents was collected, from a wide range of nationalities and consumption behaviours.

Data analysis

In the data analysis stage, the case studies and survey answers were examined through deductive thematic analysis method. The method helps identify and describe themes within data, then relate them to literature review and survey questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis can produce a detailed description of the data and highlight similarities and differences across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, this allows us to compare and contrast these companies' approach to brand activism.

Literature review

The Rise of Brand Activism

The study aims to explore how brand activism is practiced in fast fashion companies. To achieve this, we must first understand what brand activism is and how it is communicated within and outside of an organisation. Brand activism is when a company or brand takes stand with “social, cultural, gender, environmental issues and supports the same in its marketing and advertising” (Shetty, v & Anand, 2019). In comparison to corporate social responsibility (CSR) that is marketing and corporate driven, brands that engage in activism take a step further and are driven by the common good (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021). Brand activism is signified by the use of marketing messages, the use of symbolic characters and content based on societal or relevant industry topics (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019).

In developed nations, modern consumers are conscious of sustainable issues and they do not want bigger brands, but better brands (Kapferer, 2012). Consumers want brands to show that they care not only for profits but for communities and the environment. In the digital era, thanks to new technological advancements, consumers are well informed of contemporary issues and brand behaviours. As the consumer

needs and the market evolves, many brands are highlighting their societal contribution in their communication efforts (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). By adapting and creating values for the consumers, brands can differentiate themselves from the competitors and gain customer loyalty. A study found that millennials have a more positive perception and buying intention towards brands that actively commit in activism. In contrast, if the level of brand activism is perceived as inauthentic and profit driven, millennials are likely to dislike or boycott the brand. Therefore, companies need to carefully analyse their consume values and behaviours before committing brand activism. (Shetty, v & Anand, 2019).

According to Kapferer (2012), to achieve brand activation, a company must have three factors: *actions* – perform impactful storytelling; *brand actor* – to be perceived as key actors in their market category and *brand activism* – show care for the environment and the well-being of its end users. To become a brand activist, the brand needs to encourage debates in its category, have sustainable innovations and differentiate from competitors. If done correctly, the activist brands will be able to create a community feeling and relate to its followers.

Brand activism can be divided into two degrees: regressive and progressive (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021). The former one refers to the activities that can potentially harm the common good, while the latter one supports the common good.

Brand activism consists of six categories: social activism, legal activism, business activism, economic activism, political activism, environmental activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021). For the purpose of this paper, only social and environmental activism will be elaborated. Social activism refers to initiatives to achieve equality in terms of gender, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity or age. Environmental activism can be understood as nature preservation,

pollution and waste policies (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021).

Brand or Market Orientation

When analysing brand orientation, the study must acknowledge the strategic orientation that these companies may have.

To be *market oriented* is to highlight the importance of the brand image and the customers' needs. The approach is from outside in, and the consumer's desires and needs in the market are considered vital (Urde, Baumgarth & Merrilees, 2013). On the other hand, the author mentioned that to be *brand oriented*, the company strategy is based on the importance of its brand identity (mission, vision, and values), and use these as a guide and hub for behaviour, organizational culture, and the development of strategies.

However, the evolution of companies and the necessity to change and to adapt overtime shows that we can find other two approaches to a company's strategy that are not "either-or" propositions.

The market and brand orientation is a hybrid approach, that it is originally related to market orientation, but this proposition recognizes the significance of brand identity and the internal side of the brand. The view of the market and customers comes first, but the organizational culture, behaviours and strategies are influenced by the brand identity (Urde, Baumgarth & Merrilees, 2013).

Furthermore, the author mentions *the brand and market orientation*, this approach is also a hybrid and is related to brand orientation as the main focus, but accords the importance of brand image and the external factors of the brand. Brand identity comes first, but the consumers' wants and needs, together with the brand image, play an important role in the organizational culture and its strategy.

Image – Vision Gap

To engage in brand activism, the corporate brand needs to align with some essential elements; *vision, image* and *culture* (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). In our study, the focus will be put on the gap that can exist between image and vision. We aim to evaluate how fashion companies' vision towards activism and their actions, influence customers' perception of the brand. Are customers' opinions and believes in line with what these companies promote and stand for?

The image-vision gap is described as the discord that can exist between stakeholders' images of the company and the vision that the company pursues. Companies should give special attention to what customers expect from the company to succeed and fulfil their vision (Hatch & Schultz, 2001).

As the authors mentioned, the company must clearly know who its stakeholders are and what they expected from the company. These questions must be answered by the management to control and react to any gap or misalignment that can be found. Furthermore, they must evaluate how they are communicating the vision of the company and if this is aligned with the above-mentioned questions.

Brand Activism Framework

Based on the analysed theories by Hatch & Schultz (2001) and Sarkar & Kotler (2021), we propose the following framework to characterize effective brand activism (Figure 1). This framework evaluates the companies brand activism based on both the companies' visions and the brand image. The framework is built upon two factors:

1. Progressive vs. Regressive brand vision: The degree to which the brand is committed to societal and environmental activism. If the brand vision is progressive, the activism efforts bring positive impact. If the brand vision is

regressive, the activism is lacking and/or detrimental to society.

2. Progressive vs. Regressive brand image: The degree to which brand activism is perceived by customers. If the brand image is progressive, the brand is perceived as genuinely concerned about the environment and social well-being. If the brand image is regressive, the activism is perceived as harmful for the common goods.

To measure the degree of brand activism, we see how the brand's societal and environmental activism are promoted from the organisational standpoint (brand vision) and from the consumers' perspective (brand image). From this framework, we proposed four types of brands:

1. Dishonest brand: These brands are greenwashing or hiding shady

business practices. They are perceived to be doing better for the common good than what they truly pursue as a company. The positive image can backlash if the truth becomes public, which would move them to a 'shameful brand'.

Recommendation: reinvent their business model and focus on making positive impact on society.

2. Evangelized brand: These brands are successfully pursuing the common good which is also perceived by the customers who are likely to recommend the brand to others. This is the ideal state to be in.

Recommendation: maintain the strategy and keep up the pace to maintain relevance.

