



# SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT

## Real or Fake? The Thin Line Between Consumers' Perceived Brand Authenticity and Scepticism

A qualitative study on what influences consumers' perceived authenticity  
of cosmetic brands that engage in socio-political activism

Master's Programme in  
International Marketing and Brand Management  
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## **Abstract**

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### **Key Words:**

Socio-Political Activism, Brand Activism, Brand Authenticity, Brand Scepticism, Incumbent Brands, Challenger Brands, Cosmetics Industry

### **Thesis Purpose:**

The aim of this study is to gain a nuanced understanding of consumers' perceived authenticity of incumbent and challenger brands in the cosmetics industry. To examine the phenomenon, four brands from two different sectors within the cosmetics industry are investigated. While Maybelline New York and Fenty Beauty represent the make-up market, Gillette Venus and Estrid cover the razor market.

### **Theoretical Perspective:**

To analyse our findings, two existing frameworks tackling brand authenticity in regard to brand activism were consulted: (1) the perceived brand authenticity framework by Morhart et al. (2015), and (2) the woke activism authenticity framework by Mirzaei, Wilkie and Siuki (2022).

### **Methodology:**

To reach the objective of the study, an abductive approach was adopted, and qualitative data was gathered. Hence, 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of consumers' perceptions of the authenticity of brands that engage in socio-political activism.

### **Main Findings & Theoretical Contributions:**

Most of our findings were supported by existing literature. They indicate that a brand's motivation for engagement in activist practices and reason for existence, the time of its market entry and consumers' previous associations are of great importance, being a novel contribution to theory. Further, the alignment between a brand's core values and its activist practices plays a vital role, which is confirmed by past academia. Finally, consumers' representation by and identification with a brand influences their perceived authenticity. This aspect is in line with previous research, while simultaneously extending it.

### **Practical Implications:**

The study provides managers and marketers with valuable insights into what influences consumers' perceived brand authenticity. When engaging in socio-political activism, practitioners need to be aware of the risk of pushing the limit. Hence, finding the golden middle is key to avoiding consumer scepticism.

## Acknowledgements

We made it! We made what seemed so far away, almost unmanageable just a few months ago. We completed our master's degree by handing in this thesis that we wrote over the last two months as the final degree project of the Master's Programme in International Marketing and Brand Management. Although it has been a stressful and challenging process, we thoroughly enjoyed conducting the research. It is hard to believe that this inspiring journey has come to an end. We would like to take this opportunity to express our fullest gratitude to those who have made our time in Lund an unforgettable experience in our lives. We would further like to thank everyone who has supported, guided, and motivated us during the master thesis process.

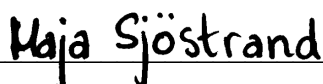
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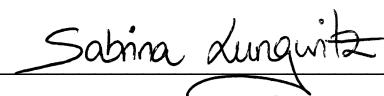
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# 1 Introduction

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“ *‘It’s 328. It’s the darkest shade, but still too light’, she tells her friend disappointingly. ‘I walked through the city for hours, from store to store, but this was the best I could get. It’s so hard to find a shade that fits my skin tone. I have tried so many different brands and products already, but nothing worked’, she complains. ‘It’s so frustrating. Why is it that the majority of make-up is made for Caucasians even though there are millions of people that need darker shades?’* ”

The short story is inspired by one of our interviewees Louisa, telling us about her endless and unsatisfactory search for the perfect shade of foundation, a shade that would fit her skin colour. Louisa is one of the millions of people who suffer from the marginalisation that society exerts on people of colour and other minority groups every day. The cosmetics industry, in particular, has made a large contribution towards giving these people a feeling of exclusion and of being worth less than Caucasians. Not long ago, cosmetic brands solely addressed white consumers by offering a limited range of product alternatives and by only depicting Caucasian models in their ads. In recent years, however, socio-political issues centring around diversity and inclusivity have sparked great attention among society and were brought to the forefront of consumers’ minds. This development and consumers’ increased expectations towards brands to actively take a stance have led brands to make a shift and adapt to societal changes. Hence, many well-established brands that have previously focused on Western beauty ideals have started to transition to become more diverse and inclusive. Simultaneously, new brands have entered the market out of the endeavour to actively participate in the development and to make a difference.

## 1.1 Problematisation

In today’s fragmented and polarised marketplace, in which it is no longer sufficient for brands to solely focus on product attributes and quality, consumers demand brands to engage in environmental, social, and political issues and take a stance to change the world for the better

(Sarkar & Kotler, 2021; Schmidt, Ind, Guzmán & Kennedy, 2021; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry & Kemper, 2020). Hence, the number of brands jumping on the bandwagon of brand activism and publicly expressing their stance on a relevant issue and incorporating it into their marketing strategy has rapidly increased during the last years (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Thus, the concept of brand activism has gained great relevance and attention both among marketers and researchers (Bhagwat, Warren, Beck & Watson, 2020; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Moorman, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2021; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Sibai, Mimoun & Boukis, 2021; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Since brand activism is a relatively recent development, research conducted on the topic remains rather limited and fragmented. Nevertheless, some relevant work has been published concerning the authenticity of brand activism (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin & Grohmann, 2015, Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Vredenburg et al. 2020), the concept of woke washing (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022) and consumers' perceptions on brands taking a stance (Eyada, 2020; Morhart et al. 2015; Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020), which serves as a solid foundation for this study. Even though some research focuses on consumers' perceptions and attitudes, the majority of studies investigate the phenomenon from a managerial perspective (Bhagwat et al. 2020; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Moorman, 2020; Sobande, 2019; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). These publications mostly categorise a brand's activist practices based on the level of alignment between its core values and activities, assigning it to the category of either authentic or inauthentic brand activism (Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Further, most studies deal with and refer back to similar controversial campaigns, such as Gillette's 'The Best Men Can Be', Nike's 'Dream Crazy', 'Believe in Something' or 'For Once, Don't Do It', Ben & Jerry's 'Pecan Resist!', Dove's 'Real Beauty', or Starbucks' 'Race Together' (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Eyada, 2020; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Morhart et al. 2015; Sibai, Mimoun & Boukis, 2021; Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). Hence, we argue that more focus should be placed on incumbent brands that are less known for their engagement in socio-political activism and brands that have recently entered the market specifically for the reason to induce change and to make a statement. As both researchers and consumers may hold predispositions influenced by previous studies and ongoing discussions centring around well-known brands and their



socio-political activities, we believe that it is fruitful to gather consumers' impartial perceptions of brands that are less spoken about. This approach can spark attention to brands that have not been publicly recognised for their socio-political engagement in the past and can induce consumers to reflect upon societal issues to a greater extent. Further, the findings of such a study may assist in confirming or contradicting past research that are based on more controversial brands and campaigns. Moreover, we feel that the cosmetics industry is an interesting, yet rather unexplored field to examine since cosmetic brands increasingly invest efforts to address socio-political issues. Especially topics such as diversity and inclusivity are tackled by presenting a great diversity of individuals in their commercials and on social media as well as advocating different beauty ideals and standards. We believe that the cosmetics industry can have a valuable impact on society and future developments. Tying to Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) suggestion for future research, we are hence interested in examining if *incumbents*, meaning well-established "global brands with long and checkered histories [... , ...] can shift into authentic brand activist[s]" (p. 456) and are perceived as genuine in their activist practices as brands that have entered the market explicitly out of the ambition to address such issues, which we refer to as *challenger brands* (De Chernatony & Cottam, 2009). Additionally, Schmidt et al. (2021) point out that there is "a lack of research elucidating how companies that have not been sociopolitically active in the past should approach this" (p. 48). These quests for future research open up the discussion of whether incumbent brands can be as successful as challenger brands when engaging in socio-political activism and what influences consumers' perceived authenticity.

## **1.2 Research Aim and Intended Contributions**

To address the identified research gap, this study aims to gain a nuanced understanding of consumers' perceptions of cosmetic brands that take a stance on socio-political issues and to examine the level of authenticity consumers attribute to these brands. Thereby, the focus is placed on the comparison of established brands, that have successfully operated for decades and have started to undergo a transition to stay attractive and address time-relevant issues, and brands that have recently entered the market out of the endeavour to challenge the status quo, break boundaries and make a statement. Since cosmetic brands take an active role in socio-political activism, we decided to investigate this specific area. When we refer to the cosmetics industry

throughout this paper, we consider the following five subcategories: skincare, haircare, make-up, perfume, and hygiene products (Statista Research Department, 2022). Our ambition to contribute to research by narrowing the identified gap has led us to develop the following research question:

*What influences consumers' perceived authenticity of incumbent brands compared to challenger brands that engage in socio-political activism within the cosmetics industry?*

To address the research question, consumers' perceptions of four brands that operate in two sectors within the cosmetics industry (razor and make-up market) were investigated. The choice to focus on the razor and make-up sector was made to cover several socio-political issues such as diversity, inclusivity, and beauty standards in different ways. While razor brands mostly emphasise beauty norms regarding the perception of female body hair and diversity related to different body sizes, make-up brands rather focus on diversity and inclusivity by showing various ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. Hence, the two brands representative of each sector were selected based on their different marketing approaches and the ways they tackle socio-political issues as well as their periods of existence. Put simply, we decided to look at two incumbent and two challenger brands within each sector, which motivated the choice of examining Gillette Venus and Maybelline New York as incumbent brands and contrastingly, Estrid and Fenty Beauty as challenger brands. Subsequently, female consumers were interviewed to assess the extent to which each of these brands was perceived as authentic. Even though we are aware of the fact that cosmetic products are nowadays not solely used by women, but any gender or sexual orientation, we decided to only focus on female consumers. We actively made this choice, as we are interested in consumers' perceptions and associations of incumbent brands and their developments over time as well as how successfully and authentically they have shifted compared to challenger brands. Further, since the primary target audience of these four brands are women, we have decided to limit this study to female participants only.

With this study, we aim at contributing to both theory and practice by presenting several aspects of authenticity that influence consumers' perceived trustworthiness of brands, thereby extending the literature on brand activism and brand authenticity, and by presenting some valuable advice for marketers and managers about what to keep in mind when engaging in socio-political activism. Further, we hope that the findings will be generalizable to other industries.

### **1.3 Outline of the Thesis**

The study pursues the objective to analyse consumers' perceived authenticity of brands engaging in socio-political activism operating in the cosmetics industry. In doing so, a comparison of incumbent and challenger brands is drawn. To set the stage, we provide an overview of the existing literature on the topic of socio-political activism, outlining its development in the second chapter. Subsequently, the theoretical framework is presented in chapter three. We consulted two frameworks to analyse our findings, these being (1) the perceived brand authenticity (PBA) framework by Morhart et al. (2015), and (2) the woke activism authenticity framework (WAAF) by Mirzaei, Wilkie and Siuki (2022). In the fourth chapter, the methodology is delineated. To address the research question, we conducted 14 semi-structured interviews and examined four brands operating in two different markets within the cosmetics industry. In chapter five, the findings are analysed through the lens of the theoretical frameworks and categorised into three overarching themes. Further, we discuss the findings while simultaneously presenting some theoretical contributions, followed by an outline of several practical implications in chapter six. Finally, the study is concluded by summarising the main findings, answering the research question, and presenting some limitations combined with suggestions for future research.

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## 2 Literature Review

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*This chapter presents an overview of the existing literature on the topics of relevance for this study. First, the phenomenon of brand activism is outlined, which is followed by a detailed elaboration of the stream of socio-political activism as the key concept of this study in the second section. The literature review is concluded with a brief summary of socio-political activism in the cosmetics industry, highlighting the research gap of the study.*

### **2.1 Brand Activism**

#### **2.1.1 Background of Brand Activism**

Today, consumers are very well-aware of the wide range of social and environmental challenges faced around the world and demand corporations to take action to induce change. This quest has led to many companies actively engaging in initiatives to be more socially and environmentally responsible (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). The phenomenon of brand activism has arisen from the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which can be described as the “commitment to improve community well-being through discretionary business practices and contributions of corporate resources” (Kotler & Lee, 2005, p. 3). Companies have started to devote great efforts and valuable resources to social engagement, environmental protection, and socially conscious corporate practices (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010). Such social initiatives are defined by marketing and corporate-driven actions firms engage in to illustrate their support towards social issues and to demonstrate that CSR is of vital importance in their operations (Kotler & Lee, 2005; Kotler, Hessekiel & Lee, 2012; Sarkar & Kotler, 2021). These activities have set the foundation for brand activism which is characterised by actions steered by the public (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021). Additionally, Sarkar and Kotler (2021) claim that the phenomenon is “driven by a fundamental concern for the biggest and most urgent problems facing society” (p. 25). In sum, brand activism is encapsulated by society-driven activities which have evolved from marketing and corporate-driven actions, in short from CSR.

“Enter brand activism” (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021, p. 23). In a world with rising environmental, social, and political issues, where it is no longer sufficient for organisations to merely position themselves based on product quality or act upon a higher purpose, Sarkar and Kotler (2021) call to action and incentivise organisations to engage in practices beyond their current purpose-driven behaviours. Consumers, especially the generation of millennials, want organisations to show responsibility and concern for the world and society they live in (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020). To address these issues and induce change, organisations are demanded to shift their focus from the prevalent myopic perspective to “a mindset that views reality from the outside in” (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021, p. 21). This development has led to brand activism gaining high relevance and great attention from marketers and researchers in recent years (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Moorman, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2021; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Sibai, Mimoun & Boukis, 2021; Vredenburg et al. 2020). One of the most cited works on the phenomenon is Sarkar and Kotler’s (2021) book “Brand Activism: From Purpose to Action”. The authors (2021) refer to 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” (p. 24). Further, Sarkar and Kotler (2021) introduce six main areas of brand activism, each addressing the most substantial issues in society. These are political, social, economic, environmental, legal and workplace brand activism (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Sibai, Mimoun & Boukis, 2021; Sarkar & Kotler, 2021). Since our study focuses on the social aspect of brand activism, which according to Sarkar and Kotler (2021) centres around “equality - gender, LGBT, race, age, etc.” (p. 28), a more detailed explanation of the phenomenon of socio-political activism is provided in section 2.2.

Brand activism can be regarded as a marketing tactic employed by organisations to take a stance on social, political, and environmental issues in a marketplace that has become progressively fragmented and polarised. When brands engage in activist practices, they simultaneously “pick a side” (Moorman, 2020, p. 389). Hence, one of the main characteristics of brand activism is its partisan nature, which distinguishes it from CSR (Bhagwat et al. 2020; Moorman, 2020). Besides nourishing an already existing controversy, brands can also trigger disputes on societal issues by unveiling and disseminating provocative claims (Sibai, Mimoun & Boukis, 2021). In both

instances, brands initiate public debates on moral issues, thereby forming opinions of what is “right/wrong, good/bad, or worthy/unworthy” (Wieser, Hemetsberger & Luedicke, 2019, p. 153).

