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**An exploratory study on how Gen Z consumers perceive fashion brand involvement in activism and how their perceptions influence purchase decision and brand loyalty.**

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## Title page

### Abstract

**Title:** An exploratory study on how Gen Z consumers perceive fashion brand involvement in activism and how their perceptions influence purchase decision and brand loyalty.

**Course:** BUSN39 – Degree Project in Global Marketing – Master Level

**Keywords:** Brand activism, Gen Z, Brand loyalty, Fashion brands, Sustainability

**Thesis purpose:** The thesis aims at identifying a framework of interactions between Gen Z's responses toward fashion brands' activist campaigns, brand perceptions, and brand loyalty. It is hypothesized that authentic brand activism, wherein perceptions about the brands' sustainability values and practices align with its marketing messages, will generate positive responses from Gen Z and contribute to building brand loyalty.

**Methodology:** Extensive literature review was conducted to explore relevant theories in the topic of brand activism and consumer responses. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on ten Gen Z participants who posit different levels of understanding about the fashion industry and brand activism. Interviews were processed with axial coding to further assess the proposed framework.

**Theoretical perspective:** The research supports the theoretical perspective that Gen Z consumers value authenticity above other characteristics in brand activism and thus only campaigns that align with brands' ESG values and practices can generate positive responses from Gen Z consumers.

**Empirical data:** Data deduced from the semi-structured interviews with participants were coded into five categories representing elements of the theoretical framework, including brands' ESG values and practices, brand perceptions, authenticity, purchase decision, and brand loyalty. The data suggested that participants were influenced by brands' ESG values and practices, brand perceptions, and authenticity in drawing purchase decision but there was essentially no impact of brand loyalty.

**Conclusion:** The analyses suggest an increasingly important role of ESG values and practices in constructing Gen Z's perceptions about fashion brands. However, it is found that Gen Z views brand activism with increased scrutiny and very few campaigns are identified to be authentically aligned with the brands' ESG values and practices. There is also a lack of brand

loyalty in general and in the occasions where brand loyalty is recognized, it does not influence purchasing decision as much as product practicality and ESG characteristics.

**Practical implications:** The research confirms the increased interests of Gen Z in the ESG values of fashion brand and highlights the nonconsequential nature of brand activism in influencing purchasing decision and brand loyalty. It also suggests that rather than investing in brand activism as a marketing tool, brands should focus more on developing core ESG competencies to attract Gen Z consumers.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

The state of the fashion industry is rapidly changing around the world. Even though the industry still plays a significant role to the economy of Asia, North America, and Europe with over 20% of regional GDP contributions, the nature of supply chain and consumption have undergone drastic transformations in the past decade (Dabija, 2018; McKinsey, 2022). Business models that thrived on peak globalization and characterized by offshore manufacturing, massive resource consumption, low-cost retailing, and short product life cycle are slowly becoming backward thinking as consumers grow more concerned about the social and environmental impacts of fashion (McKinsey, 2022). ESG – environmental, social, and governance – values of fashion products are factored into consumer purchase decision, with consumers growing more inclined to consider not only price, quality, and selection but also the ethical impacts of their purchase on the environment and communities (Joy et. al., 2012; Bick et. al., 2018). The distinctions between fast and slow fashion have never been clearer as portrayed in mainstream media and research (Anguelov, 2015). Fast fashion brands are identified as those mass produced in developing countries with low-cost labor and natural resources, retailed at significantly low prices, and often offer a vast selection of styles that are not intended to last long (Joy et. al., 2012; Bick et. al., 2018). The same economy of scale that allows fast fashion brands to profit on selling inexpensive products is also responsible to depleting natural and labor resources while generating massive waste of unworn, unwanted clothes that end up in landfills around the globe (Anguelov, 2015).

Originally viewed as a smart choice offering affordable and stylish clothes, fast fashion brands are increasingly viewed less favorably by consumers after numerous high-profile and publicized cases of environmental and labor violations (Carlson & Bitsch, 2018; Tarnovskaya, Hånell, & Tolstoy, 2022). More specifically, consumers boycotted products two brands – H&M and Zara – in the Big Four brands of fast fashion (H&M, Zara, Gap, and Uniqlo) in 2013 when a supplier factory collapsed and killed over one hundred workers who were working in dilapidated conditions (Carlson & Bitsch, 2018). With overstretched supply chain that make monitoring and oversight extremely difficult, fast fashion brands struggle to convince consumers that they have control over how clothes production is impacting the ecologies and social balance in developing countries (Tarnovskaya, Hånell, & Tolstoy, 2022). In response to growing concern over the sustainability of the fast fashion industry, a portion of consumers have chosen to distance themselves from the brands and become avid advocates for green labels that produce sustainable products with longer intended life cycles (Casalegno, Candelo, &



Santoro, 2022). It is becoming more common for consumers to vocally express discontent over reported environmental and labor violations of fast fashion brands, culminating in viral boycott movement where the targeted brands are stigmatized en masse on and off social media platforms by waves of discontent stakeholders who might not even be its customers (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014; Reinikainen, Kari, & Luoma-aho, 2020; Yuen, Zeng, & Lo, 2021).

In an important pivot toward adopting business models and brand images toward a more sustainable future with the younger generations who are exceedingly conscious about ESG values, fashion brands have incorporated ESG practices in its operations and also become more vocal in expressing these practices as parts of its brand identity (Ismail et. al., 2019; Joshi & Garg, 2020; Yoon et. al., 2020). This pivot is separated into what brands are actually doing to improve its ESG practices and how they are presented to consumers through marketing (Joshi & Garg, 2020; Yuen, Zeng, & Lo, 2021). In operations, to different extents, both fast and slow fashion brands are becoming more efficient in resource consumption and conservation, providing fairer compensation for the low-skill workforce in its supply chain, and implementing circular economy at retail level to reduce waste and prolong the life cycle of product (Shen et. al., 2014; Carlson & Bitsch, 2018; Ki, Chong, & Ha-Brookshire, 2020; Tarnovskaya, Hånell, & Tolstoy, 2022). In marketing, fashion brands are active in packaging and presenting campaign messages that stress ESG values and the brands' stance on social issues (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014; Yoon et. al., 2020). Brand activism is growing fast to be the latest marketing tactics to connect with consumers on mutually concerned topics that are often ESG related, such as the environment, fair labor, racial and gender equality (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Shivakanth, Belavadi, & Anand, 2019).

Fashion brands' increased utilization of activist campaigns in brand building has received mixed response from consumers, especially among Generation Z (hereby referred as Gen Z) – the digital natives who are habituated to online expressions of opinions (Nadanyiova, Gajanova, & Majerova, 2020; Vredenburg et. al., 2020; Casalegno, Candelo, & Santoro, 2022). The apparent strength of activist campaigns that immediately followed a social trigger is that the campaign is guaranteed to receive attentions on social media due to the viral effect of the event (Vredenburg et. al., 2020). In the success cases, activist campaigns applauded for its creativity and concrete value added to the social event or issue can boost consumer perceptions about the brand and even mark a turnaround in brand image toward the better (Yoon et. al., 2020). For example, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter (hereby referred as BLM) protests in the United States throughout 2020, Nike's controversial activist campaigns and ads

supporting the movement made the brand into a social sensation overnight. Not only that Nike emerged from the controversies as a stronger brand with an widen fan based, sales were also lifted (Nailu & Balu, 2020). However, successes are not the norms and media attentions do not always accumulate to positive brand perceptions and supports (Vredenburg et. al., 2020; Yoon et. al., 2020). As often as fashion brands had been boycotted and criticized in the past for ESG scandals exposed by the media, they are now being accused of greenwashing and wokewashing through activist campaigns perceived as inauthentic by consumers (Indvik, 2020; Pucker, 2022). The issue of authenticity is compounded for Gen Z consumers, who are more proactive and sophisticated in previous generations in sourcing and evaluating the influx of information scrawling on social media and platforms (Ismail et. al., 2019; Francis & Hoefel, 2022). Activist campaigns seen as consumer scam to attract attentions and do not reflect the realities of practices faced severe backlash and, in some cases, are forced to be pulled back (Schmidt et. al., 2021).

The stakes are high, and the results are unpredictable for fashion brands who intend to utilize activist campaigns to pivot brand images to be more sustainable and exerts stronger ESG values. It is important for brands to understand how consumers interaction and perceptions of activist campaigns might influence their purchase decision and brand loyalty. Hence, while focusing on Gen Z as the demographics of focus, this study titled **“An exploratory study on how Gen Z consumers perceive fashion brand involvement in activism and how their perceptions influence purchase decision and brand loyalty.”** will explore the framework explaining Gen Z’s responses to activist campaigns and the latent relationships with purchase decision and brand loyalty.

## 1.2. Problematization

There is an apparent research gap to guide understandings about Gen Z’s responses to activist campaigns, mainly because of the relatively renewed focus on brand activism has only gained traction in the past five years, starting with research on politicized ads campaigns and brands taking a political stance on social issues (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Research on brand activism and Gen Z intersect through studies that focus on Gen Z’s interactions with brands on social media, which are separated into two purposes of to be informed or to be entertained (Read et. al., 2019; Berestova, Kim, & Kim, 2022). Gen Z who socially interacted with brands and brand-based communities to be informed exhibit high interest in opinions of the brands concerning social and political issues (Berestova, Kim, & Kim, 2022). Even though the nature of interactions and brand perceptions are described in detail, there is an inherent disconnection in

linking Gen Z's responses to brand-led activist campaigns with purchase decision and brand loyalty – the chief outcomes of any marketing activities (Read et. al., 2019; Berestova, Kim, & Kim, 2022).

Other parts of the literature focus on evaluating activist campaign outcomes with no differentiation of age groups (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Among research focused on brand activism and its impact on brand perceptions, loyalty, and purchase decisions, there is a general consensus in viewing brand activism with skepticism, questioning its effectiveness and authenticity as a marketing and branding instrument (Sakar & Kotler, 2018; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Bhagwat et. al., 2020; Vredenburg et. al., 2020). Brands with strong ESG values and practices are likely to incorporate these factors into image building, at the result of which brand activism only presents opportunities to confirm and project internalized brand values into renewed marketing messages that are more relevant to the current social contexts (Sakar & Kotler, 2018). On the other hands, brands without the prerequisite ESG values and practices are likely to face consumer backlash over inauthenticity when they try to instill values that are not associated with the brand through activist campaigns – often recognized by the terms “greenwash” or “wokewash”, for environmental and social issues, respectively (Vredenburg et. al., 2020). In the former case it seems that brand activism is unnecessary while in the second case, it appears to be a blatant attempt at foreseeable failures. This is also the case with the fashion industry, wherein practices have been heavily influenced by few examples of brands boycotted or boycotted by consumers at the result of activist campaign launch, with the two polarized examples being Nike and H&M (Vredenburg et. al., 2020). In the vast space between these outliers, there are no framework to compare the significance of brand activism on purchase decisions and brand decision, or vice versa the damage of brand staying neutral.

Indeed, it is highly debatable whether if brands can all together avoid activism (Sakar & Kotler, 2018; Yoon et. al., 2020). Research on the next gen – Gen Z – relationship with brand activism certainly suggest that it is more preferable for brands to take a vocal stance on social issues and to express the ESG perspectives as parts of the brand identity, in parts because Gen Z prefers brands making concrete and publicized commitments (Yoon et. al., 2020). As suggested by Bhagwat et. al., often times brand activism only occurs sporadically when the situation demands a response from the brand or there are marketing opportunities triggered by social events (2020). On the other hand, brand activism can also take place as consistent strategic decisions made to affirm brand values with the public. There is still considerable research gap in illustrating Gen Z responses to brand activism under each condition, since the motivations

for brand activism exert significant impact on the message content of marketing campaigns (Sakar & Kotler, 2018).

### 1.3. Research aims and questions

This research aims at focusing the investigation of consumer responses to brand activism on the Gen Z population and fashion labels. Even though there has been robust research on consumer behaviors and values of Gen Z, research on brand activism has not been able to separate the Gen Z demographics from other age groups who are profoundly different in purchasing capacity and consumer behavior. More specifically, Gen Z has been identified to be more intensely conscious about ESG values and practices as compared to the older generations (Yoon et. al., 2020). As digital natives, Gen Z is also participated in online discussions and social media campaigns more ardently, with keener abilities to process and source information to evaluate the authenticity of campaigns (Francis & Hoefel, 2022).

Gen Z's responses to fashion brands' activist campaigns have also been acutely diverse – as in the case of Nike and H&M abovementioned (Vredenburg et. al., 2020). There is an incredible gap in understanding whether activist campaigns do play a role in promoting brand loyalty and purchasing decisions among Gen Z consumers and whether fashion brands are indeed forced to take a stance amidst attention triggered political and social phenomena, as stated by Sakar and Kotler (2018). On the other end of the conundrum, there might be little support for the necessity of brand activism in influencing Gen Z, since the population has already grown to be extremely sophisticated in evaluating fashion brands' ESG performances and the risks for activist campaigns to be detected as unauthentic are simply too high (Yoon et. al., 2020; Vredenburg et. al., 2020).

