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Brand Activism Scepticism

Consumer Validation of Brand Activism's Moral Competency

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Abstract

Title

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Thesis Purpose

The aim of this thesis was to deepen the understanding of brand activism by looking into existing and novel dimensions on which consumers base their validation and opinion of brands engaging in socio-political discourse.

Methodology

This dissertation followed a dual-analysis approach in which both qualitative and quantitative research was conducted. As the purpose of this thesis was to confirm and discover dimensions of validation and scepticism, and not to control variables akin to an experimental setup, both forms of research were of exploratory nature.

Theoretical Perspective

This study drew on theories which discuss at first brand activism, defining socio-political brand activism in this context, and identifying dimensions in prior literature which affect consumer perception forming. Second, Consumer Culture Theory was employed to understand consumer's decision-making process and self-actualisation to form a coherent line of questioning. Finally, the Moral Competency framework by Sibai, Mimoun and Boukis (2021) formed the basis for the qualitative research.

Empirical Data

The sampling criteria concerned young Western consumers as this group has increased awareness of branding and the use of brands as a platform alongside the fact that Western countries became the catalytic factor for consumerism and brand development, allowing for a better understanding of brands and their intentions. The qualitative research covered in-depth interviews to illuminate underlying thoughts whereas the quantitative research allowed for semi-quantifiable findings across 200+ respondents.

Findings/Conclusion

Research has highlighted young Western consumers employ several constructs to arrive at a judgement of the moral competency of brands' activism. Previously defined dimensions were supported by this research, and consequently, this dissertation extends the Brand Activism Theoretical Framework by Pimentel and Didonet (2021). These new components are divided into three groups based on their interconnectivity and level of priority concerning the extent to which brands can influence them. Initially, history, leadership, business size, and a brand's product/service can be grouped together. These dimensions are directly related to how a brand has managed itself over time. The second group includes benefit to brand, corporate congruence, CSR contribution versus spend, transparency, communication management, structure of communication, sources of information, timing and type of issue, and locality. Brands can adjust this group to a degree. The third group consist of consumer elements such as knowledge of brand, demographics, and micro-affiliations and beliefs. As consumer experiences are highly involved in these constructs, brands have limited power of influence.

Practical Implications

For brand managers to tackle consumer validation and scepticism of brand activism efforts by young Western consumers, various considerations from the consumer's perspective need to be

considered before companies engage in socio-political discourse. These considerations include transparency and awareness of the before mentioned findings to prevent misalignment between what brands *do* and what brands *say*. Ergo, brands need to (re)position communication factors and (re)consider their heterogeneous target audience.

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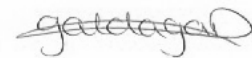
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Gal Dagan



Lund, May 2022

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1. Introduction

This initial chapter introduces the research topic for this dissertation, namely the validation or de-validation of socio-political brand activism by consumers. To start, an elaborate research background is given. Thereafter, the aim and main research questions are presented.

1.1 Research Background

“For Once, Don’t Do It”. In 2020, Nike released a campaign following the awareness burst of the Black Lives Matter Movement, accelerated by the murder of George Floyd by a Minnesotan police officer (Cohen, 2020). This campaign, stressing a contradictory interpretation of Nike’s iconic slogan, *“Just Do It”*, is a primary example of how brands participate in socio-political discourse, focused on establishing the brands’ positioning within the movement. Brands’ objectives to do so involve appealing to certain customer segments and intensifying consumers’ loyalty to the brand (Kotler & Armstrong, 2020; Ismail et al., 2020).

It has been established by Ismail et al. (2020) that young consumers utilise brands as building blocks for their identity. Hereby they require brands to align with their worldview and personal values in an authentic way. In this manner, brands in today’s brandscape (the brands accessible in the market) are coerced into taking a stand in polarising socio-political issues. Doing so, Ulver (2021b) states, will inevitably estrange some consumer groups. Consumer groups alongside other essential players in society (such as political actors and for-profit organisations) continuously partake in societal discussions around such matters. Whilst these issues garner attention and are debated at large, brands shall need to engage in these conversations to uphold their awareness and guarantee their existence. Ulver (2021b) argues, through the monetisation of polarisation, brands perpetually partake in unrest formation to *“...steer consumers into engagement in conflicts, while brands create and leverage these conflicts in terms of raised brand engagement...”* (p13).

The current political landscape in the West is polarised (Edsall, 2022; Pausch, 2021), with the United States (US) specifically experiencing extreme levels (Korschun, 2021; Klobert, 2021). This has allowed space for brand activism to materialise but does not explain the reason for its existence. According to Accenture (2018), 62% of consumers demand from companies to communicate their positioning on socio-political matters, specifically those that are valuable to them (p.11), and 52% of consumers chooses a brand based on the values it stands for which

should correspond to their own personal values, rather than the product or service's utility functions (p.8). Therefore today, consumers, especially young ones (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018), judge companies on their socio-political stances rather than product attributes, which become increasingly similar across brands. It is no longer sufficient to simply communicate a brand's values and beliefs, rather, consumers are searching for concrete actions, and base purchase decisions based on how well they align with their personal values (Korschun, 2021). These young consumer groups increasingly become more crucial for brands to win over, as they hold high spending power as well as impacting their relatives' decision making (Shetty, Venkataramaiah, & Anand, 2019). Therefore, more brands are partaking and capitalising on engaging in socio-political discourses which attract these customers (Kotler & Armstrong, 2020).

When employing brand activism, brands often engage in conversations on socio-political topics which younger consumers, consisting of younger Millennials and Gen Z'ers (Cammarota, Marino, & Resciniti, 2021), deem essential. Subjects such as the environment and climate change, women's right and feminism, social justice, human rights, LGBTQIA+ rights and more are at the forefront of public discourse (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019; Cammarota, Marino, & Resciniti, 2021; Vredenburg et al. 2020). In the last few years, race has become a prominent subject in public discourse in the US (Balz, 2020) as well as in Europe (D'Ignoti, 2021). Two main reasons for the rise in conversation around race can be identified. The first, is the discrimination experienced during and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on non-white groups (Rošker, 2021); xenophobic attacks on Chinese individuals (Rošker, 2021) as well as the higher death rates of Black individuals in the US not accredited to health concerns, but rather to racism (Morgan, 2021). The second is closely linked to George Floyd's murder in 2020, which has raised the profile of the conversation to a new level. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has seen increased awareness and participation, not only in the US, but also across European countries such as Germany, Portugal, Italy, and France (D'Ignoti, 2021). Additionally, according to Forbes (2022), consumers are wary of brands making large claims. In their 2022 article on clothing shoppers, they found that only 20% of consumers trust a brand's environmental claims. Increased publication of fact-checking spread online is conducive to brand opinion forming. Forbes (2022) concluded that nearly half of the clothing brands operating under EU law, have made untrue sustainability claims.

For the younger consumers, whilst participating in these sensitive conversations, authenticity of the brands is crucial, otherwise brand activism is viewed as a manipulating, merciless marketing trick employed to increase sales (Shetty, Venkataramaiah, & Anand, 2019; Edelman, 2020), also known as ‘*woke washing*’ (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Woke activism authenticity (Mirzei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022) consists of six dimensions, namely practice, inclusion, fit, motivation, social context independency and sacrifice. These dimensions are interconnected and when not correctly harnessed by businesses, can form barriers to consumer validation of brand activism. Moreso, backlash is a threat which can be detrimental to a brands’ reputation (Vredenburg et al., 2020), potentially allowing space for a ‘*doppelgänger brand image*’ to arise (Thompson, Rindfleisch & Arsel, 2006). Finally, transparency also plays a key role and is regarded as a prerequisite for successful brand activism (Hydock, Paharia, & Blair, 2021; Korschun, 2021). Transparency has not been defined in the context of brand activism as of yet, however, in a general sense, is defined as “*the extent to which an entity reveals relevant information about its own decision processes, procedures, functioning, and performance*” by Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer (2012, p.139). It can be contextualised to marketing communication in which businesses disclose corporate activities and information (Cambier & Pocin, 2020), or to corporate marketing as businesses willingly share in- and external info, whether positive or negative, “*in a manner that is accurate, timely, balanced and unequivocal*”, enabling stakeholders to exercise accountability (Rawlins, 2009 p.75, in Leitsch, 2017).

Prior research has focused on the development of a typology of brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Pimentel & Didonet, 2021), its establishment throughout history (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019), the role of authenticity in brand activism (Mirzei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022), initial research on consumer responses to BA (Cammarota, Marino, & Resciniti, 2021) and the differences between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and BA (Mirzei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Sarkar and Kotler (2020) wrote a book encapsulating some of the above, specifying what brand activism is and proposing strategies to work with for businesses (for example, “*The 6Ps of Brand Activism*”, p.156). However, even though the aforementioned study by Mirzei, Wilkie and Siuki (2022) and some of the other studies mentioned touch on consumer perspectives, there is a lack of consumer-focused research, which delves into their perceptions of brand activism. How do consumers validate brand activism? What are the reasons for their assessments? Which facets make up their perceptions?

These questions are interesting and moreover, imperative to answer as to fill a gap in the literature. Brand activism is an emergent strategy (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Kotler & Sarkar, 2017; Cammarota, Marino, & Resciniti, 2021) which is considered to speedily become widespread. Understanding consumers' perspective on how BA is perceived, and which dimensions compose these perceptions is thus crucial for business' and specifically, Brand Managers' ability of successfully utilising the strategy. In addition, comprehending how it is observed and judged by the younger generation in the context of socio-political matters is necessary, as they are the leading consumers of tomorrow.

1.2 Research Aim and Question

The overall aim of this study is to extend the understanding of how consumers validate or de-validate the moral competency of socio-political brand activism. Initially, this research has examined the consumer perception on brand activism from a holistic view. This broad take helped assess the thought process and emotional or social attributes, and consequently, capture any new dimensions that might form the basis of their judgement. On this notion, the various possible dimensions that form the basis of consumers' judgmentalism on the use of brand activism are researched to evaluate, confirm, or extend them. Consequently, the results verify whether these dimensions and possibly other ones truly affect consumers' perceptions of brand activism. The results of this research are essential to the industry as the trend of companies employing brand activism is growing alongside the trend of polarised consumers mistrusting companies and any disinformation or dishonesty. As a result, the main research question concerns:

What are the constructs young, Western consumers employ to validate or de-validate the moral competency of socio-political brand activism?

Existing literature and theoretical frameworks have been consulted to scope out dimensions. These dimensions are then applied to field research to see whether they hold true. The background of consumers regarding their demographic characteristics, beliefs, and political affiliations, has been evaluated to illustrate a general connection and analyse whether this affects their perception on brand activism. By asking for and giving examples of brand activism, a deeper understanding can be obtained as respondents have been given a research

platform to voice their opinions and concerns. Context behind the population scope of ‘*young Western consumers*’ is given in chapter 3, Methodology.

1.3 Reading Guide

The outline of this thesis concerns the following.

1. Introduction

The initial chapter introduces the research problem including its underlying research gap, its research aim and its consequential research question for this dissertation.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is a continuation of the research aim and based around existing literature and methods regarding brand activism.

3. Methodology

The methodology section gives an overview of the methodological approach to both the qualitative and quantitative research and the contextualization around the sampling process.

4. Qualitative Results

The interview results are visualized, presented, and discussed. The chapter ends with a summary of the most notable findings.

5. Quantitative Results

The questionnaire results are visualized, presented, and discussed. The chapter ends with a summary of the most notable findings.

6. Discussion

The results of the qualitative and quantitative research are discussed jointly to form a cohesive analysis.

7. Conclusion

The final chapter concludes the main findings regarding the research question and the study’s theoretical contribution to the literature alongside future research directions.

2. Theoretical Framework

The second chapter concerns a theoretical framework which includes an overview of existing literature and conceptual methods regarding brand activism. Consequently, these frameworks will be applied to the methodology and research execution.

2.1 Literature Review

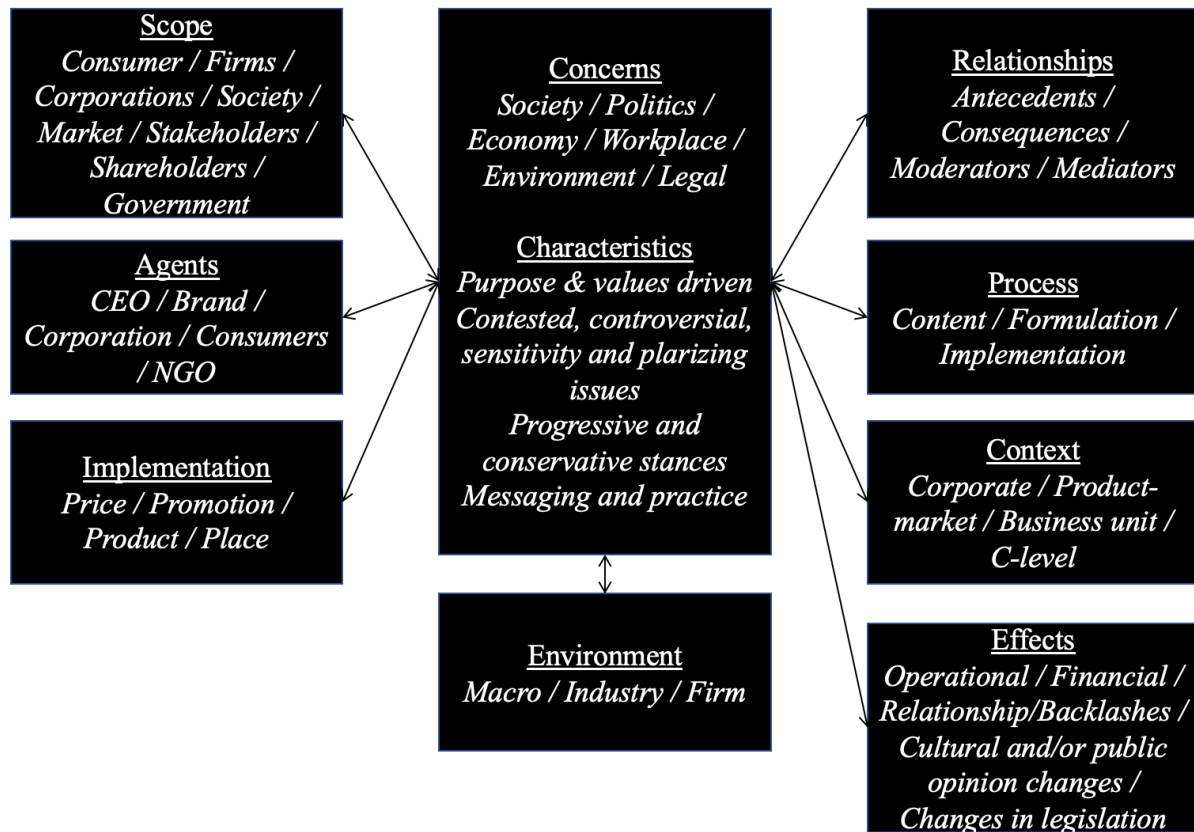
The following concerns an overview of past research surrounding a proper methodology for the term brand activism. Additionally, the scope of dimensions surrounding consumer perceptions is provided.

2.1.1 Brand Activism

Vredenburg et al. (2020) define brand activism (BA) as brands' corporate socially-politically underpinned practices aligning with its internally specified purpose and values. Whilst brands specify their positioning within important socio-political matters in society (employing intangible and tangible activities), some customers may grow a stronger, loyal tie to the brand. However, brands must face the possibility of potentially estranging other consumer groups (Vredenburg et al, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Korschun, 2021). Others have described BA as corporate political activity (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019) in which campaigns of brands are politically underpinned to sway "*citizen-consumers*" (p.343). Moreover, coined Corporate Political Action (CPA), Hydock et al. (2021) emphasise the topics brands must refer to are often polarising political matters, dividing society. Referring to the concept as free speech boundary work, Sibai, Mimoun and Boukis (2021) specify brands act as moral agents, mediating if certain social norms, construing which attitudes and beliefs are tolerated within society's public discourse, should be created, and how they should be facilitated. Brand activism is considered an extension of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Kotler & Sakar, 2017; Korschun, 2021; Eyada, 2020), however the concepts differ on a few points. CSR is often employed around issues that unite the international community such as providing resources for the poor in third world countries, whereas BA debates controversial urgent matters that society is facing (Mirzei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). CSR is thereby often a key part of a company's long-term strategy, whereas BA occurs on a more accidental basis, as a timely response to an intensely debated issue in society at that very moment (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Cammarota, Marino, & Resciniti, 2021).

Pimentel and Didonet (2021) summarise the main ideas of BA which have been researched and identified, proposing a typology in Figure 1. The components of the framework that are most relevant to this study, namely Characteristics and Concerns, are discussed below.

Figure 1 Brand Activism Theoretical Framework



Source: (Pimentel & Didonet, 2021)

Characteristics

Four characteristics of BA have been identified by Vredenburg et al. (2020): (1) it is purpose and value-driven; (2) discusses dividing matters in society’s discourse; (3) these subjects are contrasted as either progressive or conservative; (4) consists of narratives and actions. Korschun (2021) stipulates BA must involve the public communication of a brand’s take on an issue, and that the brand’s positioning should be action-oriented, undertaking activities to stress its viewpoint. Another four characteristics set out by Manfredi-Sanchez (2019) are interesting to note. Symbolism, specifically, the importance of reputation and the value consumers hold to it, is significant. Moreover, readjustment of the concept of politics, in which brands do not tie themselves to a political party but rather to a stance on a socio-political issue is a distinctive

trait of BA. Finally, addressing the international community and digital importance are interwoven and key to the concept.