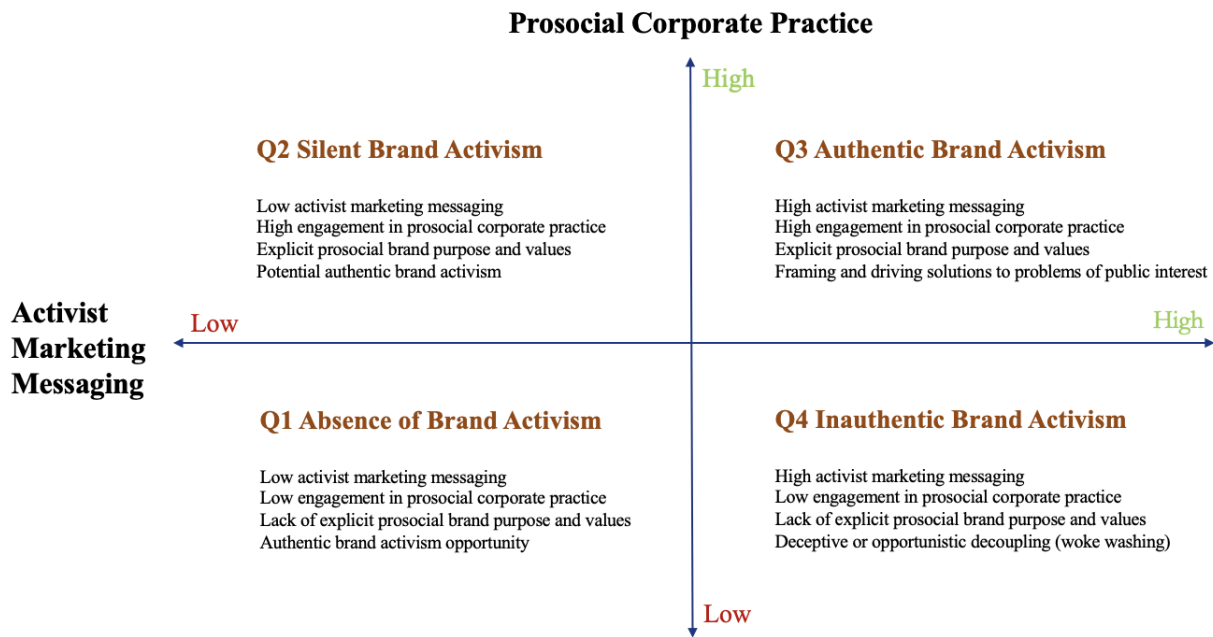
Moreover, Vredenburg et al. (2020) and Sarkar and Kotler (2021) highlight the purpose and values-driven aspect of such marketing strategies in which brands express their stances on relevant issues. These actions require close alignment with the organisation’s core values to be perceived as authentic by consumers (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020). When brands do not take a stand, they express neutrality, which is no longer an option, since it is rather considered a failure than a benefit (Nalick, Josefy, Zardkoochi & Bierman, 2016; Sarkar & Kotler, 2021; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019, Vredenburg et al. 2020). Consumers, especially millennials, demand brands to take action since they strive to identify themselves with brands that are socially and environmentally conscious and act towards a common good (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Schmidt et al. 2021). Millennials are perceived as more civic-minded, tend to be more progressive and conscious than older generations as well as knowledgeable about current marketing trends and brands’ intentions, thereby questioning the status quo. This newly developed ethos challenges organisations’ traditional marketing strategies and pressures them to adopt new approaches that align with the mindset of millennials (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Schmidt et al. 2021).

In sum, brand activism can be identified as a purpose and values-driven practice in which organisations publicly express their stance on a specific issue (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021; Vredenburg et al. 2020). At any time, it is of great importance that the actions taken by organisations align with their overall purpose and values in order to be perceived as authentic and to avoid consumer scepticism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Vredenburg et al. (2020) outlined four different types of authenticity, which are elaborated on in the following subsection.

### **2.1.2 Categories of Brand Activism**

Brand activism can be executed to various extents depending on the level of engagement in prosocial corporate practices and the communication of activist marketing messages which should be in line with the brand’s purpose and core values to be perceived as authentic

(Vredenburg et al. 2020). Vredenburg et al. (2020) further illustrate that a brand’s core purpose and values can be regarded as a reflection of brand promise and a representation of stakeholders’ needs and desires. While messaging comprises the different tools of communication and content distribution, corporate practices refer to the actual activities the brand executes. Based on these four characteristics (purpose, values, messaging, and practice), Vredenburg et al. (2020) conceptualise four categories of brand activism, distinguishing between the (1) *absence of brand activism*, (2) *silent brand activism*, as well as (3) *authentic* and (4) *inauthentic brand activism*. Further, it is important to note that messaging and practice should be regarded along a continuum rather than within a static, predefined framework, varying among brands (Vredenburg et al. 2020). Figure 1 presents an outline of the four typologies.



**Figure 1:** Categories of Brand Activism (adapted from Vredenburg et al. 2020)

Brands falling under the first quadrant *Absence of Brand Activism* barely engage in prosocial activities and communicate very little to no activist marketing messages (Vredenburg et al. 2020). These brands lack explicit prosocial brand purpose and values. In short, none of the four key elements is sufficiently represented or aligned. Consumers usually do not express high expectations towards such brands to change their status quo and to engage in activist behaviour. Further, these organisations often operate in a business-to-business environment, where

marketing is not driven by consumers. However, brands have to acknowledge that engaging in brand activism gains growing relevance nowadays due to changing norms and expectations. Hence, not taking a stance at all may be considered a disadvantage in terms of financial losses or a decrease in customers (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Thus, the majority of organisations try to become involved and exercise activist practices (Vredenburg et al. 2020).

The second category *Silent Brand Activism* is characterised by companies' high engagement in activities that support relevant issues and match the brand's core identity and values. However, these brands operate rather silently and behind the scenes, without clearly and actively communicating their efforts. Further, they tend to be smaller, with lower market power. Since brands within the silent quadrant already have aligned prosocial brand purposes, values, and practices that just have to be matched with their messaging, these brands have great potential to engage in authentic brand activism and can benefit from consumers hearing about their socio-political stance (Vredenburg et al. 2020).

To achieve authenticity, a brand's purpose and values have to be consistent with its activist messages and corporate activities as shown in quadrant three *Authentic Brand Activism*. Thus, a clear and transparent purpose and values-driven communication of its activist stand, which should also be of public interest, is key (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021; Vredenburg et al. 2020). As previously stated, Vredenburg et al. (2020) identify purpose, values, messaging, and practice as the four main characteristics of brand activism. When aligned, consumers are likely to perceive these brands as authentic, relevant, and trustworthy leading to increased profits and a growing customer base (Vredenburg et al. 2020; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). Hence, "[e]ach of these four factors (purpose, values, messaging, and practice) influences, determines, and builds on one another in a holistic system to create authenticity" (Vredenburg et al. 2020, p. 449). Moorman (2020) agrees by stating that brand authenticity requires activist practices to be executed "in a brand-consistent manner that connects with target markets in an authentic way" (p. 390). In a world with endless product options and brand choices, consumers seek brands that are original and authentic and align with their individual identity projects (Holt, 2002; Beverland, 2009; Morhart et al. 2015; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022), since these brands act as valuable sources for consumers to express themselves and to construct their identities (Aaker, 1999; Elliott &



Wattanasuwan, 1998; Holt, 2002; Beverland, 2009). Gilmore and Pine (2007, p. 5) contend that “authenticity has overtaken quality as the prevailing purchasing criterion, just as quality overtook cost, and as cost overtook availability.” Thus, brand authenticity is crucial for brands to survive and stand out in today’s overwhelming branded landscape since it plays an essential role in consumers’ brand selection (Morhart et al. 2015).

Brands that are assigned to the fourth category, *Inauthentic Brand Activism*, already engage in brand activism and disseminate activist marketing messages that express their stance on a relevant topic but only exhibit a low level of prosocial corporate practices (Vredenburg et al. 2020). Further, they lack clear and explicit brand purpose and values. In short, there is an inconsistency in the brand’s purpose, values, messaging, and corporate practices. This discrepancy may result in consumers perceiving these brands as inauthentic, dishonest, or even deceitful (Vredenburg et al. 2020). Researchers refer to the phenomenon of *woke-washing*, when brands disguise their actual purpose of taking a stance (Key et al. 2021; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Moorman, 2020; Sibai, Mimoun & Boukis, 2021; Vredenburg et al. 2020), which can lead to consumer backlash such as boycotts (Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017; Micheletti & Isehour, 2010; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022). Digging deeper into the phenomenon of woke washing, the term *woke* originates from African American slang and is used as a byword, referring to social awareness (Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020). In the literature on brand activism, the concept of wokeness is linked to social movements such as #MeToo or Black Lives Matter (Sobande, 2019; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022). Mirzaei, Wilkie and Siuki (2022) state that a brand is woke when it is “awake or alert to critical social issues, discrimination, and injustice” (p. 1). Hence, brands engaging in woke brand activism stand up against racism and injustice (Sobande, 2019; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022). Supporting solidarity and social equality, woke brand activism can be considered as part of socio-political activism which is discussed in section 2.2. Hence, when brands engage in woke washing, they pretend to be concerned about a socio-political issue. However, their stance might not be in line with their core purpose and values and thus, may be perceived as an inauthentic or hypocritical behaviour by consumers, hiding the true reason for doing so, i.e., marketing to increase reputation and sales (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022). Responding to brands’ activist practices, conscious consumers might use the market as a sphere to express their political views.

### **2.1.3 Consumers' Responses to Brand Activism**

Depending on the consistency between a brand's actions and messages and the alignment to its core purpose and values, the involvement in brand activism can be perceived as either authentic or inauthentic by consumers (Vredenburg et al. 2020). When done in a genuine and trustworthy way, consumers are likely to reward and support brands for their behaviours through buying and consuming their products and services, which is referred to as *consumer boycott* (Baek, 2010; Friedman, 1991; Kam & Deichert, 2020; Klein, Smith & John, 2004; Neilson, 2010; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). On the other hand, when consumers notice inconsistencies or recognise that brands act hypocritically and disguise their actual purpose of engaging in activist practices, consumers may raise scepticism and perceive these brands as inauthentic and punish them for their unfavourable actions through resistance, i.e. *consumer boycott* (Baek, 2010; Friedman, 1996; Kam & Deichert, 2020; Klein, Smith & John, 2004; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Neilson, 2010; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). As put by Kam and Deichert (2020), boycott can be referred to as the "intentional purchase" (p. 72) of specific products or brands by consumers, whereas boycott describes the "intentional avoidance" (p. 72). In sum, political consumerism and consumer resistance can be considered a response to consumers' brand perceptions (Micheletti & Isenhour, 2010).

## **2.2 Socio-Political Activism**

Whether it being Gillette tackling toxic masculinity with its 'The Best Men Can Be' campaign during the #MeToo Movement or Nike standing up for racial justice in its 'Dream Crazy' campaign in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests, brands taking a stance on socio-political issues has been a rising phenomenon in recent years (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020). These socio-political initiatives taken by brands and the phenomenon of corporate political and social activism have sparked great attention among researchers (Johnson, Bauer & Carlson 2021; Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Klostermann, Hydock & Decker, 2021; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Moorman 2020; Nalick et al. 2016; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020). According to Bhagwat et al. (2020), corporate socio-political activism can be defined as "a firm's public demonstration (statements and/or actions) of support for or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue" (p. 1). As the above-mentioned

campaigns illustrate, socio-political activism centres around controversial topics such as gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights, racial justice, same-sex marriage, gun control, immigration policies, or abortion, to name a few (Bhagwat et al. 2020; Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Klostermann, Hydock & Decker, 2021; Moorman 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2021; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Especially the topic of diversity and inclusivity has gained great relevance in the business environment. This diverse and inclusive approach may include brands showing different genders and ethnicities, as well as various body sizes in their commercials and on their social media. Since our study focuses on the cosmetics industry, the following section provides a review of existing literature on socio-political activism in this specific domain.

### **2.3 Socio-Political Activism in the Cosmetics Industry**

When closely investigating socio-political brand activism in combination with the cosmetics industry, research is limited in this field despite the growing trend for brands to engage in activist practices in recent years (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Some well-known cosmetic brands that have received recognition and have been highlighted due to their stance on socio-political issues are Dove with their ‘Real Beauty’ campaign and Gillette with ‘The Best Men Can Be’ (Morhart et al. 2015; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Other brands which have received great attention and acknowledgement in media and past research are, for example, Always with their ‘#LikeAGirl’ campaign, Pantene and ‘Not Sorry’, Dove’s ‘Choose Beautiful’, and Gillette Venus’ ‘Use Your And’ campaign, to name a few (Yoon & Lee, 2021; Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016; Åkestam, Rosengren & Dahlen, 2017; Case, 2019; Lima & Casais, 2021). However, these brands are mostly highlighted because of their engagement in femvertising, which can be defined as “a growing marketing trend utilized by large brands [...] that appropriates feminist values and female empowerment to encourage brand consumption” (Feng, Chen & He, 2019, p. 293). As previously stated, many cosmetic brands have been recognised due to their activist stance on femvertising with the aim of empowering women. However, there is also a wide selection of brands within the cosmetics industry that have taken a powerful stance on socio-political issues such as diversity, inclusivity, and body norms that have not gained the attention and acknowledgement they may deserve. For this reason, we have chosen to investigate this topic

further by examining what influences consumers' perceived authenticity of brands operating in the cosmetics industry. Further, previous studies have mainly examined brand activism from a broader perspective, focusing on brands that are well-known for their controversial campaigns (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Eyada, 2020; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Morhart et al. 2015; Sibai, Mimoun & Boukis, 2021; Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). However, less emphasis was placed on the nature, size and origin of the brands. Highlighting an avenue for future research, Vredenburg et al. (2020) suggest investigating “global brands with long and checkered histories” (p. 456) and their ability to “shift into authentic brand activist[s]” (p. 456) compared to “smaller [...] brands” (p. 456). Further, Schmidt et al. (2021) point out that limited research exists on how brands that have not engaged in activist practices in the past can address such change. Hence, we believe it is interesting to examine what distinguishes the socio-political actions of well-established brands from brands that have recently entered the market and how consumers' perceptions differ. Additionally, academia highlights that authenticity takes a decisive role when evaluating brands' activist practices. Thus, this study aims at addressing the outlined research gap by examining what influences consumers' perceived authenticity of incumbent and challenger brands that engage in socio-political activism within the cosmetics industry.