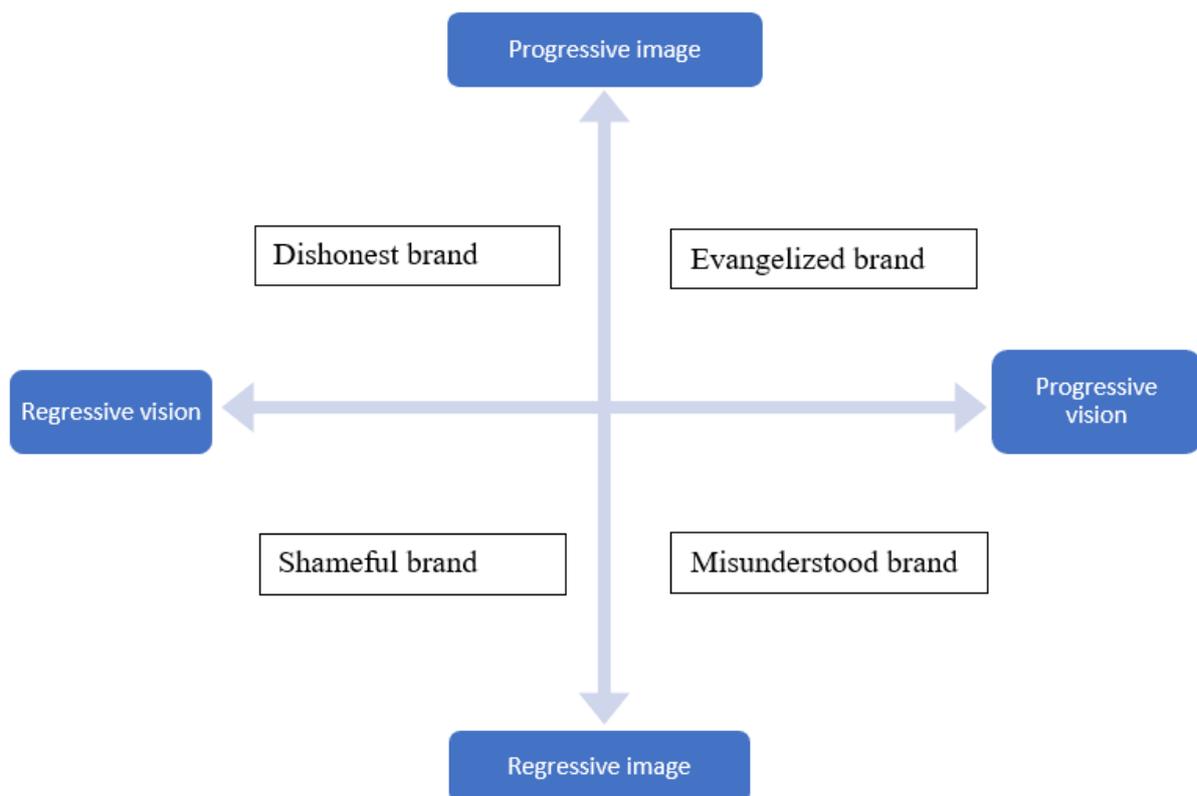


Figure 1 Brand Activism Framework

3. Shameful brand: These brands are actively pursuing harmful business practices and the customers know it. This is the worst state to be in and customers may revolt against the brand.

Recommendation: Take responsibility for previous mistakes, reinvent the business model, and communicate the progressive changes.

4. Misunderstood brand: These brands are actively pursuing the common good, but this is not perceived or trusted by the customers. Sometimes these brands have been ‘Shameful brands’ before and are now working to become an ‘Evangelized brand’.

Recommendation: work more on communicating the good practices and support the claims to build trust to the brand. Give it time.

Empirical results and analysis

Study case: H&M

H&M is a Swedish multi-national fast fashion brand founded in 1947, and has since then grown to become second largest apparel retailer in the world (FAST RETAILING, 2021). According to themselves, H&M is all about “making fashion and the joy it can bring accessible to everyone — democratising what had previously been a privilege of the few”, and their sustainability vision is “to lead the change towards a circular and climate positive fashion while being a fair and equal company” (H&M Group, 2021b). Their sustainability focus was highlighted in January 2020 by the appointment of the new CEO Helena Helmersson, former head of sustainability, who succeeded Karl-Johan Persson, the grandson of founder Erling Persson and son to main owner Stefan Persson (Wilen, Kammel, & Bloomberg, 2020).

H&M as a brand activist

H&M’s sustainability vision is supported by a comprehensive change-making program which covers the ‘how’ by stating goals, roadmaps, standards, and methods (H&M Group, 2021). Further, they push for engaging changemakers (colleagues, customers, business partners, experts), and emphasize that sustainability is to be integrated in everything they do (H&M Group, 2020). They ensure this by using a sustainability KPI as one of four equally weighted parameters in their performance scorecard, hence sustainability is given the same importance as customer satisfaction and sales figures when evaluating central functions (H&M Group, 2018a).

Without going into detail with every social and environmental effort H&M makes, which would be beyond the scope of this paper, we still want to give a few concrete examples.

In a step to become circular they have initiated a recycling program where anyone can bring their old garments to an H&M-store and get a voucher as a reward. The garment is then recycled and, when possible, reused in new products (Reuse and Recycling, n.d.). H&M also actively work to develop responsible purchase practises, e.g., they have a strong presence with local offices near their suppliers and they ring-fence the labour costs in negotiations to ensure that garment worker’s wages never are negatively affected (Responsible Purchasing Practices, n.d.). When it comes to materials they already use 100 % sustainable cotton, and looking at the whole assortment they use 64,5 % sustainable materials (DeAcetis, 2021). Transparency is a key part of H&M’s plan to become sustainable, and this year they ranked 2nd out of 250 fashion brands evaluated on transparency (Fashion Transparency Index 2021, 2021), showing on their true commitment to the issue. Recently, they were further acknowledged

for their environmental and social sustainability work as the only fashion company to be announced as a Global Compact LEAD by the UN Global Compact. The 40 LEAD companies to be awarded with this title represent the highest level of commitment to a sustainable future (H&M Group, 2021).