Concerns

Brand activism can be harnessed by brands across a variety of dimensions in society. Six have been identified by Kotler and Sarkar (2017). The first, business, specifically regards the issues of equal pay, unions, fair working conditions and so on. The second dimension regards the social, speaking on matters of social equality, such as LGBTQ+ rights, women's rights, rights for education and education funding. Moreover, within the political category, concerns regarding voting rights, lobbying activities and so forth are discussed. Another area calls for problems involving the environment, detailing water and air pollution laws, conservation, and land-use policies. The economic dimension concerns minimum wage laws and the redistribution of wealth. The final and sixth dimension refers to legal matters, such as laws about the workplace and employment.

2.1.2 Dimensions of Consumers Perceptions

When brands engage in brand activism, consumer perceptions can be formed. One of such perceptions is consumer scepticism, which can arise in the form of consumer suspicion, which is linked to perceived sincerity, a construct of brand personality (Yoon, Gürhan-Canli, Schwartz, 2006; Ragas & Roberts, 2009; Aaker, 1997). This can arise from brands trying to force their '*cultural authority*' (Moorman, 2020, p.389), a brand's ability to transform moral judgements of lifestyle consumption choices, onto consumers (Sibai, Mimoun & Boukis, 2021). Several dimensions of consumer perceptions can be identified in prior literature.

Source of Information

Yoon, Gürhan-Canli and Schwartz (2006) identified the source through which consumers learn about a brands' activism as one construct. If consumers acquired information about brand activism from the brand itself or from a neutral source affected the extent to which the activism was assessed sincerely; predominantly, if consumers learned about a brand's activism through its own communication, the brand was often judged insincere. If the source of the content was a neutral one, consumers tended to assess the brand as sincere.

Benefit to Brand

Moreover, benefit to the brand as a result from the activism was distinguished as another dimension; consumers considered self-benefit derived from the activism for the brand in evaluating sincerity. If benefit to the brand was examined as high, consumers assessed the brand as employing BA as an ulterior motive for its own benefit. However, if the cause referred to in its activism did not have direct positive impacts on the brand, consumers tended to determine the brand sincere (Yoon, Gürhan-Canli and Schwartz, 2006).

CSR Contribution versus Spend

In addition, the proportion between the resources spent on CSR contributions versus CSR marketing costs was recognised; namely, the extent to which the proportion is skewed is considered in the examination of sincerity. If most of the resources were spent on CSR, if more resources were attributed to the contribution of the brand towards the cause, that positively impacted the evaluation of sincerity (Yoon, Gürhan-Canli and Schwartz, 2006).

Corporate Congruence

When external communication and internal corporate practices are aligned, congruence is observed by consumers (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Cammarota, Marino, & Resciniti, 2021). This is favourable for the assessment of authenticity and perceived sincerity, as it forms the antidote to ‘*woke washing*’, proving to consumers the brand does not only ‘*talks the talk*’ but also ‘*walks the walk*’. It affirms brands’ motivations are honest to consumers (Mirzei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022).

History

The company history can also be considered an influential dimension on which BA is judged. According to Roper and Fill (2012), history forms the essence of branding as it is created within a unique context. These unique historical elements are seen as signature practices from the consumer’s perspective. These processes are one of a kind, reflecting the company’s character that was created over time (Gratton & Ghoshal, 2005), based on culture, size, and structure (Melewar, 2008). Altogether, these historical elements form the very basis of what attracts certain consumer groups to the company as it may “*relate to [their] psyche*” (Roper & Fill, 2012, p.103).

Leadership

The company's leadership is also a factor consumers might use to validate the candour of BA. As per Dowling (2006), a company's authenticity and reputation are dependent on the CEO and other board members due to their public context (Gaines-Ross, 2008). This context translates into the '*emotional benchmark*' on which the entire company is judged on and is related to: (1) the beliefs and expectations of a company's leadership; (2) the business model of the company; (3) and the company values (Dowling, 2006). As the leadership forms the public '*face*', it directly reflects the company's values and thus its moral compass (Roper & Fill, 2012). Hence, De Chernatony and Riley (1998) state that the CEO is inherently the company's '*brand manager*' as this person is the be-all and end-all regarding the credibility of branding.

Consumer Background

Alongside the external dimensions on which BA can be validated or de-validated, another important factor that could form the basis of judgement is the consumer's very own characteristics. Vredenburg et al. (2020) concluded that brand activism contests a polarising socio-political issue that is either of progressive or conservative nature. On that note, Vredenburg et al. (2020) argue that socio-political issues are subjective to the consumer's political ideology, religion, and other ethics. Hence, ethnicity, religion, and political affiliation can be examined to identify to what degree these affect consumer perception on brand activism. Firstly, ethnicity, as a consumer dimension, is relevant as socio-political issues often revolve around cultural elements. Moreover, religion or lack thereof, may affect validation as socio-political issues are subjective to personal beliefs. Lastly, the consumer's political affiliation is directly related to the socio-political nature of the issue at hand.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

The second section concerns a conceptual framework regarding three streams of literature. These streams are employed to form a cohesive framework on which the research can be built: Socio-Political Brand Activism, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), and Moral Competency.

2.2.1 Socio-Political Brand Activism

This study has integrated two of the five concerns of brand activism as defined by Kotler and Sarkar (2017); the political and the social to form the socio-political concern. According to the

Global Risk Report by the World Economic Forum (WEF) (2020), one of the top trends of risks facing societies today is the crumbling of social cohesion referred to as “*domestic political polarization*” (p.25). It is the risk second in line most probable to intensify. The report specifies, “*major social movements or protests (e.g., street riots, social unrest) that disrupt political or social stability, negatively impacting populations, and economic activity*” (p.87). To incorporate the social and political into one dimension allowed for a more complex investigation into the phenomenon of brand activism concerns. Today, Millennials and Gen Z become increasingly vocal about socio-political issues that are dear to them, such as systematic racism, discrimination, and social inequality (Deloitte, 2021). The socio-political avenue for brands to express their activism has thus emerged as a prominent approach to signal to younger consumers the brand is positioning itself on socio-political issues that matter to them and is aligned with their personal values.

In this research, which focuses on this group of consumers, examples of socio-political brand activism have been employed. It is hence essential to further define the components of this type of brand activism. This interpretation consists of the following attributes:

- (1) Socio-political brand activism consists of issues which coalesce “*salient unresolved social matters on which societal and institutional opinion is split, thus potentially engendering acrimonious debate among groups*” (Nalick et al., 2016, p.386). They also can be defined as “*open moral questions*” (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p.773). These address issues such as systematic inequality and racism, matters relating to ageism, gender and sexual orientation discrimination, immigration, the rights, and accessibility to vote and multiculturalism (Pimentel & Didonet, 2021).
- (2) These moral issues cause a partisan divide in society, and consensus is implausible (Nalick et al, 2016; Kotler & Sarkar, 2017; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).
- (3) The issues related to this type of brand activism are pressing in society, however viewpoints on these matters can evolve, depending on the intersection of culture and politics at a certain point in time (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Nalick et al., 2016).

Perceptions of consumers

To further elaborate on how young consumers assess the moral competency of socio-political brand activism, several dimensions of perception have been engaged. The facets which have been uncovered and discussed in the literature review, namely Source of Information, Benefit to the Brand, CSR Contribution versus Spend, Corporate Congruence, History, Leadership and

Consumer Background have been employed (Yoon, Gürhan-Canli and Schwartz, 2006; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Roper & Fill, 2012; Dowling, 2006).

Furthermore, this study aimed to identify and determine whether other aspects are present and has actively researched two more dimensions. The first regards Business Size. Hydock, Paharia and Blair (2020) found that brands with a smaller part of the market are likely to enjoy greater advantages from brand activism due to high levels of credibility, whilst brands that are market leaders are more likely to experience damage, but more research on whether company size has an influence on the evaluation of moral assessment of brand activism in general is scarce. A differentiation is made between two business sizes. ‘*Big*’ is considered as a brand occupying a large part of the market (Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020), known for a certain brand personality and having established an audience. ‘*Small*’ brands are considered brands occupying a small share of the market (Hydock, Paharia & Blair, 2020), they are still in the process of establishing an audience and a brand personality externally (they might have developed a brand personality internally, it has not yet firmly been established in the market). The second regards Product/Service, as Cian et al. (2018), concluded companies with a notorious supply chain are trying to stay ahead of controversies via brand activism surrounding their product/service and its supply chain. Companies nowadays are making broad claims about their production efforts. An example by Cian et al. (2018), concerns coffee companies such as Starbucks who are aware of their industry’s notorious supply chain, considering the poor working conditions of the farmers, and are thus staying ahead of brand management around controversies. This is done by promoting sustainability claims. Interestingly, misalignments can be seen with brand activism concerning their product/service, and brand activism concerning socio-political issues in general, in this Cian et al.’s (2018) research example, race.

2.2.2 Consumer Culture Theory

Brands, and their products and services, are utilised as building blocks for individuals’ identity projects formation in postmodernism (Belk, 1988; Holt, 2002; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Cova, 1997). Consumers’ self-actualisation, also known as sovereignty, plays a key role in how consumers employ brands within this process (Holt, 2002). Consumers identify which brands align with their emotional selves, connecting personal values with brands which exhibit the same beliefs. They then emotionally bond with these brands (Ekström & Gianneschi, 2017) and consider them as an extension of themselves (Belk, 1988). In this way, brands are essential

to an individual's assembling of elements of self. As a result, it becomes increasingly crucial for brands to align on values and beliefs consumers build their identities on; consumer responses to corporate practices and messaging depend on the brand's positioning (Cammarota, Marino & Resciniti, 2021; Hydock et al, 2021) and can be positive or negative.

Positive responses occur when consumers identify themselves in a brand's exhibited values (Cammarota, Marino & Resciniti, 2021). They are certainly preferable, and they are linked to three aspects: (1) authenticity, a brand's ability to exhibit values and beliefs without consumers growing suspicious of ulterior financial motives (Holt, 2002); (2) trust, enabling consumers to experience "*predictability and calculability*" from the brand (Ekström & Gianneschi, 2017, p.158); and (3) improved financial performance (Thompson, Rindfleisch & Arsel, 2006).

Negative responses often arise when consumers do not share a brand's positioning (Cammarota, Marino & Resciniti, 2021) and can entail consumer anti-brand activism through formation of a '*doppelgänger brand image*' (Thompson, Rindfleisch & Arsel, 2006), utilising boycotting and buycotting to "*vote with their wallets*" (Roux & Izberk-Bilgin, 2018, p.307) and negative brand commentary (D'Arco & Marino, 2018; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

These forms of consumer resistance are used as a retaliation for establishing consumers as the '*responsible consumer subject*' (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). Consumers are pinpointed as responsible for ethical and moral consumption as a governmental process through the P.A.C.T routine established by Giesler and Veresiu (2014). In practice, consumers are manipulated to think they can solve environmental and socio-political issues through neogreen consumption (Ulver, 2021b). However, consumers challenge this governmentality by casting the responsibility back to brands, enforcing them to position themselves on socio-political issues (through brand activism), and assessing which brands they will harness as resistance tools, through the aforementioned boycotting and buycotting strategies.

Another way in which brands are utilised by postmodern consumers is through products and services' linking value. Postmodernism is marked by a radical form of individualism, in which individuals are no longer shackled to a community they would previously be obligated to. As a result, individuals roam independently with few social links. This has caused society to fragment, affecting the crumbling of consumption (Cova, 1997). Today, consumers employ the explicit positioning brands take on certain values and beliefs to feel connected to other

consumers via a new type of postmodern tribes (Cova, 1997), for example brand communities (Muñez & O'Guinn, 2001). Brand activism is then utilised by both brands and consumers in different ways; brands employ activism to connect to consumer communities and guide them towards its own brand community, whilst consumers use brand activism to link them to other consumers to enable finding consumer communities which uphold the same values and beliefs.

2.2.3 A Brand's Moral Compass

The manner in which consumers perceive the moral competencies of a brand is a framework which has been drawn upon during the research. According to Sibai, Mimoun and Boukis (2021), consumers judge a brand's activist stance based on three skills: (1) Moral Sensitivity, (2) Moral Vision, and (3) Moral Integration. By assessing the overall moral compass of a brand, consumers verify whether brand activism is used authentically or inauthentically.

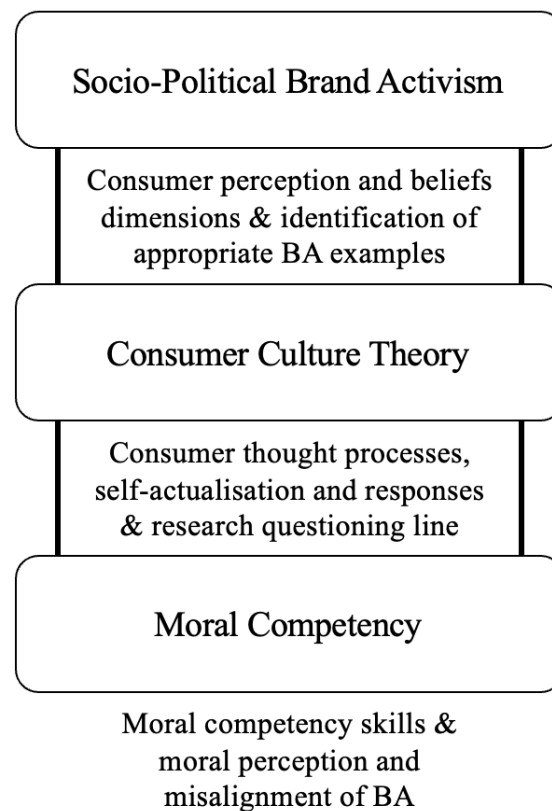
Initially, Moral Sensitivity concerns a brand's situational awareness on whether the moral situation at hand is relevant or not from the perspective of the consumer. This level of relevancy concerns the matter in which the situation allows for a sensitive or insensitive approach. In light of brand activism, Moral Sensitivity means whether brands raise urgent, moral issues in its activism. Secondly, Moral Vision regards whether a brand's moral compass or internal financial motivations guides brands whilst setting future goals. Does the brand determine future goals based on how it can morally contribute, or whether it can enjoy financial gains from these targets. Lastly, Moral Integration is the concept of brands consistently integrating their moral beliefs throughout every process. Consumers can question if a brand's activist stance is applied to other aspects of the company, both internally and externally (Sibai, Mimoun & Boukis, 2021).

Sibai, Mimoun and Boukis (2021) noted that the previously mentioned moral skills are not evaluated equally by consumers. The current polarised brandscape is less fixated on Moral Vision in comparison to Moral Sensitivity and Moral Integration. A lack of sensitivity and integration are deemed as more morally unforgiving. To assess the brand's activist stances, consumers are likely to base their judgement on former and current operations of a brand in light of morality, rather than the development of their moral vision.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

Figure 2 visualises the different research areas that have been applied to the methodology for both the qualitative and quantitative research. These areas formed the basis of pre-existing results on which the interview structure and questionnaire have been based. Overall, these theoretical areas include Socio-Political Brand Activism, Consumer Culture Theory and Moral Competency.

Figure 2 Conceptual Framework



3. Methodology

The following methodology chapter provides an overview of the chosen research approach. This includes the contextualisation around the sampling method such as the scope around ‘*young Western consumers*’ and the example of the BLM movement. Moreover, the methodological approach to both qualitative and quantitative research is given. This chapter concludes with a summary of the methodology.

3.1 Research Approach

Research Philosophy

According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2015), a research philosophy includes the ontological and epistemological approach behind the research problem. Ontology concerns the relationship between the nature of reality and existence. On this note, the research background implied that relativism is the underlying relationship. Individuals have multiple perspectives on the brand activism issue at hand, influenced by different human experiences. Consequently, the epistemological approach of this research, the basis on which the world is measured through objective methods, concerns constructionism. The latter relates to a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods such as interviews and surveys. The former allows for human experiences to be examined comprehensively and in-depth whereas the latter concludes which perspectives respondents have, based on specific internal and external dimensions. To conclude, this mixed research philosophy aims to bring different perspectives together via different methods, allowing for more elaborate conclusions conducive to theory generation (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015).

Mixed Approach

The overall approach to the main research questions concerns mixed methods research, otherwise known as triangulation. This multimethodology includes a qualitative approach in the form of in-depth interviews and a quantitative approach in the form of descriptive questionnaire research. Both types of research are not generalisable in nature and thus conclusions are only applicable to the sample groups (Burns & Burns, 2012). An inductive research approach in which notable qualitative results form the basis of further research within a quantitative study was not possible due to time constraints. Nonetheless, interesting findings may become the basis for future exploratory research when resources are more elaborate.

Each form of research focused on a specific part of the research aim. Nonetheless, the results have overlapped for the most important part. To contextualise, the qualitative approach has derived deeper insights into the respondent's psyche by asking for and giving brand activism examples. This allowed the researcher to ask about any motivations behind given answers. Regarding the qualitative approach, this form of research has identified semi-quantifiable patterns concerning the beliefs and ethics of the respondent's background which may form the basis of their judgement on BA. Both forms of research concluded the relevant dimensions on which consumers form the validation or de-validation of brand activism.

3.2 Research Context

Context of 'Young' Criterion

As per Burns and Burns (2012), the initial step of the sampling process concerns defining the population conducive to the sample frame. This step requires reasoning behind the chosen population of '*young Western consumers*'. The initial criterion, '*young*', requires specification on the use of age. Due to the dynamic nature of this concept, Ting et al. (2021) have redefined a young age cohort as individuals who were born between the years of 1986 and 2006. This so-called '*i-Generation*' ranges from 16 to 36 years old.

To elaborate, Ismail et al. (2020) conclude that this age cohort is well-educated and extremely tech-savvy. As a result, Ting et al. (2021) gathered that consequently, young people have a different relationship with brands compared to older age cohorts. Young people use brands as a platform for their own identity-creation on the condition that the brand's beliefs align with theirs (Ting et al., 2021; Ismail et al., 2020). Consequently, brands seek to apply the consumer's beliefs and identity characteristics to their corporate communication, as to reposition and distinguish themselves (Ismail et al., 2020; Roper & Fill, 2012) as they intertwine brands with their own identity perception (Ismail et al., 2020). Hence, the increased awareness of branding and the use of brands as a platform makes '*young*' respondents a relevant area of research.