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## 3 Theoretical Framework

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*The following chapter outlines the theoretical concepts that are used to analyse the empirical data and to solve the research question. Since this study is aimed at examining what influences consumers' perceived authenticity of brands taking a socio-political stance, brand authenticity has turned out to play a vital role. Hence, a brief overview of the different dimensions that exist in current literature is presented, followed by a more in-depth elaboration of the two most relevant frameworks for this study: (1) the perceived brand authenticity (PBA) framework by Morhart et al. (2015), and (2) the woke activism authenticity framework (WAAF) by Mirzaei, Wilkie and Siuki (2022).*

### 3.1 Different Authenticity Dimensions in Previous Literature

In today's society, that is characterised by uncertainty and scepticism, consumers are on a permanent search for authenticity. This continuous quest for the true and real is reflected in every moment of their lives, in the brands they buy and the products they consume (Bruhn, Schoenmüller, Schäfer & Heinrich, 2012). Hence, authenticity has turned into a highly relevant aim for brands and has emerged as “one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing” (Brown, Kozinets & Sherry 2003, p. 21). It is vital especially for brands that publicly take a stance on relevant issues in society. As previously discussed, when being involved in activist practices, brands face the thin line between consumers' perceived authenticity and consumer scepticism. While the first induces consumers to support and buy a certain brand, the latter can lead to consumer backlash and boycotts (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Sarkar & Kotler, 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). The reason for why consumers may not trust certain brands and regard them as deceitful lies in consumers questioning brands' true purpose and motivation for their engagement in activist practices and thus may blame them for inauthenticity, i.e., woke washing (Sobande, 2019; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022). Thus, to defeat consumer scepticism, to broaden the customer base and to increase business success, brand authenticity is key (Bruhn et al. 2012; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Morhart et al. 2015; Schmidt et al. 2021; Vredenburg et

al. 2020). It is further said that authenticity acts as a distinguishing factor between brands and helps to improve a brand's image (Becker, Wiegand & Reinartz, 2019; Morhart et al. 2015; Schmidt et al. 2021).

Despite the great variety of dimensions related to authenticity that exist in current literature, researchers agree that authenticity describes the quest for the original, genuine, true, and real (Alhouthi, Johnson & Holloway, 2016; Becker, Wiegand & Reinartz, 2019; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Bruhn et al. 2012; Fritz, Schoenmueller & Bruhn, 2017; Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020; Joo, Miller & Fink, 2019; Lehman, O'Connor, Kovács & Newman, 2019; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Morhart et al. 2015; Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland & Farrelly, 2014; Spiggle, Nguyen & Caravella, 2012; Schmidt et al. 2021; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Beverland and Farrelly (2010) point out that *control*, *connection*, and *virtue* are important drivers of authenticity in consumption. The authors (2010) state that consumers link authenticity to a feeling of "personal control over their surroundings and life in general" (pp. 841-842), to a sense of connection to "important others, to community, place, culture, or to society" (p. 843), and the experience of virtue that one encounters when being true to oneself and when expressing moral values. Spiggle, Nguyen and Caravella (2012) view brand authenticity from both a positive (*brand style*, *brand heritage*, and *brand essence*) and a negative perspective (*brand exploitation*). Picking up on the three positive attributes, Napoli et al. (2014) point out the importance to communicate a brand's standards (*quality commitment*), to honour its history (*heritage*), and to remain true to the brand's core values and identity (*sincerity*). Further, Morhart et al. (2015) contend that a brand is likely to be perceived as authentic when it is true towards its consumers and itself, takes responsibility for actions, and encourages individuals to be faithful to themselves. The four dimensions of consumers' perceived brand authenticity (*credibility*, *integrity*, *symbolism*, and *continuity*) introduced by the authors (2015) resemble the attributes proposed by Bruhn et al. (2012) who posit *reliability*, *originality*, *naturalness*, and *continuity* as the key dimensions of authenticity. Further, Becker, Wiegand and Reinartz (2019) investigated authenticity in the context of TV commercials and identified four influencing factors. For advertising to be perceived as authentic by consumers, it requires a *realistic plot* and a *credible message* (Becker, Wiegand & Reinartz, 2019). The authors (2019) further argue that the ad should retain the brand's *essence* and celebrate its *heritage*. As discussed earlier, Vredenburg et al. (2020) advise brands to focus on a close alignment of their *purpose* and *values* to their activist *practices* and

marketing *messaging* to overcome consumer scepticism and to ensure authenticity. Finally, Mirzaei, Wilkie and Siuki (2022) developed the woke activism authenticity framework (WAAF), including the following six dimensions: *social context independency, inclusion, sacrifice, practice, fit, and motivation*.

Since the woke activism authenticity framework by Mirzaei, Wilkie and Siuki (2022) and the perceived brand authenticity framework by Morhart et al. (2015) were established within the context of brand activism and thus seem to be the most relevant and appropriate for our study, these two models are elaborated on in more detail in the following two sections.

### **3.2 Consumers' Perceived Brand Authenticity Framework**

Morhart et al. (2015) established a framework to measure consumer's perceived brand authenticity (PBA), highlighting four influencing factors: *continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism*. The authors (2015) point out that PBA can be defined "as the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful toward itself (continuity), true to its consumers (credibility), motivated by caring and responsibility (integrity), and able to support consumers in being true to themselves (symbolism)" (p. 203). Looking at the four dimensions more specifically, *continuity* refers to a brand's history, its timeliness and strength as well as its ability to exist in the future (Morhart et al. 2015). Further, brands are more likely to be perceived as authentic the greater the level of *credibility*, referring to its transparency and reasons for engaging in prosocial activities and its willingness and efforts to meet its promises (Morhart et al. 2015). *Integrity* is determined by the extent to which its behaviour is reflected in and aligned with its intentions and values (Morhart et al. 2015). The prosocial practices firms engage in should be executed based on primarily intrinsic motivation rather than commercial and economic reasons to prevent the perception of woke washing (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Morhart et al. 2015). The dimensions of *credibility* and *integrity* can be linked to the four characteristics of authentic brand activism introduced by Vredenburg et al. (2020) who contend that a brand's core purpose, values, messaging, and corporate practices need to be consistent to be perceived as trustworthy and authentic. Lastly, *symbolism* reflects a brand's ability to support consumers' identity creation (Morhart et al. 2015). It indicates "the symbolic quality of the brand that consumers can use to define who they are or who they are not" (Morhart et al. 2015, p. 203).

This dimension can be supported by former literature on consumers' identity construction, self-expression, and search for self (Aaker, 1999; Elliott & Wattanasuwan 1998; Holt, 2002).

### **3.3 Woke Activism Authenticity Framework**

Mirzaei, Wilkie and Siuki (2022) propose the Woke Activism Authenticity Framework (WAAF), introducing six dimensions that influence authenticity regarding woke activism, more specifically targeting socio-political activism. These dimensions are *social context independency*, *inclusion*, *sacrifice*, *practice*, *fit*, and *motivation* (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022). *Social context independency* refers to how well a brand manages to address certain societal problems in their campaigns regardless of what is relevant and trendy (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022). The second dimension, *inclusion*, assesses consumers' perceived neutrality towards activist messages centring around topics such as politics, race, age, or gender. For outside parties to view a brand that engages in woke activism as authentic, *sacrifice* plays an important role as well. As explained by the authors (2022), brands show sacrifice if they are willing to go beyond their mere strive for profits and actively support society e.g., through donations. According to Mirzaei, Wilkie and Siuki (2022), *practice* is the degree to which brands demonstrate their commitment and wholehearted support to a cause and "act on what they preach" (p. 6). The dimension of practice by Mirzaei, Wilkie, Siuki (2022) is consistent with Morhart et al.'s (2015) influencing factor credibility. Further, *fit* refers to the alignment between the core business, such as culture, identity, values, and the socio-political activities they engage in. This dimension is similarly discussed by a plethora of authors, illustrating its vital importance for a brand to be perceived as authentic (Vredenburg et al. 2020; Alhouthi, Johnson & Holloway, 2016; Schaefer, Terlutter & Diehl, 2019; Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020). Finally, *motivation* is explained as the reason or motive for a brand's existence, either emphasising profit-maximisation or being motivated by other factors (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022).



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## 4 Methodology<sup>1</sup>

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*The following chapter illuminates the methodology of the research. In this context, the philosophical perspectives relevant to this study are disclosed, followed by a detailed elaboration of the research design and research method. Further, the quality of the data is assessed through four different criteria. Subsequently, the analysis of the empirical data and some limitations are unfolded. The method section is terminated with an outline of a set of ethical considerations.*

### 4.1 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy plays a vital role in research strategy as it assists in understanding the nature of knowledge and where it originates from. Further, it helps to explain how researchers view the world and the relations they form with knowledge (Easterby-Smith, Jaspersen, Thorpe & Valizade, 2021; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Thus, before outlining the method of this study, the philosophical stances of ontology and epistemology relevant to this research are reflected upon. Ontology refers to “philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality” (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, p. 71). Since this study centres around consumers’ perceptions of brands that engage in socio-political activism, where individuals hold different viewpoints, the philosophical stance of relativism had an influence on the work. Epistemology revolves around “the nature of knowledge and ways of enquiring into the physical and social worlds” (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, p. 77). Due to its interpretative nature, meaning that reality and truth are constructed through individual and collective thoughts and feelings, shared experiences, and interactions between people, the epistemological perspective of constructionism has impacted the study (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> Several parts in this chapter are adapted from the pilot study conducted in the course BUSR31 Qualitative Research Methods

## 4.2 Research Design

Research design is “the general plan of how you will go about answering your research question(s)” (p. 136), where emphasis is placed on the choice of the research methods and their relation and fit with the research question of the study (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). This research employs a qualitative method of data collection, carried out in an exploratory manner, using an abductive approach. The three different parts are elaborated on in the following.

Since our study aims to identify what influences consumers’ perceived authenticity of incumbent brands compared to challenger brands that engage in socio-political activism, a qualitative research design was deemed as the most appropriate choice. This type of data collection is described as an “interactive and interpretive process” (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, p. 189). Our decision to conduct qualitative semi-structured interviews can be justified by the fact that this method allows for broad and open discussions, in-depth responses, and interviewees sharing insightful stories (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). During the semi-structured interviews, we were able to gather illuminating and fruitful information about consumers’ perceptions of the authenticity of four different cosmetic brands.

Further, this study was carried out through an exploratory design. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009), it commences with a wide angle on the topic, leading to a more specific focus throughout the process. Additionally, it provides a high degree of flexibility and offers new directions (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). In the case of our study, we identified the phenomenon of socio-political activism as an overarching topic. Prior to the semi-structured interviews, we created an interview guide (see Appendix 1) with different themes to lead us through the interviews. However, at this point, we were not completely certain about the final course of the research. Hence, we remained open-minded and objective to the participants’ responses. Once the first interviews were conducted and initial findings were gathered, we specified the direction of our study.

As previously mentioned, the aim of this work is to identify what influences consumers’ perceptions of different cosmetic brands, where existing theoretical frameworks (chapter 3) were used to analyse the empirical findings, comparing consumers’ perceived authenticity of

incumbent and challenger brands. Therefore, an abductive approach was chosen as the most fruitful strategy. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), abduction is a technique used to “connect an observation or instance to a theory by means of plausible interpretation” (p. 267).

## **4.3 Research Method**

### **4.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews**

The primary data for this study was gathered through semi-structured interviews held online. The method of interviewing was considered an appropriate course of action to answer the research question of this thesis as interviews offer the possibility to study social phenomena that would otherwise be challenging to observe (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Further, they enabled us to gain deep insights into consumers’ behaviours, beliefs, and perceptions and to learn about the reasons why they hold certain perspectives. Thus, to gain a profound understanding of the interviewees’ attitudes, practices, and worldviews, the method of semi-structured interviews was chosen (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). The flexibility allowed us to ask follow-up questions through the technique of *laddering* to acquire more in-depth knowledge about the participants’ views. While *laddering up* aims at obtaining a more abstract understanding mostly through asking why questions, *laddering down* helped us to reveal rather hidden ideas and to gain more concrete insights through e.g., illustrations (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). As semi-structured interviews have a rather loose design, an interview guide with some themes and respective questions served as a beneficial tool throughout the course of the interviews (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

The 14 semi-structured interviews for this study were conducted with female consumers aged 18 to 42 where each interview took between 30 and 55 minutes. All the interviews were held in English, as it allowed us both to take part. The participants were informed about the language of the interviews prior to their involvement. Further, one of us had the role of the note-taker, while the other posed questions to the respondents. Since 14 interviews were held, we took turns and switched roles every other time.

Before the interviews were conducted, an interview guide (see Appendix 1) was set up, consisting of five overarching topics: (1) personal information, (2) purchase behaviour of cosmetic products, (3) socio-political activism, (4) the brands of study and (5) closing questions.

The first questions covered some personal information and hence allowed us to get an understanding of the participants' age, nationality, country of residence, field of study, or educational background, and occupation. This topic was followed by questions about the interviewees' purchase behaviours in regard to cosmetic products. Further, open-ended questions about socio-political activism and the interviewees' experiences with the phenomenon were posed, enabling us to understand their perspectives on the topic. Subsequently, we took a closer look at the brands of study, Maybelline New York vs. Fenty Beauty and Gillette Venus vs. Etrid. Prior to the interviews, links to the Instagram pages of the four brands were provided to the interviewees allowing them to familiarise themselves with the brands. However, knowing the brands of study was not a requirement to participate in the research. Within this topic, initial questions were asked to gain insights into the interviewees' experiences and associations with the brands. Next, a video commercial of each brand was shown on YouTube, followed by a set of questions to unfold the respondents' impressions and attitudes towards the brands after watching the campaigns. This structure was applied in a similar vein to both the make-up and the razor brands. Finally, the closing questions provided the opportunity for the interviewees to reflect on the topic of the study from a wider perspective and express some thoughts regarding future developments.

At the beginning of each interview, the participants were asked about their permission to be recorded, which they all agreed on. Their consent allowed for an easier and more convenient transcription process since a programme (atlas.ti) was used to automatically transcribe the interviews. Due to pronunciation inaccuracies and spelling mistakes by the programme, we listened back to the interviews and corrected the mistakes in the automatised transcriptions. It was a time-consuming, yet crucial procedure, as these transcripts were used in the next step of carefully coding and analysing the findings (chapter 5).

### **4.3.2 Sampling Method**

Since it is rarely feasible to investigate the entire set of entities that are related to a research question, it is appropriate to draw a sample (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), a sample can be defined as “a limited number of subjects selected from a population” (p. 113). There are two types of sampling methods that can be distinguished, differing in their probability of a unit being part of the sample. These two methods are

*probability* and *non-probability sampling* (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). While the former assures each entity an equal chance of being included in the sample, it is not the case for the latter (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021; Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2015). Since this study investigates consumers’ perceptions of cosmetic brands that engage in socio-political activism, mainly focusing on women, the method of non-probability sampling was considered to be more fruitful. Contrastingly, probability sampling would presumably have not been able to ensure the sample the researchers wished for, as this method could have led for instance to respondents with too similar backgrounds and characteristics being selected.

Subsequently, convenience sampling and purposive sampling were selected as the two most relevant methods of non-probability sampling for this study. While convenience sampling was chosen due to its easy accessibility of participants, purposive sampling, which is aimed at selecting respondents based on the purpose of the study, was used to gain the information we strived for (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021; Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2015). Correspondingly, 14 women aged between 18 and 42 years with diverse educational backgrounds and a wide range of nationalities and countries of residence were selected. As stated in previous literature, younger generations tend to be increasingly aware of current societal issues and more often question the status quo than older generations (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Schmidt et al. 2021). Hence, we decided to focus on consumers within the age groups of millennials and Gen Z. The choice of excluding male consumers from our research was made since we assumed that female consumers would identify themselves to a larger extent with the topic of study and express more valuable insights due to their relatability and their personal connections to some of the chosen brands. Further, we consider 14 interviews as an appropriate number regarding the scope of this study and given the fact that we increasingly reached saturation approaching our last interviews. The participants’ characteristics are shown in the table below.