H&M's guidelines state the following: "We believe it's important to increasingly communicate with our customers about all the conscious actions that we take. In all we do sustainability is a natural part and we all play a part in communicating our conscious message to our customers." (H&M Group, 2018b).

All in all, this shows that H&M's ambition is to contribute to the common good in environmental and social issues and that they strive to communicate this to the customers. This also means that they are to be seen as a progressive brand activist rather than neutral or regressive.

H&M's brand activism on YouTube

A variety of content can be found on H&M's YouTube channel. The video series 'The Small Things' educates the viewer about all the small things in the fashion industry that can make a difference, and that H&M is working on. It shows how they innovate new ways to replicate real leather and other materials by using climate friendly and ethical alternatives such as grapes, bananas, pineapples, cactuses, and even old fishnets. Another video demonstrates how 'We aRe SpinDye' works, which is a new dyeing-technique that drastically reduces the environmental impact of manufacturing clothes. Other videos in the same series cover the concept of circular fashion, the environmental pros of 3D garment simulation, why one should reuse, repair, and recycle their denim, how upcycling can be a creative and fun way to freshen up dull clothes, and how H&M is working on the challenge of combining affordability, sizeability and innovative

design in their collections to be an inclusive company. It is noteworthy that H&M in this series admits to being on a journey towards a more sustainable and inclusive future, but that they are not quite there yet. (The Small Things - YouTube, 2021)

Another video series covers conversations about sustainability and transparency. One conversation of special interest is the one between CEO Helena Helmersson and scientist and sustainability advocate Zinnia Kumar. In this conversation Helena Helmersson is asked how the fast fashion can be sustainable. Helmersson mentions their vision of selling fashion in different ways (circular models, renting, remakes), but that they always must think of the three 'P': People, Planet, Profit. Her argument is that if H&M makes the whole collection ecologically and socially sustainable, but not profitable, they won't sustain (H&M, 2021a).

In another conversation between activist Avery Ginsberg and H&M designer Victoria Allen, Allen talks about how growth can't always be economically measured, and that H&M needs to start to define growth and profit in another way than bottom line. Her point is that resources saved or not used is also of great value, and that the current system doesn't recognise this in a sufficient way. (H&M, 2021b)

Among the campaign videos there are many that contain no trace of brand activism at all. In general, they focus more on how clothes can express one's personality, which is a more traditional message from H&M. Other campaign videos have a more subtle social or environmental message, e.g., they front some videos with a variety of people of different sizes, colours, or ethnicities without necessarily making a thing out of it. Another case is when the environmental message is vague although still present; in one video, 'All the Little Things', two young women are out in the woods walking, talking, and enjoying their day. The one woman suddenly says, "I try to recycle and try not to waste water, but

sometimes it just doesn't feel like enough, you know?”, when the other replies “Yeah, but I think that's the point. It's all about the little things that add up” (H&M, 2021c).

With that said, there are also some campaign videos that are fully dedicated to sustainability issues. To celebrate World Recycle Week in 2016 H&M collaborated with famous artist M.I.A. to create a music video which highlighted the urgency of climate change, calling for action from everyone. The video culminates with an urge to ‘Join in a global fashion movement for the planet’, and it encourages the viewer to recycle their clothes at H&M (H&M, 2016). Another example is their campaign ‘Role models’, which features interviews with kids from all over the world who in different ways engage to make the world a little better. The video ends with the words ‘The future belongs to those who will live in it’ (Role Models | H&M SE, 2021). The whole video has a clear undertone of that we are not currently taking full responsibility of today's most urgent challenges, and that we must act, like these kids, if we want to give them the future they deserve.

H&M on Instagram

Last month H&M posted 89 posts on Instagram. Out of those 89 posts, three could in some way be connected to sustainability. Two of those posts mentioned in the description that the displayed jeans were made of recycled denim, and one post featured the earlier described video ‘All the Little Things’. All other post were exclusively showcasing clothes or collaborations.

One ‘story’ is listed which feature videos from their ‘Beyond the rainbow’-campaign. This campaign highlights emotional and personal stories from LGBTQI+-people and is an initiative in support for the Pride-movement (H&M (@hm) • Foton och videoklipp på Instagram, 2021).

Customer's perception of H&M activism

When being asked about the degree of brand activism in the H&M brand, 15.1% respondents perceive a high degree of activism whereas 37.7% perceive a low brand activism (Figure 10, Appendix B). In terms of environmental impact, 30.1% agree that H&M is concerned about the environment and 38.4% disagree (Figure 11, Appendix B). When it comes to social responsibility, 13.7% agree that H&M care about the well-being of the society and 44.5% disagree (Figure 12, Appendix B). These findings suggest people have a negative perception of H&M activism. The environmental activism of H&M is perceived as stronger than its social activism.

H&M: From brand activation to brand activism

We analyse H&M's brand activism together with the three factors of brand activation: actions, actor, and activism (Kapferer, 2012).

H&M shows specific activism *actions*: the clothing recycling program, using sustainable materials, and performing good purchasing practices. They also clearly demonstrate sustainable values in their mission and goal and are transparent about their efforts and performance.

H&M is a key *actor* in the fast fashion industry, as demonstrated by high brand awareness (93.7% respondents are familiar with the brand, see figure 9, appendix B). It has a well-established position as the second largest apparel retailer (FAST RETAILING, 2021).

Regarding *activism*, H&M has stimulated debates and discussions about doing good for the environment and adopted more sustainable methods in its production. However, it tends to focus more on environmental activism and less on social activism in their marketing communication and advertising. Our survey shows that

customers do not perceived H&M as a brand that is involved and cares about communities. 44.5% of respondents said that they do not perceived H&M as a socially responsible brand (Figure 13 appendix B).

H&M: Market and brand orientation

H&M started out as a market oriented brand, they aim to satisfy the needs and wants of the customers and meeting the newest fashion trends (Urde, Baumgarth & Merrilees, 2013). More recently, H&M has recognised the importance of brand identity and integrated sustainable values in their strategy (H&M Group, 2018a), which makes them moving towards a market and brand orientation.