Context of 'Western' Criterion

As for the criterion of what is considered a '*Western*' country or region, research by Huntington (1996) has been consulted as he was the first researcher to define '*Western*' countries. Huntington (1996) concluded that countries located within North America, Western Europe, and Oceania, were historically financially the strongest in the world, based on disposable income. As a result, these countries became the catalytic factor for consumerism and brand

development. The latter is an important factor for this research as Western respondents have a better understanding of brands and their intentions, making this a relevant area for research. The sampling process considers any person who was born in a before-mentioned Western area regardless of the respondent coming from a first-generation immigrant household.

Race within Identity Politics

Identity politics, defined as “[the] *social movements to gain recognition of historically oppressed ethnocultural or racialized groups*” (Kobayashki, 2009, p.282), encompasses topics in public socio-political discourse such as race, religion, gender, age, class, and sexual orientation (Maciel & Wallendorf, 2021; Bernstein, 2005). These are facets of how individuals define their identity, or how they fit “*social categories or roles*” (Fukuyama, 2018, p.6). Globalisation and its effects of creating an increasingly unequal, liberal society provides an explanation for the amplified attention for identity politics. Unrest bubbles in groups of individuals who, throughout the process of globalisation, have lost their own identity; their anxieties and bitterness over that loss (Fukuyama marked this phenomenon ‘*politics of resentments*’ (2018, p.17)) has fostered an extreme split: progressives versus conservatives, today’s ‘*democrats*’ versus ‘*republicans*’. This study aims to elucidate how brand activism is perceived by consumers by exemplifying racism as a part of identity politics. Defined as “*the collective text and talk of society with respect to the issues of race*” (Doane, 2006, p.256), race narratives have inflated in recent years as an effect of COVID-19 and George Floyd’s murder (Balz, 2020). For this reason, it is deemed a relevant topic to provide context with, one which brands have explicitly commented upon in the market; for example, during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, a diversity of brands across industries took to Instagram to post a black square (Duarte, 2020).

The reason for selecting BLM as the main example for this study is that BLM is a worldwide known movement, whose awareness peak had erupted in a specific moment in time in which the world population was confined to their homes because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to this, all attention was directed towards this movement. As a result, it was expected that many individuals, including the participants of this study, were familiar with the context at hand. In this way, a general understanding of the example already existed in participants’ minds, and two years’ time has passed for them to pass a judgement on how brands employed their activism in this light. Moreover, due to the nature of this movement, a large number of brands were compelled to speak up within their activism, which allowed for a great number of examples to be selected from for this study. Other main examples which were considered for this study was

the #MeToo movement, as well as the US legalisation of Marriage Equality in 2015, however, the two felt more geographic-specific to the US rather than on an international scale such as BLM, and unlike BLM, did not have a specific peak in time when the entire world was talking about the same issue or have taken place too long ago to be able to provide an array of BA examples.

3.3 Qualitative method

The first part of this research was carried out utilising a qualitative approach and was set out to illuminate different, in-depth experiences of individual consumers. Gaining an in-depth understanding of these different points of view enhanced the contextualisation of the research subject (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

3.3.1 Research Method

The specific research method selected for this section is semi-structured interviews. During semi-structured interviews, the researcher follows a set line of questioning but allows space for ad hoc questions that may arise to further probe into the experiences of the interviewees (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). It enables the researcher to expand on interesting points the interviewees make which, perhaps due to the formulation and structuration of the questions, could fall outside of the scope of the pre-set questions (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The reason for the selection of this method is that it allowed the researcher to elucidate constructs that could be typically regarded as sensitive subjects; race can be classified as a sensitive topic as it can come at the expense of the interviewee, such as emotional distress (Lee & Renzetti, 1990; Kallio et al., 2016). Therefore, a safe environment in which interviewees could feel comfortable sharing intimate thoughts and feelings was considered one of the highest priorities in conducting this research. A one-on-one setting was thus essential to provide comfortability, privacy, trust, and confidentiality when discussing matters revolving around race and morality.

Other types of interviews do not fit the requirements for this research, as unstructured interviews could not provide reliability and replicability of interviews across participants, and structured interviews could not provide the depth of individual experiences and the flexibility this research was seeking (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). As a result, semi-structured interviews were the preferred method for this research topic, and main research question specifically, over other types of interviews. However, there are some disadvantages or challenges tied to this type of interview, such as the potential inability of interviewees to articulate their thoughts and

emotions in such a way that is understandable by the researchers. In addition, as this study aimed to adopt an intersectionality approach to the data selection (further elaborated in chapter 3.2.2), interviewees from different cultural backgrounds and mother tongues might have found it difficult to correctly translate their experiences into the English language in a detailed manner. In response to this, the interviewers have employed several interviewing techniques such as laddering up (asking why-questions) and down (requesting an example) (Easterby-Smith et al., 2020). Another technique that was utilised was providing concrete examples which made the context of specific questions more understandable.

Other qualitative research methods were considered before selecting semi-structured interviews, however, could not accommodate the type of private, confidential environment this research pursued. Group interviews and focus groups are too public for this research's sensitive context (Easterby-Smith et al., 2020), as the dynamics during these discussions can be triggering and emotionally upsetting for some participants. Alternative methods such as visual analysis, ethnography or netnography and case studies were not an appropriate fit for this research context as well. The main aspect of this research was to interact with the interviewees, creating space for them to articulate their experiences and delve deeper into their understanding and perceptions of brand activism (Kvale, 1994). Semi-structured interviews were, conclusively, the appropriate research method for this research context.

3.3.2 Data Collection

As mentioned before, this study aimed to adopt an intersectionality approach to its data collection. According to Cole (2009), three questions should be continually asked at each step of the research to guarantee intersectionality:

- (1) "*Who is included in this category?*" thus ensuring different types of individuals, or diversity, is a key aspect of the data collection (p.171);
- (2) "*What role does inequality play?*" how does inequality affect different aspects of the research, from data collection to data interpretation (p.173);
- (3) "*Where are there similarities?*" aiding in finding common ground between categories of individuals which are typically considered distinctive (p.175).

In this research, questions 1 and 2 were considered in the sampling strategy and participant selection phase, whilst questions 2 and 3 were reflected on during the research execution and data interpretation phases.

In practicality, a set of criteria was created to which individuals must have adhered to ensure an inclusive approach to the research. This study therefore has adopted a purposive sampling strategy (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2021), which allowed a representative sample from a diverse range of individuals. Specific group membership criteria were age (within the ‘*young*’ context, specifically aged 16-36), nationality (within the Western context) and ethnic and cultural background. Furthermore, through the focus of ethnicity and cultural background, special attention was placed on the interaction between these demographic features and power relations with the social systems in society (Hunting, 2014). A final criterion was a high level of English proficiency, to ensure the ability to pursue a thorough understanding of the participants’ experiences. Due to the time constraints and the restricted nature of this research, no other criteria were set. It is hereby acknowledged by the authors that other, important classifications such as sexual orientation and class were not incorporated, and therefore, the intersectionality of this research sample is limited. The researchers endeavoured to interview eight participants, which, considering the time constraints, has expectantly provided contextualisation.

Therefore, the data was collected from the following eight individuals:

- Aged 16-36;
- Living in the West;
- Mostly with a non-Western ethnic background, perhaps first or second-generation immigrants;
- With a high English proficiency.

The data was collected in the following manner:

- (1) A list of 10 potential interviewees was created randomly according to the sampling strategy;
- (2) Individuals were approached whether they would like to participate in this study;
- (3) After having received confirmation of participation, interview date and time was set; if individuals did not agree to participate, the following individual on the list was approached until a minimum of eight participants were identified;
- (4) Participants were sent a consent form before the interview took place, and the interview only started if the form had been filled in and received by the researchers. Moreover, a demographic information form was also sent, to ensure intersectionality;
- (5) If the filled-in consent form had been received, the interview took place;
- (6) During the interviews, the researcher took notes by hand, and recorded the interview by using a recording device;

(7) After the interview had ended, the notes were digitised, and the recording was transcribed by the use of online transcribing software.

Remote interviewing

It had been decided to carry out the interviews digitally. There are a few reasons for this decision. Firstly, it provided convenience to both researchers and interviewees; it allowed them to be physically in different parts of the world (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Their locality might have been affected to some extent by the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore ensured interviews took place. Second, by allowing interviewees to be at their own locality of choice during the interview, they might have felt more relaxed in their own surroundings, allowing them to open up further. Although remote interviews are beneficial, especially in a world dominated by COVID-19, there are limitations as well. One constraint is the interview environment (Topping, Douglas & Winkler, 2021); the interviewer has no impact on the environment which could negatively affect the interviewees. Moreover, Topping, Douglas, and Winkler (2021) stipulate privacy and confidentiality is another important factor; the interviews were conducted on Zoom, specifically through the university-generated account(s) to ensure maximum confidentiality.

3.3.3 Interview Guide

The interviews were semi-structured according to an interview guide, which can be found in Appendix I.I alongside a table of participants overview in Appendix I.II. The aim of the interview guide, the sections and their added value are expanded upon here.

An interview guide is a common tool for qualitative interviews (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2021), and is a list of questions that aids the interviewer to lead the interview (Kallio et al., 2016). An interview guide for semi-structured interviews is flexible, sets out preliminary questions but allows the freedom for the interviewer to adjust the order of the questions throughout the interview, or introduce new questions which have not been set prior. During the interviews, employing wording such as how, why, when, how and whereas as opening to a question could generate descriptive responses (Kallio et al., 2016). Two types of questions are important in this context: “*main themes*” and “*follow-up questions*” (Kallio et al., 2016, p.2960). The first focuses on the leading theory and the latter on explanations of the interviewee and are often spontaneous. The objective of the interview guide was thus to enable a prepared, flexible, somewhat structured conversation with an interviewee.

Interview guide sections

The guide consists of four sections. Its main sections follow the theories set out in the Theoretical Framework. Questions were hence guided by the Moral Competency framework by Sibai, Mimoun and Boukis (2021), socio-political activism and its perception constructs. Each subsection focused on the theory included up to three predefined questions, with a number of nine pre-set theory-focused main theme questions in total. The following sections were included:

- (1) *Introduction* set out the aim of the interview, introduced the topic and communicated the main guidelines for the interview, such as consent, confidentiality, and recording.
- (2) *Setting the scene* the interview began by asking interviewees what they knew of brand activism and if they could think of any examples. This allowed for answers that were unbiased by the interviewer. Afterwards, the concept of brand activism as defined in this study was introduced, along with basic information about the BLM movement and the 2020 incident in which George Floyd was killed. Moreover, concrete examples of brands interacting within the BLM movement were provided from a wide range of industries and business sizes.
- (3) *Main themes* were discussed according to the three moral skills as defined by Sibai, Mimoun and Boukis (2021).
 - (3.1) *Moral Sensitivity* studied the perceptions of consumers on the extent to which brands identify moral issues in society and raise them via brand activism. Follow up questions raised perception constructs that have not been mentioned by the consumer.
 - (3.2) *Moral Vision* investigated the perceptions of consumers on the extent to which brands guide their actions by morality when setting future goals, prioritising socio-political matters over financial gains. Again, follow up questions raised the perception constructs set out in Chapter 2, Theoretical Framework.
 - (3.3) *Moral Integration* examined the perceptions of consumers on the extent to which brands are consistent in their morality across business practices and over time. Here as well, follow up questions raised perception constructs.
- (4) *Closure* of the interview was concluded by providing space for the consumer to articulate any other thoughts or comments, as well as thanking the interviewee and checking in with the participant to ensure they are feeling well.

Examples used in interviews

A total of six examples were drawn upon during the interview to provide context for interviewees, and to ensure a level of homogeneity in their understanding of BLM brand activism. The examples were presented in the second section, Setting the Scene. First, any video advertisements were shown, after which a screenshot was displayed through the researcher sharing their screen with the participant. The screenshot of the brand's Instagram post in which their BLM statement was exhibited. Whilst the participant views the screenshot, the researcher reads aloud what the statement says, and states which external and internal actions have been undertaken by the brand. If there are additional screenshots of these actions (for example, if a brand has shared internal diversity statistics on Instagram), these were shown as well.

These six examples of Nike, Netflix, Starbucks, SundayRiley, Spanx and Klarna were selected to form as much of a holistic view of brand activism as possible. These brands are from different industries, ranging from apparel, cosmetics, food, and entertainment to financial services. There were also different sizes brands, ranging from key global players which the consumers are expected to be familiar with (Nike, Netflix, and Starbucks specifically) to smaller, independent brands which they might not be aware of (SundayRiley, Spanx, Klarna) depending on the consumer's background. By employing a diverse range of examples, an extensive understanding is formed for the consumer.

Please find a table of brand activism examples along with screenshots of any Social Media posts in Appendix I.III and I.IV, respectively.

3.3.4 Analysis method

In this study, the data was analysed through the use of systematic categorising, which is in reference to the themes of the Moral Competency framework by Sibai, Mimoun and Boukis (2021). Each moral skill was analysed separately using thematic analysis, after which an overall conclusion with regards to the perception of moral competency of brand activism was reached.

Thematic analysis

Defined as “*a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data*” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79), thematic analysis was utilised in this study. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p.78), this method is flexible whilst providing the researcher with “*a rich and detailed, yet complex*” data interpretation. Moreover, it is a relevant choice across the epistemological spectrum, allowing academics to identify ‘*reality*’ as well as explain its

underlying constructs (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). In addition, it is fitting for a relatively small data set (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). Therefore, thematic analysis was a suitable method for this study.

More specifically, a theoretical thematic analysis was undertaken, meaning the data collected was analysed with the theoretical framework in mind, seeking to detail specific features of the data rather than provide a more analysed overall view of the data, which is termed inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It was carried out through the identification of themes, namely, “*something important about the data set in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set*” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.82). In practice, the researcher sought topics or specific phrases that reappeared throughout the data collected to form concepts fitting with the perception constructs and moral skills established in the Theoretical Framework.

The data was analysed following five steps which have been derived from the frameworks by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Castleberry and Nolen (2018):

- (1) *Assembling* consists of gathering all the collected data, transcribing the recorded material and familiarising with the data;
- (2) *Reviewing* sorting through the data to distinguish initial themes, and understand the collected material better in-depth;
- (3) *Grouping* the data is sorted to establish main themes and concepts according to the perception construct and moral skills established in the Theoretical Framework;
- (4) *Coding* the main themes and concepts are formalised into a thematic map;
- (5) *Concluding* utilising the thematic map, conclusions were derived to the main research question.

3.4 Quantitative Method

Alongside the quantitative research regarding in-depth interviews, qualitative research has been conducted in the form of an online questionnaire. Its overall aim was to determine which dimensions influence consumer perception in relation to brand activism. As a result, one of the main research goals, concerning *how* a brand’s socio-political activist stances are validated or de-validated by consumers, can be answered.

3.4.1 Research Method

This quantitative study was of descriptive nature. Descriptive research can aid in describing or exploring a certain phenomenon, in this case, the (de-)validation of brand activism by consumers. For this scenario, variables were not controlled or influenced but merely observed in order to make semi-quantifiable statements. With a descriptive analysis, two main goals can be achieved:

- (1) Which dimensions are used by consumers to base their level of validation on?
- (2) How do these dimensions affect the consumers' level of BA validation?

Both goals are exploratory in nature. The overarching idea was to confirm expected dimensions, discover new dimensions, and analyse their current influence on consumer perception. Consequently, the results can be discussed, and business references can be drawn for the final managerial implications section.

This study is of descriptive setup aiming to answer '*What*' questions regarding trends and relationships (Grimes & Schulz, 2002). It does include research into underlying dimensions which would make it an analytical research design during which variables are controlled or influenced by the researcher. To illustrate, analytical research designs concern experimental and observational analytical setups. According to Grimes and Schulz (2002), analytical research aims to highlight the cause-effect relationships between variables, aiming to explain the '*Why*' questions. Another notable distinction between descriptive and analytical research concerns the absence of a hypothesis to (Grimes & Schulz, 2002). A hypothesis test would form the basis of a premeditated expectation regarding a cause-effect relationship (Grimes & Schulz, 2002).

This quantitative research took on the form of an online questionnaire. The survey was conducted via Google Survey and analysed through Microsoft Excel. Its questionnaire was of abductive nature, with predetermined sub-dimensions being extracted from theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Regarding the research population, this concerned '*young*' people from Western regions, as previously defined within this chapter. The respondents were reached through a nonprobability snowball sampling to minimise the amount of non-response within this research's relatively short time frame.

3.4.2 Sampling Process

An integral part of quantitative research concerned the sampling process of respondents. Burns and Burns (2012) constructed the following five-step model regarding the sampling process:

- (1) Define Population
- (2) Define Sample Frame
- (3) Define Sample Size
- (4) Define Sampling Technique
- (5) Define Data Collection Methods

Initially, the population itself had to be defined. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the population of this research concerns young Western consumers. The criterion of age has been determined as people born between 1986 and 2006 by Ting et al. (2021). Hence, respondents between the age of 16 and 36 have been approached. Moreover, the criterion of Western concerns countries and regions located within North America, Western Europe, and Oceania (Huntington, 1996).

Secondly, a sample frame was scoped out. As the questionnaire is of digital nature, a wide sampling frame was applied. This frame concerns any relevant respondent through the platforms LinkedIn, Facebook, and other social media. Nonetheless, the sample frame is based on certain demographic criteria, such as age and current residence. People below the age of 16, or above the age of 36, were disadvised to fill out the survey, rather than share it with relevant people.