<b>Profile of Interview Participants</b>					
	<b>Interviewee (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Current Country of Residence</b>	<b>Educational Background/ Field of Study</b>
1	Ashley	32	Swedish	Sweden	Bachelor in Marketing; Master in Pharmaceutical Science

2	Charlotte	42	Swedish & U.S. American	U.S.	Bachelor and Master in Economics
3	Nina	27	Croatian	Sweden	Bachelor in History and Philosophy; Bachelor in Marketing ; Master in International Marketing
4	Camilla	22	Danish	Denmark	Bachelor in Political Science
5	Valentina	28	Swedish	Sweden	Bachelor in International Management
6	Stella	18	Swedish	Denmark	High School
7	Ariana	23	Spanish	Spain	Bachelor in International Business; Master in International Marketing & Brand Management
8	Eva	22	Canadian	Canada	Bachelor in Social Science
9	Jessika	39	Swedish	Sweden	High School
10	Chloé	23	Indian	Sweden	Bachelor in Strategic Communication; Master in International Marketing & Brand Management
11	Kate	21	Danish	Denmark	Academic Profession (AP) Degree in Design, Business and Technology with Specialisation in Marketing and Communications Design
12	Holly	24	German	Germany	Bachelor in Communication Science; Master in Corporate Communication
13	Louisa	22	Italian	Sweden	Bachelor in Business Administration (Communication Science); Master in International Marketing & Brand Management
14	Gabriella	25	Israeli & German	Netherlands	Bachelor in International Business & Languages; Master in International Marketing & Brand Management

**Table 1:** Profile of Interview Participants

### 4.3.3 Brand & Commercial Selection

To investigate consumers' perceived authenticity of brands engaging in socio-political activism, we decided to focus on the cosmetics industry, since we believe that cosmetic brands as part of people's everyday lives play a vital role in shaping consumers' perspectives on socio-political

issues. Further, our aim was to encompass various socio-political issues, such as gender, equality, diversity, inclusivity as well as beauty standards and body positivity. Thus, we chose to look at both the make-up and razor market since we got the impression that they emphasise different socio-political concerns or at least tackle them in different ways. While the first market addresses diversity and inclusivity by providing a wide range of make-up shades to serve individuals of different ethnicities, the latter is more concerned about topics like body positivity and beauty norms in the sense of the stigma of female body hair linked to questions of gender equality such as why only women have to shave. The choice to examine Maybelline New York and Gillette Venus as incumbent brands was made because of their size, success, and long existence in the market. Maybelline New York was founded in 1915 and is today operated by the French multinational L’Oreal (Maybelline New York, 2020), whereas Gillette Venus was established in 2001 by the American corporation Procter & Gamble (Procter & Gamble, 2022). Contrastingly, on the search for challenger brands, we looked for those that are controversial, questioning the status quo and trying to break boundaries by speaking up on socio-political issues. Hence, we selected the celebrity brand Fenty Beauty, founded by the Barbadian singer Rihanna in 2017 (Kendo Holdings, 2022), and Estrid, a Swedish start-up established in 2019 (Estrid, 2022).

When searching for commercials to show our participants during the interviews, we based our decision on a few criteria to assure comparability and equivalent representation of the brands. First, we ensured that the ads tackled similar socio-political issues and were generally comparable to each other. Second, we tried to find commercials of similar lengths (40-60 seconds). Further, we wanted the ads to be published on the respective brand’s YouTube channel to guarantee their trustworthiness. The following table provides an overview of the four different brands and the commercials.

Assigned Category	Brand	Year of Foundation	Origin	Commercial
<b>Incumbent Brand</b>	Maybelline New York	1915	U.S. (operated by L’Oreal)	Making it Must Haves Fit Me <a href="#">(Link to Commercial)</a>
	Gillette Venus	2001	U.S. (operated by Procter & Gamble)	My Skin. My Way <a href="#">(Link to Commercial)</a>

<b>Challenger Brand</b>	Fenty Beauty	2017	U.S.	Pro Filt'r Complexion Collection ( <a href="#">Link to Commercial</a> )
	Estrid	2019	Sweden	Shave and Misbehave ( <a href="#">Link to Commercial</a> )

**Table 2:** Overview of the Selected Brands and Commercials

#### 4.4 Quality of the Data

When conducting qualitative research, it is important to acknowledge the trustworthiness and quality of the data collected and analysed. To assess how trustworthy the data is, the following four criteria can be applied: *credibility*, *dependability*, *transferability*, and *confirmability* (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019; Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017).

*Credibility*, also known as internal validity, concerns how adequately the researcher presents the participants' perceptions or beliefs. It can be achieved by asking the interviewees to confirm the collected data to ensure that their responses were interpreted correctly (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019; Tobin & Begley, 2004). In this study, the participants were offered the opportunity to review the findings we achieved through the interviews to guarantee accuracy and credibility.

*Dependability* or reliability assures that the process of the study can be followed by others and is recorded throughout the time of the work (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019; Nowell et al. 2017; Tobin & Begley, 2004). In this respect, we have kept a logbook of the progress made and the next steps we planned to take throughout the entire thesis writing process. Additionally, all the work has been well-documented and saved, including the recordings and transcripts of the interviews.

According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), *transferability* is “the extent to which observations or theories derived in one context can be applicable to other contexts” (p. 141). This concept is also referred to as external validity (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019; Tobin & Begley, 2004). Since the findings were drawn from a non-representative sample, we cannot guarantee complete transferability and generalisability to other contexts. However, through the choice of convenience and purposive sampling, we tried to diversify our sample to the best of our ability



by interviewing 14 female consumers aged between 18 and 42 with different nationalities and educational backgrounds.

Lastly, the data is assessed in respect to its *confirmability*, which is aimed at ensuring that “data and interpretations of the findings are not figments of the inquirer’s imagination but are clearly derived from the data” (Tobin & Begley, 2004, p. 392). Put simply, researchers should try to avoid personal biases and opinions influencing the study (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019; Tobin & Begley, 2004). When analysing the empirical material of this study through the transcripts and audio recordings, we used our own interpretation, while still aiming to remain objective to a certain extent. However, since this is a qualitative study influenced by a relativist and constructionist perspective it will always be subjective in nature. Hence, given the fact that we interpreted the data, having similar backgrounds and experiences, there may have been minor influences that affected the final outcome of the study.

#### **4.5 Empirical Analysis**

When analysing empirical data, Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) suggest a systematic process consisting of the following three activities: *sorting*, *reducing*, and *arguing*. The authors (2018) note that there is no single way to execute each of the three steps but rather a great variety of approaches. In fact, the “uncertainty represents part of the charm of analytical work” (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p. 190). Due to its systematic and analytic facets, empirical work can be associated with craftsmanship. Thus, analyses may differ depending on the objective of the research. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) recommend playing with the data and being creative in its interpretation. Following the process of sorting, reducing, and arguing, the first activity is concerned with ordering and gaining an overview of the material. In this initial step, the researcher familiarises themselves with the data and “gets a grip on details and patterns” (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p. 184). Subsequently, the material needs to be condensed to an extent the researcher can work with. This means that selected material has to be put aside, as not the entire set of data can be used and will also not be valuable for the final work. At this point, the researcher has to be prepared to iterate between the chosen and the abandoned sets of data. After the material has been sorted and reduced, the third activity can be looked at. According to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), “[a]rguing means theorizing [which] is a form of argumentation based on empirical data” (p. 192). In this stage, the analyst attaches meaning to

the data in a more general sense and links it to existing knowledge and previous work. Thereby, the aim lies in the creation of and the contribution to theory. The authors (2018) conclude that “[i]nteresting theorizing is a result of the interplay between being creative and being systematic” (p. 193).

Applying the model introduced by Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018) to the data gathered for this study, we reread the interview transcripts and familiarised ourselves with the participants’ responses as a first step, already looking for recurring answers and patterns. Further, we colour-coded the material by using a program called atlas.ti for a more efficient and organised process. By doing so, the material was limited to the most relevant findings. The process of sorting and reducing helped to gain a first understanding of the main similarities and differences between the participants’ perceptions of the four brands of study and to focus on the main findings (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Subsequently, the codes were grouped into three overarching themes: (1) Why We are Here and Where We Come From, (2) In Line or Not in Line? and (3) Can You Relate?. In the last step called arguing, the material was analysed and interpreted in respect to the research question in chapter 5, where the theoretical framework served as the foundation. Finally, the findings were summarised and discussed in chapter 6 in relation to existing literature presented in the literature review. Lastly, a final conclusion was drawn and an answer to the research question was provided in chapter 7.

#### **4.6 Limitations of Methodology**

Even though the methodology was carefully and thoroughly selected with respect to the study’s objectives, the research faces some limitations. Firstly, we tried to be as diverse as possible in the selection of our interview participants regarding their demographics (age, educational background, nationality, etc.), however, there remains space for improvement. Since most interviewees do not have English as their mother tongue, language barriers might have restricted the participants’ responses. Further, the majority of our interviewees hold a university degree. Since university encourages critical thinking, these consumers may reflect more critically on certain topics. Hence, future research could include more consumers without an academic background. Another restraint emerges in the fact that only four brands from two different markets within the cosmetics industry were chosen to be investigated due to the study’s limitations in time and scope. By examining a larger number of brands from the cosmetics

industry, more diverse and generalisable results could have emerged. If the results had been obtained from more brands, our data could have been confirmed to an even greater extent.

#### **4.7 Ethical Considerations**

When conducting empirical research, ethics plays a highly important role (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019; Easterby-Smith et al. 2021; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill; 2009). Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) describe research ethics as “the appropriateness of your behaviour in relation to the rights of those who become the subject of your work, or are affected by it” (pp. 183-184). Hence, researchers have to be aware of several ethical aspects to ensure that the study is carried out morally and that the material is gathered in a considerate and courteous way. They are required to comply with the respect of the respondents’ privacy and dignity, the prevention of harm and deception, the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity, as well as informed consent (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019; Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). In short, the integrity of the research participants as well as of the entire research community needs to be protected at any time (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill; 2009).

To adequately address the research question, the empirical data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews to hear consumers’ personal thoughts and views on socio-political activism in the cosmetics industry and the extent to which they perceive brands that take a stance on relevant issues as authentic. Hence, due to the nature of the research, ethical considerations were of vital importance. To ensure moral integrity, a consent and information sheet (see Appendix 2) was dispatched to all participants at least one day prior to the interview. It confirmed that the interview was conducted on voluntary terms and that the participants’ identities remained anonymous throughout the entire study. Further, the respondents were informed about their right to withdraw from the interview at any time. Additionally, it was outlined that the interviews were recorded for a more precise and elaborate study. To guarantee that the participants had read and understood the information, we highlighted the most important points again at the start of each interview and asked about the participants’ consent for recording once again.

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## 5 Empirical Findings and Analysis

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*In this chapter, the empirical findings that we gathered through the 14 semi-structured interviews are outlined and analysed through the lens of the two theoretical frameworks presented in chapter 3. Based on our data, we identified three main themes consisting of several subthemes to adequately address the research question of the study: (1) Why We are Here and Where We Come From, (2) In Line or Not in Line? and (3) Can You Relate?. The first theme assesses the reasons and motivations of a company's existence and its intention for engaging in socio-political activism. Further, it deals with the time of its market entry and consumers' previous associations. The second theme centres around the consistency and alignment between a brand's core values and its activist practices. The last theme covers topics such as representation and identification regarding inclusivity and diversity as well as the way a company depicts itself and communicates with its customers.*

### 5.1 Why We are Here and Where We Come From

The first theme touches upon a brand's reason and motivation for existence, hence why they are in the market, which may be traced back to genuineness or profit reasons. Further, the time when the brand was established and where it comes from as well as consumers' previous associations have been shown to be of great importance.

#### 5.1.1 Truly Genuine or Just Profit in Mind?

*“Are they actually truly trying to do good or are they just using a good story to sell more products?”*

This rhetorical question posed by Camilla during her interview is a common thought that consumers are often concerned about when evaluating the trustworthiness of brands that engage in socio-political activism. Do brands take a stance on relevant issues because they genuinely care and try to induce a positive societal change or is it just a strategic move to stay relevant and

increase sales? Throughout all our interviews it became obvious that a brand's intention for engaging in socio-political activism and its reason for existence plays an integral role in consumers' perceived brand authenticity. This observation among all respondents can be connected to the dimension of *motivation* introduced by Mirzaei, Wilkie and Siuki (2022). The authors (2022) assert that the motive of a brand's existence is of great relevance when evaluating its authenticity and can either lie in the aim of profit maximisation or can be justified by a superior goal. Camilla brings her thoughts to the point by phrasing the following supposition:

*“I think there are two camps. There's one camp like Fenty and Estrid that actually genuinely care. And then there's the other camp where they try to stay relevant.”*

The categorisation of brands into two camps as delineated by Camilla illustrates the common assumption that incumbent and challenger brands' motives for engagement generally differ. While the intention of incumbent brands can often be interpreted as one of capitalistic nature and the ambition to stay relevant, challenger brands usually act on a higher purpose of actively inducing a positive change and doing good for society. Further, all respondents agreed that brands nowadays experience great societal pressure to engage in activist practices and actively take a stance to avoid scrutiny by consumers. Ashley described it as a “major setback” for brands when they refrain from engaging in socio-political issues nowadays. Charlotte further elaborated:

*“I think that they always need to stay on top of the desire of consumers. And I think that the desire right now is to be diverse and inclusive.”*

Hence, to remain attractive in today's competitive branded landscape and to meet consumers' expectations, it has almost become a necessity for incumbent brands “to jump on this bandwagon or trend” (Nina) of socio-political activism. However, Chloé warned that it should not be considered a trend since there are “people [...] going through this every single day”, meaning that there are groups of people that are marginalised by society, in our case the cosmetics industry, every single day. Hence, brands have to take such issues seriously and refrain from misusing them and from engaging just “for the sake of pleasing other people” (Chloé) and to not be considered “racist” (Chloé).