H&M: Image – Vision gap

From the analysis, we can see that there is a clear gap between the brand vision and brand image regarding the topic of brand activism. The company's vision is clearly more ambitious than what is perceived by the consumers. Another noteworthy point is that the environmental effort is perceived by consumers as higher than social effort. When conducting the case study, we also found a lack of communication regarding labour rights and working conditions in H&M.

H&M case conclusions: applying the framework

Applying the Brand Activism framework in the H&M case, we found that H&M has a progressive brand vision in both environmental and social aspects due to their extensive work in those issues and their clear progressive vision and goals; yet they have a regressive brand image which is shown by the conducted survey. This makes H&M according to the framework to a *misunderstood* brand. Their activism efforts have been evident, yet not noticed or

trusted by the customers. This is especially true for the social aspect.

Study case: Patagonia

Patagonia is a brand of outdoor clothing and gear for silent sports such as climbing, skiing, snowboarding, trail running and surfing. The company was founded in 1973 by Yvon Chouinard, an American rock climber. In Patagonia, they consider themselves to be activist and promoters of a sustainable way of life, they claim: “At Patagonia, we appreciate that all life on earth is under threat of extinction. We’re using the resources we have, our business, our investments, our voice and our imaginations, to do something about it” (Business Unusual - Patagonia, 2021).

Patagonia as a brand activist

In Patagonia they carry out several actions throughout their daily operations in order to reduce their environmental and social footprints. They have a partnership with Fair Trade USA, which help them to guarantee better conditions and benefits for the workers at the factories where they produce, in US they achieved a 100% usage of renewable electricity and 80% globally, furthermore, 87% of their line, used recycled materials the past 2021 season (Environmental & Social Footprint - Patagonia, 2021). Besides, they have a program, ‘PatagoniaActionWorks’ where people from all over the world can get involved with current issues affecting the world. They connect individuals with organizations working with environmental issues in different communities and donate 1% of their sales for the restoration and preservation of the environment (Environmental Activism - Patagonia, 2021).

Patagonia promotes the philosophy of “buy less, wear longer”, they have a program call “Worn Wear”, where customers can buy and sell used garments from Patagonia. The company takes care of washing, repairing,

and selling them again. In Patagonia they are committed with their high quality and durability standards, they promote the 'Patagonia Ironclad Guarantee', where they offer reparation, replacement and refund if something it is wrong with a garment (Ironclad Guarantee - Patagonia Help Center, 2021).

Their core values lie in sustainability and environmental protection: *build the best product*, where they aim for long lasting quality products; *cause no unnecessary harm*, where they acknowledge that they are also part of the environmental problem but they are seeking for doing more good, *use business to protect nature*, they act and react to environmental problems and seek for solutions; *and not bound by convention*, where they are always looking for new ways of doing things that cause less harm (Our Core Values - Patagonia, 2021).

With these findings we found that Patagonia's brand activism falls into the 'progressive' category (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021).

Patagonia on Instagram and YouTube

One remarkable part of Patagonia as an active social and environmental activist, is their communication and how they reach people and connect with them.

Last month Patagonia had 20 posts on Instagram, where the main themes are nature, sports and people, and less focus is put on their actual product. Among these posts, 5 posts are related to environmental activism: responsible jeans, trade-in service and the ecosystem protection. 7 posts are related to social activism: empower climbers and runners, show appreciation for indigenous people. The brand is active through history-telling where they give space to different activist on the sport field to tell their stories and motivate people to support a variety of causes. They also provide advice on how to preserve the useful life of your clothes, or videos on how

to get it fixed by yourself (Patagonia (@patagonia) • Instagram Photos and Videos, 2021)

Throughout their YouTube and Instagram, we can see that Patagonia actively seeks to build a bond with communities and individuals. On YouTube they have a variety of films where they encourage people to get involve and support different causes. An example is "Run to" film, where they present histories about activist runners that fight for a cause through running or "Run to save a watershed" where the activist Felipe Cancino runs 120 km through Chile's Maipo River Valley to highlight the effects that the hydropower project Alto Maipo, is having on the local communities and ecosystem, especially on the water supply for Santiago, Chile's Capital (Run To: A Film Series About Runners and Activism - Patagonia, 2021). Their film "They/Them" shares the journey of non-binary people overcoming hardships and finding their true identity through the climbing sports. From this film, they empower non-binary and trans people to embrace their authentic self and provide resources for supporting their rights. They also have a few videos featuring their product, focusing on the durability of the clothing and sustainable garments made from recycled waste (Patagonia - YouTube, 2021).

From brand activation to activism

As said in the literature review, to achieve brand activation and became an activist, a company must possess three different factors (Kapferer, 2012), first of all, *actions*, here Patagonia shows that is involved and cares about the community, people can share their own stories about their adventures in their webpage and in their social media, which helps to create a bond between customers and the brand. They are devoted to connect individuals that are willing to volunteer in communities' issues, through their program 'PatagoniaActionWorks', they can

participate as skilled volunteers in different parts of the world, they can also find out about events on environmental issues and contribute to petitions of NGOs. Furthermore, Patagonia seeks to link sports with activism, where they support well-known activist role models of the sports that they promote (About, n.d.).

The second factor is to be a *brand actor*, Patagonia plays an important role on the communities and the markets where they are present, they are considered as a key actor of the field, especially through innovation and high-quality products that are long-lasting and that can be repaired through the program 'Worn Wear' that was mentioned above.

Lastly, the *activism* factor, where Patagonia shows daily that they care about their footprint in the world, and that they work every day towards minimizing it, through the development of recycled raw materials and renewable energy, their concern about workers in the producing factories, their programs to repair and re-sell garments, and this is just to mention a few of the actions that they are doing towards a better future for the environment.

Through the role of Patagonia as a key actor in their field, the silent sport market, and all the actions that they carry out daily to contribute to the community, to bond and interact with their customers and to be less harmful for the environment, the brand is seen as an activist brand that people relate to as an integrated part of the community.

This is supported by the conducted survey, where 48.4% of the respondents perceive Patagonia as having a high level of brand activism (Figure 16, appendix B), on the other hand, also 44.5% claims that they relate with Patagonia Brand (Figure 20, appendix B), while we can also observe that the other majority of respondents does not know about the activism in Patagonia, we related this to the fact that Patagonia targets a niche market, the one for silent sports, so even though people can have heard about

the Brand, they do not really know how they are as a brand and that they are activists.