In exploring the theoretical framework that explains Gen Z responses to fashion brand's activism, the research seeks to understand firstly, the factors that impact Gen Z responses to brand activism. Previous research by Vredenburg et. al. in 2020, Eigenraam, Eelen, and Verlegh in 2021 have suggested that consumer responses are dictated by consumer perceptions of brands' ESG performances prior to exposure with the campaigns and the marketing messages presented in the activist campaigns. The interaction ensued from these two factors is authenticity, a quality which measured the extent to which the activist campaigns actually align with the brands' ESG values and practices. Authentic campaigns are positively perceived and supported in consumers while inauthentic campaigns face extensive backlash that can even results in boycotting (Vredenburg et. al., 2020; Eigenraam, Eelen, & Verlegh in 2021). Consequentially, a question central to the investigation of factors impacting Gen Z responses

to brand activism is how Gen Z perceives campaign authenticity and how this perception might moderate responses to campaigns.

The second major aim of the research is to connect response to brand activism with Gen Z’s purchase decision and brand loyalty. As abovementioned, previous research literature has been rather vague in illustrating a connection between supports for activist campaigns and increased purchase tendencies/brand loyalty. In exploring this topic, it is important to be able to answer the question of whether Gen Z’s different responses to activist campaigns can actually impact their purchase decision and brand loyalty. The second question is to compare between responses to activist campaigns and perceptions about brands’ ESG performances to determine which one is a stronger predictor for purchase decision and brand loyalty.

Last but not least, the research aims to ultimately arrive at a relevant framework to explain the interactions between Gen Z’s responses to activist campaign, their purchase decision, and brand loyalty. The new framework is proposed through literature review and later tested with qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews with participants. A cognitive map of research aims, and questions is illustrated as below.

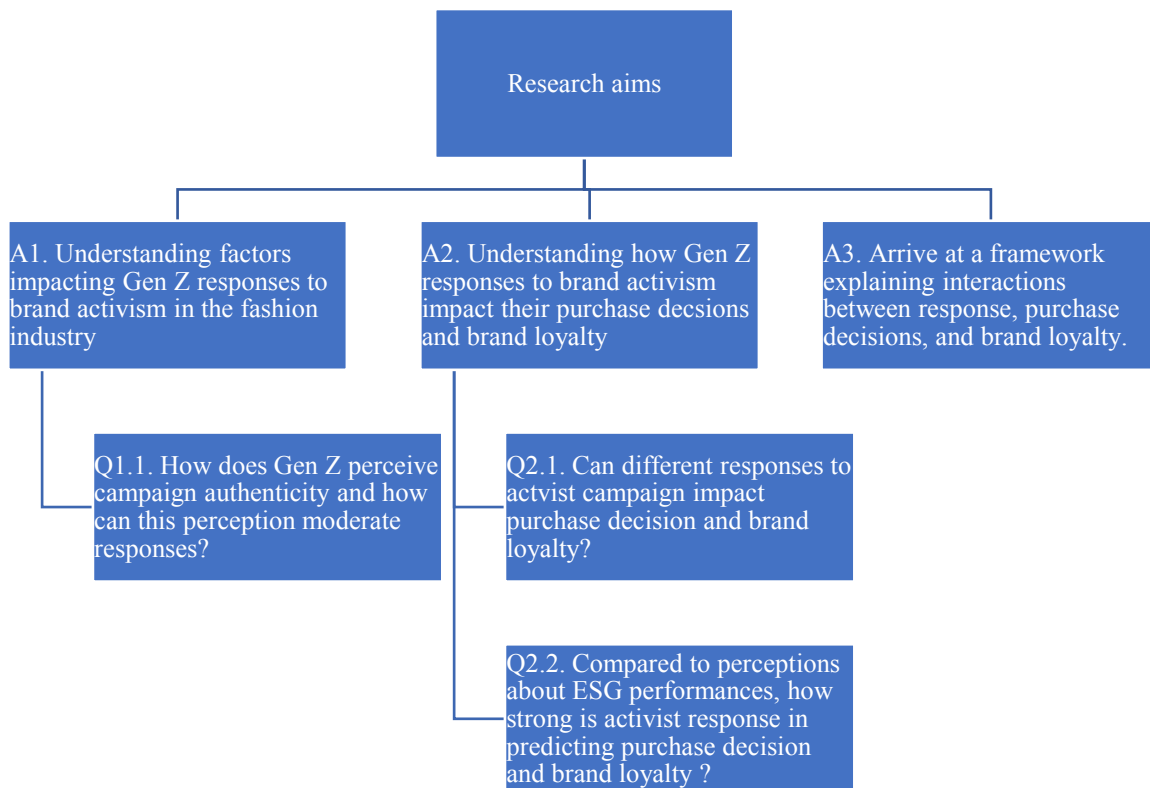


Figure 1 - Research aims and questions

## 1.4. Research structure

The research is structured in eight parts. Following the introduction which presents the background, research problems, aims, and questions, the literature review highlights key findings from robust research body on brand activism, as well as its impact on how consumers perceived the brands and build brand loyalty. The literature review will also attempt to highlight the unique consumer characteristics in light of brand activism. In the theoretical framework section, the research discussed in-depth Vredenburg et. al.'s typology of brand activism to highlight the interaction between perceptions of brand's ESG performances and actual activist campaign messaging (2020). This interaction is subsequently explained by Eigenraam, Eelen, and Verlegh' concept of brand authenticity (2021). The theoretical framework section concludes with a brand-new framework for understanding Gen Z's response to brand activism and its impact on purchase decision and brand loyalty. The following sections proceed to test this framework with qualitative data obtained from interviews. The methodology section explains how the philosophical stance, research design and approach, as well as the method of data collection and analysis. The analysis and discussion section dwells on discussing the result of the study and draw conclusion on the applications of the proposed framework. Limitations and suggestions for moving forward with research findings are described in detail in the conclusion. Reference readings, copy of questionnaires and axial coding can be found in the reference and appendix.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Brand activism

#### 2.1.1. Defining brand activism

Brand activism is the communication strategy employs by firms to influence the consumer perceptions of brands through brand-led campaigns to take a stance on prominent social issues (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). The concept is a direct derivative of increasing corporate political activity and social responsibility in the 21st century, marking an important transition in marketing from market positioning to purpose seeking (Sakar & Kotler, 2018). While the underlying implications of brand building has been deeply rooted in positive value creation, brand activism in marketing demands the transformation of good intention into concrete actions (Sakar & Kotler, 2018).

In the age when environment, social, and governance (ESG) has become the core operating pillars in profit making entities, brand activism is no longer a reactive response of crisis marketing but rather an orchestrated tactic for brands to differentiate and stand out in the

marketplace (Vredenburg et. al., 2020). While corporate political activity has been traditionally considered as best colorless and impartial to focus primarily on the commercial aspects of business, recent developments in popular marketing campaigns suggests that commercial brands can be just as vocal in political and current affairs as any public figures (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Nike provides an excellent example of brand activism with high exposure campaigns that included professional football player Colin Kaepernick – who at the time was caught in a political storm for kneeling during the national anthem to protest against police brutality in the United States – or featured the issue of systematic racism in its “For once, Don’t do it” campaign (Schmidt et. al., 2020). Nike is one of the brands that frequently produce socially and politically charged ads, among other household and boutique names such as Adidas, AirBnB, Ben & Jerry’s, McDonald, P&G and Patagonia (Berestova, Kim, & Kim, 2021).

The extent to which brands vocally advertise their ethical decisions has been exercised in moderation and in excess, with drastically polarized consumer responses from boycott to buycott (Yoon, 2020). With concerns over empty woke wash instead of committed and responsible advocacy, consumers are growing more sophisticated in evaluating brand activism in the full scope of motivations and actions, making judgement on whether brands are genuinely participating in the social issue as a proactive stakeholder or simply using the hot-topic camouflage to attract consumer attention (Vredenburg et. al., 2020). The stakes are high and increasingly compulsory for brands to take a stance, however, the sway of consumer responses are not easily predicted and defined, in addition to the short and long term impact on brand perception (Casalegno, Candelo, & Santoro, 2021).

### 2.1.2. Characteristics of brand activism

Brand activism posits four core characteristics: commercialization, firm-based values, digitalization, and global audience (Sakar & Kotler, 2018; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). The commercial aspect of brand activism is to be separated with the inherent firm-based value reflected through the campaign. In this, political ads are designed purposely for a specific group of consumers who preferences are influenced most by social responsibility and citizenship instead of product and brand related criteria (Johnson, Bauer, & Carlson, 2022). Commercializing brand activism is a double-edged sword, because just as there are citizen-consumer who value and expect brands to be vocal on social issues, there are also those who prefer brands to stay neutral and uncommitted in taking stance (Berestova, Kim, & Kim, 2022).

Brand activism can also serve as instruments to reflect and express firm-based values, as in the example of green brands such as Ben & Jerry and Patagonia (O'Rourke & Strand, 2017; Ciszek & Logan, 2018). Marketing campaigns in this case are rooted solidly in the firm identity and operations: the campaigns utilize momentous events to illustrate and communicate to the public the direction corporate activism which the brand has pursued consistently in the long-term window (Afego & Alagidede, 2021). This is the case of Ben & Jerry's "Dismantling White Supremacy" campaign in the wake of race-based murders by the police in the United States. The company reacted to the event by issue a strong public statement condemning racial violence, boycotting Facebook for failing to spread hate messages, and release new ice-cream flavors such as "Pecan Resist" and "Justice ReMix'd". The campaign echoed Ben & Jerry's corporate values on eliminating social injustice as presented and a pattern of corporate activism in the issue of racism and injustice (Ciszek & Logan, 2018).

The third characteristic of brand activism is digitalization. It suggests that viral content and social platforms are the mechanism of choice for politically charged campaigns (Berestova, Kim, & Kim, 2022). At the heart of activism is a constant demand for actions – requiring stakeholders to feedback, engage, and interact directly with the issue or content in discussion (Afego & Alagidede, 2021; Schmidt et. al., 2021). The activist demand to generate public interest and facilitate concrete action coincides with the first branding goal in marketing campaign, both of which can be enhanced exponentially through the use of social media (Berestova, Kim, & Kim, 2022). Thus, brand activism in the majority of cases is intensely digitalized and viral (Nadanyiova, Gajanova, & Majerova, 2020).

Last but not least is the global characteristic of brand activism (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Even though the campaigns are introduced only in selected markets where the social issues are undertaking, its messages are catered toward a global audience (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Schmidt et. al. 2021). The products and interaction might be unavailable in certain locations; however, through news and viral content messages that are spread either organically or through corporate tactics, the campaign can extend its reach geographically together with the coverage of social issues (Johnson, Bauer, & Carlson, 2021; Schmidt et. al. 2021). Stakeholders' responses are highly complex, as non-consumers can also contribute opinions and take stance on the campaign based on conflicting interests and perceptions about the issue (Johnson, Bauer, & Carlson, 2021). Due to the volume of campaign exposure alone, it is highly tempting for corporates to devise activist campaigns regardless of their original stakes and interests in the viral issues (Johnson, Bauer, & Carlson, 2021; Berestova, Kim, & Kim, 2022).



## 2.2. Brand perception

### 2.2.1. Defining brand perception

Brand perception is often defined as consumers' description of the brand based on exposure, experience, and engagement with the brand (Aiswarya & Krishnan, 2019). In conceptualizing the brand, consumers attached values and emotional labels to brands and subsequently project these characterizations into brand preference and purchase decision (Vivek et al., 2014; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Depending on negative, positive, or neutral brand perceptions, consumption patterns may vary from indifference to extremes of boycott and buycott (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Brand perception is the product of exposure and experience with the brand that posit multiple layers of symbolic meaning, in which consumers have internalized different characteristics of the brand to subsequently serve as unconscious behavioral and emotional triggers (Prentice et al., 2019). Brand-led customer engagement can alter the consumer experience and influence perceptions about the brand (Vivek et al., 2014). As an application of brand-led engagement, activist marketing campaigns also provide complex symbolism and values attached not only to the brand but also to the social issues (Afego & Alagidede, 2021). While brands might seek to control the message content to control emotional and cognitive triggers, hidden triggers presented in the ads might produce divisive responses, as in the case of Pepsi's BLM campaign with Kendall Jenner that elicited heavy backlash instead of supports (Schmidt et al., 2021). Brand perception is a malleable concept susceptible to constant changes in exposure and experience with the brand, of which activist campaigns can target directly the universal emotions and beliefs to exploit favorable opinions or exacerbate discontent (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Barari et al., 2020).