Thirdly, the size of the sample had to be confirmed. Although this research design cannot calculate a sampling error due to applying a nonprobability sampling method (Burns & Burns, 2012), the total population (N) of Western consumers between the age of 16 to 36 can be expected to be larger than 20,000. As a result, 200 respondents (n) were enough for descriptive data input. A larger number of respondents would give saturated data resulting in no new descriptive information, according to Israel (1992).

Fourthly, the sampling technique ought to be described. In this scenario, an online questionnaire was held due to this research's limited time and resources. As a result, convenience sampling was applied to maximise the survey's reach within a short timeframe. A

form of convenience sampling that is time sensitive, inexpensive, and effective for social media survey distribution concerns snowball sampling. This sampling method is effective as online questionnaires are affected by low-response rates. According to Black (2019), the average response rate is 20%. Thus, this research had to approach roughly 1,250 people based on a sample size of 200 people. Snowball sampling is therefore conducive to greater awareness of the online questionnaire within the whole sampling frame. Moreover, this sampling technique is of nonprobable nature. Not everyone within the population has an equal chance of participating or being represented in this research. Therefore, the results forthcoming from snowball sampling may not be generalised beyond the sample.

Lastly, confirmation of data collection methods must be given. This quantitative research concerned an online questionnaire conducted on social media such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and WhatsApp. Due to the expected low response rates, respondents had to be effectively enticed to engage with and finish the survey. Hence, Cialdini's (2014) six principles of influence were consulted. Two principles, liking and commitment, are applied to the research design. '*Liking*' already concerns the sampling method itself since snowball sampling relies on private and professional networks. '*Commitment*' concerns an unspoken agreement between researcher and respondent that the survey will be transparent and not take up too many resources from the respondent, e.g., time, in return for commitment in the form of starting and finishing the questionnaire. Therefore, the questionnaire communicated a short demand of time in exchange for clarity surrounding the need for respondents in light of a master's dissertation. An overview of the questionnaire sampling can be found in Appendix II.I.

3.4.3 Questionnaire Design

To acquire a large set of descriptive data within a relatively short time frame, an online questionnaire was held. As previously mentioned, this questionnaire aimed to discover the dimensions that affect consumer perception of brand activism. Moreover, it aimed to describe how these dimensions influence the validation or de-validation of brand activism. This questionnaire researched the respondent's demographic background, the respondent's micro-affiliations and beliefs, and the respondent's existing prejudice towards branding in general.

The initial umbrella dimension, the respondent's demographic background, includes the sub-dimensions of gender, nationality, and ethnicity. These demographic dimensions, according to

Vredenburg et al. (2020), may affect perception as socio-political activism tends to revolve around cultural or demographic elements.

The second umbrella dimension is branding prejudices which include if, and how, company history, leadership and moral competencies affect their perception of brand activism. History is relevant to research as Roper and Fill (2012) conclude that a company's history includes historical elements, often tied to cultural notions, and forms the essence of any branding efforts and attracts specific customer groups. As for leadership, Dowling (2006) stated that reputation and communication are dependent on the CEO as it is the '*face*' of the company, essentially being a brand manager (De Chernatony & Riley, 1998) who sets the tone for brand activism efforts. Additionally, the way consumers perceive a brand's moral compass ought to be researched as Sibai, Mimoun & Boukis (2021) stated that this forms the basis of judgement on branding authenticity.

The last umbrella dimension, micro-affiliations, and beliefs, concerned the sub-dimensions of personal values, opinions, and religious and political affiliations. These value-based dimensions were researched as socio-political activism is either of progressive or conservative nature (Vredenburg et al., 2020), fuelling societal polarisation (Ulver, 2021). Hence, socio-political brand activism can be viewed as subjective, affected by political affiliation and personal beliefs, including religion.

Regarding data acquisition, descriptive questions were asked resulting in nominal data. This type of data has no mathematical meaning but rather provides qualitative input on the respondent's background and perceptions (Burns & Burns, 2021). Moreover, Likert-scale questions were used to determine the strength of the respondent's affiliation, beliefs, and attitudes toward branding and brand activism. This type of questionnaire concerns noncomparative itemised scales such as notions of agreement, importance, likelihood, and experience. These scales may range from '*major*' to '*minor*' on a five-point basis. Both nominal and Likert-scale questions were combined within the questionnaire resulting in four survey subcategories described below. A link to the survey questions and data output can be found in Appendix II.II.

- (1) *Who am I?* This first section of this survey consisted of questions surrounding age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and upbringing.
- (2) *What are my personal beliefs?* This second section of this survey consisted of questions regarding the respondent's religious, political, and personal beliefs.
- (3) *How do I personally experience brand activism?* This third section aimed to measure the strength of an opinion regarding statements on brand activism in relation to the consumer's values and beliefs.
- (4) *What's my opinion on brand activism?* The last section of this survey concerned the respondent's opinion on brands tackling societal issues surrounding gender and sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and politics. These questions aimed to establish how they create an opinion on brand activism.

3.4.4 Analytical Method and Data Scaling

As the main goal of a descriptive study is to merely analyse trends and relationships, this research considered nominal data from descriptive questions and ordinal data from Likert-scale questions. The online questionnaire was conducted through and extracted from Google Survey. Moreover, the data was analysed via Microsoft Excel. Descriptive analytical methods were applied wherein cross-tabulations included quantiles, means, medians, and modes allowing for compelling data visualisation techniques. Moreover, as nominal data is non-mathematical, and ordinal data is categorical, the scaling of variables was statistically labelled with numerical values.

3.5 Quality of Data

Assessing the quality of data is essential to enable the study to successfully withstand external scrutiny by the research community, and to allow understanding of the extent of replicability (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Quality concepts imperative in this study are representativeness, reliability, and validity.

Representativeness

The quality of representativeness is the degree to which this research's data reflects the real world. The authors acknowledge the research was limited in resources, and time was of the essence. Hence, quantitative respondents were targeted based on a nonprobability sampling method. Consequently, not everyone within the whole population of 'young Western

consumers' had an equal chance of participating and thus being represented. Therefore, none of the results from this study are allowed to be extrapolated beyond the sample. Regardless, notable findings can form a realistic basis for exploratory research in the future that would follow a probability sampling method. Moreover, if over- or under-sampling occurred, then these nonsampling errors were mentioned within the footnotes.

Reliability

The quality of reliability includes the level of consistency applied to the research. Firstly, the quantitative section of this research followed the same question pattern for each respondent. Nonetheless, the pattern may have been adjusted if a respondent had a certain reply to a given question, making any follow-up questions irrelevant. Although the questionnaire adapted to the respondent, non-response was prevented by applying '*forced response*' to each question. Consequently, each respondent went through a similar number of questions resulting in a sense of stability in the overall results. To measure the questionnaire's reliability, a pilot survey was distributed among familiar relations. These pilot tests ensured similar results when the same answers were given in multiple sessions.

Secondly, the qualitative section of this research could have faced the following threats, affecting the reliability of the study. The time of day could be one; interviewees might have been affected by factors such as hunger and fatigue (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). To counteract this, all interviews were conducted over Zoom and in the mornings at 10.30 AM or afternoons at 1.30 PM. In addition, social desirability could have played a role; interviewees might have felt obligated to answer in a certain type of way to be perceived positively by the researchers (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). To neutralise potential social desirability, the researcher set expectations at the outset of the interview and guaranteed the interviewees that their honest opinions were requested and would not have been judged. Finally, researcher bias or the researcher's ability to interpret the recorded datasets accurately could have affected final conclusions (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). To compensate for subjectivity brought about by researcher bias, the qualitative-focused research interpreted the data first, after which the quantitative-focused research inspected and evaluated the conclusions derived from the data.

Validity

From a constructionist perspective, validity regards the extent to which an adequate number of viewpoints are interpreted whilst forming conclusions (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). There are two elements within validity; internal validity, specifically credibility, and external validity, which touches on generalisability. To ascertain the highest degree of internal validity possible in this study, the following was undertaken by the researchers throughout both quantitative and qualitative sections of the research.

Firstly, this study's questionnaire prevented double negative questions and answer bias by applying answer randomisation on questions with many possibilities. Validity may have been affected based on the English comprehension skills of the respondent, which impacts the target language. The questionnaire was held in English while distributed among international respondents. To measure the questionnaire's validity, a pilot survey was distributed among familiar relations.

Secondly, the environment of the interviewees during the qualitative research was somewhat outside of control for the researchers, however, some context-dependent elements could be better controlled. For example, the researchers avoided the utilisation of jargon, abstract theories, and complex lines of questioning as much as possible (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Moreover, the use of examples throughout the interview made any theoretical questions more practical and understandable. Additionally, probes, by the employment of the laddering up and down interviewing techniques, guided interviewees in their active thinking as well as provided more insights for the investigators. Another aspect that was integrated into the interviews was creating space for the participants to reflect and express any additional thoughts and emotions they potentially have experienced during the interview.

3.6 Ethics

Ethical considerations in this study pertain to key principles of protection of participants such as consent, confidentiality, and privacy of the participants among others (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). To start with, the researchers ensured informed consent through the utilisation of the consent form before the start of the interview for the qualitative section. Moreover, notification at the start of the questionnaire on the goal of this research, the use of their data, and data retention was utilised for the quantitative section. Moreover, a demographic information form was also requested to be filled in, however, was not mandatory for participation, and was not

linked to an individual by the omission of names (participants were assigned a code instead). Furthermore, participants were informed of their rights before the interview started (guidelines were read to the participants in the introduction of the interview, which can be found in the interview guide in Appendix I.I). To ensure the confidentiality and privacy of the participants, they were informed of the data collection method, data storage and data utilisation throughout the study. They were also informed that their data would be deleted at the end of the project period, namely on May 31st, 2022. Ethical considerations pertaining to the research community include honest representation and communication of research findings, which were adhered to throughout the collection, interpretation and presentation of research findings and conclusions.

4. Interview Results and Analysis

The qualitative interviews conducted aimed at providing contextualization of consumer assessment of BA's perceived moral competency. The eight interviewees have diverse backgrounds which allowed for different points of view to emerge, providing a descriptively rich data set through which experiences can be observed. The results for each moral competency skill are presented and analysed separately, based on the dimensions laid out in the Theoretical Framework. To reiterate, those concern Sources of Information, Benefit to the Brand, CSR Contribution versus Spend, Corporate Congruence, History, Leadership and Consumer Background. Moreover, Business Size was investigated as well as a potential construct raised by the researcher. The identified new constructs emerging from the respondents' answers are discussed in a separate subchapter. Finally, a broader analysis of moral competency is drawn with the sketching of a thematic map.

4.1 Moral Sensitivity

Defined as “*a brand's ability to recognize the moral content of situations*” (Sibai, Mimoun & Boukis, 2021, p.1659), brands can be judged as exhibiting low or high moral sensitivity, depending on the extent they put forward urgent and important moral matters in their activism (Sibai, Mimoun & Boukis, 2021). Overwhelmingly, participants found relevant and referred to Sources of Information, Benefit to the Brand and Corporate Congruence as leading constructs of consumer opinion of brands' display of moral sensitivity as described in prior literature. History, Leadership and Consumer Background were also supported by the participants, having been probed by the researcher. Most respondents did not, however, find CSR Contribution versus Spend to be an important factor in their opinion forming. They found that the act of donation was more important to their assessment of moral sensitivity rather than the amount of the contribution to the cause versus the spend on advertising, such as P1, who said:

“But at the same time, I mean, to me, it's the act of donating money rather than the amount.”

Other respondents mentioned the message the brand put out and the impact of the donation to be more of value, for example, P2 who stated:

“I don't care how much you donate because I feel like it's more about how honest and truthful your message is and how many people you actually are, who you're trying to impact.”

The respondents' focus on the act of donating and the impact of said donations can be explained by another construct which has emerged, namely, *Transparency*. Participants criticise brands, articulating their inability to judge whether the donation was impactful, demanding more transparency from brands with regards to where they donate to, and how that contribution was used to aid the affected individuals. This emergent construct is elaborated upon further on in chapter 4.4.

Furthermore, Business Size was deemed not necessarily an influential dimension for most interviewees, except for P2 who stated:

“I do think that I actually very much go on size, how, if they are globally active, what is their kind of profit per year? And I do judge them based on that because I feel like if you have this global platform that is Starbucks, it's kind of like, similar to McDonald's.”

And P6, who said:

“It's just, as like, to me, a bigger, again, where does your dollar going? Like if you're going to donate \$50,000 to a national organisation, it's sort of a drop in the bucket of their annual funds. But if you're going to give \$10,000 to the local youth baseball programme, like that means new uniforms or whatever and can really change a kid's life close to home. So, yeah, I don't know. I'm more sceptical of the larger corporations.”

Most did state, however, they found Business Size to have some impact on brands' exhibition of moral sensitivity; awareness of big brands' brand activism was higher due to the number of resources available to such companies, along with the heavier responsibility accounted to big companies to speak up about urgent moral matters. Additionally, many found it a riskier move for big companies to take a stand within their activism, noting smaller brands have a smaller audience and hence have more freedom to express their stance.

4.2 Moral Vision

Defined as “*guides the definition of ethical and meaningful goals and actions (Sangarakshita, 2007) rather than those that serve organisational performance*” (Sibai, Mimoun & Boukis, 2021, p.1660), brands can be judged as exhibiting moral vision if they set future goals based on how they can morally contribute to society, rather than focusing on financial gains (Sibai, Mimoun & Boukis, 2021). Participants referred to and generally supported the constructs of Benefit to Brand as well as Corporate Congruence in this context. Consumer Background, History and Sources of Information were largely illustrated as well, sometimes referred to by the participant, sometimes when enquired into by the researcher. Leadership and CSR Contribution versus Spend were not introduced in this context by any of the interviewees, however, when initiated by the researcher, were found relevant to some degree.

Business Size was considered by most interviewees to be of importance. For example, P6, who gave the example of Electrical Vehicles (EVs) and the increased interest of consumers and hence in producing them, remarked:

“I think, like, the larger corporations from your examples are financially motivated. ... And that wasn't true five years ago, wasn't true 10 years ago, and so they didn't do it 10 years ago when, like, arguably the climate change alarms were ringing, if not for the first time, certainly louder than they had been.”

Moreover, P5 specified how it is more complex to expect change within big brands, noting:

“It's harder to drive change, of course, at a bigger corporation. But seeing them try already makes them trust, makes me trust them more just because [of] how difficult it is, like it's easier to drive change in, you know, in a company with like five to 12 people, but if we talk about 500 or even more, that's really difficult to do that.”

In addition, P4 stated:

“I feel like, if, I feel like, as a small business, you're more in touch with your consumers. And so, you're more likely to be authentically supportive of small communities because you rely on small communities. And so, as a consequence, you're more likely to support them.”

Overall, participants regarded Business Size important in the extent to which the brand could utilise resources to spend more time on moral contributions. Therefore, expectations could be set higher on bigger brands than smaller brands, and smaller brands might generally be considered to have more space to form a public opinion and make an impact.

4.3 Moral Integration

Defined as “... brands’ ability to pursue their moral beliefs in all situations” (Sibai, Mimoun & Boukis, 2021, p.1660), brands can be judged as exhibiting moral integration if they set out a consistent stance through messaging and actions (Sibai, Mimoun & Boukis, 2021). Constructs that were largely illustrated and brought up by interviewees were Benefit to Brand alongside Corporate Congruence. Others that were substantially found relevant but have been probed by the researcher include Sources of Information, History, Leadership and Consumer Background. CSR Contribution versus Spend was by some regarded as important and by others as not. Finally, Business Size was considered by some participants to play a role in their judgement of consistency, for example, P3 who stated:

“I think larger businesses have the ability to be more consistent and set up like the whole foundation and everything than smaller businesses.”

Another interviewee, P7, stated:

“I don't think big brands like that are consistent, in what they say they believe in and they only, I feel like they only utter it, they only utter that they really care about, is, whenever they're called out on something.”

However, P4 responded:

“Um, business size, I feel like for consistency, not necessarily. Just because you can also have um, I mean, for example, Nike is a big organisation and I think they've been quite consistent in their messaging throughout the years.”

Business Size thus affects how some respondents judge consistency of brand activism, which could shape consumer opinion, depending on individual experience.

4.4 Emergent Constructs

Several new themes have emerged through the participants' answers. The following are presented: Transparency, Knowledge of Brand, Timing, Communication Management, Structure of Communication, Locality and Type of Issue.

Transparency

As briefly touched upon previously, it was apparent in some interviewees' answers regarding all three moral skills. Firstly, it was demanded by consumers to be able to gain a better understanding of brands and of their actions in Moral Sensitivity, for example, P1 expressed:

“... just companies actually like openly being honest and genuine about their support, not just for marketing purposes, but like ethics purposes.”

P6 referred to one of the examples provided at the beginning of the interview, *SundayRiley*, who donated nationally as well as locally, published diversity statistics and highlighted Black-owned businesses on their Instagram, adding:

“I think the transparency, of like, showing the behind the scenes is more important than, just like posting a square. ... And I think that's like a corrected application because they saw the moment and they realised that it was more, it was more than just like, a lump sum donation to a national organisation. It was about like supporting the local Black community”

Moreover, *Transparency* was mentioned in Moral Vision as well, when considering whether brands set future goals based on moral contribution or financial gains, for example, P7 stated:

“And, so there's no continuity about the transparency of their work, but rather like whenever, whenever a journalist finds out about it and then they have to deal with it.”

Along with P5, who brought up *SundayRiley* and its publishing of diversity statistics on Instagram as an example as well, likewise specified:

“Of course, it was like, you know, 44 percent white and then everyone, it was just, it's still, it's still a minority, but at least they're honest about it. And that, I think vulnerability also shows that you want to improve. So, I think that, yeah, that plays a big role in how I judge it and how I judge the validity of it.”