Patagonia: brand and market oriented

Patagonia is a brand that acts as a guiding hub for the organization, their brand identity (mission, vision and values) where they clearly state what they want as a company and for the company, they are in business to contribute to the world, to develop practices that are less harmful for the environment while doing business, at the same time, they also acknowledge the importance of their customers and their image towards them, that is why Patagonia is positioned as having a brand and market oriented approach (Urde, Baumgarth & Merrilees, 2013). By being disruptors in their market through innovation and high-quality garments, pioneering the changes and revolutionizing, Patagonia benefits itself by creating long-term values for the brand (Ghauri et al., 2016).

Patagonia: an aligned brand

According to the literature review, there are essential elements that must be aligned in order for a brand to be successful and strong, these are: *vision, image and culture* (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). For our purpose, we studied the vision-image gap, where in Patagonia we can observe that these elements are properly aligned, as the vision of the company where they strive to make their business the least environmentally harmful as possible and fight the environmental crisis constantly, is in line with stakeholders' perception of the company, as we can see in Figure 16, appendix B.

Patagonia case conclusions: applying the framework

In line with the literature review, the case study about Patagonia, and the conducted survey, we concluded that Patagonia is a

brand that possess high level of activism, and it can be categorized in our framework as an *evangelized* brand which means they are a company that delivers on what it promises and stands for and this is perceived as well by their stakeholders as we also found in our survey.

Even though there were a lot of respondents that did not know about activism in Patagonia, we argue that this unfamiliarity is because they target a specific market which involves people that practice silent sports. Among their target group, Patagonia is communicating in a proper way to their customers and are succeeding to be involve in their community and promoting the common good.

Discussion and conclusions

Throughout our study, we aimed to delve into the way that fashion brands practice brand activism, and evaluate if their corporate vision is aligned with customers perception of brand activism.

RQ1: How do the fashion brands H&M and Patagonia perform social and environmental brand activism?

Our findings can conclude that both brands are active in their environmental and social activism, through different actions such as the use of recycling materials, renewable energy, circular programs to recycle used clothes, development, and research of innovations towards sustainability, transparency in their supply chain, support for the LGBTQI+-community, among others. Both companies perform progressive brand activism. Patagonia especially stands out in their social activism and often involves people, especially minority groups in promoting their causes.

The results in our survey reinforce that brand activism is important for brands, as 60.2% of respondents (Figure 7, appendix B) affirms that the level of activism of a brand influence their brand perception and

49% (Figure 8, appendix B) claims that brand activism can highly influence in their purchase decision.

RQ2: Does the corporate vision of these brands align with their brand image regarding brand activism?

We can conclude that despite all efforts coming from both brands, and that both brands possess ambitious visions for their companies that are related to being less harmful to the environment and fair and equal within the society, H&M is more negatively perceived as a brand activist. According to our Brand Activism framework, H&M has an image – vision gap and is characterised as a ‘misunderstood brand’. Both image and vision are aligned in Patagonia, which makes them a ‘evangelized brand’.

From the framework we therefore draw the conclusion that H&M must more actively communicate its efforts to be perceived as a true brand activist. Going from a ‘misunderstood’ brand to an ‘evangelized’ brand takes time, trust, and a lot of communication effort; it’s not enough to just act or have good intentions unless their consumers also know about it and trust them.

H&M’s history as a fast fashion company is unfavourable as the business model is infamous for being environmentally unsustainable. This is a challenge for H&M, as fast fashion also has a strong social benefit, namely that it makes fashion accessible to more people. This contradiction makes it hard for H&M to be credible in both environmental and social issues.

Anyhow, H&M has also previously been connected to greenwashing and unethical standards. We see it as likely that their history plays a role here; a brand that once has been ‘shameful’ probably has a harder time to be trusted despite great efforts in repositioning itself and may therefore be

stuck in the 'Misunderstood' category. This could also explain to why they avoid performing brand activism through Instagram-posts; it could simply be out of fear of being perceived as a 'dishonest' brand, which could make the customers revolt in the comment section. The comment section on YouTube was always turned off, so there it's easier for them to avoid such rage from the viewers.

The same goes for a market-oriented brand, as it could potentially be perceived as less true to their core values and more profit driven, hence also less credible and genuine in its efforts. As previously mentioned in the paper, people are generally sceptical to brand activists if they are perceived as being too focused on profit. Helmersson's statement that H&M always needs to focus on the three 'P' (Planet, People, and *Profit*) to sustain enhances the view that H&M's primary priority always will be profit, which in that case could help explain the distrust experienced from the customers. Furthermore, H&M comes from a market orientation but has recently moved to a market and brand orientation, which hopefully will help them with time.

Patagonia on the other hand is more brand oriented and has consistently stayed true to its values throughout the years. They have also more convincingly showed that profit is secondary to them. According to our analysis, they are an ideal example a brand activist, with heightened sustainable values that are consistent with consumers' perception. It built its business on the sustainable identity, therefore is more trustworthy when communicating their activism.

In conclusion, our research uncovered progressive activism of both H&M and Patagonia and found an image-vision gap in H&M.

Research and Managerial Implications

This paper contributes to the lack of research on brand activism and core value gap. It proposes a framework about the alignment gap between brand vision and brand image, consisting of four positions a brand may face when practicing brand activism. The framework also suggests several strategies that a brand can adopt to improve brand perception and reduce the vision-image gap.

The study provides insights in how two big fashion brands engage in brand activism, their strengths and pitfalls. This analysis can help brand managers improve their own activism performance.

A positive link has been found between brand activism and one's brand perception and purchasing habits. This confirms a significant role of social and environmental issues in brand building, in line with previous research.

Limitations and further research

The study solely focuses on analysing brand activism performance and customer perception of two companies within the fashion industry. Applying the brand activism framework on other companies and industries can yield a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

Another limitation of the study is that the majority of survey respondents are in a younger age group: 18 – 35 (Figure 2 – Appendix B). Therefore, the result might not be generalisable for other age groups, as millennials are shown to more concern about sustainability and social issues (Shetty, v & Anand, 2019). Future research count takes into account the effect of culture and age on one's perception of brand activism.