### 2.2.2. Engagement for enhanced brand perception

Brand-led consumer engagement on popular social platforms is specifically separated by purposes: whether to inform or entertain consumers (Eigenraam, Eelen, & Verlegh, 2021). Research on popular platforms such as Twitter and Instagram indicate the main benefits of brand-led action of this type are to cultivate a sense of intimacy and provide the standard benefits of customer service through another accessible channel (Read et al., 2018). However, because of the snowball effect of virality, the risks of public backlash from customer engagement on social platforms are also significant, campaigns which are perceived to be distant from the usual brand image are negatively perceived and punished by consumer blocking (Read et al., 2018). Authenticity emerges as a core performance benchmark for social campaigns, with successful campaigns that peak positive interests are evaluated as genuine, true, and align with what consumers believe brands ought to be, or consistent with their brand

types (Eigenraam, Eelen, & Verlegh, 2021). By brand types, consumers perceive entertaining campaigns to be more suitable with warm brand type while informative campaigns are more relevant for competent brands (Eigenraam, Eelen, & Verlegh, 2021). The relationship between brand-led engagement and brand perception are not final but ongoing, with perceptions highly malleable to change by interactions with brands (Read et. al., 2018). However, this is only partially true in the case that consumers have not developed brand loyalty. When brand loyalty is established, brand-led engagement can withstand social backlash if the messages and campaigns are viewed as inconsistent or irrelevant to brand values (Guckian et al. 2017; Schmalz & Orth, 2012). Furthermore, effective brand-led engagement can help brands to recover after corporate scandals if they can convince consumers that the events are only exceptions to the brand, as in the case of Volkswagen social campaign after its cheating scandal concerning faulty emission monitors (Guckian et al. 2017; Schmalz & Orth, 2012).

### 2.3. Brand loyalty

#### 2.3.1. Brand loyalty as an emotional concept

Brand loyalty is increasingly being associated with emotions over product performance (Joshi & Garg, 2020). While brand loyalty has been long recognized as the consistent preference for one brand over another in making purchase decision, in recent years researchers have sought for a deeper explanation of brand loyalty beyond the behavioral evidence of purchase preference (Joshi & Garg, 2020; Schmalz & Orth, 2012). Introduced by Carroll and Ahuvia, brand love plays the mediating role of shaping brand loyalty (2006). Brand love is understood as a strong emotional attachment to the brand that is much more intense than like and preference (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). The latent relationship between brand love and loyalty intention is moderate by brand experience, which in turns are impacted by brand-led engagement campaigns (Joshi & Garg, 2020).

Unlike positive brand perception which can be influenced instantly through exposure and experience, brand loyalty is cultivated overtime with consistent positive feedback between consumer expectations and what the brand provides (Schmalz & Orth, 2012). Emotional feedbacks are internalized and becomes purchase preference, which subsequently provides the measurable behavioral benchmark of brand loyalty (Schmalz & Orth, 2012). Recognizing brand loyalty as an emotional concept instead of a behavioral manifestation provides the relevant background for studying impact of brand activism on brand loyalty, as the majority of brand led activist campaigns simply aim to elicit participation and social response instead of providing promotions or consumer benefits that encourage purchases (Read et. al., 2018). It is

also a more accurate indicator of brand loyalty as supposed to purchase preference, as there can be multiple cognitive motivators for purchase that might not trace back to brand loyalty (Casalegno, Candelo, Santoro, & 2021). Brand love ignites by the sense of comradery exists on the opposite spectrum of brand apathy at the result of corporate scandals are both possible emotional response to activist campaigns, which focus on social events that explore complex but universal ethic and raw emotions (Schmidt et. al., 2021).

### 2.3.2. Impact of activism on brand loyalty

In the reactive direction, the power of “woke” or awareness of injustice on brands is definite. Brands that are caught in social protests are perceived to carry less value and perform worse than before the protests. Consumers are also less satisfied and committed to previously preferred brands (Shuv-Ami, 2015). As mentioned above, the impact of public social backlash on brand loyalty is less definitive. This is because brand attachment persists from behavioral conditioning and influence cognitive processing about the brand – more specifically, consumers can justify for publicized corporate misconduct as singular incidents that do not reflect the comprehensive brand values (Guckian et al. 2017; Schmalz & Orth, 2012). In the proactive direction, the influence of corporate activism on brand loyalty is becoming more distinctive, however the extent of impact is less studied and identified (Moisescu & Gică, 2020). The majority of studies tend to focus on immediate responses to activist campaigns instead of the long-term impacts which are more often associated with brand loyalty (Schmidt et. al., 2021; Berestova, Kim, & Kim, 2021).

The direct impact of corporate activism on brand loyalty is observed under different points of interaction, as consumers react differently to different social issues involved under the umbrella of CSR (corporate social responsibility) and ESG (Vredenburg et. al., 2020). Campaign approaches and message presentation also yields different results. For example, in the United States consumer market one of the hot button topics is systematic racism and brands are expected to take the universal consensus against the issue (Yoon et. al., 2020). The choice to be vocal about this stance in marketing campaigns, however, may yield polarized result. While both Nike and Pepsi launched ads campaigns tailgating BLM, the Nike’s approach became the trendsetter and was generally received with applause while Pepsi’s campaign featuring Jendall Kenner was criticized to the point that Pepsi had to publicly apologize and take down the ads (Schmidt et. al., 2021). This illustrated that brand activism is evolving to the point of being an implicit requirement and its explicit expressions are expected to conform to the general moral “oughtness” in representation, which Pepsi has ultimately failed to follow when staging Kenner

offering beverages as a mean to cool down protest, causing the impression of belittling the issue (Schmidt et. al., 2021).

Across different topics of brand activism, consumers have responded most consistently positive on environmental issues, demonstrating the impact of environmental activism on loyalty cultivation (Moisescu & Gică, 2020). The trend is especially visible in the younger age group of generation Y and Z, as compared to generation X, with environmental values attached to a brand being a strong antecedent for purchase decision (Casalegno, Canelo, & Santoro, 2021). Social issues are more divisive, as the set benchmark for fairtrade and responsible corporations are not unified across global markets and the sense of moral “oughtness” are not necessarily transcribed (Kim, Lee, & Park, 2010; Yoon, 2020; Schmidt et. al., 2021).

### 2.3.3. Buycott and boycott

Boycott is an expression of protest against an entity by refusing to engage in commercial transaction with the entity or associated sellers. It is often politically and socially motivated (Vredenburg et. al., 2020). Boycott garners strength by volume of participation and can be characterized as parts of a civil movement, in this case targeting commercial entities (John & Klein, 2003). The refusal to purchase can persist en mass until the boycotted entity issue adequate response or yielding to the request of the boycotting party (John & Klein, 2003). Buycott, on the opposite end of the spectrum, is the expression of support for a certain entity through making purchases of the products (Neilson, 2010). Buycott and boycott are the products of responsive campaigns, as supposed to indifference or forceful requests for brands to not take stance in matter irrelevant to their operations (Eigenraam, Eelen, & Verlegh, 2021). Are boycott and buycott better than unresponsiveness or worse – consumer backlash for brands to stay clear out of issue too distant from the core business? Researchers generally agree that from a perspective of exposure, the answer is yes (Vredenburg et. al., 2020). By taking a public stance on social media, the intentions of brands are to elicit response and generate the snowball effect of virality. However, as abovementioned this is a calculated gamble because consumer attitudes and perceptions cannot be designed. In the greater context of a political movement, the brand is considered a politically motivated entity and its vocal actions are constantly judged by other stakeholders – the decision to buy or to reject is part of the expected exchange between consumers and the brands to communicate a political idea with commercial transaction (Neilson, 2010). Brand activism taken out of the CSR context is often view negatively as a way to politicized marketing for profit, resulting in the content coverage without good intents, which

have been associated with the terms “green wash” in environmental activism and “woke wash” in social activism (Vredenburg et. al., 2020)

## 2.4. Generation Z consumer characteristics

### 2.4.1. Age group differences in values and social engagement

The term generation Z (Gen Z) is used to describe people born from 1995 to 2010, a period marking the maturation and peak of digital technologies that penetrate deep into every facets of daily life (Francis & Hoefel, 2022). As the cost of internet connectivity and scaled up technologies decrease drastically, no matter where they live on the planet, people in Gen Z are digital natives, savvy and confident in participating and utilizing mobile devices and the social network (Ismail et. al., 2019; Francis & Hoefel, 2022). Every generation posits a different interpretation of consumption. For baby boomers born between 1940-1959 who grew up in the shadow of Cold War, ideology sells best. For Xers (1960-1979), it is status, for millennials (1980-1994) experience, and for Gen Z it is authenticity (Francis & Hoefel, 2022). The value of authenticity influences Gen Z’s interaction with brands and subsequently brand loyalty (Dabija, 2018; Ismail et. al., 2019; Joshi & Garg, 2020). Authenticity is expressed through fluid identities of not restricting oneself to any definition, through communal connection to generate more dialogs about different truths, through living realistically with true values (Francis & Hoefel, 2022). These important factors in consumption dictate the interaction between brand engagement, value consciousness, and brand loyalty for Gen Z (Ismail et. al., 2019). Engaging with the community in discussion about brands and seeking brand authenticity positively impact the cultivation of brand loyalty (Dabija, 2018; Ismail et. al., 2019). This partially explains for the rise of consumer activism in the past decades, as Gen Z becomes a major contributor in consumer spending and replaces the less vocal generations who also typically spend less time on the digital side of life (Yoon et. al., 2020).

Being identify-fluid suggests that Gen Z is increasingly detached from traditional demographic indicators used to outline consumer profiles of the elder generations, such as gender and religions (Francis & Hoefel, 2022). On the contrary, Gen Z identifies with multiple diverse social groups and actively engage in online discussion in the seek for truth (Reinikainen, Kari, & Luoma-aho, 2020; Munsch, 2021). With increased exposure comes increased sophistication, Gen Z is particularly skilled in understanding and reconciling different truths as they are sourced from different sources (Munsch, 2021). The main implication for truth seeking behaviors in consumption is that Gen Z is prone to thoroughly access and evaluate information concerning the brand and the product before making purchases (Reinikainen, Kari, & Luoma-

aho, 2020). They are also more comfortable with sharing rather than ownership, thus power the proliferation and growth of different products and services in the share economies (Francis & Hoefel, 2022). As seekers and appreciators of multiple truths, compared to elder generations, Gen Z prefers discussion and dialogues over confrontation (Francis & Hoefel, 2022). This preference for social participation in the non-confrontative and proactive manner motivates Gen Z's participation in activist campaigns in an expanded capacity that is more inclusive and result-based (Yoon et. al., 2021). Particularly in the subject of brand activism, Gen Z expects authenticity and concrete results in brand-led activist campaigns (Eigenraam, Eelen, & Verlegh, 2021).

#### 2.4.2. Age group differentiation in consumer activism

Consumer activism can be divided into direct engagement and reactions to activism campaigns related to brand and the implicit preferences for brands depending on their activist commitment on different ESG issues (Yoon et. al., 2020). In the first domain of engaging and reacting directly to brand led and consumer led activist campaign, generation Z has been identified as the changing force behind ethical capitalism and sustainable profit making (Ismail et. al., 2019; Joshi & Garg, 2020; Yoon et. al., 2020). The impact of sustainability and ESG is even more pronounced in products that cater more prominently toward Gen Z users, including the social platform and internet service companies (Vredenburg et. al., 2020; Yoon et. al., 2020). In response to the BLM campaign in the United States, Gen Z consumers have pressured companies such as Netflix and Twitter have announced moving its investment capitals to African American owned commercial banks in responding to pressure from rights groups and supporters of conscious capitalism (Yoon et. al., 2020). Similarly, the Gen Z led movement of boycotting Facebook has gained momentum during the peak virality of police brutality against African American in the United States, with companies followed one another in withdrawing ads from the Facebook universe (Schmidt et. al., 2020). Compared to elder generations, Gen Z participation in brand activist campaigns increased multifold due to their familiarity with social media as platforms for expression and also the enhanced appreciation for corporate sustainability (Francis & Hoefel, 2022).

In the second domain of preferred usage, Gen Z considers the products and services they used as concrete statements for expressing their individual identities (Francis & Hoefel, 2022). Furthermore, consumption is anchored solidly on ethics (Dabija, 2018; Yoon et. al., 2021; Francis & Hoefel, 2022). Because of these reasons, not only that Gen Z outnumbered other age groups in participation of consumer activist campaigns, but they also focus more on corporate

sustainability and activism as major performance indices to make purchase decision (Francis & Hoefel, 2022). Gen Z is also more sophisticated than elder generations in evaluating the quality and overall alignment of brand-led activist campaigns with total brand values (Eigenraam, Eelen, & Verlegh, 2021). The test of authenticity further provides adequate explanation for the success and failure of brand-led activist campaigns, connecting the authenticity of the campaign to the brand and between the message preached and what is actually practiced (Vredenburg et. al., 2020; Eigenraam, Eelen, & Verlegh, 2021). It is what Gen Z values most and they are by contribution the most vocal and ardent responders to corporate activism, to a certain extent even treating it as an implicit requirement for brand love and loyalty (Joshi & Garg, 2020; Francis & Hoefel, 2022).

### 3. Theoretical framework

#### 3.1. Typology of brand activism

Vredenburg et. al. provides a general framework to study brand-led activist campaigns that focuses specifically on the alignment between previous perceptions of brands’ ESG performance, and the activist messages delivered through marketing campaign, presented as “prosocial corporate practices” and “activist marketing messaging” in the matrix below (2020). Authentic activism is presented in the top right quadrant suggests the most favorable position wherein brands do not only posit strong ESG values and practices but also devise effective activist campaign to reflect these values in brand promotion.