Challenger brands on the other side, as stated by Chloé, primarily enter the market because they notice “a lack in something” and identify a specific need that ought to be addressed. She further

elucidated that Rihanna for example launched Fenty Beauty because she “saw a lack of [a] proper representation [of] women of colour” (Chlo  ), meaning that Rihanna recognized that there were “not enough alternatives” (Stella) of dark make-up shades available to adequately satisfy consumers of colour, which turned out to be her main reason for the foundation of Fenty Beauty. Camilla agreed by asserting that Rihanna established Fenty Beauty because “she wanted more black women to feel [...] represented by the beauty industry.” Eva further expressed her devotion towards Fenty Beauty as follows:

*“I particularly like Fenty Beauty because I know that the brand specifically tries to create foundation and concealer colours that every single consumer is able to purchase. I know that they're uniquely known for having foundation and concealer colours that are for people of colour. And I know a lot of people who are black have trouble finding a concealer and foundation that's actually dark enough for their skin complexion and [...] I've heard and watched a lot of reviews about Fenty Beauty actually having foundations that meet the darkest of skin tones.”*

Moreover, the fact that Fenty Beauty was founded by Rihanna, a woman of colour, who has probably experienced the challenge of finding the perfect make-up shade herself, lets the brand appear as much more authentic than others. “This [simple] fact”, as stated by Holly “already makes a difference.” After watching the commercials shown during the interview, Gabriella also explained that Fenty Beauty came across as more genuine and trustworthy because Rihanna herself was shown at the very beginning of the ad “kind of stating [...], I made this for you, I made this for cultures, for local people, for everybody to be part of this community”, thereby spreading the feeling that “everybody [...] can be a part of that brand” (Gabriella). Knowing the background story and the specific reason for the existence of Fenty Beauty makes the brand appear much more authentic as Stella explained above. While Rihanna recognized a lack in the variety of dark make-up shades tailored towards people of colour, Estrid’s founders aimed at questioning the prevalent stigma of female body hair and the existing societal pressure to shave. By addressing the commonly discussed topic of whether to shave or not to shave and by giving consumers the choice, Estrid breaks the conventional boundaries and abandons the common perception of female body hair. Both Holly and Louisa highly valued Estrid’s controversial approach and the fact of being given the choice to shave which emerges to be a primary reason

why the brand is perceived as authentic among consumers. Further, by showing hairy armpits in their commercials and on social media the brand depicts a very genuine and realistic picture, thereby conveying a sense of relatability as stated by Nina. Estrid's motive for entering the market and the way the brand communicates its stance to consumers makes it appear as authentic, genuine and trustworthy. All respondents agreed on Estrid being a brand that truly acts upon this higher purpose, its initial intention and reason for existence. Eva described the Estrid commercial as follows:

*“The ad just doesn't feel like it's trying to appeal to the CEO of the company who's trying to get more money by being inclusive. It seems like that's just the type of brand that they are. It is a brand that actually reflects the people they want to be using it.”*

Even though Holly considered Fenty Beauty and Estrid as authentic and trustworthy, she expressed slight scepticism towards the brands since she believes that “[most companies] engage in the first place because they need to make revenue.” “And even Rihanna [...] just wants to make revenue”, Holly added and further stated that she believes that only non-profit companies that originated based on the mission and the commitment to benefit society are truly authentic. Nevertheless, she pointed out that the difference between incumbent brands like Maybelline New York and Gillette Venus and challenger brands such as Fenty Beauty or Estrid is that the latter two arose out of the endeavour to address a particular societal need and are hence perceived as more authentic even though they are not non-profit organisations and are still aimed at profit-maximisation.

As just mentioned, consumers are even more sceptical, when well-established brands that have operated within a specific market for many years, start to engage in activist practices. Even though consumers value incumbent brands' involvement and their shift towards being more inclusive, diverse, and open to relevant societal issues, they often question the true motivation behind such actions. Since these brands are usually not founded because of a societal problem, it is difficult for consumers to believe the brands' externally depicted motivation of engagement. Most of the respondents agreed that Maybelline New York and Gillette Venus came across as less authentic, genuine, and trustworthy than the respective challenger brands. Both Kate and Camilla explained that Maybelline New York exaggerate in their actions, “they're trying too

much” (Kate), “trying too hard for something they don’t actually believe in” (Camilla). Camilla further expressed her doubts:

*“I think it does seem less genuine and more like something they’re trying to do because that’s what’s expected from consumers and they’re just trying to live up to that new trend of not just reproducing old beauty standards. But I’m not sure if that’s something they actually believe in or if they’re just trying to sell makeup.”*

Some respondents however valued Maybellines’ approach and the fact that the brand has actively tried to address more consumers by offering 35 different shades of foundation. Hence, by seeing this variety of options some respondents felt that Maybelline is not just pretending to change and jumping on the bandwagon of diversity and inclusivity to please consumers and maximise profits, but that they actually care about people of darker skin colour and want them to feel included.

Similarly, perceptions regarding Gillette Venus’ level of authenticity differed among our interview participants as well. Stella was quite upset about the brand’s approach after having watched the commercial:

*“The Gillette [ad] was very, very like brand focused and it was almost like all about inclusivity to the point where it just felt that they’re doing it so that they wouldn’t get hate as a brand first, and people being ‘Oh, you’re not inclusive, you’re not showing this, you’re not showing that’, they made sure to include everything which of course is good in every single way, but almost to the point where it just feels, okay, you’re only doing this for your brand’s image rather than actually doing it from a genuine perspective.”*

Eva also showed her scepticism by stating that “it just seems like they produced an ad that ticks off boxes to appeal to their donors”. Jessika, contrastingly, was pleased by the Gillette Venus commercial:

*“I felt very happy when I saw the first one because it was happy. And it was free. And I was really happy to see different types of women. And also, it feels perfect, imperfect[ly] perfect if you understand what I mean. Like everyone is accepted and everyone should be proud of themselves.”*



Even though Charlotte perceived both incumbent brands as less authentic than the challenger brands, she nevertheless revealed that she values the incumbent brands' engagements in activist practices and appreciated: "I think that's good of them, good, that they're keeping up with time". Others agreed by stating that "it's always a plus" (Valentina) and that "an attempt is better than no attempt" (Camilla).

Based on the responses given by our interviewees, one can argue that the *motivation* (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022) of a brand's engagement in socio-political activism and its reason for existence is a key influencing factor of authenticity. While incumbent brands are often perceived to engage in activist practices to increase their profits and to meet consumers' expectations, challenger brands rather enter the market because they strive to actively participate in the debate and induce a societal change. Moreover, it became apparent that the era in which the respective brand entered the market plays a decisive role when examining the extent to which it is perceived as authentic by consumers. The time-related aspect is closely linked to a brand's intention for engagement and its reason for existence that was outlined in this subtheme. Due to its importance laid out in our findings, we decided to dedicate this aspect a separate section. Hence, the temporal component is picked up in the next subtheme.

### **5.1.2 It's a Matter of Time**

As previously mentioned, the time in which a brand has entered the market and its period of existence seems to influence brand authenticity. Since beauty standards and socio-political issues are under constant transformation, the time in which a brand was established turned out to be of great importance when evaluating a brand's degree of authenticity. This aspect has not explicitly been taken into consideration by the two frameworks introduced in chapter 3. Morhart et al.'s (2015) framework on consumers' perceived brand authenticity does include a time-related dimension which they denote as *continuity*, however, this element rather refers to "the brand's timelessness, historicity, and its ability to transcend trends" (p. 202). With this theme, we want to highlight the importance of the socio-political era in which the brand was founded and its period of existence as well as consumers' previous associations. Our findings indicate that these aspects influence consumers' perceived brand authenticity. This point also ties in with the second theme concerning the alignment of a brand's core values which is outlined in section 5.2

“When they started definitely has an effect on all of that”, Chloé stated, referring to the influence the time of a brand’s foundation has on its perceived authenticity. When Gillette Venus entered the market around 20 years ago, “they had the complete, right strategy for that time”, as Valentina affirmed. During the brand’s growth, the beauty standard was characterised by Caucasian models with smoothly shaved, silky skin and perfect make-up. Hence, Gillette Venus had to address the beauty ideal of that time to please its customers. As time has proceeded and beauty norms have changed, so have brands’ marketing strategies and the ways of approaching consumers to stay relevant. Nina pinpointed it:

*“What worked before, 10 years ago, it doesn’t work anymore. So they need to make changes and adapt to the market [...] they have to, otherwise they will lose customers.”*

Nina’s statement is in line with what all our respondents indicated. Nowadays, brands are expected, even forced by society to address socio-political issues. Charlotte agreed, referring to Gillette Venus and the transformation of beauty standards in the razor market:

*“They always need to stay on top of the desire of consumers. And I think that the desire right now is to be diverse and inclusive. Nobody really cares about [the old beauty ideal]: more skin, more sexy and more sun-tanned. [In the Gillette Venus commercial] I noticed like even if they were on the beach, nobody was super tanned. It’s because it’s not really the fashion [...] anymore.”*

What was considered as appealing back in the days, meaning Western, sun-tanned, very skinny models with perfectly shaved skin, is not the beauty ideal of today. Hence, brands have to change the way they approach their consumers according to the time and consumers’ current expectations in order to stay relevant. It can be quite challenging for well-established brands that have operated within the market for many years to induce such a transformation in an authentic and genuine way as consumers often hold long-standing prejudices and associations. When talking to our interviewees previous associations of Gillette Venus were “traditional”, “white-skinned girls”, “one size”, “photoshopped”, “air-brushed skin”, to name a few. Even though Gillette Venus attempts to change in respect to the current times, it still adheres to some old values which makes it appear to not wholeheartedly engage and hence to be less authentic. Stella elaborated on this aspect as follows:

*“Gillette is from a time when body hair was still a very much like a taboo where [...] the whole discussion of body hair was very much like ‘Yeah, women are not supposed to have body hair’ and so I think it definitely originated more from that aspect. And of course, it's following the modern trend of what we're seeing in a lot of other brands, of like more inclusivity but [...], it's a little more old-fashioned as well.”*

Ashley agreed with Nina's and Charlotte's statements above, supporting Gillette Venus' transformation towards a more diverse and inclusive brand. Ashley further stated that when comparing Estrid and Gillette Venus, she perceives it “a little bit unfair to Gillette because they've been in the market for so much longer” and were established when female body hair was regarded a stigma and shaving considered the norm. Hence, she appreciated Gillette Venus' engagement in socio-political issues today and its approach towards being more diverse and inclusive in their marketing communications in recent years. Ashley further brought up the following point about Estrid:

*“Estrid, they came out now in a you know, political and social environment where that is not only expected of you, from customers, but it's, to survive, you have to be very much about that. So we don't have [...] proof of how they [...] would have been back then, let's say if they started their company 20 years ago. So, yeah, maybe it's easy to say, they come up more authentic, Estrid, but then again, we can talk about the timeline of it all.”*

A similar discussion was raised when evaluating Maybelline's level of authenticity. Gabriella was one among several participants who perceived the brand as rather inauthentic, referring back to “their history of being so white centred; it just, it feels very forced”. The associations of white models representing Maybelline in the past was held by several interviewees. Further, terms such as “top-models”, “white”, and “traditional” were mentioned illustrating prejudices against Maybelline. Even though Holly showed scepticism towards Maybelline as well, she valued the brand's involvement and justified its approach with the fact about where the brand is coming from:

*“I think at that time, when Maybelline was founded, I think, it didn't really play so much of a role to spread the message of inclusiveness or political activity and also including black*

*people in advertisements. I think it was a different time and, I don't know how the adverts were back then, but I feel like the style of advertisement changed over the years a lot.”*

Chloé further pointed out that “Maybelline had to kind of stop from where they came from, reassess and then start again”, since the brand was built on different values, whereas Fenty Beauty “kind of like started based on all of that”, referring to the socio-political topic of diversity and inclusivity.

In sum, all respondents agreed on the fact that beauty ideals have changed over the last few years, giving incumbent brands like Gillette Venus or Maybelline New York no choice but to shift and adapt to current socio-political issues. Hence, they are no longer able to adhere to their old values, which often makes them appear as less authentic and as just hopping on the bandwagon of socio-political activism. Gabriella explained that “brands that have been historically very white centred, perhaps have to put in a bit more effort than new brands [since] they have a whole long history that they have to kind of make up for”.

Tying this theme back to what has been mapped out in the previous section, challenger brands are usually founded to tackle a specific issue in time. Hence, timeliness and motivation are interrelated elements that influence consumers’ perceived brand authenticity (Morhart et al. 2015; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Suiki, 2022). When talking about the two razor brands of study, Gabriella elaborated on the fact that beauty standards have changed between 2001 (foundation of Gillette Venus) and 2019 (foundation of Estring):

*“Yeah, obviously, 2019 is an insanely different world than 2001. Way more about, you know, diversity, inclusivity. And I guess the founders of that brand is also, or they are our generation, right? They are millennials, Gen Zers and they care about, I guess, the same things as we do. And they kind of founded Estring as maybe even a bit of a revolution against what the current kind of shaving industry is offering.”*

Gabriella further explained that she believes that brands that have entered the market since 2016, have been founded because “they were meant to speak up about issues” and hence have topics such as diversity and inclusivity ingrained in their core values. The alignment of the core values such as a brand’s identity and its socio-political engagement is another influencing element that

turned out to be of great importance when interviewing our respondents. Hence, we identified the aspect of alignment as a second overarching theme.

Concludingly, our findings indicate that the motivation of a brand's engagement in socio-political activism and its reason for existence as well as the era in which it entered the market plays a decisive role when evaluating consumers' perceived brand authenticity. These aspects can be connected to Mirzaei, Wilkie and Suiki's (2022) dimension of *motivation* and the factor of *continuity* introduced by Morhart et al. (2015). Since beauty standards have significantly changed in previous years and diversity and inclusivity have specifically been brought to the forefront of consumers' minds, brands are expected to adjust and tackle the issues in their marketing communications. Particularly incumbent brands face a daunting challenge since beauty norms used to be different when they entered the market. Hence, they have to change their approach which often makes them come across as less authentic by consumers. As challenger brands were founded based on the endeavour to directly respond to such issues and actively induce a societal change, consumers tend to perceive them as more genuine.

## **5.2 In Line or Not in Line?**

When conducting the interviews, there were repeated findings regarding alignment between the core values and the activist practices of the four selected brands and the consistency in their socio-political activities. Three areas within alignment and consistency are more closely investigated. First, the alignment between core values and external practices is outlined. Second, the focus is shifted towards internal alignment regarding the management board. Third, actions that go beyond profits such as donations are discussed.