Finally, the construct also emerged in the final skill, Moral Integration, which regards consistency of brands. P4 mentioned:

“It makes me doubtful that it is, for them, just a one-time thing, just because they didn't show, they didn't show the numbers in terms of diversifying their workforce.”

Many of the interviewees mentioned the concept of ‘one-off’ or ‘one-time’, addressing brands that do not show consistency oftentimes are judged to not be transparent, which might change consumer opinion.

Transparency in this context is hence regarded as specifically, when brands are unambiguous of what activities they are undertaking in the frame of brand activism, how these are followed up internally, as well as sharing with consumers the impact of their BA endeavours. The extent to which brands communicate to consumers and vulnerably share internal and external specifications of BA efforts can thus define *Transparency* in this setting.

Knowledge of Brand

The extent to which consumers’ knowledge of the brand and its actions existed, affected consumers’ opinions of Moral Vision. If knowledge was limited, opinion forming was impacted for P6:

“So, yeah, you know, it's sort of like when a company is willing to like, try to claim then I'm willing to start questioning more why they're claiming that's good. But I guess the less I know about the company, the more likely [I am] to give them the benefit of the doubt.”

P1 also mentioned the extent of knowledge, referring to *Patagonia* and its campaign raising the issue of environmentalism, having donated a large sum from its sales:

“But I do think, as I said, with Nike, for example, or like I know Patagonia also, like it's not related to the Black Lives Matter movement, but I do know they care a lot about the planet and the environment. And they may now, they may now, not make a lot of sales or like a lot of money, but that's when their morals come first.”

Being aware of the extent to which the brand follows up on its promises, here *Patagonia* and its donation of its sales to a certain cause, influenced the opinion forming of the consumer. This particular interviewee had read a LinkedIn article about *Patagonia* and due to its increased knowledge of the brand, judged it to be more morally motivated.

Another interviewee, P8, referred to internal processes:

“Well, it's hard to know because we don't know what's happening internally within the business as BLM. ... I can probably name you a number of Black people I've worked with. And it's less than 10, which is pretty shocking. And I don't, I don't know what processes have [been] put in place to change that.”

Without concrete knowledge of the brand and its internal processes, this interviewee finds it difficult to judge whether the brand sets its goals considering moral contributions or financial motivations.

Judging consistency of brand activism in Moral Integration, here as well, *Knowledge of Brand* of consumers can be imperative. P7 stated:

“Well, I feel like I know so little about these brands. At least for Nike, I know very little about Nike. So, it's hard for me to say that they're consistent about these morals.”

If consumers' knowledge is limited, in this context, consumers might find it difficult to judge consistency and thus perception might be affected.

Timing

The timing of brand activism actions of brands was mentioned by interviewee P1 as an essential construct for assessing Moral Integration. They mentioned:

“There are some brands that are, or companies that just jump on the bandwagon and are like, oh, June is coming, let's do something for the LGBTQ+ community or March is coming, let's do something for women's rights and everything that has to do with it. But there are some companies that just through the whole year, they do different activities, different things that actually help communities or people or whatever they're fighting for. And I think that's, that's what is more important.”

P3, likewise, stated:

“Uhm, I guess the time frame is, once a year, once a month, once a day... like that also affects how many times I see it, the more times I see it, I guess the more I like to believe that they're consistent or something.”

Distrust of brand activism, when it is only employed at certain time points throughout the year, can hence increase. The more often and the more continuity consumers see in brands' activism, the more consumers might judge a brand as consistent, and could affect consumer perception.

Communication Management

P5 highlighted the management of the communication as a potential construct for judging consistency in Moral Integration, stating:

“But often actually, what then, I feel like happens, is that you see these, you see these corporations implementing these changes and they'll announce it over a period of a month or something. And then after that, you hear nothing of it again. And then I'm wondering, yeah, but a month, it's quite short to implement a change like, why is there not continuous updates?”

The amount of communication and the way it is managed to inform consumers on brand activism developments, might play a role as well in how consumer opinion is formed.

Structure of Communication

Referring to the example of *Nike*, P4 explains how the ways in which the advertisements concerning moral issues are structured affects their judgement of Moral Sensitivity:

“... I still feel like in the advertising, they still implement some kind of social political message. And I feel like that's the aspect that sticks out for me. And also like how... They kind of, they always kind of put the message first and the product after. ... But the product always came later, and it was always the message first. And that to me shows that, that's something that they truly care about and they try to implement also within their organisation.”

Highlighting the message around the moral issue first rather than focusing on how the brand's offering can help mediate, could play a role in adjusting consumer opinion forming as it might show consumers the brand prioritises the cause over its own financial gains.

Locality

The interviewees' stances on Moral Sensitivity in general can also be related to another emergent construct called Locality. Some mention small-scale action is more believable, affecting their opinion forming, such as P2 who said:

“Because if you are smaller and you're trying to impact, I don't know that, the, the city or the town that you're headquartered in, it seems a lot more believable.”

A local donation or action (at times in addition to a national one) therefore might be a way to decrease distrust of brand activism, as it could signal authenticity to consumers.

Type of Issue

Mentioned by P8, the Type of Issue a brand is referring to in its brand activism could affect consumer assessment of Moral Integration:

“I think maybe, I think the most frustrating thing is, especially during the BLM thing was, when some brands are talking about issues that are so systematic, you know, just putting a black square on and donating a bit of money doesn't really solve anything. So, I think that, especially in the UK, like, systematic racism was such a big issue in terms of higher education system [how it] works.”

It could be that opinion is impacted when brands undertake moral issues that are more of a systematic nature, which is expected to be resolved by the government. In such a way, regardless of the brand activism messaging and actions that are put forward, consumer opinion

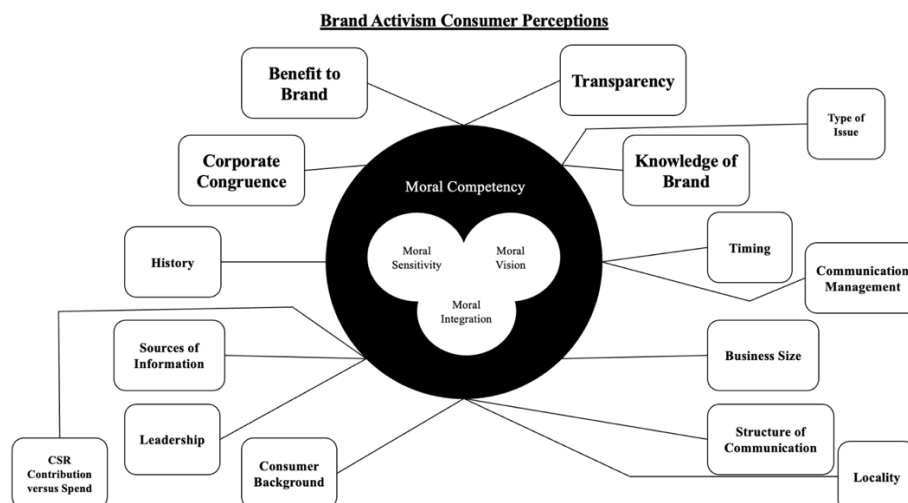
might be influenced because it is experienced as a small addition that could not have major consequences.

4.5 Moral Competency

Considering the three moral skills discussed above, a general understanding of moral competency can be sketched. Constructs that were identified in prior literature, mainly Sources of Information, Benefit to the Brand, Corporate Congruence, History, Leadership and Consumer Background were predominantly considered imperative to consumer opinion. CSR Contribution versus Spend was found at times to be relevant, but not as significant. Finally, newly emergent themes can be distinguished as Business Size, Transparency, Knowledge of Brand, Timing, Communication Management, Structure of Communication, Locality and Type of Issue. The extent to which these new constructs have an impact on consumer opinion is inconclusive as of yet and must be further researched.

The thematic map sketched below in Figure 3 portrays an overview of the constructs employed by consumers to form a judgement of Moral Competency. On the left-hand side, constructs which have been identified in prior research and supported by this study are presented. The constructs which are deemed the most important are presented in a larger typecase, whereas those which have a more limited effect are displayed in a smaller typecase. On the right-hand side, the elements which have emerged from consumers' answers are exhibited. Once again, those that are considered more substantially affecting consumer judgements are in a larger typecase than those that are more limited in their impact.

Figure 3 Qualitative Results



5. Survey Results

On top of a qualitative study, quantitative descriptive research was conducted. The next chapter covers this research, conducted in the form of an online questionnaire. This section starts off with an overview of the survey process including a summary of respondent characteristics and a description of which variables were discussed. Following, notable findings are discussed and juxtaposed with the theoretical framework in order to confirm possible implications.

5.1 Survey Process & Demographic Background

An important goal of this quantitative study was to define relationships between consumers and their beliefs and characteristics. Its overarching aim was to explore and confirm specific dimensions on which the validation of brand activism is based. The sampling process concerned a non-probability sampling technique in the form of an online snowball method.

Ultimately, 211 surveys were gathered of which 172 respondents mirrored the predefined sample criteria of ‘*young*’, between 16 and 36 years old, and ‘*Western*’, born and/or spent most of their life in North America, Europe, or Oceania. Regarding the former criterion, 5 respondents were 37 years or older. As for the latter criterion, 25 people grew up in Asia, 8 in South America, and 1 in Africa. These respondents were deducted from the 211 surveys but are discussed briefly in the chapter’s final section.

Although the results may not be generalised beyond the sample (Black, 2019), it is relevant to confirm on which grounds the 172 respondents reflect the population as a whole. The following demographic results can be confirmed. Firstly, concerning gender, this sample had a near 50/50 split between male and female respondents mirroring society correctly. On top of that, sexuality was also an accurate reflection as the homosexuality (queer) to heterosexuality ratio concerned one in ten. Nevertheless, an important factor to note is ethnicity. The results of this variable offered an inaccurate representation as nearly 90% of respondents defined themselves as ‘*white*’. This result was expected due to the snowball effect occurring within mostly Caucasian circles and will be described in the limitations part of this dissertation. As a result, any relationships between ethnicity and brand activism dimensions cannot be defined nor explored based on this sample.

5.2 Focus Areas of Results and Variables

Before the survey results can be discussed, a scope is needed regarding which results and variables are to be focused on and why. The most important questions concern the following (in sequential order). Firstly, Question 11 *'Which value set is most important to the respondent'* is highlighted as this could give insight into the relationship between a consumer's personal values and a brand's core values. Secondly, Question 12 *'The respondent's generation finds brands that take an activist stance more important than older generations'* is discussed as this may confirm former research by Ismail et al. (2020), Roper and Fill (2012), and Ting et al. (2021). Moreover, a distinction is made between Generation Z, 16 to 25 years old, and Millennials, 26 to 36 years old, in order to explore any generational differences in brand perception.

Besides general results, certain variables are juxtaposed to explore possible relationships between consumer beliefs and brand activism validation while also aiming to substantiate research conducted by Vredenburg et al. (2020). These values and beliefs include the variables gender, sexuality, religion, and political affiliation (note: ethnicity cannot be researched due to not being representative). Each variable is studied in light of Question 13 *'The respondent wants media representation of [variable]'*, Question 14 *'The respondent wants brands to be vocal of [variable]'*, Question 15 *'The respondent finds that brands use [variable] authentically'*, and, lastly, Question 16 *'The respondent tends to research the company to form an opinion on a brand's true intentions'*.

Lastly, other important focus areas include Question 16, *'The respondent tends to research the company to form an opinion on a brand's true intentions'* and Question 17 *'Which dimension do the respondents base their validation of brand activism on'* including their designated question flows. Their follow-up questions determine the relevance of pre-defined dimensions on which brand activism might be validated based on research by Roper and Fill (2012), Dowling (2006), and De Chernatony and Riley (1998).

5.3 Notable Findings and Discussion

The following section follows the research dimensions from the methodology chapter and is divided into branding prejudices and opinions, micro-affiliations and beliefs, and dimensions of brand activism validation.

5.3.1 Branding Prejudices & Opinions

This survey made an age distinction between respondents who are 16 to 25 years old, and respondents who are 26 to 36 years old. The former can be described as Generation Z and covered roughly two out of three respondents, whereas the latter can be viewed as Millennials and covered the remaining one out of three. Ismail et al. (2020), Roper and Fill (2012), and Ting et al. (2021) mentioned that young people, born between 1986 and 2006, are well-educated and extremely tech-savvy and as a result, they have a different relationship with brands compared to older age cohorts. In this survey, both Millennials and Generation Z strongly agree on the fact that their respective generations *'find brands that take an activist stance more important than older generations'*. Generation Z is slightly more opinionated as 86% agreed on 'yes' as opposed to 78% for Millennials. As each generation finds brand activism more important than the previous, implying a growing trend for future generations, our conclusions agree with prior research.

As for religious beliefs, over half of the respondents are non-religious, followed by Christian respondents (30%), and *'other'* religions (12%). With nearly half of the sample being religious, about 40% are non-practising and another 40% practise it only mildly. In general, the religious respondents are not strong practitioners of their beliefs. As more strongly religious people are underrepresented, they are described in the limitation section. Regarding political affiliations, about twelve in twenty respondents take on a progressive-to-strongly-progressive stance. As visualised in Figure 4, five in twenty respondents take on a centric stance while only one in twenty is on the more conservative side of the political spectrum. Overall, the majority of the respondents have progressive political beliefs followed by a more nuanced group. Nonetheless, the lack of strong conservative respondents are included in the limitation section.

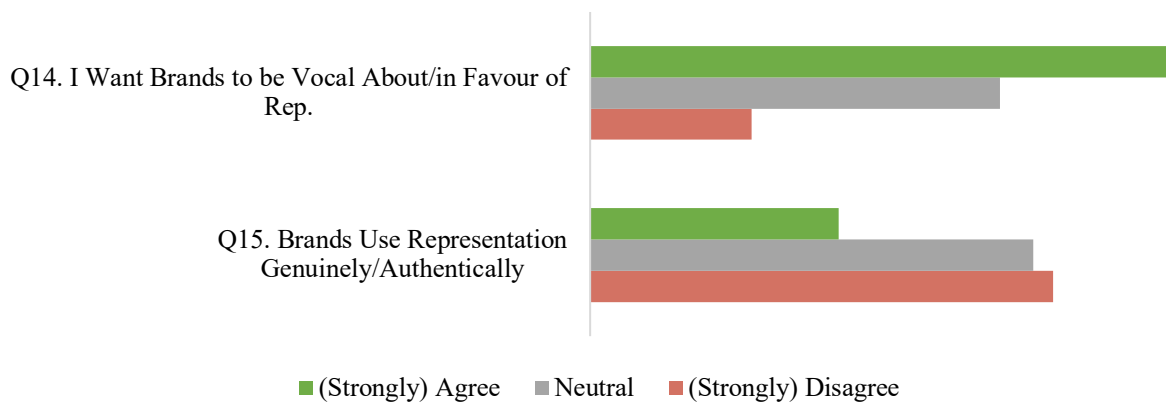
Figure 4 Q9. Political affiliation



When asked if they want brands to be vocal about their most important form of representation, as well as when questioned if they believe brands use them in an authentic way for brand

activism, roughly four out of ten respondents take on a neutral stance. As visualised in Figure 5, a notable finding occurs with half of the respondents agreeing on the fact that they want more positive representation in media regarding any of these variables, but nearly this same half shifts to not believing that brands use gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation in a genuine manner. Hence, there is a misalignment between consumers wanting positive representation and not being able to retrieve this or find validation when brands use it for their brand activism.

Figure 5 Combined Results Q14 & Q15



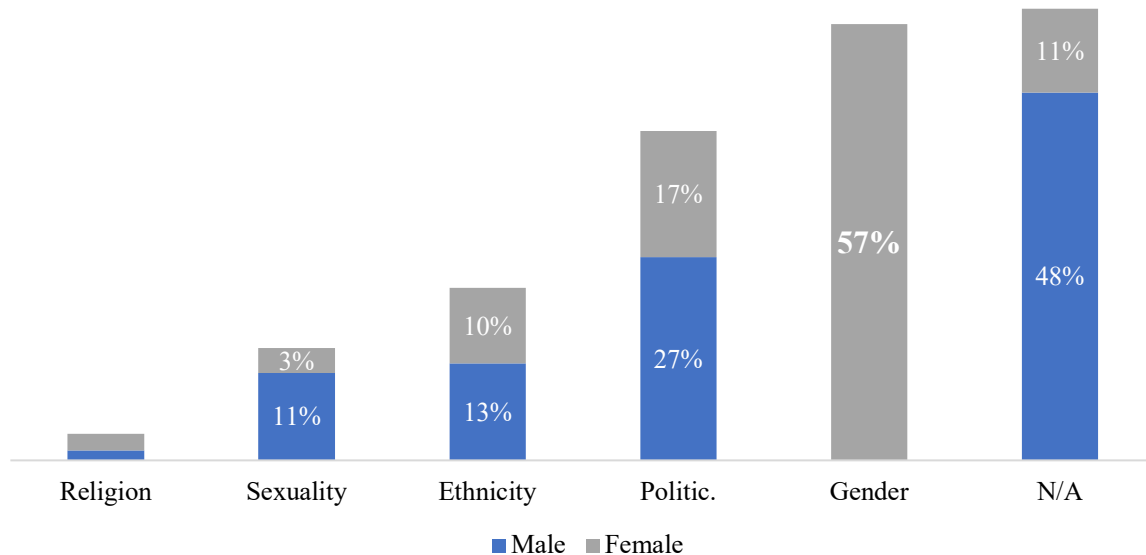
Regarding positive portrayal in media surrounding the variables gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation, 30% of respondents wish for representation surrounding gender, followed by ‘no answer’ (30%), and political affiliation (20%). However, these results may not be relevant as according to Vredenburg et al. (2020), consumer backgrounds influence brand activism perception. Therefore, the results will be analysed in their respective context in the next section.