CORPORATE PRACTICE	↑	<b>SILENT BRAND ACTIVISM</b> Low activist marketing messaging High engagement in prosocial practice Explicit prosocial brand purpose & values Potential authentic brand activism	<b>AUTHENTIC BRAND ACTIVISM</b> High activist marketing messaging High engagement in prosocial corporate practice Explicit prosocial brand purpose & values Framing and driving solutions to social problems
	↓	IKEA’s Taste the Future campaign (Eigenraam, Eelen, & Verlegh, 2021)	Ben & Jerry’s Dismantling White Supremacy campaign (Ciszek & Logan, 2018)



<p><b>ABSENCE OF BRAND ACTIVISM</b></p> <p>Low activist marketing messaging</p> <p>Low engagement in prosocial practice</p> <p>Lack of prosocial brand purpose &amp; values</p> <p>Authentic brand activism opportunity</p>	<p><b>INAUTHENTIC BRAND ACTIVISM</b></p> <p>High activist marketing messaging</p> <p>Low engagement in prosocial corporate practice</p> <p>Lack of explicit prosocial brand purpose &amp; values</p> <p>Deceptive or opportunistic decoupling</p> <p>Pepsi's BLM campaign (Schmidt et. al., 2021)</p> <p>Audi's Paid My Due campaign (Eigenraam, Eelen, &amp; Verlegh, 2021)</p>
<p><b>ACTIVIST MARKETING MESSAGING</b></p> <p>Low ←————→ High</p>	

Figure 2 - Vredenburg et. al' typology of brand activism

The SILENT BRAND ACTIVISM categorizes the popular counter option for the majority of MNC brands – wherein the corporation itself implements strategic ESG pillars and robust CSR practices in its operations but posit low activist messages in its marketing function (Vredenburg et. al., 2020). The choice supports the corporations in taking neutral stance with their CSR values being more result based rather than vocalized. Swedish firms IKEA and H&M provide an excellent example for silent activism because the companies rarely rely on their expansive and high-quality CSR practices as marketing tools; the brands have largely remained neutral on the ground of activism despite the company's robust ESG orientation (Eigenraam, Eelen, & Verlegh, 2021). This is calculated choice influenced by IKEA and H&M' monetarization model of retailing massive volume of low-cost products, which in itself presents a high-stake leverage between sustainability and profitability, making contention unavoidable when discussed (Yuen, Zeng, & Lo, 2021).

In the AUTHENTIC BRAND ACTIVISM quadrant, brands do not only posit strong CSR values but also aligns this strength with its public marketing messages (Vredenburg et. al., 2020). Representative brands in this domain include but not limited to Ben & Jerry's and Patagonia, as these brands have responded timely accurately to specific events that triggered Gen Z's attention in social issues – Ben & Jerry's Dismantling White Supremacy campaign in response to the BLM movement in the United States and Patagonia's Global Climate Strike campaign following the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord (Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Berestova, Kim, & Kim, 2021).

While the upper quadrants of the matrix represent efficient examples of brand activism, the lower quadrants are not so. The ABSENCE OF BRAND ACTIVISM includes brands which



posit unclear ESG strategies and less robust CRS practices, while also ignore the opportunities of activist marketing messaging (Vredenburg et. al., 2020). This quadrant is considerably unoccupied, as the pressures on brands to engage and play a role in social issues as well as fulfilling CSRs are palpable, making it nearly impossible for brands to both ignore the sustainability factors and remain muted on social issues (Schmidt et. al., 2021). The more brands interact directly with consumers downstream, the higher demands for them to consider ESG as guidance for actions and vocally informed clients of these choices (Nadanyiova, Gajanova, & Majerova, 2020). With enhanced capabilities to trace social impacts across the value chain, not only brands but also manufacturers upstream are scrutinized, thus expanding the net of stakeholders and increasing participations from all stakeholders (O'Rourke & Strand, 2017).

Last but not least, in the **INAUTHENTIC BRAND ACTIVISM** quadrant, brands face the highest risks of facing backlash from consumers (Vredenburg et. al., 2020). This is because brands utilize activist marketing messages to attract customer attention when its core operations do not reflect the same values in respective social issues, ultimately results in unauthenticity and deception (Eigenraam, Eelen, & Verlegh, 2021). Two examples for inauthentic brand activism are Pepsi's Kendall Jenner and Audi's Paid My Due campaign (Eigenraam, Eelen, & Verlegh, 2021; Schmidt et. al., 2021). As mentioned previously, the blatant incoherence and misalignment between brand values and social issues presented in these campaigns are responsible for their failure in eliciting positive consumer response (Schmidt et. al., 2021).

It is clear that the degree to which "prosocial corporate practices" might align with "activist marketing messaging in Vredenburg et. al' framework to understand the positioning of brand activism represents the authenticity factor (2020). Brands located in the upper quadrants of Silent brand activism and Authentic brand activism posit high congruence between what the brands say through marketing campaigns and what they actually do in ESG practices. Brands in these quadrants rank high in authenticity regardless of the extent to which they practice activism. In the lower quadrants of Absence of brand activism and Inauthentic brand activism, brands suffer from incongruence between the conflicting brand images presented in marketing campaigns and what customers actually perceive about the brands' ESG capacities. Due to the lack of ESG values and practices in corporate activities, these brands are inauthentic regardless of how much they engage in activist marketing campaigns. Authenticity and consumer perceptions of brands' ESG values and practices emerge as two important factor in moderating the outcomes of brand activism positioning.

Vredenburg et. al.’ typology of brand activism only suggests potential outcomes for the strategic position that brands take in activism (2020). Eigenraam, Eelen, and Verlegh’ concept of brands authenticity proposes a more concrete direction in connecting brand authenticity with consumer responses, as presented in Figure 3 (2021). Perceptions of authenticity is moderated by brand perception and campaign characters, as well as the interaction effect from these two factors. There is also a latent relationship between authenticity and consumer responses, including campaign participation and purchase preference (Eigenraam, Eelen, and Verlegh, 2021). Similar to Vredenburg et. al.’ typology of brand activism, Eigenraam, Eelen, and Verlegh’ study also focuses on brand authenticity as the main moderator for consumer responses to activist campaigns. Authenticity is clearly illustrated as a product of brand perceptions (BP) and campaign character (CC) which ultimately influences how consumers react to the campaign. However, the apparent limitations in Eigenraam, Eelen, and Verlegh’ study of authenticity as compared to Vredenburg et. al.’ typology of brand activism is that it does not suggest the different directions of consumer responses – positive or negative, boycotting or buy coting

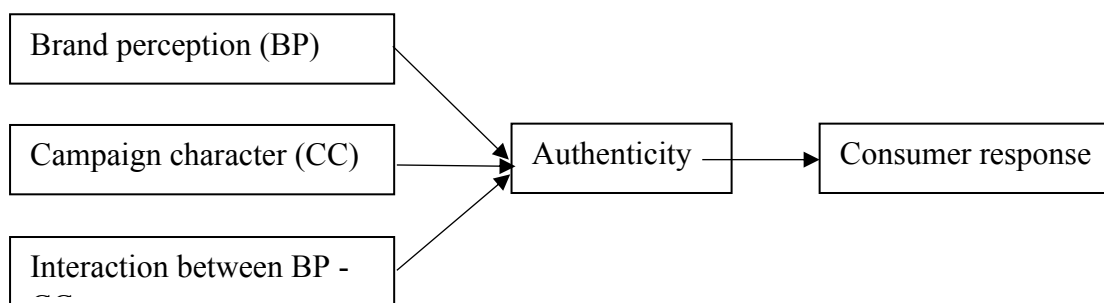


Figure 3 - Eigenraam, Eelen, and Verlegh’ framework of authenticity (2021)

The proposed framework for explaining the interactions between Gen Z’s responses to brand activism, purchase decision, and brand loyalty is described in Figure 4. The framework attempts to correct the limitation from Vredenburg et. al.’ typology of brand activism in that it suggests authenticity to be the alignment between existing perceptions about brands and activist messaging as found in marketing campaigns. The framework also identifies perceptions about ESG values and practices as the main moderator for consumer perceptions about brands. In extending Eigenraam, Eelen, and Verlegh’ concept of authenticity, the framework presented two possible outcomes for consumers’ determination of authenticity. In responding positively to high authentic campaigns, consumers will make purchase preference for the brands or support the activist campaigns through participations. In responding negatively to low authentic campaigns, consumers will boycott the brand. Furthermore, the framework also proposes that positive responses to brand activism can build brand loyalty.

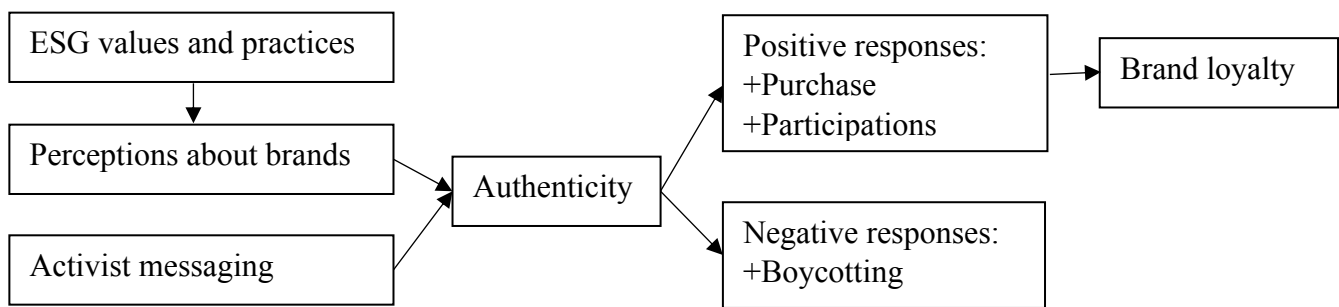


Figure 4 - Proposed framework for Gen Z's responses to brand activism, purchase decision, and brand loyalty

#### 4.1. Philosophical stand

The philosophical stand of this project is interpretivism. The interpretivist approach differentiates from the remaining three philosophical quadrants in that it leans toward a subjective evaluation of social phenomena (Hirscheim & Klein, 1989). By interpreting how meanings are attached to action, interpretivism deduces knowledge from observations and interviews. More specifically, instead of focusing purely on theoretical frameworks, interpretivism processes information and data as they are subjected to unique interpretations under the private context of individual experiences (Gunbayi & Sorm, 2018). In this research design, the perceptions of a particular group of consumers toward brand activism will be explored from different angle of experiences, ultimately result in a comprehensive and diversified understanding about brand loyalty as contingent to brand activism.

The interpretivist approach is reflected in the choice of semi-structured questions used in the interviews. In responding the research question of how Gen Z perceives campaign authenticity and the influence of perceived authenticity on responses to activist campaign, the semi-structure interview questions seek to understand the broad categories of feelings and actions that Gen Z might take toward brand activism, drawing on specific situations of how they have actually acted toward specific campaign messages. For the question of comparing between perceptions of ESG performances and perceptions of authenticity in moderating purchase decision and brand loyalty, the flow of questions invited participants to consider the entire process of making a purchase decision and how they might have factored their knowledge of brands' ESG performances against the authenticity of marketing messages to finally come to a decision.

The interpretivist approach to research also marks the role of researchers as facilitator of conversations and dialogues to reveal knowledge instead of dictating the content of this process by expertise (Hirscheim & Klein, 1989). Inductive reasoning is critical for interpretivist

researchers to draw general conclusion from specific observation and pattern recognition (Woiceshyn & Daellenbach, 2018). Data from qualitative in-depth interviews about exposure and experience with brand activism are pruned and generalized to construct a paradigm of latent relationship between brand activism and brand loyalty.

#### 4.2. Design & approach

The target sample is Generation Z consumers of fashion labels categorized into two main types: Fast fashion and slow fashion. Fast fashion labels are identified by cost leadership strategy and rapid style cycles, led by the Big Four multinational corporations (MNC) Hennes & Mauritz, Inditex, Gap Inc, and Fast Retailing (Anguelov, 2015). Fast fashion products bear a relatively undesirable reputation of generating massive waste during production and post-consumption, wherein resources are depleted to make clothes that soon to be turned into waste (Bick et al., 2018). Slow fashion, on the other hand, are categorized by longer life cycle and environmental-friendly production process. It is also associated with moderate consumption and an increased tendency to properly recycling products for extending their life cycles (Anguelov, 2015).

Consumers response to semi structured interviews consists of sixteen main questions concerning three specific topics: 1) Awareness of brand activism, 2) Perceptions toward brand loyalty, and 3) Impact of brand activism on purchase decision and brand loyalty. The questions aimed at determining the demographics of the participants, their understanding of brands' ESG performances and activism, and ultimately how they make purchase decision of fashion product and determining brand loyalty. However, the list of questions is entirely unrestricted and the rest of questions during the interview are unplanned. Depending on the flow of the conversations, interviewers can provide additional questions to clarify topics of interest. This expanding nature of semi-structured interviews allow interviewers to control the flow of the interview, allocate proper time to expand topic of interest, and gather information from interviewers without requiring prior understanding about the questions, thus increasing validity of the study (Saunders et. al., 2016). The list of main questions to the interview can be found in the appendix section.