Furthermore, this study indicates that a brand orientation is more beneficial than a market orientation for a brand activist, but no definite conclusions can be drawn. This must be investigated further in future research.

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Appendix A – Survey Questions

1. What is your age?
 - 12 – 17
 - 18 – 24
 - 25 – 34
 - 35 – 44
 - 45 - 54
 - 55 – 64
 - 65 – 74
 - 75 or older
2. What gender do you identify as?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Prefer not to answer
3. What is the highest degree of level of education you have completed?
 - Some High School
 - High School
 - Bachelor's Degree
 - Master's Degree
 - Ph.D or higher
 - Trade School
4. Nationality
5. Would you be willing to buy from a brand with strong brand activism? (Brand activism is when a company or brand takes stand with social, cultural, gender, environmental issues and supports the same in its marketing, advertising and actions.)
 - Very willing
 - Willing
 - Neutral
 - Not willing
 - Strongly not willing
6. How does the level of brand activism influence your perception of a brand?
 - 1 (not influence)
 - 2
 - 3

- 4
 - 5 (highly influence)
7. How much can brand activism influence your purchasing decision?
- 1 (not influence)
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5 (decisive factor)

H&M questions

8. Have you heard about the H&M brand?
- Yes (if yes, move on to the next question)
 - No (if no, move on to the next section)
9. What do you think is the degree of activism of H&M? In a scale from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest)
- 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5
 - Not sure

Do you agree with the following statements:

10. H&M is concerned about its environmental impact
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
11. H&M is a socially responsible brand
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
12. H&M is concerned about the well-being of society

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

13. I can relate with the H&M brand

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Patagonia questions

14. Have you heard about the Patagonia brand?

- Yes (if yes, move on to the next question)
- No (if no, move on to the end of the survey)

15. What do you think is the degree of activism of Patagonia? On a scale from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest)

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- Not sure

Do you agree with the following statements?

16. Patagonia is concerned about its environmental impact

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

17. Patagonia is a socially responsible brand

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral

- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

18. Patagonia is concerned about the well-being of society

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

19. I can relate with the Patagonia brand

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Appendix B - Survey Results

What is your age?

151 responses

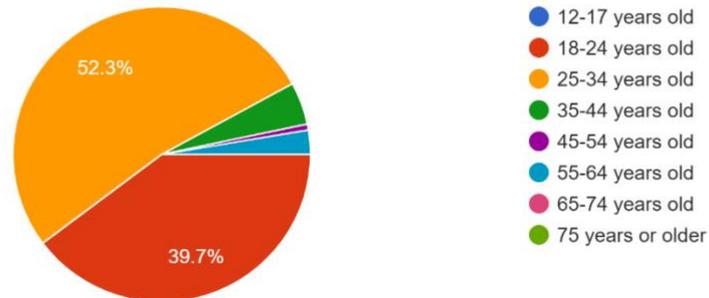


Figure 2

What gender do you identify as?

151 responses

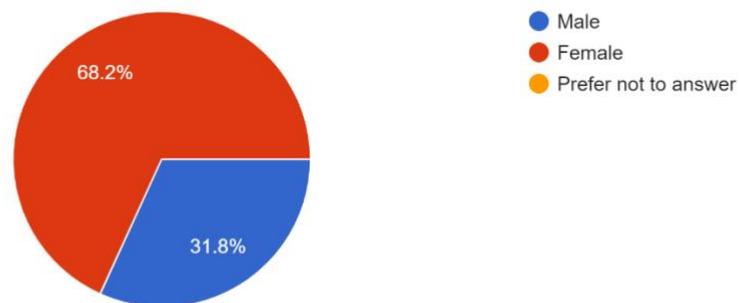


Figure 3

What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?

150 responses

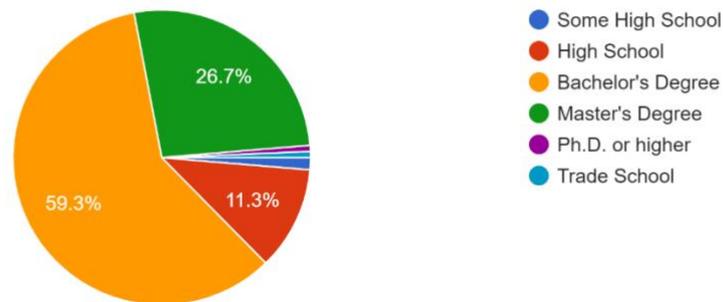


Figure 4

Nationality

147 responses

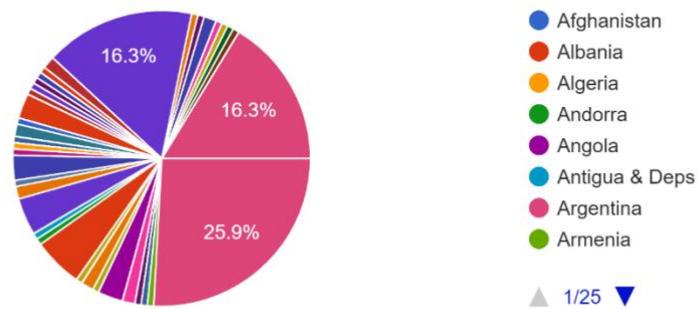


Figure 5

Would you be willing to buy from a brand with strong brand activism?

151 responses

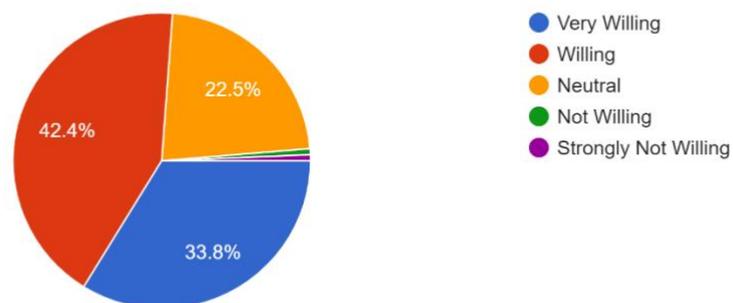


Figure 6

How does the level of brand activism influence your perception of a brand?