### **5.2.1 Words over Actions or Actions over Words?**

In regard to the alignment between a brand's core values and its activist practices, many of the participants outlined that it is more important for them that a brand acts on socio-political issues and gets involved rather than only stating that they support a cause. Chloé expressed her opinion on this topic as follows:

*“I think it should be kind of like shown towards those actions, like ‘Do it rather than saying it’. They put it on their social media. They plaster it everywhere. But they actually don’t follow those things that they say they do. And I think what I value much more is those actions like actually happening rather than them just ‘oh, yeah, I do it’, and then just putting it on their website, putting it on their social media.”*

Gabriella was clearly in accordance with Chloé as she also believed in “more actions than words” for brands that wish to be perceived as authentic. These statements can be supported by the dimension of *practice*, one of the factors which influence brand authenticity according to Mirzaei, Wilkie and Suiki (2022). *Practice* can be defined as the degree to which brands “act on what they preach” (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Suiki, 2022, p. 6) as well as demonstrate their wholehearted support and dedication to a cause (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Suiki, 2022). Valentina perceived Maybelline New York as an inclusive brand and explained that she liked the ad. However, the way the content was touched-up and edited contradicted Maybellines’ emphasis of being natural. Hence, the brand’s actions were not in line with what it preached, as they were claiming one thing but acting in a contrasting manner (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Suiki, 2022). Investigating the dimension of *practice* (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Suiki, 2022) further, Louisa stated:

*“I mean for me something that is inauthentic is when you have maybe an ethnicity represented but then that does not translate fully to your products”*

With this statement, Louisa refers to make-up brands not being inclusive in their alternatives of, for instance, concealer or foundation shades, leading to not all ethnicities being entirely represented in the products offered. Louisa expressed that both Maybelline New York and Fenty Beauty however are inclusive in her opinion as they “act on what they preach (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Suiki, 2022, p. 6), by including 35 and 50 shades respectively. Louisa however also explained that she believed that brands sometimes “reap[...] the benefits” of a situation rather than “truly car[ing] for what you’re saying”, by for instance including “[a] black model but then they don’t stand for anything in regards to the black community.” Eva was in accordance with Louisa as she touched upon brands sometimes taking advantage of socio-political issues by sporadically including people of colour or someone “who isn’t skinny as a twig” to be seen as more inclusive or diverse even though these actions may not be in line with their core values, which is highlighted by Morhart et al. (2015) as *integrity* and by Mirzaei, Wilkie and

Siuki (2022) as the dimension of *fit*. Both relate to how well a brand's core values and identity are aligned with its intentions and actions regarding socio-political issues. If cosmetic brands do not align their core values with their societal engagement, they are more likely to be perceived as inauthentic by their consumers, referring back to the previously mentioned dimensions (Morhart et al. 2015; Mirzaei, Wilkie, & Siuki, 2022).

Further, Ariana explained the necessity for brands to “set a ground of what is correct, [...] of what you stand for, [your] core values.” Once these core values have been put in place, brands need to demonstrate alignment between their values, identity, core business practices, and the socio-political issues which they engage in, illustrated through the actions taken, also known as *fit* (Mirzaei, Wilkie and Siuki, 2022). As mentioned in section 5.1.2 brands that have been in the market for a long time, such as Maybelline New York or Gillette Venus, sometimes struggle with “implement[ing] inclusion and diversity into their branding [as] it isn't part of their core value[s]” (Eva). Since inclusion and diversity are topics which have not always been relevant to address from a societal perspective, established brands may struggle to align their socio-political actions with their values, identity, and organisational culture, resulting in higher chances of perceived inauthenticity. Estrid and Fenty Beauty have demonstrated more emphasis on aligning their core values with their socio-political engagement, as they were founded to induce societal change. With the goal of making a difference and revolutionising the market, their efforts seem to be more well-known by consumers. Further, in this study the perceived authenticity levels of incumbent in comparison to challenger brands regarding alignment does not significantly differ, illustrating that aligning actions with words is important no matter what brand it concerns. Besides the external alignment discussed in this subtheme, internal consistency plays a vital role as well, which is outlined in the following.

### **5.2.2 A Diverse Representation of the Management Board**

When asking the interviewees about what they would advise brands to keep in mind when engaging in socio-political activism, there was an agreement about the fact that brands need to align their practices with their core values both internally and externally. Hence, brands would not only need to look at external aspects, such as how they market themselves but also place

emphasis on the internal parts, referring to the employees and decision makers. Ashley phrased it in the following way:

*“If you want to come up as authentic, one of the best ways you can do that is by actually using the people you want to appeal to, like if you're a man wanting to appeal to women, [...] let women [...] show you or, I mean, at least be part of that conversation for you to actually get around like the tone. If you wanna appeal to a younger generation include younger people. If you wanna, whatever there be [...] try to have a diverse team of those decision-makers for it to come off as authentic [as possible].”*

Continuing along these lines, Camilla, Chloé and Gabriella emphasised the importance of having diversity on the board or the people working for the company, as you cannot wish or hope to present diversity and inclusion in an authentic way without including a diverse group of people in the conversation. Chloé and Camilla referred to old, white men sitting in the management board of many well-established corporations, making decisions on issues they probably cannot entirely relate to. Rather than being diverse regarding nationality as well as ethnicity and religion, which would make their practices appear more authentic, multinationals are often run by a single type of individual, which has at least been the case in the past. Camilla and Chloé both attached a negative connotation to the organisational culture and structure of many incumbent brands. Further, Camilla came up with a recommendation for what brands can keep in mind:

*“If the creators are more diverse and have some sort of emotional connection with the message that they're trying to send, I think that way it could be more genuine.”*

Considering that issues regarding for instance beauty norms, body standards, inclusivity and diversity are sensitive topics, Camilla also mentioned hiring people who are aware of the problems occurring in society, and those who can tackle them with respect and sensitivity. Chloé further elaborated on brands often showing diversity throughout their media channels, but not having a diverse set of employees, which essentially defeats the purpose of illustrating inclusion outwards. Ashley agreed and suggested brands the following:



*“Think about it throughout the whole company, and not just like a commercial or shallow thing I would say. Yeah, that's more so important to me than just sprinkling it in there, just for me to buy something.”*

These claims made by the interviewees can be supported by Mirzaei, Wilkie and Suiki (2022) and their dimensions of *fit* and *practice*, and Morhart et al's (2015) *integrity*, as the act of alignment between core values, organisational culture, and identity in relation to the socio-political issues a company is involved in is crucial. Furthermore, showing wholehearted support for a societal problem, internally and externally, is essential for any company to be perceived as authentic by consumers, no matter if they have been operating in the market for a long time or if they just have recently emerged as a controversial brand challenging current norms.

### **5.2.3 Looking Beyond Profits**

*“Estrid, I started to use a few months ago”,* Nina explained when we asked her about her preferred razor brand. She had always used Gillette Venus but decided to switch to Estrid recently because she “believe[d] it's [a] more sustainable solution [...], they're vegan and I like [that] they're environmentally conscious, but they also donate some of their profit.” Nina emphasised Estrid's environmentally conscious values in her purchase decision, which Gillette Venus was not able to offer her in the past. The fact that Nina was aware of Estrid donating some of their profits illustrates that Estrid is openly and proudly presenting charity efforts to their consumers, whereas she was not aware of Gillette Venus taking such actions. Holly believed that brands “should try to act in the best way possible” when it comes to socio-political issues. However, this can “involve [...] small things [...], it doesn't need to be the highest amount of raising money and giving that to some kind of associations.” Further, Chloé expressed herself in the following way regarding donations and alignment:

*“Even if they're doing it in the back end of things, like [...] donating or [...] hiring more people, I think it should be [...] shown towards those actions, like ‘Do it rather than saying it.’”*

This statement showcases that Chloé appreciates brands that not only externally present being diverse and open towards people of different cultures, ethnicities, and religions, but brands that

actually follow through with their words and act on it. Chloé further wished to see brands that donate money to non-profit organisations, simultaneously representing these actions in their core business operations. Gabriella agreed with Chloé and emphasised the importance of brands being aligned in what they say and what they do. This requires taking an extra step and not only showcasing diversity in advertisements but also hiring people of diverse backgrounds as well as demonstrating wholehearted support by donating some of the profit. These findings are supported by the theoretical frameworks of Morhart et al. (2015) and Mirzaei, Wilkie and Suiki (2022), yet again, emphasising the dimensions of *practice*, *integrity*, and *fit*. Additionally, *sacrifice* was identified as an influencing factor in this regard. As the authors (2022) explained, it considers brands' willingness to go beyond profit and engage in socio-political activism by conveying support for society through for instance donating money to certain organisations. Such initiatives can also be connected to Morhart et al.'s (2015) dimension of *practice* by showing full and devoted support for an issue. Furthermore, donating money to organizations in need illustrates that brands show wholehearted dedication and actively take part in societal changes, instead of just scratching on the surface and only partly engaging.

By analysing these findings, it became clear that consumers assume that incumbent brands do not sacrifice themselves to a similar extent as challenger brands do, or rather that challenger brands feel the need to highlight their engagement in socio-political issues more. It can be argued that challenger brands are outspoken about their wholehearted support, as they are expected by society to do so. Incumbent brands on the other hand were not founded in a time when engagement was valued in the same way it is today, leading to less support and *sacrifice* shown (Mirzaei, Wilkie, & Suiki, 2022). Despite this fact, our interview participants conveyed that they regard brands as more authentic and trustworthy if they align their actions internally and externally, by for example, donating money, showing diversity in their management boards as well as illustrating their intentional inclusivity and diversity through their marketing channels.

### **5.3 Can you Relate?**

This theme tackles the topic of consumers' representation by and identification with a brand. Hence, the topic of diversity and inclusivity is examined more thoroughly. Further, the importance of the proximity of reality in relation to consumers' perceived authenticity is

investigated. In this regard, the approach brands take to present themselves to their consumers is outlined.

### 5.3.1 Diversity and Inclusivity

Identifying with a brand and feeling represented in its actions and marketing communications such as advertisements play an important role for consumers nowadays, which was outlined by several interviewees. Camilla talked about her experience of growing up as a white, privileged woman which most likely was different to experiences other people have had, such as individuals who have been marginalised and discriminated against in many different ways. She explained that she “would probably feel represented by a blonde white model.” Louisa, on the other hand, a woman of colour, disclosed an experience she had a few years ago in which she felt excluded when she tried the darkest shade of a concealer from Maybelline New York which was too light for her skin tone. Further, Chloé expressed the following wish when buying cosmetics:

*“I want to see someone who looks like me so I can envision how that product looks on myself.”*

Ariana was in accordance with Chloé that she wants to feel represented by the brand she purchases from. Brands nowadays are expected or even forced by society to be diverse and inclusive and to address and represent a plethora of different groups of people as Louisa’s statement confirms:

*“I feel like for the era where we live in you have to [...] represent consumers and you have to represent everyone and a way to do so [is] to stand for people, stand for your consumers and part of your consumers are gonna be black people, are gonna be transgender people.”*

The importance of diversity and inclusivity as brought up by Louisa was supported by all our interview participants. As our findings show, it is a decisive element when evaluating a brand’s level of authenticity and trustworthiness. This aspect can be connected to the dimension of *inclusion* identified by Mirzaei, Wilkie and Siuki (2022). The authors (2022) refer to *inclusion* as the degree to which consumers assess and perceive activist messages that focus on topics such as politics, race, age, or gender as neutral. Hence, brands should aim to be as diverse and inclusive as possible and avoid one-sided representations. Relating the dimension of *inclusion* as described

by Mirzaei, Wilkie and Siuki (2022) to our topic, it would mean for brands to show both minority groups such as women of colour, transgender, or people of different body sizes, to name a few as well as stereotypical Caucasian models, who used to be the only actors in commercials just a few years ago, to represent inclusivity to the greatest extent possible, rather than excluding Caucasian women simply because society has shifted the focus to minority groups.

In its commercial *My Skin My Way*, Gillette Venus included a variety of women of different body sizes and types: white and black women, women with scars, stretch marks as well as birthmarks. The diverse approach was highly valued by Chloé: “I really really love the representation”, making her perceive Gillette Venus as authentic. She further appreciated that the brand tried to make women feel more comfortable in their bodies, regardless of what they looked like. Nina was also positively surprised by seeing women of colour since she was used to being confronted with “typical skinny white girls”. Kate agreed by stating that she liked the Gillette Venus commercial since they addressed the topic of diversity and inclusivity in a subtle way. Stella, contrastingly, felt that Gillette Venus exaggerated by including such a great range of different women, which lets her perceive the brand as less genuine:

*“They made sure to include everything which of course is good in every single way, but almost to the point where it just feels, okay, you’re only doing this for your brand’s image rather than actually doing it from a genuine perspective.”*

Even though Estrid only depicted a few white women of a rather corpulent stature as well as a few men, the commercial was perceived as authentic by all respondents. The reason for consumers’ consistent perception can probably be traced back to the brand’s motivation and reason for existence as described in the first theme (section 5.1.1) and the realistic picture it represents. The latter aspect is elaborated on in the second subtheme of this topic (section 5.3.2). Further, some respondents might have been aware of the fact that Estrid is quite inclusive on their social media and supports the LGBTQIA+ community.

Similar to the Gillette Venus campaign, the way Maybelline communicated its message of inclusivity and diversity in the *Fit Me* commercial elicited different perceptions from our participants. The depiction of different women presenting the number of their shades and the professions they practice combined with the final slogan “Don’t box us in” was perceived as

forced and scripted by Ashley. Charlotte mentioned that the commercial felt quite American to her, referring to the stereotypical skinny models shown in the ad. Moreover, Stella and Kate both agreed that the occupations that were chosen were quite esteemed, feminine careers, such as model, singer, entrepreneur, or even superhero, depicting a “picture-perfect thing” (Stella), which is further discussed in the following subtheme. If the brand wholeheartedly and genuinely supported diversity and inclusivity, Kate expected them to “bring in an engineer, [...] a construction worker, [...] different kinds of jobs and not just architects and designers and influencers”. Additionally, Stella expressed that “the whole use of ‘We’re more than just a number’ [felt] inappropriately used.” Nevertheless, she appreciated the fact that Maybelline nowadays offers a greater variety of shades compared to the number they used to have a few years ago. Contrastingly to most of our interviewees, Ariana was one of the few respondents who quite liked the Maybelline commercial and acknowledged the step towards a more diverse and inclusive brand. She further expressed her appreciation for Maybelline’s creative idea of promoting the fact that we are more than just a number. “I like that they are [inclusive], it was a nice ad”, Valentina agreed. Nina also complied by admitting that Maybelline has become much more diverse in their make-up shades, recalling that a few years ago, there were “only five different foundation colours and then you [were] either walking like a ghost or like [an] orange; so nowadays there’s way more options for everyone.” She went on to explain that she likes how Maybelline tries to appeal to and fit every woman with the 35 shades that they offer.

Fenty Beauty, on the other hand, was regarded as authentic by most of the respondents. Eva highlighted the following:

*“In the Fenty ad, they had people of colour and evidently of different religions and of different accents, which to me felt a lot more real.”*

Charlotte agreed and stated that the commercial to her felt more “worldly” and hence more genuine, referring to the Muslim woman shown in the ad who covered her hair with a hijab.

Concludingly, the degree of diversity and inclusivity in relation to consumers’ perceived authenticity differs among consumers. As most of the findings indicate, incumbent brands face the daunting challenge of pleasing consumers and adequately meeting their expectations. Even though well-established brands like Gillette Venus and Maybelline New York invest great efforts

into being more diverse and inclusive, consumers may not be entirely convinced of their socio-political engagement, perceiving their actions as rather inauthentic. It became clear that no matter what approach an incumbent brand takes, it may not be good enough for some consumers. While Gillette Venus was perceived as inauthentic because consumers felt that the depiction of the different types of women was too inclusive (Stella), Maybelline was blamed for still being too American (Charlotte). Challenger brands, on the other side, seem to occupy a favourable position. Although Estrid did not include a great variety of diverse people, the brand was perceived as authentic, genuine, and trustworthy by all respondents. As previously mentioned, the reason for Estrid's perceived authenticity may be traced back to its proximity to reality which is discussed in the following.