#### 4.3. Data collection

The ideal sample size is within the range of ten to twelve interviews, mainly because of the time-consuming nature of semi-structured interviews and the expected quantity of data deduced. Two interviews were conducted as pilot to determine the extent of information provided in an interview is deemed sufficient to collect enough data on each element of the proposed framework. Even though there are no required benchmark for the number of

interviews necessary for validity confirmation in qualitative studies, the general consensus is that there have to be enough interviews to reach saturation – the point where new data accumulation no longer enhances novelty and relevancy (Dworkin, 2012). The pilot interviews suggested that the key differentiation between participants in terms of how much relevant information they could provide to the study is professional exposure to the fashion industry, whether through professional works and/or studies. Participants who posit professional exposure provided more in-depth and on-point insight about how authenticity is perceived. Thus, snowballing sampling is utilized after the two pilot interviews to identify interviewees with sufficient understanding to the fashion industry. Furthermore, previous studies on the relationship between brand activism and loyalty utilizing semi-structured interviews suggested the range of interview proposed is reasonable for reaching saturation (Green & Peloza, 2011; Sahin & Burnaz, 2019).

The method of data collection is convenient sampling by exponential discriminative snowballing, wherein each interviewees suggest multiple referrals, yet only one of these referrals are selected to be interviewed next (Saunders et. al., 2016). Snowballing is a non-probability technique highly effective for identifying sample with specific traits. In this case, it is chosen because the interviewees must fall within a specific age range and posit specific preference for clothes shopping. The method is also selected due to the ease of reaching critical volume, as supposed to other methods of convenient samplings that called for a higher volume of initial approaches and more subsequent screening actions for relevant interviewees (Saunders et. al., 2016).

Data is collected face-to-face through both on and offline channels, as permitted by the social distancing regulations during Covid-19 pandemic.

#### 4.4. Data analysis

Interview transcripts are analyzed in their entirety. Axial coding is deployed for integration and categorization of prominent themes in the scripts. Axial coding is a common research method for analyzing qualitative data by grouping them into codes, categories, and subcategories (Allen, 2017). More specifically, each category in the proposed theoretical framework including 1) ESG values and practices, 2) Perceptions about brands, 3) Activist messaging, 4) Authenticity, 5) Responses, and 6) Brand loyalty serve as paradigm elements in axial coding. Opening coding is sourced from transcript quotes to support connect with paradigm elements and produced axial categories to explain and observe the proposed latent relationships between

variables in the framework. Example of data analysis process is provided below while the complete coded transcripts can be found in the appendix.

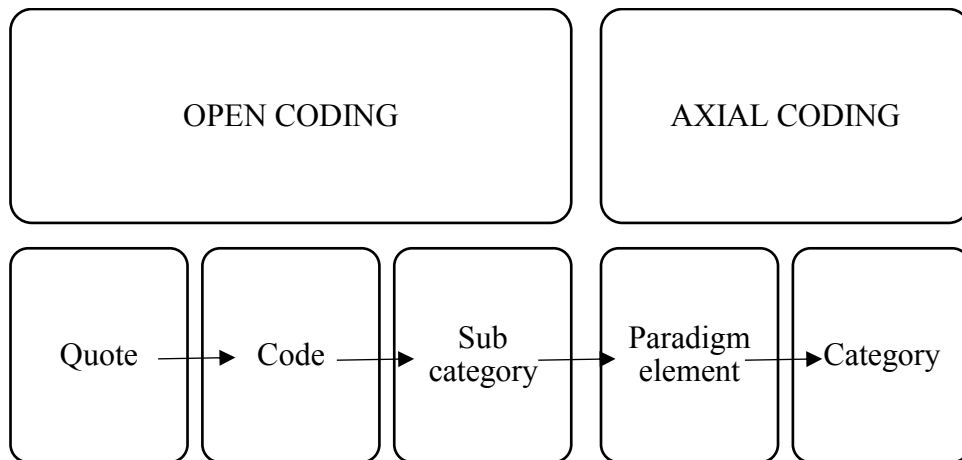


Figure 5 - - Axial coding process (Allen, 2017)

#### 4.5. Quality control

Since the research takes an interpretivist approach, quality control is crucially important to manage and alleviate substantial risks of bias (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2008). Hence, debriefs were carried out for every interview, allowing researchers to confirm with interviewees if their opinions have been correctly expressed and understood. Furthermore, axial coding also supports restricting potential bias in data analysis by clearly identifying the subareas that were mentioned most often interviews and suggesting a direction for linking these codes (Allen, 2017).

#### 4.6. Ethical considerations

All participants were provided with consent forms and properly debriefed after the interviews. They were informed and agreed record and transcribe the interviews for research purpose. Interviews were immediately anonymized after collection and presented in aggregation, respecting and protecting full confidentiality of the interviews. A full copy of the consent form can be found in the appendix section.

#### 4.7. Research limitations

Research limitations are inherent to the nature of interpretivist qualitative research, wherein researchers seek to deduce a general pattern of knowledge from individual lenses of interpretation. Even though potential bias has been controlled by awareness and strict debriefing procedures, it is possible that the findings reflect the researchers' subjective views on the topic. Furthermore, the malleable Covid-19 situation has also induced certain

inconvenience to data collection, causing interview arrangements that were not necessarily ideal.

## 5. Analysis & discussion

### 5.1. Overarching themes

Ten semi structured interviews were conducted with Gen Z master students aged 22 to 26 from Lund University in Sweden. Gender identity was not mentioned and factored into the framework as a variable. As characterized by snowball sampling, the demographic was homogeneous, with a small range of age distribution and median age at 24 and similar restricted disposable income as the participants were full time students. Nine out of ten participants were EU citizens, and the remaining participant was Vietnamese. All participants posited general knowledge of key concepts in the research, such as brand ESG performance, activist marketing campaigns, and the differences between fast and slow fashion labels. However, knowledge of brand ESG performance varies greatly between participants who were more exposed professionally to the fashion industry and those who were only concerned consumers of fashion. Mutual concerns for brand's ESG practices and values were shared among all participants.

As seen in the axial coding tables in the appendix section, the overarching themes highlighted through all ten interviews aligned with the literature on Gen Z consumer in the pivoting characteristic of pragmatism. Product utility clearly influences purchase decision and brand loyalty. Product utility is defined not only by product functionality but also by the ability to mitigate different conflicting characteristics that consumers prefer in the same product. More specifically, because the participants were students with limited disposable income, the preferred characteristics were contingent on price, quality, functionality, and ESG factors. As informed and concerned consumers, participants must negotiate more aggressively between price and ESG factors, as opposed to the situation where consumers had more disposable income.

On one end of the spectrum, participants chose fast fashion brand with strongest perceived ESG practices, which were mentioned to be H&M. On the other end, participants preferred slow fashion brands and shopped less frequently to mitigate the higher cost of these products. Both decisions highlighted the impact of product utility as a complex negotiation between different conflicting factors that consumers desire in the product. Where there was no brand loyalty it was because participants found it was more beneficial to buy what they need from any brand that best matched all the required characteristics. Where participants vowed loyalty to a specific

brand it was because there were few alternatives on the market at the same level of wholesomeness.

Conclusively, consumer preference was diluted in the zone of favorites and concretized in the zones of avoidance. An overwhelming majority of interviewees did not posit any favorite brands; some participants at most mentioned brands that they thought could adequately meet all of their purchasing requirements. Despite a clear understanding of fast and slow fashions, participants did not show a preference for either category but generally reported flexible purchasing decisions depending on what was needed most in their purchasing context. Brands most often mentioned in this zone of favorites included H&M and Patagonia. While participants were not bound brand loyalty, they were absolutely committed in boycotting brands which they perceived to be unethical. Contrasting to the expansive and flexible zone of favorites, this zone of avoidance was concretized and binding, as participants vocally expressed not purchasing from several brands because of publicized ESG violation. The most mentioned brand in this zone was Shein. Conclusively, ESG values and performance influenced purchase decision more when they were perceived as negative, as compared to when they were positive.

The third overarching theme from the interviews were the varied degrees to which participants sought information about brands' ESG values and performances. All participations – including those who were professionally exposed to the fashion industry and those who were merely concerned consumers – showed sophistications in judging the validity of brand-initiated ESG marketing messages. Some participants even crosschecked these messages with corporate practice by seeking official sustainability reports. As in the case of purchase intention, the test of genuineness mattered less when the marketing messages align with brand identity – participants saw activist campaigns as a reflection of who the brand was – and more when the message was perceived as ingenuine. Participants expressed dislike for brand who used ESG marketing as a pretext to build a positive brand image that was not representative of what the business actually did to societies and the environment. Interestingly, between the different types of marketing messages, those initiated by the brands were less trusted while those originated from media sources registered more powerfully with participants. This characteristic suggested the inherent nature of the media virality, where bad news stuck more and travelled more rapidly. The publicized case of Shein was mentioned in the majority of interviews showed tremendous stickiness wherein participants decided to boycott the brand regardless of brand-initiated messages to mitigate the impact of ESG violations exposed by media.



## 5.2. ESG values and practices

The axial analysis suggested the importance of brands' perceived ESG values and practices in influencing customer responses toward brand-initiated activist marketing messages and purchase preference for the brand. More specifically, participants confirmed their boycott of brands involved in ESG scandals or damaging to the environment and societies without reconciliatory practices. As abovementioned, the impact of perceived ESG values and practices on consumer responses and purchase preference were more prominently and homogeneously exhibited in the case of boycott, while positive ESG values and practices were thought of as a part of the good brand, which consumers appreciated but did not feel that brands must vocally express their ESG stand by activist marketing.

Reconciliatory practices were understood as ESG strategies to limit production and consumption impact. They played a significant part in consumer judgment of the brand's ESG performance, recognizing that while fast fashion brands have exerted massive damage to the environment and on some occasion poorly compensated worker, some brands have initiated reconciliatory practices to reverse the damage and build sustainability. H&M was discussed at length by at half of the participants as a brand falling in this grey category, a brand that initially was not associated with high ESG performances but have recently experienced a turnaround in its environmental and labor treatments for the better. Because of this reason, H&M was more positively regarded than other fast fashion brands which participants considered to have made no attempts in correcting past violation or building up capacity for future improvement in ESG. The topics of concern for participants in evaluating ESG values and practices of fashion brands belonged to two main areas of worker relations and environmental protection. In worker relation, participants clearly recognized the monetarization model of fast fashion of offshoring production to less developed country to exploit low-cost labor. However, responses varied on two ends of the spectrum, where participants suggested that brands need to engage in this monetarization model to make profit but also sharply condemned brands that mistreated workers to maximize production volume and margin. Shein was used repeatedly as a target for boycott because of their violation of the labor codes in low-income countries, yet H&M – a company with similar monetarization model and an equally publicized case of workers' maltreatment where its supplier factory collapsed in 2017, killing over 1000 Bangladeshi workers – was viewed less critically (Bick et. al., 2018).

Compared to worker relations, environmental protection was mentioned more often as an important pillar of ESG values and practices for fashion brands. It was also the domain where brands could be more proactive and innovative where brands could perform to a greater extent

of deviation, whereas fair employment was treated with a stricter and more concrete baseline of ethical practices. In the domain of environmental protection, consumers acknowledged that brands could move forward with environmental sustainability slowly as long as it was consistently. Participants mentioned fast fashion brands who were seeking to become environmentally sustainable with circular economy practices, resource conservation, and the utilization of recycled materials in production. They also recognized that these practices were constrained and poorly leveraged when compared to the massive environmental impact of fast fashion. However, as reconciliatory practices, these initiatives were highly welcomed and consumers factored ESG efforts into their purchase decision, not exclusively by the efficiency of the practice but whether or not fast fashion brands did make a strategic pivot toward better ESG practices.

True to Gen Z consumer characteristics and values identified in the literature review, participants actively sought out information concerning ESG values and practices from diverse sources. They also registered and analyzed the information, though with different degree of thoroughness. The most prominent example of how Gen Z scrutinized ESG information is with H&M. As abovementioned, the majority of participants regarded H&M relatively more positive than other fast fashion brands. When confronted with the factors of price, selection, and ESG impact among fast fashion brands, participants considered H&M as the more conscious option. They gathered information about H&M ESG initiatives through social media, online articles, annual reports, discussions with others, and shopping experience. However, the extent to which information was accumulated and analyzed greatly differed between participants who posited professional exposure with the fashion industry and those who did not. Professional exposure was understood as working experience in the fashion ecosystem, having a personal connection who works in the fashion ecosystem and regularly discussing industry topics with this connection, or having studied or researched extensively about topics in the fashion industry.

Participants with professional exposure to the fashion industry were more critical and specific in identifying sources of information. They were able to name the specific sources detailing H&M ESG initiatives and comment on their validity, while participants without professional exposure were less specific and selective in their sources of information. Furthermore, these participants were also able to judge the authenticity and effectiveness of H&M ESG initiatives, pointing out that the amount of recycling materials used in production and circulated clothes only contributed to a fraction of the waste generated by the firm. Participants who felt most

intensely against H&M also pointed out the practice of encouraging consumers to buy more for cheaper prices as a violation of sustainability practice.