151 responses

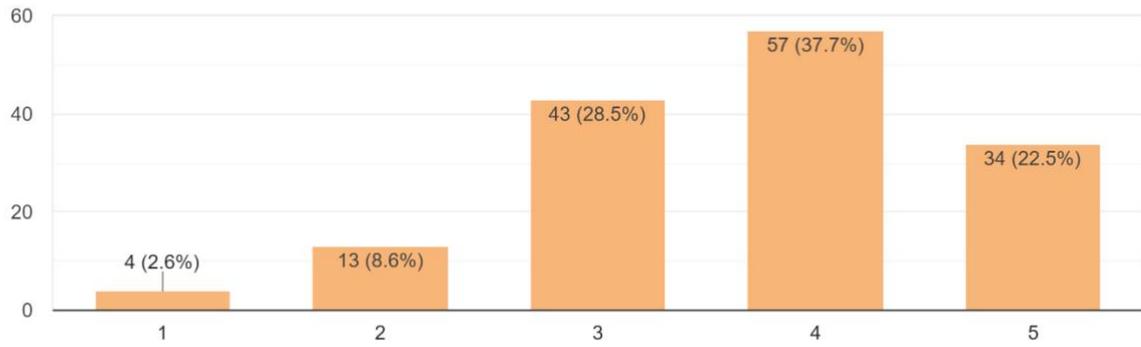


Figure 7

How much can brand activism influence your purchasing decision?

151 responses

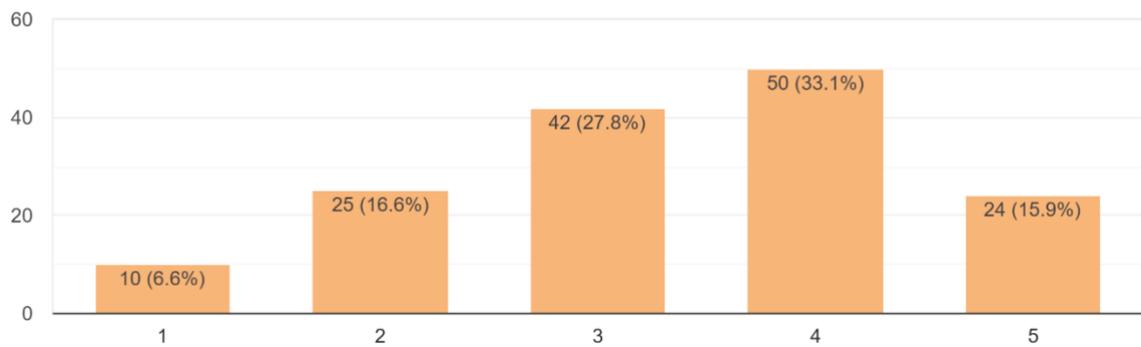


Figure 8

Have you heard about the H&M brand?
151 responses

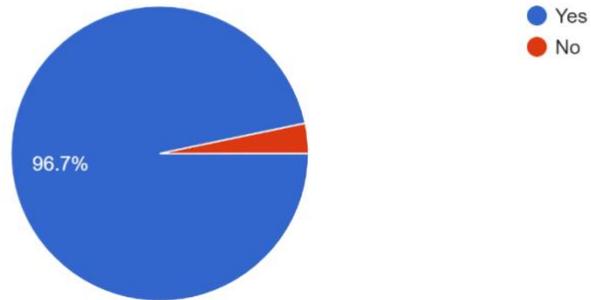


Figure 9

What do you think is the degree of activism of H&M? In a scale from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest)
146 responses