5.3.2 Micro-Affiliations & Beliefs

Vredenburg et al. (2020) concluded that consumer perception of socio-political issues tackled by brand activism is subjective to an individual’s political ideology, religion, and other values and beliefs. Therefore, this section explores if any relationships exist concerning these variables and whether they form grounds on which the respondent forms an opinion on brand activism. As previously mentioned, ethnicity cannot be considered as it was not representative. This section is divided into five parts: gender, sexuality, religion, and political affiliation.

Gender ¹

Figure 6 Q13. (Gender) I care most for positive representation in media...



Gender in this survey is seen as a binary concept between ‘men’ and ‘women’. Other gender dimensions were included in the survey, but their results were not representative. Moreover, as previously mentioned, this sample had an equal 50/50 division for both genders. As visible in Figure 6, regarding the question of what type of representation both genders wanted to see in media, over half of the women (57%) wanted a positive portrayal of gender compared to 0% of men. Instead, half of the men (48%) had no specific type of representation they wanted to see. Nonetheless, neither men nor women showed any significant differences when asked if they wanted brands to be vocal on the type of representation, they find important and when questioned if brands use this type of representation genuinely. However, when asked if they proactively research the company behind a brand activism campaign, men are twice as likely to not do any research in order to form an opinion, with 32% saying ‘no’ in contrast to 18% for women.

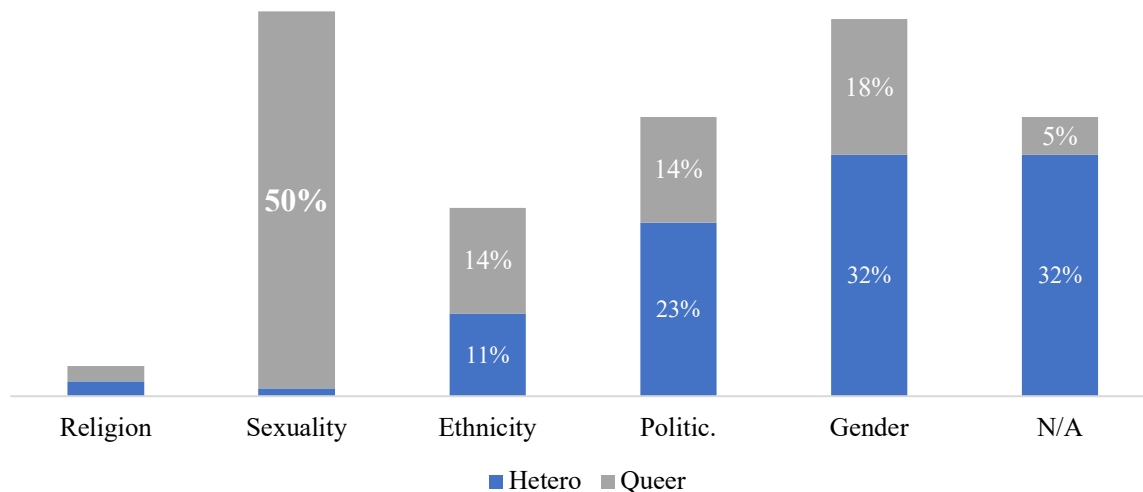
Sexuality ²

All non-heterosexual orientations can be placed under the ‘queer umbrella’. As a result, sexuality in this survey is divided into ‘heterosexual’ and ‘queer’.

¹ Non-binary removed, non-representative

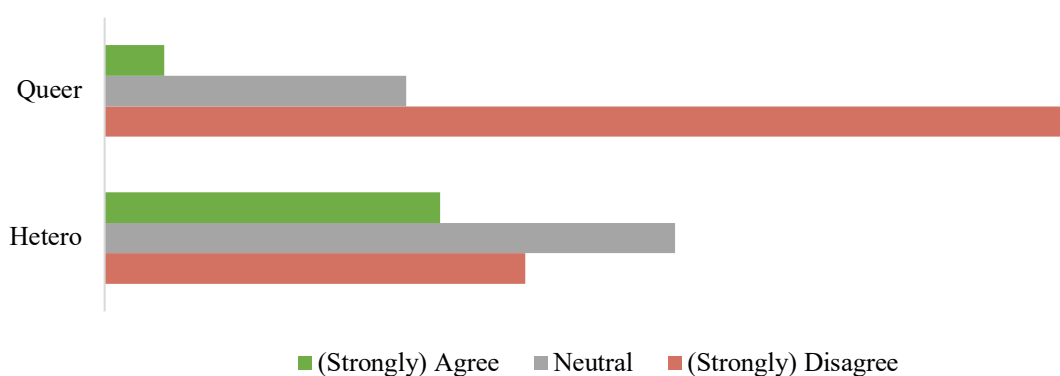
² N/A removed, non-representative

Figure 7 Q13. (Sexuality) I care most for positive representation in media...



As seen in Figure 7, similarly to ‘women’ within the gender section, when questioned on what type of positive portrayal respondents wanted to see in media, representation for sexuality goes from 1% for hetero people to 50% for queer people. Another notable result concerns that queer people agree more on the fact that they want brands to be vocal and take a stance in favour of their type of representation. This level of agreement concerns 70% of queer respondents versus 40% of hetero respondents.

Figure 8 Q15. Brands use representation genuinely/authentically



In addition, when queer respondents were asked if they believe that their most favourable form of representation is used authentically by brands, queer people disagree significantly more (64%) than hetero people (28%), as seen in Figure 8. There are no significant differences when

questioned on whether both groups researched the company to form an opinion on its brand activism intentions.

Religion

This survey divided religion into atheist/non-religious, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and 'other'. However, Muslims, Jews, and Hindus are underrepresented as these had little to no respondents whereas 'other' religions lack a clear definition. Nonetheless, the respondents showed a fairly equal 50/50 division between religious and nonreligious respondents. Therefore, this survey will recalibrate this variable into 'religious' and 'non-religious'. As one might expect, nonreligious people had no need for a positive portrayal surrounding religion in the media. However, surprisingly, religious people also had little need for representation in media around religion (4%), compared to 'women' within the gender section, and 'queer people' within the sexuality section. This could be due to the fact that most religious respondents are non-practising or only mild practices of their beliefs.

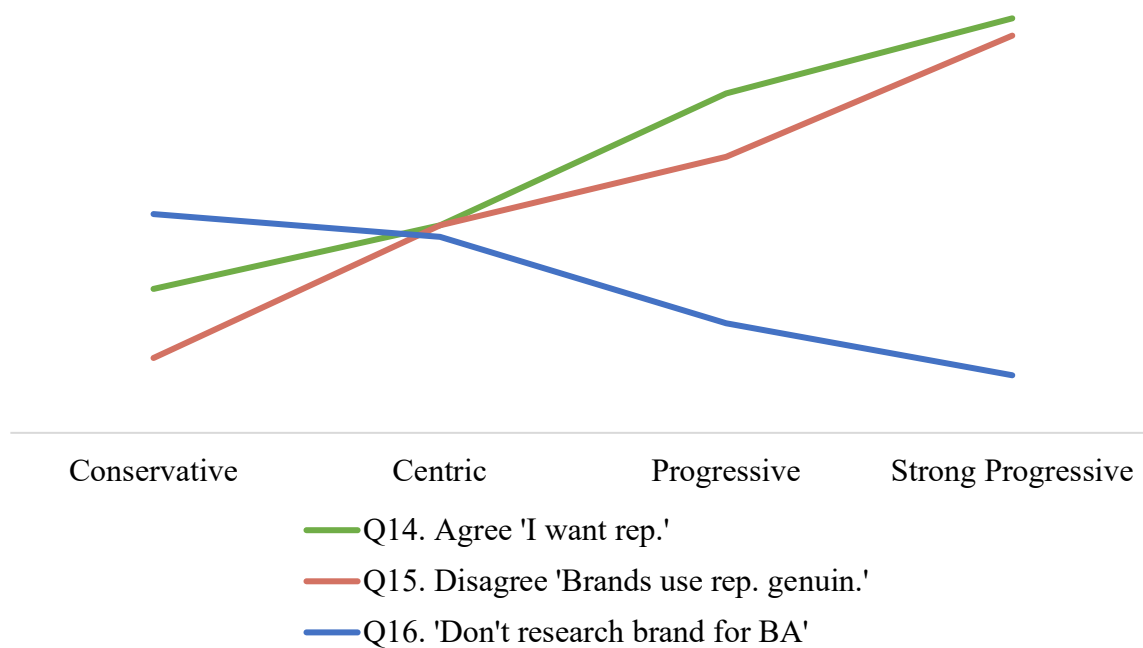
Consequently, there is no significance to the follow-up questions concerning if they want brands to be vocal about their most important form of representation, as well as if they believe brands use them in an authentic way for brand activism. In addition, there are no significant differences when questioned on whether both groups researched the company to form an opinion on its brand activism intentions.

*Political Affiliation*³

This survey considered a general political spectrum of which the final results range from conservative beliefs to centric beliefs, to progressive beliefs, to strongly progressive beliefs. one in four respondents who have conservative, and progressive beliefs want a positive portrayal of their political affiliation in media. This number is smaller for people with centric beliefs (16%) and higher for people with strong progressive beliefs (38%). Interestingly, nearly half of the respondents with a centric stance (43%) had no preference regarding the type of representation they wanted.

³ N/A removed as hold no relevance
No strong conservative respondents

Figure 9 Political Affiliation Trends Q14, Q15, and Q16



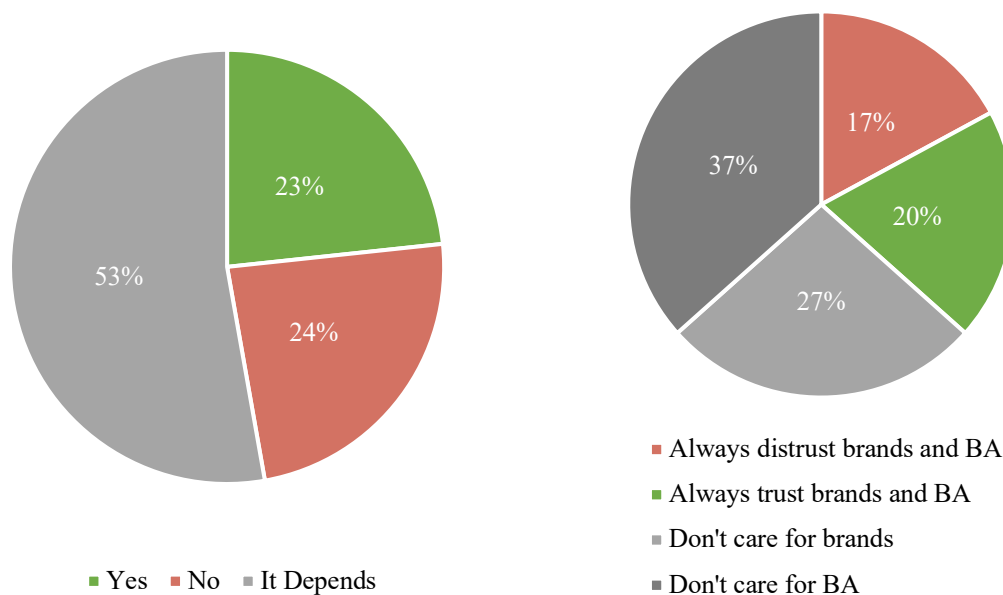
As for the question of whether respondents want brands to include representation in brand activism, the same group of people with centric beliefs (43%) are again quite neutral. A growing trend can be seen for people who agree with the statement, 25% for conservative, 36% for centric, 59% for progressive, and 72% for strong progressive beliefs, as visible in Figure 9. Notably, another incremental trend can be seen when respondents disagree on the question of whether brands use representation genuinely, with 13% for conservative, 36% for centric, 48% for progressive, and 69% for strong progressive beliefs. As for whether the respondents research the company when taking a socio-political stance with their brand activism, another trend can be seen regarding ‘not’ researching the company, with 38% for conservative, 34% for centric, 19% for progressive, and 10% for strong progressive beliefs. Nonetheless, half of the respondents across all political affiliations say that ‘it depends’ whether they do research. Overall, the more progressive the respondent’s political affiliation, the greater the need for political representation and the more sceptical of brands using representation for their brand activism. Moreover, nearly half of the respondents with a centric mindset are neutral about the use and idea of representation in general.

5.3.3 Dimensions of Brand Activism Validation

Research by Roper and Fill (2012), Dowling (2006), and De Chernatony and Riley (1998) as a whole suggested different dimension that affect consumer perception of brands and brand activism. These dimensions concern company history, actions of leadership, and type of products/services.

In the previous section, some slight deviations based on different micro-affiliations and beliefs were noted regarding the question of whether the respondent would research a brand if it publicly supported a certain socio-political issue. Regardless, an overwhelming majority within each variable does indeed research the genuinity and authenticity behind this concept. Overall, one in four respondents does conduct research and another one in four respondents does not, as per Figure 10.

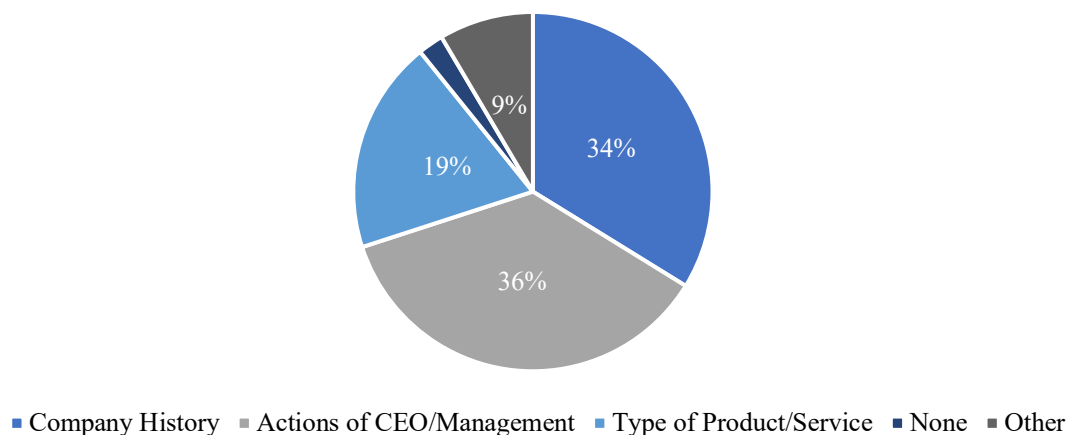
Figure 10 Combined Results Q16 & Q21



Regarding the latter, over half of the respondents (64%) who do not research the company base their answer on the fact that they simply do not care about brands and brand activism. Additionally visualised in Figure 10, 17% of this group always distrust brands whereas 20% of respondents do always trust brands. In general, apathy is the main driver for not researching a brand’s motivations behind its activism efforts.

One in two respondents agree that ‘*it depends*’ when questioned if they look into brands and their activist stances. These conditions concern whether the respondent is not familiar with the brand, whether the brand is famous, whether the brand is infamous, and whether the respondent is a frequent buyer of the brand. As per Figure 11, there is a fairly 30/30/30 split for all conditions except when a brand is infamous (10%). In general, both unknown brands and well-known brands including those with a loyal customer group, are more prone to being researched by the respondents.

Figure 11 Q17. *To form an opinion on BA, I research these dimensions*

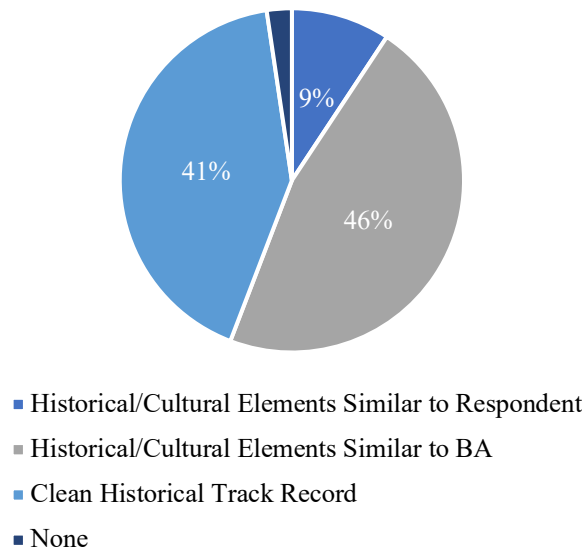


Regarding the dimensions that are most important to the respondents when they actually get to the stage of conducting research, the following dimensions are most important to the respondents in consecutive order: company leadership (36%), company history (34%), type of product/service (19%), ‘*other*’ (9%), and ‘*none*’ (2%). 1 in 10 respondents seemed to have other dimensions in mind on which they base their validation of brand activism which is described in the further research section.

Company History

As previously mentioned, nearly one in three respondents find company history the most important dimension to base their opinion on of brand activism. Roper and Fill (2012) said that a company’s history can directly relate to the consumer’s psyche, creating a deep bond. To find out how this bond affects brand activism, a distinction was made to see if company history must be related either to the respondent him/herself, the socio-political issue in question, or if it needed to have a clean historical record without controversies.