### 5.3. Perceptions about brands

There was an integral connection between ESG practices and brand perception for all participants interviewed. The degree to which ESG values influenced brand perceptions vary, as abovementioned in the case of H&M wherein participants attached different values to the brand even though they were aware of the same ESG practices. There was a clear division between participants who differentiated big brands from small brands and those who did not. Big brands were represented by well-known labels such as Zara, H&M, Shein – from the fast fashion industry – and Gucci, Patagonia, and Levi – from the slow fashion industry. Small brands were mentioned as boutique clothe makers which participants acknowledged to serve only a niche market and known to only a few. Brand perception was positively skewed toward smaller brands for participants who made the distinctions from larger brands. Participants felt that smaller brands not only posit strong ESG practices – mostly by their characterization of not selling to the mass and making clothes and accessories from selective materials – but also fit well with the other purchase decision factors such as price and quality. Participants who did not make the distinctions between small and large brands generally attached less values to ESG practices in perceiving brands.

Participants exhibited clear characteristics of Gen Z consumers in perceiving brands, through the overwhelming sense of practicality, identity fluidity, and lack of attachment to any particular brands. In terms of practicality, brand perception is attached to perceived quality of the product and brand practices, with these two factors strongly moderated by consumer values. Participants showed positive attitude talking about wholesome brands that met the complex criteria of price, selection, quality, and ESG, but in reality, they were inclined to purchase the best option available without concerning too much about the brand. Brand perception was most influential in forming customer relationship with the brand only in the case of negative perceptions led by poor ESG performance – as in the case of Shein there were a vocal expression for boycott while more mixed response and no boycott was recorded in the case of H&M. Patagonia was a brand positively perceived by the majority of participants by its ESG practices, yet none mentioned having made a purchase from Patagonia. This fact highlighted the practical aspect of brand perception among Gen Z wherein a negative perception served as an eliminator of options and thus was more influential in making purchase decisions while a positive perception did not necessarily translate to higher interactions with brand such as brand preference or loyalty.

Negative perceptions about brand were assessed from two directions: secondary sources of what was said or published about the brand and primary publication of what the brand said about itself. For participants who did not posit professional exposure in the fashion industry, negative secondary publication which they came across online or through acquaintances stuck and became powerful in moderating how they perceived the brands. Participants described in detail the latent relationship of discovering brands exploiting foreign workers through the news, attaching an unethical label to the brand, and boycotting it to show their stance on the matter. However, boycotting was spoken of more as an individual responsibility and less as part of a movement.

Negative perceptions about brand also stemmed from participants discovering double standards in what brands represented about itself. As abovementioned, H&M served an excellent case of double standards and were mentioned by almost all participants with conflicting viewpoint. When the perception was negative, participants accused H&M of misleading consumers in the majority of its ESG practices – the company provided vague label information about the contribution and origin of recycled materials, overmarketing its circular program of recycling clothes when in reality this program only recycled a marginal fraction of waste generated by H&M, and also motivated consumers to buy more with its discount scheme, even as it preached about responsible consumption. H&M marketing efforts to represent itself as a green brand seemed to have backfired. On the other hand, participants who were less critical in scrutinizing H&M materials posited double standards that benefited the brand. They mentioned reading from secondary sources about H&M's poor ESG reputation in the past and recognizing the brand's efforts to pivot away from this reputation to become more sustainable. Participants from this category were also more likely to shop from H&M, hence the positive perception also served as a justification for purchase.

Positive perceptions about brands were mentioned in three categories: homogeneously acknowledged sustainable brands, recovering brands, and small brands. Patagonia was recognized by the majority of participants as an indisputably sustainable brands, however despite this positive perception no participant reported purchasing from Patagonia. Recovering brands included brands that made an effort to pivot away from the lack of ESG practices, of which H&M were mentioned most often, as well as Zara and Nike. Participants who mentioned smaller brands held positive regards toward the brands and also purchased from them.

#### 5.4. Campaign characteristics and interaction with brand perception

BLM and environmental campaigns were most mentioned as examples for brand activism. BLM was mentioned in association with Patagonia while environmental campaigns were

connected with H&M. Participants' perceptions of campaigns varied significantly as they were inherently tied to perceptions about brand's ESG values and practices. BLM endorsed by Patagonia was positively viewed by participants under the influence of brand perception, as participants mentioned support for the campaign without acknowledging the contents of this campaign. On the other hand, H&M's environmental campaigns were viewed with scrutiny, with drastically contrasting responses from participants. All participants who mentioned H&M's environmental campaigns suggested that the campaigns were important to business operation, however the authenticity of these campaigns as expression of ESG practices were questionable. Perceptions about H&M environmental campaign varied from being greenwashing to marking important transition toward sustainability. It was clear that perceptions about activist campaigns were homogeneous where campaigns were perceived as genuine reflection of brand's ESG values and practices. Perceptions of campaigns became controversial and contrasted when participants saw a disparity in campaign values and brand values.

Supports for activist campaigns were expressed in terms of social media engagement and purchase preference. Participants distributed social media support rather freely as there was no cost attached and engagement was considered one-off instead of consistent vocal support for the campaign. Supporting activist campaign by boycott was more complex because participants only exhibited mild purchase preference for recovering brands and small brands. Environmental campaigns played an important role in altering participations' perception of recovering brands, as they signaled a change in sustainability mindset which were welcomed and supported by participants who previously made purchase from the brand but felt conflicted about brands' poor ESG performance. Environmental campaigns played no significant role in generating positive regards and purchase preference among participants who did not previously buy from the brand. These participants were more likely to scrutinize campaign contents and subsequently considered the campaigns to be brand-led attempts of greenwashing.

The impact of activist campaign on purchase intention and brand loyalty was marginal because of two main reasons: Firstly, perceptions of activist campaigns were inherently tied to perception of ESG values and practices. Secondly, activist campaigns only further justified existing purchase preference. Participants who held preference for specific brands scrutinized the contents of activist campaigns by other brands more carefully. On the other hand, activist campaigns were readily supported by participants who already positively perceived brands' ESG values and practices. More specifically, participants who did not express favorable opinions about H&M criticized their activist campaigns as being greenwashing and

unauthentic, providing ample opinions for their argument. While these arguments were justified, they contrasted significantly of participants who reported buying from H&M and regarded their activist campaigns as important changes, despite being fully aware that these changes could not compensate adequately to the brand's massive environmental impact. The findings suggested that activist campaigns in the fashion industry exerted limited influence on consumer perceptions and subsequently purchase intention. Brand perception, in contrast, held tremendous sway on how participants perceived brand-led activist campaigns. As one participant mentioned in the interview, there was an increased willingness to support activist campaigns organized by an ethical brand, as in the case of Patagonia. However, campaign supports did not necessarily translate to purchase preference. Even though participants suggested their willingness to support Patagonia's BLM campaign, none reported actually making a purchase from the brand.

#### 5.6. Authenticity

All participants demonstrated critical thinking processes to judge the authenticity of the brand ESG values, its business operations, and activist campaigns. There was a clear distinction between marketing tactics and messages which brands wanted to present to consumers and the awareness of pressures that business operations exerted on the environment and society. Of all brands mentioned in the interviews, participants only regarded the marketing messages of Patagonia and small brands to be authentic to brand values and ESG practices. All other brands were recognized as "only trying to put on a positive image" or "not doing enough". There were cases where participants reconciled inauthenticity with perceived efforts to change, as abovementioned with fast fashion brand H&M. Even as consumers compensated the lack of authenticity with efforts to change, they clearly acknowledged the conflict between brands' marketing messages and business operations.

Authenticity was perceived almost immediately using existed knowledge about the brand, which participants have accumulated through prior social discussions on and offline, as well as extensive reading and research. There was equal focus on reviewing the contents of marketing messages and the monetarization model of brands. Participants first pointed out the lack of cohesion in sustainability information presented in the marketing messages and subsequently suggested that the monetarization models of large brands were unsustainable. Even though participants did not buy from Patagonia, they homogenously mentioned the brand to be authentic, because a significant portion of profit went directly into funding sustainable projects. Patagonia also did not recommend consumers to buy more but rather to reuse their products longer. These two factors were mentioned repeatedly when participants were asked

how they knew the brands were truly sustainable. Participants reported the fast fashion monetarization model of selling more to make more profits was essentially antagonistic toward sustainability, hence there was a conditioned concern to scrutinize fast fashion ESG marketing messages more carefully.

### 5.7. Brand loyalty

Participants were not influenced by brand loyalty in making purchase decision. On one hand, participants demonstrated the subconscious needs to justify their purchases of fast fashion by recognizing the ESG values and practices of recovering brands. However, this justification was less a sign of brand loyalty and more a negotiation leverage for participants to make the best deal out of different factors of price, selection, quality, and ESG and maintain a degree of responsible consumption. As participants mentioned, they knew it was not ideal to purchase fast fashion but found it unwise to purchase clothes at exponentially higher costs just for the name brand. The preference for some fast fashion brand was not a sign of brand loyalty but rather suggested budget constraints.

On the other spectrum, participants who preferred slow fashions and small brands were also not committed to purchasing these brands without specific needs for usage. Participants who preferred slow fashion and small brands were acutely conscious of consuming less and expanding the product life cycle, ultimately constraining purchase frequency. Even though participants mentioned a connection with the brand on a more intimate level, such as knowing the products and the brand narratives, they only preferred making the purchase from these brands in specific contexts instead of a persisting preference for the brand regardless of purchasing conditions.

In addition to the lack of brand loyalty, participants also valued consistent quality and overall wholesomeness for making purchase instead of positing an intense emotion for the brand – as previously described with brand love. Because Patagonia – the brand that was most homogenously respected and mentioned as an ethically wholesome label – had even fewer customers and purchase preference than the controversial brand H&M, it was questionable if brand loyalty was factored into the complex equation for purchase decision. Brand perception and purchase preference were being considered solely on their ability to meet the pricing, selection, quality, and ESG requirements. Among these factors, price and ESG played a significant role as the population characteristics had limited disposable income and a heightened sense of consumer responsibility. Instead of remaining loyal to specific brands, participants made purchase decision contingent on the product, confirming the practicality that characterized Gen Z consumption behavior.

## 5.8. Framework evaluation

There results did not validate the framework illustrating the latent relationship between brand activism and brand loyalty, consisting of factors ESG values and practices, Perceptions of brands, Activist messaging, Responses, and Brand loyalty. There were two main findings which proved that the framework could not hold: Firstly, there was no signs of interaction between Perceptions of brands and Activist messaging and secondly, brand loyalty did not find to influence purchase decision. ESG values and practices were found to exert significant impact on brand perception, especially in the case of inefficient ESG practices that resulted in consumers boycotting the brand. However, brand perceptions did not interact with campaign character to determine campaign success. Rather, campaign success was contingent only to what consumers already perceived and recognized about the brands. Authenticity was evaluated less by the contents of campaigns but more by business practices – which consumers researched and registered. Information delivered through brand-led campaign was less trusted than those generated by consumers through secondary sources. Lastly, there was no sign of brand loyalty influencing purchase decision. Purchase decision was completely contingent on the practicality of the product and not of the brand. Consumers preferred buying products that could meet their complex needs of pricing, selections, quality, and ESG values attached to the products. While consumers expressed shifting between brands with ease, they found it more difficult to purchase from brands perceived unethical, as this action violated their image as responsible consumers. In other words, while boycott was tangible and difficult to change, buycott based on brand preference was not observed among the participants.

## 6. Conclusion

The limitations of the study are inherent to the quality and quantity of information mined from the structure interviews. Even though snowball sampling has been utilized to find Gen Z participants who posit adequate knowledge about the fashion industry to draw informed decisions about brands' ESG practices and values, as well as to evaluate the authenticity of brands' activist marketing messaging. There exists a relatively wide gap of prior exposure to the fashion industry, as reflected through the methods of collecting information concerning ESG practices and interests in the industry in general. To a certain extent, this gap reflects the reality of the sample – where participants who are less exposed to the industry will be less informed about the different variety of activist campaigns led by the brands. However, as a whole, perceptions about brands – most specifically H&M – are highly congruent because of participants' abilities to evaluate and source relevant information relating to brands' ESG values and practices. The limitation in quality and quantity of data harvested from interviews



can be greatly improved in focused group studies wherein participants posit a more homogenous level of knowledge about the fashion industry, or through drastically expanding the sample size to include only interviews from participants with baseline knowledge.

The second limitation of the study stemmed from research bias in analyzing and coding the data sourced through interviews. Even though interviews were conducted face-to-face through on and offline channels according to the Covid-19 safety guidelines, the interviewers might have misinterpreted certain verbal expressions of participants due to biases, as the result of prior knowledge about brands' ESG practices and its activism. More specifically, the researchers acknowledge the bias for Patagonia as an authentic activist brand and thus might have unintentionally framing participants into recalling their prior experiences with the brand. Biases was corrected by self-awareness. As in the case of Patagonia, the interviewer has largely refrained from mentioning the brand in subsequent interviews and only register organic mentioning of brands directly from the participants. However, the impact of unconscious bias which might influence questions framing and presentation to participants during the interview is compounded, as there is only one interviewer conducting the entire process of data collection.