### **5.3.2 Picture Perfect or Real Life?**

As mentioned in the previous section, our findings indicate that Estrid was perceived as authentic by our respondents, partly because of its proximity to reality. The brand openly addresses the topic of female body hair, depicting individuals with hairy armpits and legs in their commercials and on social media. With its controversial approach, Estrid aims at establishing a realistic picture and a close connection to its consumers. It became evident that relatability influences consumers' perceived authenticity and increases transparency and trustworthiness. This aspect can be connected to Morhart et al.'s (2015) dimension of *credibility* which they introduced to assess consumers' perceived brand authenticity. According to the authors (2015), it is "the brand's transparency and honesty toward the consumer, as well as its willingness and ability to fulfil its claims" (p. 202), connecting it to "brand trustworthiness" (p. 202). In this study, we have chosen to draw parallels between the dimension *credibility* (Morhart et al. 2015) and how the brands and their advertisements have been perceived by our interview participants.

The overall agreement from the interviewees regarding the incumbent brands, Gillette Venus and Maybelline New York, was that the commercials were "picture perfect" (Stella). Further, the interviewees used terms such as "utopia[n]" (Ariana), "put together" (Ashley), "showing the perfect view" (Valentina), "imperfect[ly] perfect" (Jessika), to describe their impressions. The Gillette Venus advertisement was shot on a beach, with sunny weather, and calm music playing in the background, illustrating a happy and beautiful environment. Some of the interviewees regarded this set-up and energy as positive as described by Jessika: "with [the] ocean, it was

perfect in one way because it was really beautiful” and “it feels right for Gillette because that’s the way they’ve always looked.” Kate agreed with Jessika stating that “it makes you happy.” Eva on the other hand did not express positive reactions to this advertisement:

*“My first impression was, ‘why are they at the beach?’ I don't really understand how that has anything to do with it. I'm like everybody being at the beach, hanging out, [...] ‘are you trying to be exotic and different’ and I don't know, I don't really like that idea, trying to be all tropical and cool. It's like ‘how does that have anything to do with it?’”*

Stella was also quite confused after having watched the commercial by Maybelline New York:

*“It's once again kind of focusing on this laid out picture-perfect thing for their ad to reach a specific target audience and for their brand image, where it just felt once again not super genuine. The [...] Fit Me foundation has become very popular and there's a lot more variety of shades today than there was before which is all good, but I think, just the way of the whole use of ‘We're more than just a number’ I think was just inappropriately used.”*

What Stella tried to explain with this statement is that despite Maybelline becoming more diverse and inclusive in their communication and products, they may not be perceived as authentic due to their inaccurate depiction of reality, where they highlight a perfect world. Her assertion further showed that the actions taken by Maybelline New York may be perceived as a step to uphold their brand image and to please consumers in times when diversity and inclusivity are highly valued topics in society, as discussed in the last section. As previously outlined, consumers hold different perceptions of the two incumbent brands’ levels of authenticity and trustworthiness, referring to Morhart et al.’s (2015) dimension of *credibility*. Even though their beautified depiction of life may align with the brands’ long-standing values, it may not be what consumers wish to see in advertisements nowadays. Hence, some consumers did not regard Gillette Venus or Maybelline New York as trustworthy because of the “picture perfect” image they built around current socio-political issues, whereas other consumers appreciated the way the advertisement presented a more diverse representation of women.

Regarding the challenger brands, all respondents agreed that Estrid presents itself in an authentic and trustworthy way. It was described with terms such as “less idealistic”, “more young, more real”, (Camilla), “portraying how it is today” (Valentina), “realistic” (Nina), and “brutally

honest” (Ariana). The interviewees got the impression that the Estrid advertisement targeted a rather young audience, as the conversations were more light-hearted and realistic and hence comparable to what young people would privately talk about. Hence, it felt relatable to many of our interviewees, as they could see themselves having similar conversations with their friends. In this regard, Estrid is seen as credible due to its “transparency and honesty” (Morhart et al. 2015, p. 202) regarding current beauty norms and the question of whether to shave or not to shave. After watching the Fenty Beauty advertisement, some of our interviewees’ first impressions and perceptions were that it “didn’t feel as forced” (Ashley) as the one by Maybelline New York, “felt more genuine” (Valentina), “was more about inclusivity” (Stella), and was “more calming” (Holly). Fenty Beauty showcasing diversity and inclusivity consistently in its marketing channels as well as having a product range of 50 different shades of make-up, illustrates the brand’s engagement in prosocial activities and its willingness and efforts to meet its promises (Morhart et al. 2015). As our findings demonstrate, the brand is viewed as credible by many consumers.

In sum, the extent to which consumers can relate to a brand as well as its transparency is integral when assessing authenticity as confirmed by our findings. Since incumbent brands often present a quite perfect, rather unreal image which may be traced back to their history and the time they entered the market as outlined in the first theme (section 5.1) and alignment of core values presented in the second theme (section 5.2), consumers tend to perceive these brands as less authentic. Challenger brands, contrastingly, are predominantly regarded as genuine and trustworthy since they tackle quite serious and sensitive topics where proximity to reality is required.



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## 6 Discussion

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*After having analysed our empirical findings through the lens of the theoretical framework, this chapter aims at discussing the results from a broader perspective by reflecting on the theory presented in the literature review. In doing so, the main purpose of this section is to provide a brief summary of the main findings combined with some theoretical contributions to existing research within the field of socio-political activism and brand authenticity. The chapter is concluded with an outline of several practical implications.*

### **6.1 Main Findings and Theoretical Contributions**

Our study contributes to existing literature on socio-political brand activism and brand authenticity in a number of ways. As highlighted in the problematisation (section 1.1), to the best of our knowledge, no previous research has aimed at distinguishing incumbent brands from challenger brands and examining how consumers' perceived brand authenticity differs among such brands, this being the main contribution of our study. Pointing out an avenue for further research, Vredenburg et al. (2020) emphasise that future studies may investigate whether “global brands with long and checkered histories [...] can shift into authentic brand activist status as effectively as smaller [...] brands” (p. 456). Further, Schmidt et al. (2021) pose the question of how brands that have not engaged in socio-political issues in the past should tackle their activist involvement. Hence, motivated by Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) and Schmidt et al.'s (2021) suggestions for future research, we aimed at analysing what influences consumers' perceived authenticity of incumbent brands compared to challenger brands that engage in socio-political activism within the cosmetics industry, thereby extending previous literature by addressing the outlined research gap. Further, our findings are supported by several aspects presented in the theoretical frameworks by Morhart et al. (2015) and Mirzaei, Wilkie and Siuki (2022), but also go beyond these dimensions. First, a brand's reason for existence and its time of market entry, as well as consumers' previous associations with the brand were identified as executing a relevant impact on consumers' perceived authenticity. Since these influences were not specifically highlighted in previous literature, our study provides a new and valuable contribution to theory

in this regard. Second, the internal and external alignment of a brand's business practices, and its socio-political engagement turned out to be of great relevance. This finding, which appeared to be of most importance in past studies, is confirmed by a plethora of existing research. Third, our findings indicate that consumers' representation by and identification with a brand seems to influence the way consumers perceive a brand's authenticity. This aspect is in accordance with what is presented in past literature, while also going beyond it. Thus, our findings present new contributions to academia. Finally, our study contributes to the field of socio-political activism in the cosmetics industry in novel ways since this specific industry was scarcely studied in the past. The three themes as well as additional findings and contributions are elaborated on and discussed more thoroughly in the following.

### **6.1.1 Motivation, Time of Market Entry and Consumers' Previous Associations**

First, the motivation and reason for existence of a brand as well as the time in which it was established turned out to play a vital role in consumers' perceived authenticity. Incumbent brands are often alleged to jump on the bandwagon of socio-political activism to stay relevant and meet consumers' expectations. Since their activist practices are commonly regarded as a strategic move to increase profits, consumers tend to perceive them as less authentic and oftentimes accuse them of woke-washing (Key et al. 2021; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Moorman, 2020; Sibai, Mimoun & Boukis, 2021; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Contrastingly, challenger brands' reasons to enter the market can rather be traced back to their motivation of changing society for the better and revolutionising the market. Since the time when challenger brands have entered the market is different to the era in which incumbent brands were founded, challenger brands are commonly rooted in a more controversial approach addressing topics such as diversity and inclusivity (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021). Thus, challenger brands are often regarded as more authentic due to the above-mentioned aspects. Moreover, consumers, especially younger generations, tend to react and respond to brands' engagements in socio-political issues to a greater extent nowadays (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Schmidt et al. 2021). Throughout the entirety of our empirical findings and analysis, the motivation and reason for a brand's existence, as well as the time of its market entry was accentuated as one the most important influences of consumers' perceived brand authenticity. Some studies within the field of socio-political activism and brand authenticity discuss brand history, also sometimes referred

to as brand heritage, as a contributing dimension of brand authenticity (Becker, Wiegand & Reinartz, 2019; Morhart et al. 2015; Napoli et al. 2014; Spiggle, Nguyen & Caravella, 2012). However, brand history and heritage mentioned in past literature seem to address slightly different aspects compared to what our findings showed. Hence, our study contributes to existing research in a novel way by highlighting the importance of a brand's period of existence and its time of market entry as well as the reason for its foundation when investigating authenticity. Since this study focuses on the comparison between incumbent and challenger brands, these elements clearly emerged as relevant influences of perceived authenticity in our findings. As mentioned above, the society we live in is not static, but rather constantly developing and changing. When investigating the cosmetics industry and beauty standards, there has been a large shift in what society expects and what is considered as beautiful and trendy at a certain point in time. Our novel findings illustrate that incumbent brands have gone through hardships and difficulties to stay relevant and up-to-date when shifting their business practices with changing societal expectations. The time of a brand's market entry and reason for existence can be viewed as a new perspective which future academics can place greater emphasis on when studying authenticity of socio-political brands, as this study highlights its relevance.

Additionally, our findings indicate that consumers' previous associations of and experiences with a brand turned out to play an influencing role when evaluating a brand's level of authenticity. As consumers may hold previous associations of incumbent brands representing the stereotypical beauty norm, a genuine shift in their business practices may be truly challenging. We would argue that consumers who have quite elaborate associations of incumbent brands tend to be more sceptical towards them and their activist practices. Our findings further suggest that consumers of minority groups might regard incumbent brands and their socio-political stance as more authentic than Caucasian consumers, valuing every single approach brands take towards being more inclusive. Contrastingly, challenger brands are generally attributed rather positive associations by consumers since their motivation and reason for existence is assumed to lie in the endeavour to lead a positive societal change. Further, we believe that consumers ascribe challenger brands a broader scope of accepted actions, meaning that such brands can afford engaging in more inappropriate and questionable activities without being cancelled compared to incumbent brands. In general, consumers who are not familiar with the brand of investigation and who do not hold any previous associations, might be more open-minded towards the brand

and may perceive it as more authentic. Since, to the best of our knowledge, the aspect of previous associations has not been highlighted as an influence of brand authenticity in past research, our study provides novel contributions to theory by emphasising their importance.

### **6.1.2 Internal and External Alignment**

The second theme that was identified tackles the relevance of alignment between a brand's internal and external activities and its socio-political stance as well as its endeavour to act beyond profits. Alignment was highlighted by most researchers studying brand authenticity within the field of brand activism (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Morhart et al. 2015; Sarkar & Kotler, 2021; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Our findings illustrate that not only external but also internal alignment is of great importance. Hence, consumers appreciate if a brand's activist stance is reflected in its daily business, e.g., the products and services it offers, meaning that if a make-up brand supports diversity and inclusivity, consumers expect the brand to have a large variety of different shades of foundation. In short, brands should "act on what they preach" (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022, p. 6). Further, the extent of diversity of the management board seems to be reflected in the brand's external communication and its public appearance. Thus, a brand's marketing communications are perceived as more genuine and trustworthy if consumers are aware that the decision-makers have diverse backgrounds and are representative of a plethora of consumers. Since consumers often believe that incumbent brands are run by conservative middle-aged, white men, it seems to be more difficult for such brands to communicate their activist stance in an authentic way. Challenger brands on the other hand are assumed to have a diverse management board consisting of people of younger generations with various personal histories that identify themselves with the current societal developments, aim at actively taking responsibility and want to be involved in the debate. As outlined in previous literature, the generation of millennials seems to show most concern for the world and society and pressure brands to engage in activist practices (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Sarkar & Kotler, 2021; Schmidt et al. 2021; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Our findings, that were gathered from consumers aged between 18 to 42, are in accordance with academia on the fact that younger generations are increasingly conscious about socio-political issues. Hence, if managerial decisions are made by the people that genuinely care and actively aim at inducing change, these brands may be

perceived as more authentic. Moreover, consumers highly value a brand's engagement in initiatives that go beyond its profits such as donating money to an association or a cause that deals with the socio-political issue the brand aims to support. Consumers predominantly assume that well-established brands only focus on profits and do not sacrifice themselves which may be the reason for why such brands are regarded as less authentic. However, just because consumers may not know about a brand's initiatives does not mean that it does not make any sacrifices. Contrastingly, challenger brands that were established based on the endeavour to address a specific socio-political issue and to lead the change are assumed to make valuable financial contributions to society.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of alignment between a brand's core business operations, identity, and internal as well as external actions and engagements (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Suiki, 2022; Morhart et al. 2015; Napoli et al. 2014; Sarkar & Kotler, 2021; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Vredenburg et al. (2020) point out that the four elements, purpose, values, messaging, and practice need to be consistent for brands to be perceived as authentic. If discrepancies exist, consumers may perceive such brands as inauthentic and deceitful, accusing them of woke washing (Key et al. 2021; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Moorman, 2020; Sibai, Mimoun & Boukis, 2021; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Hence, literature confirms our findings regarding the aspect of alignment as a necessity for brands in order for them to be perceived as authentic, no matter if they are an incumbent or challenger brand.

### **6.1.3 Representation by and Identification with a Brand**

Third, consumers' representation by and identification with a brand emerged as relevant influences when assessing their perception of brand authenticity. Since the topic of diversity and inclusivity has sparked vast attention in recent years, not least due to the Black Lives Matter movement, brands are expected to include a variety of different individuals in their marketing communications (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Consumers generally value every single approach a brand takes towards being more inclusive and diverse. Especially minority groups, such as people of colour, who may have been marginalised their entire life where the beauty industry made a decisive contribution to, highly appreciate if their voices get eventually heard. Nevertheless, incumbent brands' efforts

are generally perceived as less authentic than the steps taken by challenger brands. It became obvious that well-established brands tend to exaggerate their stance by depicting a plethora of different individuals, which often sparks scepticism by consumers regarding their authenticity. Our findings were in line with Mirzaei, Wilkie and Siuki's (2022) dimension of *inclusion*, referring to brands equally representing different consumer groups. Hence, brands that tackle diversity and inclusivity should not only depict minority groups due to its societal importance, but rather show a diverse representation of individuals, which may also include Caucasian models who have stereotypically been overrepresented in media (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022). Further, it emerged that incumbent brands tend to present types of individuals that have been shown by other brands before, such as people of different body sizes as well as ethnicities, with different skin conditions, such as birth and stretch marks, to name a few. Challenger brands, however, often go one step further and depict people of different religions, like women wearing a hijab, or include individuals identifying themselves with the LGBTQIA+ community which allows them to be perceived as even more genuine by consumers. Concludingly, previous literature supports what was outlined in our findings. By examining the cosmetics industry, this study contributes to theory in that it highlights the importance of consumers' representation by and identification with a brand.