Figure 12 Q18. Dimension: Company History



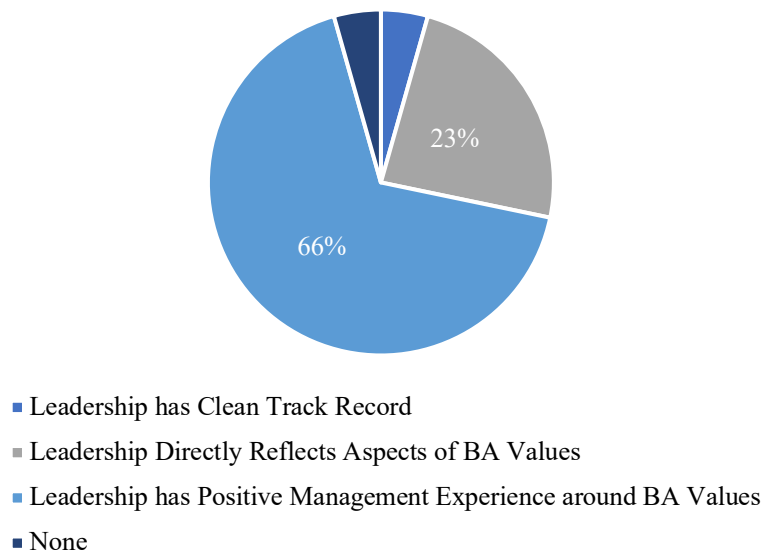
Nearly half of the respondents (46%) find that a company’s history needs to reflect the socio-political issue at hand, as seen in Figure 12. Another 41% demands for a company’s history to merely be clean and without any controversies.

Actions of Leadership

As with company history, one in three respondents believe that a brand’s leadership is the most relevant dimension to base their validation of brand activism on. Both Dowling (2006) and Gaines-Ross (2008) confirm that a company’s reputation is dependent on its leadership due to its public context. To research whether a CEO and/or management affects the public’s opinion on brand activism, a distinction was made to see if a company’s leadership needs to either have a non-controversial track record, positive management experience surrounding brand activism values or needs to inherently reflect aspects of the socio-political issue at hand.

As illustrated in Figure 13 on the next page, an overwhelming majority (66%) find that a company’s leadership needs to have management experience surrounding the subject in question that is tackled by brand activism. One in four respondents instead finds that a company’s leadership needs to directly reflect the same value or elements such as religion/ethnicity in relation to the socio-political issue at hand.

Figure 13 Q19. Dimension: CEO/Management



Nature of Product/Service

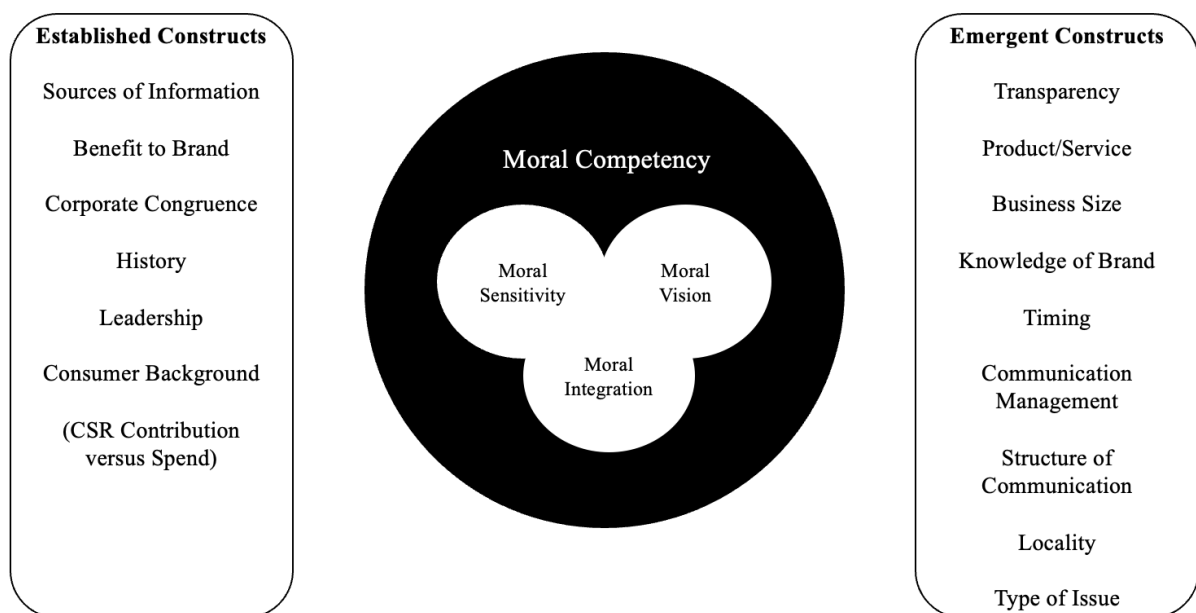
With respect to the prior dimensions, a third dimension was considered which considers the very nature of the product and/or service that the brand provides. No prior research has been conducted to see whether this dimension might affect the (de)validation of brand activism campaigns by consumers. Nonetheless, nearly 20% of the respondents find this a relevant dimension to base their validation on regarding brand activism efforts. To discover deeper motivations, a distinction was made to see if the provided product and/or service needs to be related to the socio-political issue at hand either directly, partially, or regarding its supply chain.

Two out of four respondents find that the supply chain and or production needs to be related to the socio-political issue at hand. However, one in four respondents wishes for the product/service itself to be directly related. Another one in four respondents believes that the product/service itself needs to be partially related.

6. Discussion

The following chapter provides a discussion of the main findings. Both the qualitative and quantitative studies are interlinked, providing a dual perspective on predefined dimensions in relation to the (de-)validation of brand activism efforts. Figure 14 visualizes how the constructs are related to a brand's moral competency. At the very core, a brand's moral compass is defined and based on Moral Sensitivity, Vision, and Integration, as defined by Sibai, Mimoun and Boukis (2021). Nonetheless, as this internal aspect of a company is not customarily visible, different dimensions are used by consumers to form their opinions on. On the left side of the figure, existing constructs identified in prior literature are placed whereas the right side visualises new or emerging constructs from this research. Both types will be further discussed below.

Figure 14 Perception Constructs related to Moral Competency of Brand Activism



6.1 Established Constructs

The following constructs which have been derived from prior literature have been researched and supported in both the qualitative and quantitative sections of the study. Each construct is further elaborated upon below.

Sources of Information

Through qualitative interviews, the construct of *Source of Information* was found relevant. Consumers voiced the source of the information through which they learn about a brand's activism as a potential affecting dimension. Specifically, social media and the brand's website were mentioned as subjective sources; information gathered through news outlets generally were regarded as more trustworthy and objective. Moreover, most participants stressed the importance of carrying out independent research by critically evaluating the information they received through sources by cross-checking with other sources of different natures. For example, listening to podcasts, reading a book by an expert or following journalists. This corresponds with previous research by Yoon, Gürhan-Canli and Schwartz (2006), who stated that the information provided to consumers through a brand's own channel is often considered dishonest and thus more prone to scepticism.

Benefit to Brand

Additionally, Yoon, Gürhan-Canli and Schwartz (2006) also positioned the *Benefit to Brand* dimension as an important construct in this context. Consumers' perceptions were also affected by the extent to which the brand activism of a brand was perceived to be employed for its own economic and social welfare rather than a genuine interest in contributing to the cause. Through the questionnaire, respondents expressed their willingness to see brands speak out about their own representations (in terms of demographics and psychographics), however, interestingly, do not find brands to authentically do so. This could be, as found in the interviews, that consumers are sceptical because of the monetary gain for the brand. Specifically, the Moral Sensitivity skill was judged in this light as brands were speculated by consumers to “*jump on the bandwagon*” and to “*milk the situation*”. The gain to the brand was outweighed by the brand's willingness to do good for consumers.

Corporate Congruence

17% of the respondents of the questionnaire conveyed they did not always trust brands and its BA efforts. This can be attributed to consumers' scepticism in the dimension of *Corporate Congruence* as validated in the qualitative interviews. Participants expressed “*walk the talk*” was crucial, where brands align their external communications with internal practices. When these do not match, as specified by one participant, “*identity is a mess*”. Hypocrisy came forward as a reasoning for Corporate Congruence's importance as a construct. This is in line with previous literature which states, when congruence is observed, authenticity and perceived

sincerity are improved for brands whose BA follows internal corporate practices (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Cammarota, Marino, & Resciniti, 2021; Mirzei, Wilkie & Siuki, 2022).

History

Roper and Fill (2012) argued that a company's history forms the essence of branding as it is created within a unique cultural context. It can therefore directly relate to the consumer's psyche, creating a deep bond. Both the qualitative and quantitative studies illustrated that *History* is indeed a relevant dimension for consumers to take into account for opinion-forming, extending also to BA efforts. The results also imply that a company's history, which is built upon cultural elements and signature practices, as per Gratton and Ghoshal (2005), needs to reflect the brand activism values. Specifically, previous controversies, advertisements, and the brands' motto, which can be argued forms the culture of a company, play a key role in forming consumer perception of a brand's history, as set out by Roper and Fill (2012).

Leadership

Both qualitative and quantitative research support that companies are judged based on their CEO and/or management, aligning with both Dowling (2006) and Gaines-Ross (2008). Both researchers confirm that a company's reputation is dependent on *Leadership* due to its public context. This also extends to a company's brand activism efforts. According to the quantitative study, the influence of the CEO and/or management extends to BA efforts. Notably, the CEO and/or management do not need to inherently reflect brand activism values in the form of, e.g., ethnicity, in order to jeopardise the authenticity of brand activism efforts. They merely need to have positively handled similar endeavours in the past. The latter might imply that leadership does not need to directly reflect brand activism aspects if their moral compass has already been shown through other efforts, as previously attested by Roper and Fill (2012). The qualitative study adds that particularly, the CEO acts as an example externally as well as internally to employees, and that the management of the brand in general should showcase the company's values, as in line with Roper and Fill (2012).

Consumer Background

Various demographics and psychographics in the form of values and beliefs have been researched to discuss their significance. Regarding age, Ismail et al. (2020), Roper and Fill (2012), and Ting et al. (2021) mentioned that young people have a stronger relationship with brands compared to older generations. The quantitative results agree and find that each

generation finds brand activism more important than the previous, implying a growing trend for future generations. Vredenburg et al. (2020) also argued that consumer perception of brand activism is subjective to gender, sexuality, religious affiliation, and political affiliation. Both the quantitative and qualitative results agree that these micro-affiliations are relevant. According to the interviews, respondents cared most about BA efforts that are related to themselves either directly or through personal experiences. The quantitative results extended these results with the following. Regarding gender, over half of the women wanted a positive portrayal of gender compared to none of the men. Moreover, men are twice as likely to not do any research in order to form an opinion. As for sexuality, half of the queer respondents wanted a positive portrayal of sexuality compared to 1% of hetero respondents. Another notable result concerns that queer people agree more on the fact that they want brands to be vocal and take a stance in favour of their type of representation while also disagreeing with the notion that brands use representation authentically. As for political affiliations, the more progressive the respondent's stance, the greater the need for political representation and the more sceptical of brands using representation for their brand activism. Surprisingly, religious people had next to no need for representation in media around religion compared to women within the gender section and queer people within the sexuality section. Nonetheless, this could be due to the fact that most religious respondents were non-practising.

CSR Contribution versus Spend

The final construct derived from Yoon, Gürhan-Canli and Schwartz (2006)'s research for this study was the construct of *CSR Contribution versus Spend*. They specified the ratio between the financial contribution to CSR causes versus the spend on advertising of these efforts plays an important role in the formation of consumers' perceptions. In this study, this dimension was partially supported. At times, it instigated scepticism, specifically for the Moral Integration skill in which consistency is assessed. This could perhaps be because, as one of the participants mentioned, a consistent stream of donations could signal to consumers the brand is authentically supporting the cause. However, more often than not for the other two moral skills, the dimension was not referred to as an important construct in consumer perception. Most consumers specified, when probed, that it did not matter to them whether brands spend more funds on the contribution or its advertising, but rather, that the action of donating was more important.

The constructs which were most frequently brought up independently by respondents throughout the research were *Benefit to Brand* and *Corporate Congruence*, with at times *History* being raised distinctively as well, specifically in the context of Moral Sensitivity. This forms an interesting notion that consumers possibly examine in the strictest of ways how the brand advantages from BA and whether alignment occurs in its statements and its actions. Suspicion of consumers is linked to perceived sincerity as a part of brand personality (Yoon, Gürhan-Canli, Schwartz, 2006; Ragas & Roberts, 2009; Aaker, 1997). Perhaps consumers raise these constructs independently as these signals the extent to which brands try to inflict their moral assessment of consumers' lifestyle (consumption) decisions, also called 'cultural authority' (Moorman, 2020, p.389), as mentioned in chapter 2, Theoretical Framework. It is possible consumers, therefore, regard *Benefit to Brand* and *Corporate Congruence* as the indications of the extent to which brands dictate their lifestyle jurisdiction.

6.2 Emergent Constructs

The following constructs have become apparent throughout this study. These are newly discovered dimensions from both qualitative and quantitative sections of the study which have not yet been discussed in prior literature.

Transparency

As set out in chapter 4.4, *Transparency* in this context is defined as the extent to which brands communicate to consumers and vulnerably share internal and external specifications of BA efforts. This differs from a general understanding of transparency in that it focuses on communicating to consumers the activities the brand has undertaken as well as the impact of these endeavours. *Transparency*, as a dimension, is therefore considered a crucial element for consumers' assessment of the validation of BA. Consumers express they consider Moral Competency and thus validate BA stances of brands when these brands vulnerably share information, whether that would be statistics on their leadership team or how the funds they have donated have affected the intended individuals.

Supply Chain of a Product/Service

Although no prior research has been conducted to see whether a company's product and/or service might affect the (de)validation of brand activism efforts, nonetheless, within the quantitative study, one in ten respondents find that the supply chain of a company's product

and/or service is a relevant dimension to form an opinion on. This result might imply that consumers are critical of a company's production process. A possible reason might be due to the fact that these processes are not always communicated openly to the public. Due to a lack of transparency, controversies are often downplayed or hidden, forming the very problem that is at the heart of certain socio-political movements in general. Moreover, one interview participant has stressed they do not assess the company based on its BA stances but rather, they go to the brand for its products or services. Perhaps, depending on the nature of the business, BA might not play an important role in consumers' purchasing decisions.

Business Size

To some extent, the size of the organization plays a role in the formation of consumer scepticism. Participants sometimes turn to big organizations with higher expectations of BA, as they consider them to have larger resource pools, and have a heavier responsibility to speak up. Smaller companies contrastingly are not always expected to speak up and are considered to have more freedom in choosing which matter to bring up and in what way due to their smaller community. Therefore, *Business Size* is considered an interesting construct which, to some extent, affects consumers' scepticism of BA.

Knowledge of Brand

Consumers also pointed out that at times, the extent of their knowledge of a brand and its BA could affect their assessment of BA authenticity. Regardless of whether that information is published by the brand or not, if consumers are not aware of certain information and do not possess a lot of knowledge of a brand, they find it difficult to pass a judgement. Contrastingly, if it is an issue that is dear to the participant, oftentimes it goes hand-in-hand with increased knowledge, and therefore, higher capability of judgement. This construct can be directly linked to the *Transparency* construct, in which it can be speculated that consumers expect higher transparency from brands for this reason exactly, so that they could be more informed and can make an educated judgement of the brand and its BA.

Others

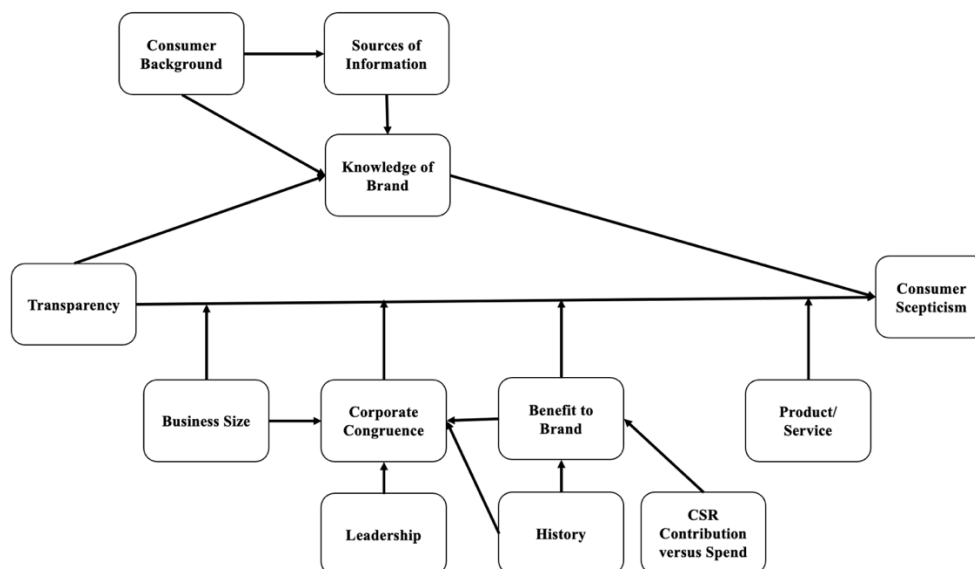
On top of the most notable new constructs, various other constructs appeared. These include Timing, Communication Management, Structure of Communication, Locality, and Type of Issue. Due to limited depth, they might form the basis of future research. Overall, *Timing* concerns when brands push their activism efforts. For example, Pride Month is the celebration

of the LGBTQ+ community. Consumers might be more sceptical about brands who conduct brand activism only during moments when this might be most favourable for internal gains such as increased consumerism or brand reputation. As for *Communication Management*, consumers are perhaps more prone to scepticism if brands push messages and advertisements around activism efforts in large quantities, followed by silence. Regarding *Structure of Communication*, this concerns the positioning of messages around brand activism efforts. Respondents reacted most favourably towards communication in which the socio-political issue at hand is highlighted first rather than focusing on how the brand itself plays a role within this discourse. *Locality* is related to small-scale efforts conducive to socio-political issues regarding the brand’s home base and/or communities, conducive to positive validation of brand activism. Lastly, *Type of Issue* includes brands who merely push brand activism issues that are ‘popular’. Respondents were sceptical of companies “jumping on the bandwagon” during which they seemed to support causes based on notorious socio-political issues which could provide a lot of free publicity and traction.