The overarching theme of the study is how brand loyalty has grown to be an irrelevant concept with Gen Z consumers. It is apparent that while consumers might hold positive regards to a brand because of its ESG values and practices, this positive regard rarely translates to purchase preference and when it does, the decision to make a purchase from the brand is largely constricted by other factors such as price, selection, and purchase frequency. The results reflect a reality in the fashion market where consumers are indeed spoiled for choices and brand loyalty is quick to become an outdated concept. Gen Z consumers in particular are highly practical when it comes to making purchase decisions. When switching cost is low and the calculations that go into making a purchase become more complicated with budget constraints and ethical considerations, consumers rarely stick to one choice of brand over time. Consumers who are relatively less aware of the ESG impacts of the fashion industry tend to rely on price and selection as the core benchmark for purchase decision. The influence of brand loyalty is further diminished when consumers might hold positive regards toward a brand but do not have the income to purchase the product, as heightened by the representativeness of participants as full-time graduate students. The majority of participants have limited disposable incomes, making price and selections more important factors than brand loyalty in the purchasing decision.

The result also suggests the importance of organic ESG values and practices over investment in activist campaigns for brands. More specifically, brands are not required to take a stand in social issues when the events trigger opportunities for marketing expressions of brand images. The majority of participants value organic ESG values and practices over marketing campaigns, regardless of the content and format of delivery. Brands that are perceived as authentically good in their ESG values and practices receive homogenous support from participants in terms of participating in their activist campaigns without clearly knowing the contents of these campaigns. On the other hands, brands who are perceived as inauthentic and incongruent between their marketing messages and actual operations are boycotted. Despite massive spending on marketing campaigns to pivot the brand image – once participants have perceived the brands to be inauthentic – there are little that brand activism can do to change brand perceptions and savage brand values.

The implication for this finding is significant, as debates about brand activism have diverged between the necessity of the practice. Pro-activist researchers such as Sakar and Kotler suggest that the options are limited for brands not to pursue activism, as Gen Z consumers are increasingly exerting pressures on brands who refuse to take a clear stance on environmental and social issues. On the other hands, researchers who see brand activism as a noncompulsory marketing instrument such as Vredenburg do not recommend brands to be overtly expressive about its political opinions in every passing opportunity. The result of this study supports the latter opinion. Brand activism is seen by participants as entirely non-compulsory. Activist campaigns only serve the roles of reaffirming ESG values and practices which consumers already aware that the brands posit. There is no evidence in the interviews showing the potency of brand activism in swaying existing opinions that consumers already have about brands. Furthermore, concerning Vredenburg et. al. typology of brand activism, silent brand activism seems to be just as effective as authentic brand activism, as in the case of small brands. Participants who support small brands hold strong beliefs about the brands' ESG practices without having to go through extensive marketing materials to confirm the validity of these beliefs.

Last but not least, the study illustrates the extent to which brands' ESG practices and values influence Gen Z's perceptions about the brand and their purchase preference as responsible consumers. Regardless of the budget for fashion spending, participants vocally express concerns for their consumption impact on society and the environment. They spoke of these impacts in terms of individual responsibility. This clearly indicates the importance of

sustainable practices in consumer behaviors of Gen Z. Participants boycott brands on grounds of ESG violations and are highly conscious about making the best ethical decision out of all factors impacting their purchase. Under budget constraint, participants buy from the most ethical fast fashion brands possible and actively seek out evidence to make the comparison. Brands that are perceived as unethical are immediately boycotted regardless of their price and selection offering while recovering brands are continuously monitored. Participants who are professionally exposed to the fashion industry demonstrate sophisticated consumer behaviors where they associate responsible consumerism with not only choosing the most ethical brands but also by buying less. Responsible consumerism is internalized as an individual decision which influences not only what consumer will but how much they buy.

In conclusion, despite certain limitations in data processing and framing, the study has illustrated that Gen Z does not require brand activism to be a compulsory marketing practice and the single method of engaging consumers. However, it is utmost important for fashion brands to invest in building organic ESG values and practices. The study has reviewed an apparent and penetrating sense of skepticism toward brand activism, which significantly hinders the returns on activist messaging delivered by the brand, as compared to consumers obtaining ESG information from secondary sources. Perceptions about brands' ESG values and practices communicated to consumers not by the brand are influential in evaluating authenticity and shaping brand images.

The study also suggests potential areas for further investigations in consumers interaction with small brands and recovering brands. The mixed perceptions about activist campaigns of the covering brands in particular are highly important for fast fashion labels with mixed ESG performances such as H&M and Zara. While consumers are highly skeptic toward activist campaigns of recovering brands, they can still be used to signify the brands' pivot and progress toward stronger ESG performances. Focusing research on which method and content are most positively perceived can help recovering fashion brands to develop the right marketing messages to consumers, suggesting changes but not necessary betray a sense of greenwashing. For small brands, there is a clear advantage of being viewed to be inherently ethical by their small production, resource conservation, and extended product life cycles. Even though the study suggests that more sophisticate consumers with exposure to the fashion industry will gravitate more toward smaller brands as choices for more responsible consumption, this hypothesis is not adequately investigated in the context of the study. It is suggested that findings in this study regarding small brands, recovering brands, and brand loyalty can become

future research areas in understanding the brand perceptions and how consumers evaluate brands' ESG performances.

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## 8. Appendices

### 8.1. Appendix 1 – Questionnaires

1. Demographic section:
  - a. Do you have any questions concerning the research before we proceed?
  - b. Can you share a little bit about yourself?
  - c. If you don't mind, what is your age? Educational and employment status? (Ask if not mentioned in 1.b.)
  - d. Can you approximate your disposable income per month?
2. Awareness of brand activism:
  - a. Please tell me what you know about the impact of fashion on the environment and society.
  - b. Please tell me about some brand initiatives that you know are making positive changes in environment, society, and governance (ESG).
  - c. Please tell me about your personal opinions, whether you think fashion brands are doing enough ESG initiatives.
  - d. What do you think about consumers' responsibilities to shop responsibly?
3. Perceptions of brand loyalty:
  - a. Please tell me about your favorite fashion brand and your relationship with the brand.
  - b. How often do you shop? How much do you buy? How satisfied are you with the brand? (Ask if not mentioned in 3.a)
  - c. Are you supporting your favorite brands with concrete actions other than making purchases?

d. Now, please tell me about your fashion brands that you do not support in detail, why do you not support these brands?

4. Relationship between brand activism and loyalty:

a. Do you think that people should choose fashion brand based on their ESG impacts?

b. What are some factors impacting your choice of brands besides their ESG activism?

c. Can you share with me how you might evaluate a brand to support and to make a purchase?

d. Please tell me how you are influenced to make these decisions and judgment about brands.

## 8.2. Appendix 2 – Axial Coding

### 8.2.1. Interview 1 with T. A.

OPEN CODING			AXIAL CODING	
QUOTE	CODE	SUB-CATEGORY	PARADIGM ELEMENT	CATEGORY
I think that fashion has a kind of impact on environment...there's some brand like the fast fashion. They kind of pollute the environment a lot but like they haven't got any like measures to tackle.	Fast fashion impact on the environment	Negative ESG values and practices	ESG values and practice	Interaction between brand perception and campaign characteristics
I think that they haven't done a lot to the environment like to protect the environment.	H&M ESG practices (ineffective)	Justification for purchase		
It's just like they trying to like to protect their identity or self-brand.	H&M ESG practices (unauthentic)		Brand loyalty	
I usually like buy clothes from H&M brand ... I know it's a fast fashion brand and they polluted the environment. But at least that I know that they have some products made from recycled material.	H&M purchase preference			Recovering brand

It's not developing the loyalty but let's see if they are keep doing good then we can keep buying clothes from them and if they are doing something bad or have any scandals	Evaluating ESG values and practice		ESG values and practice	
I don't buy clothes from the Shein because I read some articles about that. They not only pollute the environment, but they also don't have good welfare for their workers, who are exploited a lot especially in China.	Shein boycotting	Reasons for boycott	ESG values and practice	Boycotting as a responsibility
If buy clothes from Shein, I would feel so bad for myself because it's like I'm encouraging them to do,		Consumer responsibility		
I must say that I would say I don't have any favorite brands.	No favorite brand	Shopping habits	Brand loyalty	Gen Z has no brand loyalty
I think now in Sweden I'm kind of more satisfied with the brand like any brands that I bought clothes from because like they have a really good return policy which is really easy for us to buy clothes.	Purchase preference based on return policy	Purchase preference	Brand loyalty	
I'm quite like care about the transparent news for brand activism. If I can, I buy clothes from these brands as the support for them to do better for environment, or at least for them to have money to solve the problems that they have made to the environment.	Evaluating ESG values and practice Consumer responsibility			

### 8.2.2. Interview 2 with F. C.

OPEN CODING			AXIAL CODING	
QUOTE	CODE	SUB-CATEGORY	PARADIGM ELEMENT	CATEGORY
I think that fashion has a kind of impact on environment...there's some brand like the fast fashion. They kind of pollute the environment a lot but like they haven't got any like measures to tackle.	Fast fashion impact on the environment	Negative ESG values and practices	ESG values and practice	Interaction between brand perception and campaign characteristics
I think that they haven't done a lot to the environment like to protect the environment.	H&M ESG practices (ineffective)			
It's just like they trying to like to protect their identity or self-brand.	H&M ESG practices (unauthentic)		Campaign authenticity	
I usually like buy clothes from H&M brand ... I know it's a fast fashion brand and they polluted the environment. But at least that I know that they have some products made from recycled material.	H&M purchase preference	Justification for purchase	Brand loyalty	Recovering brand
It's not developing the loyalty but let's see if they are keep doing good then we can keep buying clothes from them and if they are doing something bad or have any scandals	Evaluating ESG values and practice		ESG values and practice	
I don't buy clothes from the Shein because I read some articles about that. They not only pollute the environment, but they also don't have good welfare for their workers, who are exploited a lot especially in China.	Shein boycotting	Reasons for boycott	ESG values and practice	Boycotting as a responsibility
If buy clothes from Shein, I would feel so bad for myself		Consumer responsibility		

because it's like I'm encouraging them to do,				
I must say that I would say I don't have any favorite brands.	No favorite brand	Shopping habits	Brand loyalty	Gen Z has no brand loyalty
I think now in Sweden I'm kind of more satisfied with the brand like any brands that I bought clothes from because like they have a really good return policy which is really easy for us to buy clothes.	Purchase preference based on return policy	Purchase preference	Brand loyalty	
I'm quite like care about the transparent news for brand activism. If I can, I buy clothes from these brands as the support for them to do better for environment, or at least for them to have money to solve the problems that they have made to the environment.	Evaluating ESG values and practice Consumer responsibility			

### 8.2.3. Interview 3 with N. B.

OPEN CODING			AXIAL CODING	
QUOTE	CODE	SUB-CATEGORY	PARADIGM ELEMENT	CATEGORY
I think that fashion has a kind of impact on environment...there's some brand like the fast fashion. They kind of pollute the environment a lot but like they haven't got any like measures to tackle.	Fast fashion impact on the environment	Negative ESG values and practices	ESG values and practice	Interaction between brand perception and campaign characteristics
I think that they haven't done a lot to the environment like to protect the environment.	H&M ESG practices (ineffective)			
It's just like they trying to like to protect their identity or self-brand.	H&M ESG practices (unauthentic)		Campaign authenticity	
I usually like buy clothes from H&M brand ... I know it's a fast fashion brand and they polluted the environment. But at least that I know that they have some products made from recycled material.	H&M purchase preference	Justification for purchase	Brand loyalty	Recovering brand
It's not developing the loyalty but let's see if they are keep doing good then we can keep buying clothes from them and if they are doing something bad or have any scandals	Evaluating ESG values and practice		ESG values and practice	
I don't buy clothes from the Shein because I read some articles about that. They not only pollute the environment, but they also don't have good welfare for their workers, who are exploited a lot especially in China.	Shein boycotting	Reasons for boycott	ESG values and practice	Boycotting as a responsibility
If buy clothes from Shein, I would feel so bad for myself		Consumer responsibility		

because it's like I'm encouraging them to do,				
I must say that I would say I don't have any favorite brands.	No favorite brand	Shopping habits	Brand loyalty	Gen Z has no brand loyalty
I think now in Sweden I'm kind of more satisfied with the brand like any brands that I bought clothes from because like they have a really good return policy which is really easy for us to buy clothes.	Purchase preference based on return policy	Purchase preference	Brand loyalty	
I'm quite like care about the transparent news for brand activism. If I can, I buy clothes from these brands as the support for them to do better for environment, or at least for them to have money to solve the problems that they have made to the environment.	Evaluating ESG values and practice Consumer responsibility			