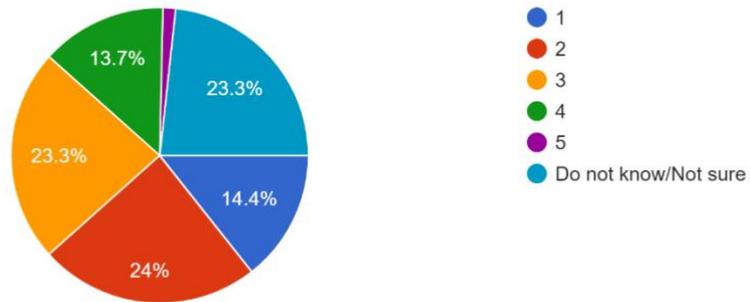


Figure 10

H&M is concerned about its environmental impact
146 responses

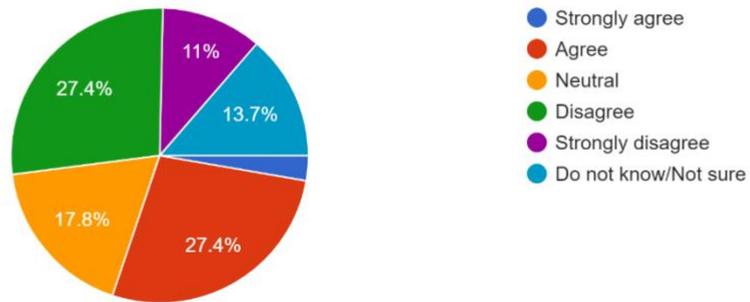


Figure 11

H&M is a socially responsible brand
146 responses

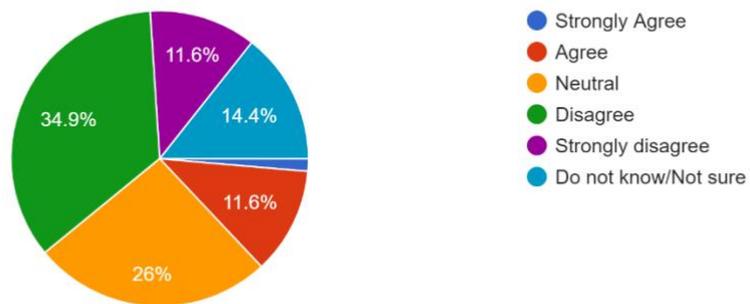


Figure 12

H&M is concerned about the well-being of society
146 responses

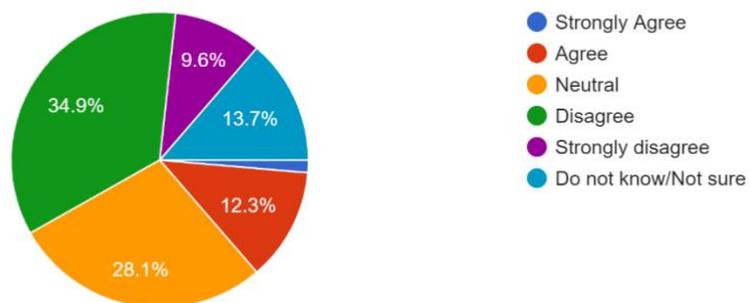


Figure 13

I can relate with the H&M brand

145 responses

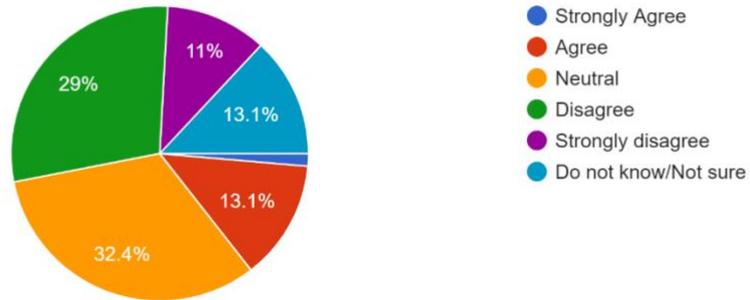


Figure 14

Have you heard about the Patagonia brand?

151 responses

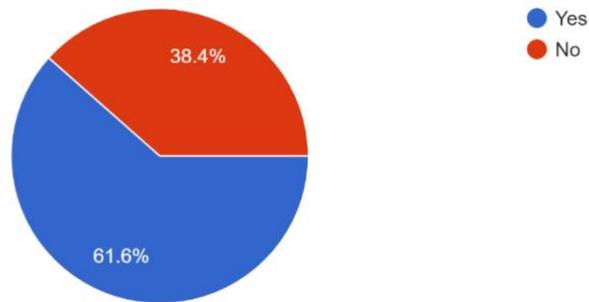


Figure 15

What do you think is the degree of activism of Patagonia? In a scale from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest)

93 responses

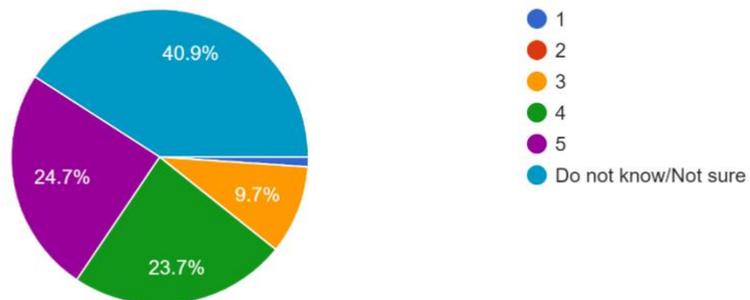


Figure 16

Patagonia is concerned about its environmental impact
93 responses

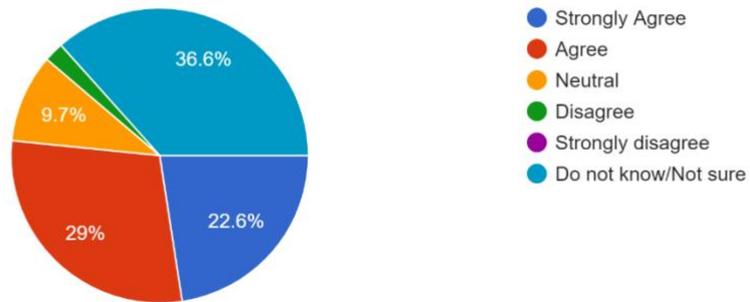


Figure 17

Patagonia is a socially responsible brand
93 responses

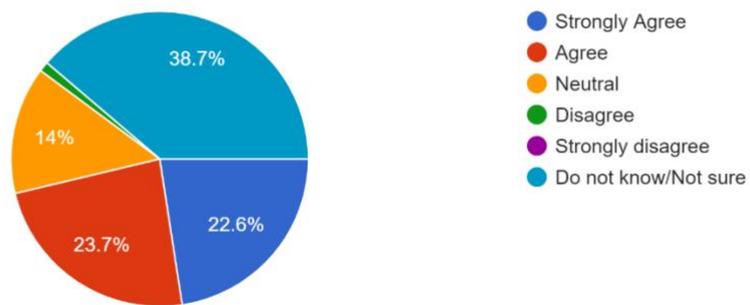


Figure 18

Patagonia is concerned about the well-being of society
93 responses

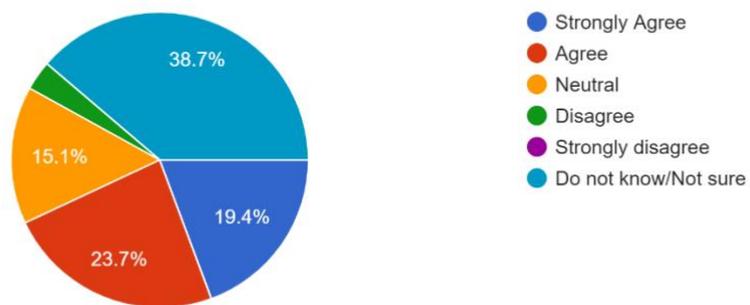


Figure 19

I can relate with the Patagonia brand
92 responses

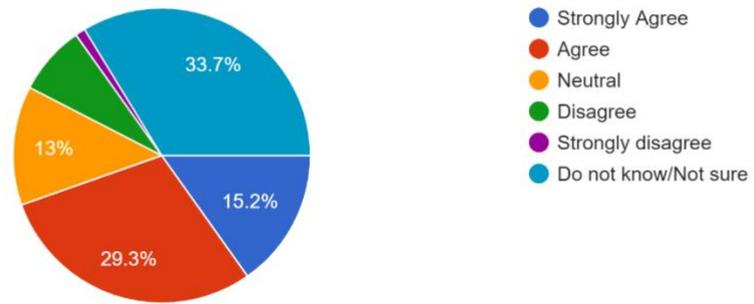


Figure 20