6.3 Relationships between Constructs

This study also supports the notion that the constructs are interconnected, and relationships exist between them. Several links can be made between constructs, and they are interlinked to form consumer scepticism of brand activism. Figure 15 illustrates these links, and they are further discussed below.

Figure 15 Relationships between Perception Constructs of Brand Activism



The constructs which this study sets forth as the principal dimensions catalysing consumer scepticism are *Transparency* and *Knowledge of Brand*. This research speculates they have the largest impact on the formation of consumer scepticism, and one affects the other. Potentially, a high degree of transparency by the brand could increase consumer knowledge of the brand, causing consumer scepticism to diminish. Conversely, a low degree of transparency decreases consumer knowledge and thus increases consumer scepticism.

The knowledge consumers have of the brand is affected primarily by two other constructs, *Consumer Background* and *Sources of Information*. The individual consumer background could impact which sources of information they seek out to learn more about the brand, for example their religious or political affiliations. Moreover, depending on which sources the consumer utilises for their research, information presented could be skewed in favour of the brand, which then affects the extent of consumer knowledge positively, which eventually would diminish consumer scepticism.

Transparency is influenced by a number of other constructs. The dominant dimension is *Corporate Congruence* which is impacted by four other facets. First, *Business Size* plays a role. It is supposed that when brands are big, corporate congruence could be perceived as low, affecting transparency to be low as well, increasing consumer scepticism. The second, *Leadership*, also impacts congruence. If senior management/CEO communicates and acts in a way that is perceived positively, congruence could be judged high, transparency could be deemed high and consumer scepticism might weaken. Thirdly, *History*, if a brand's past is negatively judged, congruence could be found low, transparency found low, and consumer scepticism could strengthen. Lastly, *Benefit to Brand*, which is shaped by history as well as *CSR Contribution versus Spend*. If the ratio is found to be disproportionate, the benefit derived to the brand could be suspected high, which decreases congruence as well as transparency directly, causing consumer scepticism to intensify. Finally, business size as well as *Product/Service* are also suspected to directly impact perception of transparency. If information is shared on the production process of a brands' products or services, transparency is determined high, which could reduce consumer scepticism.

This study merely speculates the above described links, and further research is necessary to confirm and support the suggested interactions.

7. Conclusions

7.1 Main Findings and Contribution

This study's aim was to confirm and advance the understanding of how consumers validate or de-validate the moral competency of socio-political brand activism. Both qualitative and quantitative research was conducted in order to create a holistic view as interviews allowed for a deeper understanding behind answers, whereas an online questionnaire provided semi-quantifiable results for a larger sample group.

This study indicates that young, Western consumers employ several constructs (sub)consciously to arrive at a judgement of the moral competency of brands' activism. Dimensions which were derived from previous studies, and supported by this research, are Benefit to Brand, Corporate Congruence, History, Sources of Information, Leadership, Consumer Background and CSR Contribution versus Spend. These are indeed important when consumers assess brand activism efforts. Moreover, this study also suggests several newly emergent constructs play a key role in the formation of consumers' perceptions. These include Transparency, Knowledge of Brand, Product/Service, Business Size and five other smaller dimensions (Timing, Communication Management, Structure of Communication, Locality and Type of Issue).

This study extends the perception of underlying constructs of consumer scepticism. This contribution is structured in three ways. Firstly, the results confirmed Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) findings in which brand activism is subject to a consumer's "*political ideology, religion, and other ideologies/beliefs*" (p.446). However, in addition to these findings, this study made a distinction within different religious practices, and within the political spectrum. Moreover, Vredenburg et al. (2020) did not clearly define other ideologies and beliefs. This study considered various other micro-affiliations and beliefs that have been rooted in gender, sexuality, and a combination of all. Secondly, this study not only confirmed predefined consumer scepticism dimensions derived from former literature, it also (re)defined novel relationships between perception constructs of brand activism. To emphasize, this study also considered understudied dimensions within the area of consumer scepticism such as business size and a company's product/service (including supply chain). Overall, suggested interactions were given between research conducted by Yoon, Gürhan-Canli and Schwartz (2006) concerning Benefit to Brand and CSR Contribution versus Spend, Corporate Congruence by

Vredenburg et al. (2020), Cammarota, Marino, and Resciniti (2021), and Mirzei, Wilkie and Siuki, (2022), and lastly, History and Leadership by Roper and Fill (2012). Consequently, this study extends the Brand Activism Theoretical Framework by Pimentel and Didonet (2021) to include new components in light of *Consumer Perceptions*.

These new components add additional value to existing literature by grouping and prioritising them in order to create a more holistic approach as to how consumers validate brand activism alongside a suitable response from brands to this form of validation. The grouping is based on dimensions which can be viewed as interconnected. The prioritisation concerns dimensions that influence the validation of brand activism by consumers the most, alongside the extent to which brands can influence them. Initially, history, leadership, business size, and a brand's product/service can be grouped together. These dimensions are directly related to how a brand has managed itself over time. As a result, this group receives a high priority as consumers might view it as the core of the company. The second group includes benefit to brand, corporate congruence, CSR contribution versus spend, transparency, communication management, structure of communication, sources of information, timing and type of issue, and locality. As the brand itself can directly influence the positioning of these dimensions, they are interlinked. Its level of priority can be aligned with that of the first group. However, as brands can adjust this group to a degree, consumer validation of brand activism can be influenced and optimised. Lastly, the third group consist of consumer elements such as knowledge of brand, demographics, and micro-affiliations and beliefs. Both the company and the consumer are involved in these constructs. Nonetheless, as these dimensions are subject to the consumer's nature and core nurture experiences, the brand has limited power to influence these elements when they use them to validate brand activism.

7.2 Managerial Implications

This research implies various considerations to combat consumer scepticism for Brand Managers. The issue at hand concerns how genuine and authentic brand activism efforts can be created that allows for positive validation by consumers. Firstly, brand activism efforts need to be based on transparency. This includes openness on what value their actual brand activism efforts have or will provide society regarding the socio-political issue at hand. For example, Brand Managers can talk about the impact of previous efforts such as donations. Moreover, companies should become more transparent about their supply chain in order to prevent misalignment between what brands *do* and what brands *say*. An example could be poor working

conditions of cacao farmers in contrast to socio-political issues surrounding equality. Lastly, Brand Managers ought to be more aware of communication in relation to timing, structure, frequency, and locality, as previously mentioned.

7.3 Limitations

This study's qualitative and quantitative research sections were limited by several factors. For both types of studies, inherent weaknesses concern, firstly, the method of conducting, secondly, its limited generalisability, and lastly, specific oversights regarding structure and content.

An inherent limitation of the qualitative section included the influence of COVID-19 on the interview process. In-depth interviews were conducted online as a result of semi-social distancing. Consequently, the interviewer was not able to pick up signals concerning body language, an inherent part of a qualitative study. Moreover, it affected the flow of the interview itself as computer network limitations prevented a natural interruption of speech, concerning both questions and answers. More importantly, online interviews prevent a natural in-person introduction during which the interviewer can ease the respondent into giving answers with full confidence. Altogether, this may have affected any answers given by the respondents. Alongside the medium being a weakness, another limitation concerned the interview structure itself. The interview was semi-structured which allowed for some flexibility, however, perhaps the theoretical framework on which the qualitative interviews were modelled could have proved to be too rigid, preventing a broader extension of brand activism authenticity. In addition, the qualitative research did not consider source critique, limiting reflexive awareness on the legitimacy and objectiveness of content. The latter focused on certain examples of brand activism. These did not explore a broad definition of activism in the sense of gender/sexuality/religion/political beliefs. As a result, no in-depth research was conducted regarding consumer perception of brand activism in relation to gender/sexuality/religion/political beliefs.

In light of this research's quantitative section, its strongest inherent weakness concerns the sampling method. Due to time constraints, a snowball sampling method was used to gather respondents. As a result, the overall research population had a non-zero probability of being chosen for this study. In addition, the questionnaire was held through an online medium. Both the sampling method and method of conducting prevent this research from generalising

answers beyond the respondents themselves. Nonetheless, this allows for interesting results to become the basis for future exploratory research. Apart from its non-generalisability, the online survey itself had internal weaknesses validity-wise. As the survey was written in English, answers from respondents whose first language is not English may have been affected. Moreover, certain cohorts concerning respondents who are non-binary, ethnically diverse, religiously diverse, or strongly conservative were underrepresented allowing for a limited interpretation of their results. Lastly, the online questionnaire had some structural flaws content-wise. Areas including company size, moral competencies, and transparency were not taken into consideration which caused a possible overlook of their level of influence.

7.4 Future Research

This research provided certain notable results which could form the basis of future exploratory research. Most importantly, due to non-generalisable sampling methods, the core of this research could be conducted on a larger scale in order to make results applicable to the whole population size of young Western consumers. In addition, the research could be replicated with another population in mind, namely non-Western consumers, or consumers who have been born in the West but have lived the entirety of their lives in the East. Moreover, investigating brand activism over different generations could examine the relationship between age, brands, and consumer scepticism. Finally, the most significant new constructs which have emerged from this study should be investigated further to be confirmed. These include Transparency, Knowledge of Brand, (Type of) Product/Service, and Business Size.

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Appendix

Appendice I. Qualitative research

Appendice I.I Interview Guide

Introduction

- Personal introductions: who are we
- Explaining the aim of this research: Master’s research project at Lund University
- Introduction to the topic: Brand activism is the topic of this research project. Definition provided later
- Guidelines for the interview: consent, confidentiality, recording, privacy, honesty

Table 1 Form of Consent

Concept	Information
Consent	You have given consent via the form, but are allowed to retract your consent at any point in time during the interview. You can stop at any moment in time, and you can choose not to answer any questions or provide any insights if you don’t want to. The topics at hand might stir up emotional distress and you can take as long as you need at any point in time if you want to take a break.
Confidentiality	Your demographic information will be recorded to ensure intersectionality, but your name will not be included, you will be referred to with a code.
Recording	This interview will be recorded using the recording app on my iPhone, and the recording will only be used to transcribe the interview and interpret the data. The recording will not be shared with anyone except for my research partner Jessica and will be deleted at the end of the research project period, on May 31st 2022. Also, I will be taking hand-written notes which I will then digitalize on Google Docs, using my LU Google account. Again, this same information will be deleted and destroyed on May 31st 2022.
Privacy	All data collected and processed will follow the GDPR guidelines.

Honesty	Please be as honest as you can - we will not judge you at any point, we want to understand your specific experiences and perspectives on this topic.
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Setting the scene

- Asking if they know of brand activism and if they can think of examples
- Providing definition of brand activism in this study
- Specifying discussion around socio-political issues relating to race, introducing BLM and reading a paragraph from their website
- Explanation of murder of George Floyd as catalyst for increased awareness, BA by brands commenting on this
- Providing some examples of brand activism during the height of the 2020 increased awareness:
 - Nike: ad with the text “For Once, Don’t Do It”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drcO2V2m7lw>, Instagram post, donation, changes in leadership team
 - Netflix: Curated playlist about racial injustice and Black experiences, donation, changes in leadership team
 - Starbucks: t-shirt for employees, allowing employees to show support via apparel, donation, changes in leadership team, internal discussions
 - SundayRiley: Highlighted Black-owned businesses on Instagram, donation, published diversity statistics of leadership team in 2020
 - Spanx: Donation, expanded fabric colours and included more women of colour in advertising, no official statistics on leadership team
 - Klara: Donation and matched employee donation, created specific marketplace for Black-owned businesses.

Main themes

Per skill, presenting the definition, and then asking, “What do you think? You can choose one of the examples we discussed?” and “What is important to you when you think about whether brands [depends on moral skill]? What kind of elements do you think of when you evaluate if they do so?”

Interviewer fills in the table below per skill, noting which constructs were brought up by crossing either interviewee or researcher, and filling in a phrase/word that encapsulates the answer.

Table 2 Interview Perception Construct

Perception construct	Brought up by interviewee	Brought up by researcher
Source of information		
Benefit to the brand		
Contribution vs spend		
Corporate congruence external-internal		
History		
Leadership		
Consumer background - own values/beliefs		
Business size		

Closure

- Concluding the interview by asking if there is anything they would like to mention with regards to BA.
- Checking in with the interviewee to make sure they are doing okay.
- Thanking interviewee for the interview.

Appendice I.II Participants overview

Table 3 Interview Participants Overview

Participant (P)	Nationality	Age	Ethnicity/roots
1	Spain	22	South-European/Caucasian
2	Austria	23	East-European/Caucasian
3	Canada	24	Western/Caucasian
4	Italian	24	African
5	Dutch	26	South-East Asian
6	American/US	27	Western/Caucasian
7	Swedish	25	South-American/Hispanic
8	British-Swedish	32	Central-Asia/Middle-East

Appendice I.III Interview Examples

Table 4 Brand Activism Examples

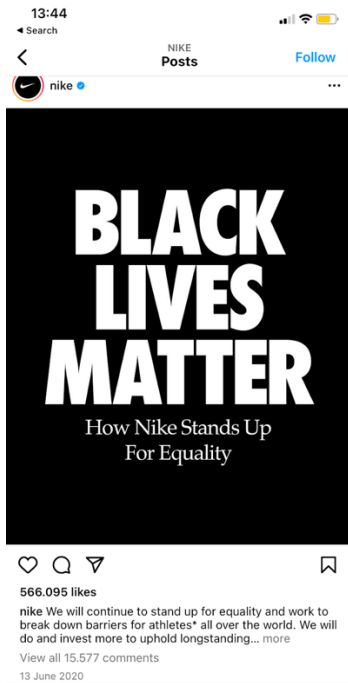
Brand	Industry	Size	External actions	Internal actions
Nike	Fashion	Big	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Video advertising (Nike in For Once, Don't Do It, 2020) > Donation of \$40M over next 4 years (Nike, 2020) > Instagram post (Nike, 2022b) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Executive leadership team: In 2020, no Black person in the team (Economic Times, 2020). In 2022, 3/16 are Black (18%) (Nike, 2022a).
Netflix	Entertainment	Big	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Curated playlist about racial injustice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Black leadership: In 2020 at 10.9%

			and Black experiences (Netflix, 2022) > Donation of \$5M (Petski, 2020)	In 2021 13.3% (Goldsmith, 2022)
Starbucks	Food	Big	> T-shirt for 250,00 employees and partners (Starbucks, 2020) > Allowing employees to wear apparel supporting BLM (Starbucks, 2020) > Donation of \$1M (Starbucks, 2020)	> Black leadership: In 2020, 5/57 (8%) executives were Black (show_the_boardroom, 2020). In 2021, 7/55 (12%) (Starbucks, 2022; Starbucks, 2021) > Internal discussions: “internal series of conversations” (Starbucks, 2020)
Sunday Riley	Cosmetics	Small	> Donation of \$50,000 > Highlighting Black-owned businesses on their Instagram (SundayRiley, 2022)	> Black employee diversity: In 2020, 11.5% were Black, 9% of management was Black In 2021, stats have not been released (SundayRiley, 2022)
Spanx	Fashion	Medium	> Donation of \$200,000 in total (Spanx, 2022a) > Includes a wide range of fabric colours (Spiegel, 2020)	> No official information can be found about diversity statistics of employees, but looking through LinkedIn there are Black employees present,

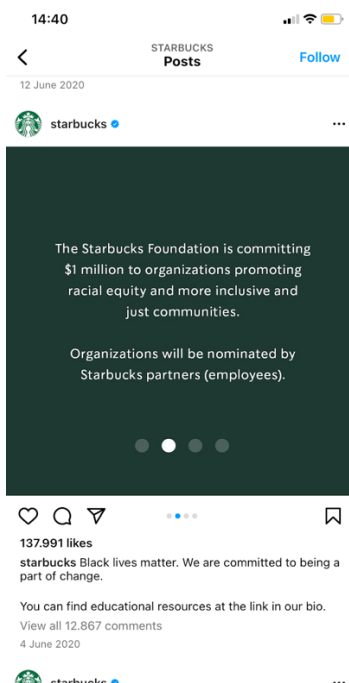
			> Influences wide range of models in advertising (Spirgel, 2020)	also at Director level (Spanx, 2022b).
Klarna	FinTech	Medium	> Donation and matched employee donation (Klarna, 2022b) > Created specific marketplace for black-owned businesses (Klarna, 2022b)	> Black diversity: In 2020, 1/6 (16%) of the board of directors were Black, 0/7 management team were Black (Klarna, 2020) In 2022, 1/7 (14%) of the board of directors were Black, (Klarna, 2022c) 0/7 of the management team were black (Klarna, 2022a)

Appendix I.IV Social Media posts

Nike



Netflix



Starbucks



SundayRiley



Spanx



Klarna



Appendice II. Quantitative Research

Appendice II.I Questionnaire Sampling Overview

Table 5 Quantitative Sampling Overview

5-Step Sampling Process	Definition
<i>1. The population</i>	Age range of 16 to 36 years old Born/Raised in North America, Western Europe, or Oceania
<i>2. Sample Frame</i>	Wide Sampling Frame via Social Media Based on Population Criteria
<i>3. Sample Size</i>	$N = > 20,000$ $n = \pm 200$
<i>4. Sampling Technique</i>	Nonprobability Basis Convenience Sampling Snowball Technique 20% Response Rate = Reach of $\pm 1,250$ Respondents
<i>5. Data Collection Methods</i>	Online Questionnaire through Social Media Cialdini's Principles of Influence

Appendice II.II Link to Survey Questions and Data Output

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1IjSzrgFx->

[kI1qoYhKIDkCtSG7OSII8Ubvc9ujDHWgZE/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1IjSzrgFx-kI1qoYhKIDkCtSG7OSII8Ubvc9ujDHWgZE/edit?usp=sharing)