#### **6.1.4 Additional Findings and Contributions**

The two frameworks that were consulted to analyse the findings included two additional dimensions that seem to influence consumers' perceived brand authenticity, *symbolism*, and *social context independency* (Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Morhart et al. 2015). However, in our study they crystallised as less relevant. As highlighted in past literature, brands often support consumers in their identity construction and act as valuable sources of self-expression (Aaker, 1999; Beverland, 2009; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Holt, 2002). This aspect was specifically outlined through Morhart et al.'s (2015) dimension of *symbolism* described as "a brand's potential to serve as a resource for identity construction" (p. 203). Our respondents did not necessarily regard cosmetic products as a source "to define who they are or who they are not" (Morhart et al. 2015, p. 203). Further, Mirzaei, Wilkie and Siuki's (2022) claim that "[w]oke campaigns with implicit and direct references to topical social issues, for which there is a built-up tension in society, can be at risk of being perceived as inauthentic" (p. 5), which they

refer to as *social context independency*. According to our empirical data, we would argue that consumers highly value brands' engagements in relevant socio-political debates such as diversity and inclusivity rather than issues society pays less attention to. Our finding is in accordance with general literature centring around socio-political brand activism and emphasises the necessity for brands to take a stance (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021; Schmidt et al. 2021; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019; Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020).

Finally, we would argue that our study on socio-political activism and consumers' perceived authenticity has contributed to the research field of the cosmetics industry. To the best of our knowledge, no previous research tackling the topic of brand activism has solely focused on the cosmetics industry. Rather researchers have taken a broader outlook and investigated brands from several different industries in comparison to one another or other industries than cosmetics (Eyada, 2020; Mirzaei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Sibai, Mimoun & Boukis, 2021; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Our choice of investigating the cosmetics industry has emphasised the importance of current socio-political issues such as inclusivity, diversity as well as beauty standards and norms. Concludingly, this study highlights that cosmetic brands can have a powerful impact on society by demonstrating everyone's true worth and making each individual feel represented and included.

## **6.2 Practical Implications**

The findings of this study present valuable insights for both marketers and managers as well as society in general. Based on our results, we collected some recommendations for practitioners about what to consider when engaging in socio-political activism. Our study is especially relevant for marketers and managers of incumbent brands that wish to be perceived as more authentic by consumers. The findings illustrate that it is crucial for brands to align themselves in regard to their socio-political engagement and core values as well as identity. A brand which shows people of colour in their advertisements while simultaneously having no signs of diversity within their management board might face troubles being regarded as trustworthy by consumers. Hence, being inclusive and diverse throughout the entire organisation as well as in their core business operations is a crucial action all firms nowadays must take. Managers of challenger brands can also benefit from this study to guarantee an engagement in socio-political issues to the best of their ability, regarding alignment between actions carried out and their core values.

Even though challenger brands are often established with the mindset of making a difference, it is important that they are aware of the risk of overdoing it. In general, brands face the challenge to find the golden middle between consumers' perceived authenticity and scepticism.

Additionally, there may be consumers who hold negative associations of a brand which some managers might regard as a challenge to get past. Instead, we would suggest them to see it as an opportunity to improve themselves and become a better brand for their consumers and for society.

Examining socio-political activism from a societal point of view, we would argue that it is important that not only brands take a stance on issues regarding inclusivity, diversity, or beauty norms, to name a few, but also individuals voicing their concerns and opinions. Thus, this research should make individuals reflect upon the subject of socio-political activism in their personal lives. If we communicate societal problems more openly, and have honest conversations about them, we are heading into the right direction. Talking about stigmatised or taboo subjects like the fore-mentioned can be challenging, hence highlighting the importance of doing so even more. Nobody should ever have to feel excluded or marginalised by others, hence by speaking up, we can all make a difference.



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## 7 Conclusion

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*The last chapter provides a comprised summary of the study while addressing the overall research aim and providing an answer to the research question. The section is concluded by a presentation of some limitations of the study, simultaneously offering fruitful suggestions for future research.*

### **7.1 The Thin Line Between Consumers' Perceived Authenticity & Scepticism**

Our research was designated to gain a nuanced understanding of the extent to which consumers perceive brands that take a socio-political stance as authentic. Special attention was paid to the comparison of incumbent brands and challenger brands operating within the cosmetics industry. Hence, the overall objective of the study was to answer the following research question:

*What influences consumers' perceived authenticity of incumbent brands compared to challenger brands that engage in socio-political activism within the cosmetics industry?*

The semi-structured interviews conducted for this study provided us with valuable insights to deliver an elaborate answer to the topic. As outlined in chapter 5, several aspects that influence consumers' perceived brand authenticity emerged, which were categorised into three themes. The findings firstly indicate that a brand's motivation for existence, the time of its market entry and consumers' previous associations influence the way it is perceived by consumers which was identified as a novel contribution to existing research. Second, previous literature confirms our findings regarding the importance of internal and external alignment in relation to brand authenticity. Lastly, the representation by and identification with a brand and its socio-political stance emerged as another influential element on consumers' perceived authenticity.

To finally provide an answer to the research question, several influences exist that impact consumers' perceived brand authenticity. Incumbent brands compared to challenger brands generally experience greater obstacles to genuinely communicate their activist practices. Due to

prejudices consumers may have built up over the years, incumbent brands might need to invest larger efforts to be perceived as authentic. Since well-established brands have usually entered the market at a time when beauty standards were characterized by Western ideals and when less attention was put on socio-political issues such as diversity and inclusivity, they are faced with the challenge of shifting their core values in order to demonstrate alignment with the activist stance they take. We would further argue that consumers tend to ascribe challenger brands a favourable position with a broader scope of action where controversial activities are accepted to a larger extent. Even though incumbent brands' socio-political engagements are often regarded as a strategic move to stay relevant and maximise profit, these brands can manage to break away from the conventional perceptions consumers may hold and become authentic actors in the branded landscape.

Our study can assist managers and practitioners in their socio-political involvements by illustrating several influences on consumers' perceived authenticity. One of the most essential aspects to consider is a close alignment between internal values and external activities. Due to the thin line between consumers' perceived authenticity and scepticism, it is important for marketers to be aware of the risk of overdoing and instead aim at finding the golden middle.

## **7.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

This research was aimed at providing a rich understanding of consumers' perceptions regarding brand authenticity of incumbent and challenger brands within the cosmetics industry. To the best of our knowledge, no other study has focused on the comparison of the two types of brands and consumers' perceived levels of authenticity, making our findings novel contributions to the overarching field of brand activism. However, we acknowledge that our research entails some limitations that simultaneously offer avenues for future research outlined in the following.

First, the selection of our interview participants presents some constraints. Even though we aimed at diversifying our sample to the best of our ability by selecting consumers of different ages, ethnicities as well as educational backgrounds, space for improvement remains. Throughout our interviews, we recognized that it would be interesting to hear the voices and stories of more people of colour who have possibly been marginalised and have experienced the feeling of exclusion first hand. Further, the topic of diversity and inclusivity invites to encompass

a wider range of consumer groups than the ones we focused on, e.g., consumers that identify themselves as part of the LGBTQIA+ community, or physically disabled people, to name a few. Additionally, we exclusively talked to consumers that shave on a regular basis. However, we believe that individuals who have made the active choice to not shave would provide novel and valuable insights as well. Further, since we only interviewed 14 individuals due to the time and scope of the study, we encourage future researchers to look at a larger and more diverse sample to gain more differentiated perspectives.

Second, due to the COVID-19 pandemic still being present as well as the diversity and spread of our participants around the world, the interviews were conducted online. Hence, the respondents' answers might have been restricted in their value compared to a face-to-face conversation since we may not have been able to capture our interviewees' reactions to the fullest extent.

Third, not all our interview participants had prior knowledge of the four brands of study, however we offered them the possibility to familiarise themselves with the brands before the interview by providing a link to the brands' respective Instagram accounts. A compelling point for further research would be to examine to what extent consumers' previous associations and knowledge about the brands of investigation influence their perceived brand authenticity. Hence, it would be interesting to compare consumers who hold associations of the brands of study to consumers who do not know the respective brands at all, as this would arguably provide different responses than our study did.

Fourth, during the interviews one commercial of each brand was shown on YouTube. Because of time-related constraints, no other channels such as the brands' websites or social media accounts were observed. Hence, future research could take more different platforms into consideration when presenting the brands to the interviewees. By doing so, the interview participants would be given the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the brands of interest and their operations, simultaneously leading to more valuable insights for the researchers.

Fifth, the data for this research was conducted through the qualitative method of 14 semi-structured interviews. Quantifying the study could be a beneficial approach to enhance the trustworthiness and validation of the findings.

Lastly, since our study was based on the cosmetics industry, future research may investigate other markets, examining the generalisability and replicability of the findings.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Interview Guide**

Thank you for taking your time and being part of our study. We are Maja and Sabrina, two master's students in International Marketing and Brand Management at Lund University. We are currently writing our master thesis on the topic of socio-political activism in the cosmetics industry. To give you some background information on the topic, socio-political activism can be described as brands that publicly take a stance on socio-political issues related to equality, gender, diversity, inclusivity, etc. When we refer to the cosmetics industry throughout this interview, we think of the following five subcategories: skincare, hair care, make-up, perfume, and hygiene products.

Thank you for reading through the consent form provided beforehand. We would like to confirm again that this interview is conducted on voluntary terms and your identity will remain anonymous throughout the entire study. If you feel uncomfortable at any point or don't want to answer a question, please let us know. For a more precise and elaborate study, we will take a recording of this interview, which will be deleted once the project is completed. Do you have any questions before we get started?

For this interview, *Maja/Sabrina* will be asking the questions and *Maja/Sabrina* will be taking notes and potentially asking follow-up questions. So, let's get started!

#### **Personal Information:**

Tell us some information about yourself:

- Name
- Age
- Nationality
- Country of residence
- Educational background/Field of study
- Current occupation

### **Purchase Behaviour of Cosmetics:**

- When buying cosmetic products, what factors do you consider (price, reviews, etc.)?
- When and why does a cosmetic brand become attractive to you?
- Would you describe yourself as brand-loyal or do you frequently switch between different cosmetic brands? What are the reasons for repurchasing or not?
- Do you purchase specific brands/products because of their core values and the extent they align with your own values?
- Do you buy certain cosmetic brands because they help you to express yourself?

### **Socio-Political Activism:**

- Is it important for you that brands in general take a stance on socio-political issues (like gender equality, inclusivity, beauty standards/norms, etc.)? Is it specifically important or not in the cosmetics industry?
- Do you expect cosmetic brands to engage in activist practices? If yes, do you appreciate their involvement and how does it make you feel?
- Have you ever paid attention to the type(s) of individuals/women/models shown in commercials for cosmetic brands? Was there anything that you noticed in particular?
- Has there ever been a situation when you decided to not purchase a brand because of what they stood for or vice versa that you purchased because their stance was important to you?

### **Brands of Study:**

#### Makeup Brands:

- Have you ever heard of or used Maybelline New York or Fenty Beauty? If yes, for how long have you used the specific brand and what made you buy it?
- What associations do you have with these brands?
- How would you describe each of these brands in 3 words?

Maybelline New York - Making it Must Haves | Fit Me

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sgy-na73TdU>

## Fenty Beauty - Pro Filt'r Complexion Collection

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3lePRmzj7iY>

- What are your first impressions of these ads? / How do you perceive these ads?
- Did your previous perception change after watching them? If you didn't have any previous perceptions, what do you think of them as a brand after seeing this ad?
- In what way do you think these brands engage in socio-political brand activism?
- Did you identify any similarities or differences between the two brands and how they address socio-political issues?
- Do you perceive the ads as authentic, genuine, and trustworthy?
- If we tell you that Maybelline was founded in 1915 and is operated as a subsidiary of the French cosmetics company L'Oréal and Fenty Beauty in 2017 by the singer Rihanna, do you think that their different marketing approaches are influenced by their different periods of existence (i.e., Maybelline's brand history)? What could this tell you about the brands?
- Have you always had the same impression of Maybelline, or has it changed in the past few years and if yes, why?

## Razor Brands:

- Have you ever heard of or used Gillette Venus or Estring? If yes, for how long have you used the specific brand and what made you buy it?
- What associations do you have with these brands?
- How would you describe each of these brands in 3 words?

## Gillette Venus - My Skin. My Way

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxbZsZ5mOQM>

## Estring - Shave and Misbehave

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-EKaX3Lo6CU>

- What are your first impressions of these ads? / How do you perceive these ads?
- Did your previous perception change after watching them? If you didn't have any previous perceptions, what do you think of them as a brand after seeing this ad?
- In what way do you think these brands engage in socio-political brand activism?
- Do you perceive the ads as authentic, genuine, and trustworthy?
- Did you identify any similarities or differences between the two brands and how they address socio-political issues?
- If we tell you that Gillette Venus was founded in 2001 by the multinational corporation Procter & Gamble (US) and Estrid in 2019 as a Swedish start-up, do you think that their different marketing approaches are influenced by their different periods of existence (i.e., Gillette's brand history) or the country they originate from? What could this tell you about the brands?
- Have you always had the same impression of Gillette Venus, or has it changed in the past few years and if yes, why?

**Closing Questions:**

- Why do you think cosmetic brands engage in socio-political activism?
- After becoming more familiar with the topic of socio-political activism, how important is it for you that brands, especially cosmetic brands, take a socio-political stance?
- How do you see the future regarding socio-political issues such as diversity, inclusivity, etc.? Do you think that cosmetic brands can have a positive impact on society?
- What aspects would you advise brands to keep in mind when engaging in socio-political activism? How should it be done in your opinion? What are important aspects to consider?
- Do you think the discussion we have just had will have an influence on your future purchase decisions regarding cosmetic brands?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

## Appendix 2



SCHOOL OF  
ECONOMICS AND  
MANAGEMENT

### **Information and Consent Form: Master Thesis Interview Participation**

I have agreed to participate in an interview for the master thesis on the topic of socio-political activism in the cosmetics industry, conducted by Maja Sjöstrand and Sabrina Lungwitz within the master's programme International Marketing and Brand Management at Lund University. I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and withdraw from the research at any time. Further, I will be asked to give the researchers a duration of approximately 30-60 minutes of my time to participate in the process.

I am aware that the interview will be recorded to simplify the transcription and analysis process for the researchers and will only be used for research purposes. My identity will remain anonymous throughout the entire study. Once the project is completed, the recording will be deleted.

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

Thank you for your participation and your valuable insights!

Maja Sjöstrand and Sabrina Lungwitz