### 8.2.4. Interview 4 with S. C.

OPEN CODING			AXIAL CODING	
QUOTE	CODE	SUB-CATEGORY	PARADIGM ELEMENT	CATEGORY
I think that fashion has a kind of impact on environment...there's some brand like the fast fashion. They kind of pollute the environment a lot but like they haven't got any like measures to tackle.	Fast fashion impact on the environment	Negative ESG values and practices	ESG values and practice	Interaction between brand perception and campaign characteristics
I think that they haven't done a lot to the environment like to protect the environment.	H&M ESG practices (ineffective)			
It's just like they trying to like to protect their identity or self-brand.	H&M ESG practices (unauthentic)		Campaign authenticity	
I usually like buy clothes from H&M brand ... I know it's a fast fashion brand and they polluted the environment. But at least that I know that they have some products made from recycled material.	H&M purchase preference	Justification for purchase	Brand loyalty	Recovering brand
It's not developing the loyalty but let's see if they are keep doing good then we can keep buying clothes from them and if they are doing something bad or have any scandals	Evaluating ESG values and practice		ESG values and practice	
I don't buy clothes from the Shein because I read some articles about that. They not only pollute the environment, but they also don't have good welfare for their workers, who are exploited a lot especially in China.	Shein boycotting	Reasons for boycott	ESG values and practice	Boycotting as a responsibility
If buy clothes from Shein, I would feel so bad for myself		Consumer responsibility		

because it's like I'm encouraging them to do,				
I must say that I would say I don't have any favorite brands.	No favorite brand	Shopping habits	Brand loyalty	Gen Z has no brand loyalty
I think now in Sweden I'm kind of more satisfied with the brand like any brands that I bought clothes from because like they have a really good return policy which is really easy for us to buy clothes.	Purchase preference based on return policy	Purchase preference	Brand loyalty	
I'm quite like care about the transparent news for brand activism. If I can, I buy clothes from these brands as the support for them to do better for environment, or at least for them to have money to solve the problems that they have made to the environment.	Evaluating ESG values and practice Consumer responsibility			

8.2.5. Interview 5 with L. M. M.

OPEN CODING			AXIAL CODING	
QUOTE	CODE	SUB-CATEGORY	PARADIGM ELEMENT	CATEGORY
I think that fashion has a kind of impact on environment...there's some brand like the fast fashion. They kind of pollute the environment a lot but like they haven't got any like measures to tackle.	Fast fashion impact on the environment	Negative ESG values and practices	ESG values and practice	Interaction between brand perception and campaign characteristics
I think that they haven't done a lot to the environment like to protect the environment.	H&M ESG practices (ineffective)			
It's just like they trying to like to protect their identity or self-brand.	H&M ESG practices (unauthentic)		Campaign authenticity	
I usually like buy clothes from H&M brand ... I know it's a fast fashion brand and they polluted the environment. But at least that I know that they have some products made from recycled material.	H&M purchase preference	Justification for purchase	Brand loyalty	Recovering brand
It's not developing the loyalty but let's see if they are keep doing good then we can keep buying clothes from them and if they are doing something bad or have any scandals	Evaluating ESG values and practice		ESG values and practice	
I don't buy clothes from the Shein because I read some articles about that. They not only pollute the environment, but they also don't have good welfare for their workers, who are exploited a lot especially in China.	Shein boycotting	Reasons for boycott	ESG values and practice	Boycotting as a responsibility
If buy clothes from Shein, I would feel so bad for myself		Consumer responsibility		

because it's like I'm encouraging them to do,				
I must say that I would say I don't have any favorite brands.	No favorite brand	Shopping habits	Brand loyalty	Gen Z has no brand loyalty
I think now in Sweden I'm kind of more satisfied with the brand like any brands that I bought clothes from because like they have a really good return policy which is really easy for us to buy clothes.	Purchase preference based on return policy	Purchase preference	Brand loyalty	
I'm quite like care about the transparent news for brand activism. If I can, I buy clothes from these brands as the support for them to do better for environment, or at least for them to have money to solve the problems that they have made to the environment.	Evaluating ESG values and practice Consumer responsibility			

### 8.2.6. Interview 6 with M. T.

OPEN CODING			AXIAL CODING	
QUOTE	CODE	SUB-CATEGORY	PARADIGM ELEMENT	CATEGORY
I think that fashion has a kind of impact on environment...there's some brand like the fast fashion. They kind of pollute the environment a lot but like they haven't got any like measures to tackle.	Fast fashion impact on the environment	Negative ESG values and practices	ESG values and practice	Interaction between brand perception and campaign characteristics
I think that they haven't done a lot to the environment like to protect the environment.	H&M ESG practices (ineffective)			
It's just like they trying to like to protect their identity or self-brand.	H&M ESG practices (unauthentic)		Campaign authenticity	
I usually like buy clothes from H&M brand ... I know it's a fast fashion brand and they polluted the environment. But at least that I know that they have some products made from recycled material.	H&M purchase preference	Justification for purchase	Brand loyalty	Recovering brand
It's not developing the loyalty but let's see if they are keep doing good then we can keep buying clothes from them and if they are doing something bad or have any scandals	Evaluating ESG values and practice		ESG values and practice	
I don't buy clothes from the Shein because I read some articles about that. They not only pollute the environment, but they also don't have good welfare for their workers, who are exploited a lot especially in China.	Shein boycotting	Reasons for boycott	ESG values and practice	Boycotting as a responsibility
If buy clothes from Shein, I would feel so bad for myself		Consumer responsibility		

because it's like I'm encouraging them to do,				
I must say that I would say I don't have any favorite brands.	No favorite brand	Shopping habits	Brand loyalty	Gen Z has no brand loyalty
I think now in Sweden I'm kind of more satisfied with the brand like any brands that I bought clothes from because like they have a really good return policy which is really easy for us to buy clothes.	Purchase preference based on return policy	Purchase preference	Brand loyalty	
I'm quite like care about the transparent news for brand activism. If I can, I buy clothes from these brands as the support for them to do better for environment, or at least for them to have money to solve the problems that they have made to the environment.	Evaluating ESG values and practice Consumer responsibility			

8.2.7. Interview 7 with A. W.

OPEN CODING			AXIAL CODING	
QUOTE	CODE	SUB-CATEGORY	PARADIGM ELEMENT	CATEGORY
I think that fashion has a kind of impact on environment...there's some brand like the fast fashion. They kind of pollute the environment a lot but like they haven't got any like measures to tackle.	Fast fashion impact on the environment	Negative ESG values and practices	ESG values and practice	Interaction between brand perception and campaign characteristics
I think that they haven't done a lot to the environment like to protect the environment.	H&M ESG practices (ineffective)			
It's just like they trying to like to protect their identity or self-brand.	H&M ESG practices (unauthentic)		Campaign authenticity	
I usually like buy clothes from H&M brand ... I know it's a fast fashion brand and they polluted the environment. But at least that I know that they have some products made from recycled material.	H&M purchase preference	Justification for purchase	Brand loyalty	Recovering brand
It's not developing the loyalty but let's see if they are keep doing good then we can keep buying clothes from them and if they are doing something bad or have any scandals	Evaluating ESG values and practice		ESG values and practice	
I don't buy clothes from the Shein because I read some articles about that. They not only pollute the environment, but they also don't have good welfare for their workers, who are exploited a lot especially in China.	Shein boycotting	Reasons for boycott	ESG values and practice	Boycotting as a responsibility
If buy clothes from Shein, I would feel so bad for myself		Consumer responsibility		

because it's like I'm encouraging them to do,				
I must say that I would say I don't have any favorite brands.	No favorite brand	Shopping habits	Brand loyalty	Gen Z has no brand loyalty
I think now in Sweden I'm kind of more satisfied with the brand like any brands that I bought clothes from because like they have a really good return policy which is really easy for us to buy clothes.	Purchase preference based on return policy	Purchase preference	Brand loyalty	
I'm quite like care about the transparent news for brand activism. If I can, I buy clothes from these brands as the support for them to do better for environment, or at least for them to have money to solve the problems that they have made to the environment.	Evaluating ESG values and practice Consumer responsibility			



### 8.2.8. Interview 8 with I. A.

OPEN CODING			AXIAL CODING	
QUOTE	CODE	SUB-CATEGORY	PARADIGM ELEMENT	CATEGORY
I think that fashion has a kind of impact on environment...there's some brand like the fast fashion. They kind of pollute the environment a lot but like they haven't got any like measures to tackle.	Fast fashion impact on the environment	Negative ESG values and practices	ESG values and practice	Interaction between brand perception and campaign characteristics
I think that they haven't done a lot to the environment like to protect the environment.	H&M ESG practices (ineffective)			
It's just like they trying to like to protect their identity or self-brand.	H&M ESG practices (unauthentic)		Campaign authenticity	
I usually like buy clothes from H&M brand ... I know it's a fast fashion brand and they polluted the environment. But at least that I know that they have some products made from recycled material.	H&M purchase preference	Justification for purchase	Brand loyalty	Recovering brand
It's not developing the loyalty but let's see if they are keep doing good then we can keep buying clothes from them and if they are doing something bad or have any scandals	Evaluating ESG values and practice		ESG values and practice	
I don't buy clothes from the Shein because I read some articles about that. They not only pollute the environment, but they also don't have good welfare for their workers, who are exploited a lot especially in China.	Shein boycotting	Reasons for boycott	ESG values and practice	Boycotting as a responsibility
If buy clothes from Shein, I would feel so bad for myself		Consumer responsibility		

because it's like I'm encouraging them to do,				
I must say that I would say I don't have any favorite brands.	No favorite brand	Shopping habits	Brand loyalty	Gen Z has no brand loyalty
I think now in Sweden I'm kind of more satisfied with the brand like any brands that I bought clothes from because like they have a really good return policy which is really easy for us to buy clothes.	Purchase preference based on return policy	Purchase preference	Brand loyalty	
I'm quite like care about the transparent news for brand activism. If I can, I buy clothes from these brands as the support for them to do better for environment, or at least for them to have money to solve the problems that they have made to the environment.	Evaluating ESG values and practice Consumer responsibility			

### 8.2.9. Interview 9 with G.

OPEN CODING			AXIAL CODING	
QUOTE	CODE	SUB-CATEGORY	PARADIGM ELEMENT	CATEGORY
I think that fashion has a kind of impact on environment...there's some brand like the fast fashion. They kind of pollute the environment a lot but like they haven't got any like measures to tackle.	Fast fashion impact on the environment	Negative ESG values and practices	ESG values and practice	Interaction between brand perception and campaign characteristics
I think that they haven't done a lot to the environment like to protect the environment.	H&M ESG practices (ineffective)			
It's just like they trying to like to protect their identity or self-brand.	H&M ESG practices (unauthentic)		Campaign authenticity	
I usually like buy clothes from H&M brand ... I know it's a fast fashion brand and they polluted the environment. But at least that I know that they have some products made from recycled material.	H&M purchase preference	Justification for purchase	Brand loyalty	Recovering brand
It's not developing the loyalty but let's see if they are keep doing good then we can keep buying clothes from them and if they are doing something bad or have any scandals	Evaluating ESG values and practice		ESG values and practice	
I don't buy clothes from the Shein because I read some articles about that. They not only pollute the environment, but they also don't have good welfare for their workers, who are exploited a lot especially in China.	Shein boycotting	Reasons for boycott	ESG values and practice	Boycotting as a responsibility
If buy clothes from Shein, I would feel so bad for myself		Consumer responsibility		

because it's like I'm encouraging them to do,				
I must say that I would say I don't have any favorite brands.	No favorite brand	Shopping habits	Brand loyalty	Gen Z has no brand loyalty
I think now in Sweden I'm kind of more satisfied with the brand like any brands that I bought clothes from because like they have a really good return policy which is really easy for us to buy clothes.	Purchase preference based on return policy	Purchase preference	Brand loyalty	
I'm quite like care about the transparent news for brand activism. If I can, I buy clothes from these brands as the support for them to do better for environment, or at least for them to have money to solve the problems that they have made to the environment.	Evaluating ESG values and practice Consumer responsibility			

8.2.10. Interview 9 with K.

OPEN CODING			AXIAL CODING	
QUOTE	CODE	SUB-CATEGORY	PARADIGM ELEMENT	CATEGORY
I think that fashion has a kind of impact on environment...there's some brand like the fast fashion. They kind of pollute the environment a lot but like they haven't got any like measures to tackle.	Fast fashion impact on the environment	Negative ESG values and practices	ESG values and practice	Interaction between brand perception and campaign characteristics
I think that they haven't done a lot to the environment like to protect the environment.	H&M ESG practices (ineffective)		Campaign authenticity	
It's just like they trying to like to protect their identity or self-brand.	H&M ESG practices (unauthentic)			
I usually like buy clothes from H&M brand ... I know it's a fast fashion brand and they polluted the environment. But at least that I know that they have some products made from recycled material.	H&M purchase preference	Justification for purchase	Brand loyalty	Recovering brand
It's not developing the loyalty but let's see if they are keep doing good then we can keep buying clothes from them and if they are doing something bad or have any scandals	Evaluating ESG values and practice		ESG values and practice	
I don't buy clothes from the Shein because I read some articles about that. They not only pollute the environment, but they also don't have good welfare for their workers, who are exploited a lot especially in China.	Shein boycotting	Reasons for boycott	ESG values and practice	Boycotting as a responsibility

If buy clothes from Shein, I would feel so bad for myself because it's like I'm encouraging them to do,		Consumer responsibility		
I must say that I would say I don't have any favorite brands.	No favorite brand	Shopping habits	Brand loyalty	Gen Z has no brand loyalty
I think now in Sweden I'm kind of more satisfied with the brand like any brands that I bought clothes from because like they have a really good return policy which is really easy for us to buy clothes.	Purchase preference based on return policy	Purchase preference	Brand loyalty	
I'm quite like care about the transparent news for brand activism. If I can, I buy clothes from these brands as the support for them to do better for environment, or at least for them to have money to solve the problems that they have made to the environment.	Evaluating ESG values and practice Consumer responsibility			