

# Unwrapping Brand Activism

An Exploration on How Consumers Perceive and Engage with Brand  
Activism on FMCG Packaging

by

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# Abstract

**Title:** Unwrapping Brand Activism - An Exploration on How Consumers Perceive and Engage with Brand Activism on FMCG Packaging

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**Keywords:** Brand Activism, Packaging, Consumer Engagement, Consumer Perceptions, Socio-political Issues, Consumer Resistance

**Thesis Purpose:** We aim to bridge the knowledge gap in current literature by examining the underexplored aspects of packaging as a medium of brand activism.

**Methodology/ Empirical Data Collection:** This research used a qualitative approach, more specifically, netnography based on two cases. The two empirical cases on the use of brand activism on packaging that have been selected for this study are: (1) Walmart's introduction of a 'Celebration Edition' Ice Cream for Juneteenth, and (2) Skittle's introduction of a rainbow-free packaging to support the LGBTQ+ community. Initially we analysed nearly 30 postings with collectively over 4000 comments on the platform Reddit.

**Findings/ Conclusion:** This study addressed the limited literature on consumer perceptions and engagement with brand activism on FMCG packaging. The study revealed three main topics: the tangible role of brand activism, consumer scepticism towards packaging, and the conflict between informative and symbolic elements. Results show how brand activism on packaging differs from other marketing tools such as advertisements on billboards; the tangible aspect of packaging creates more engagement and contribution to consumers' lives. Results show that consumers are wary of profit-driven motives but respond positively to creative and authentic brand activism. Lastly, findings emphasise the importance of balanced and genuine brand activism that respects both informative and symbolic aspects of packaging.

**Practical Implications:** (1) Leverage the unique ways consumers use brand activism through packaging, (2) Understand the potential risks that come with brand activism, (3) Tackle any tension in perceived authenticity, (4) Innovate packaging by leveraging its tangible component, (5) Balance brand activism on packaging with the informational purpose.

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*Lund, May 18th, 2023*



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# 1. Introduction

*"Bringing this rainbow home to my friends? No, I would never,"* he confessed steadfastly with his arms crossed. His remark, simple and direct, piqued our curiosity and spurred a series of questions that took us on a journey of discovery and understanding of brand activism on packaging.

This simple statement, derived during an earlier study throughout our master's program, became the catalyst that put us on the trail of a less-trodden area in the realm of Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) packaging - brand activism. The map of our quest? A rainbow as a symbol of the LGBTQ+ community, displayed on an ice cream package.

Before we penned the first lines of this thesis, we immersed ourselves in an exploration of consumer perspectives. We conducted qualitative research to investigate how different consumers responded to ice cream packaging with a brand activist design reflecting the LGBTQ+ community. What we discovered was something unexpected. This packaging (with brand activism), as it turned out, was not just a protective shell or a marketing gimmick, which many people often think packaging is. The brand activism on the packaging was something else and seemed to elicit a few things from consumers.

The man's outspoken statement echoed in our minds, expressed by someone outside the LGBTQ+ community. It raised questions in our minds: Can a simple rainbow on a package have so much power that it keeps some from being seen with it? And what is so different about brand activism on packaging than in a normal advertisement?

These questions became our guide, directed our research and formed the beginning of our academic quest. The comment sparked a curiosity that fueled our research and set us on a path of discovery about brand activism on packaging. And so we pose the question to you:

Would you take a rainbow to your friends?

The objective of this chapter is to dissect the prominent research theme of brand activism's role in packaging. We initiate the discussion by laying the foundation on the primary subject, packaging to ensure a thorough understanding of our research terrain. Subsequently, we define the research gap that motivates our study, illustrating the necessity and relevance of our research contribution. Thereafter, we elaborate why brand activism provides us with the appropriate theoretical lens to study packaging from a socio-cultural point of view. Then, we introduce our research question to illuminate the specific aim and significance of our investigation. Lastly, we provide an outline of the structure of the research.

## 1.1 Background: packaging

The significance of packaging in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) industry is often overlooked in the literature on the development of brands (Kniazeva & Belk, 2007; Lydekaityte & Tambo, 2020; Underwood, 2003). However, packaging is the primary source of information to consumers and is perceived by consumers to be part of the product (Ahmed et al., 2005). Packaging serves primarily as a communication tool for the product itself, but also as a marketing tool for the brand (Gray & Guthrie, 1990). Understanding its role in consumer behaviour and the decision-making process is therefore essential in designing packaging that attract consumer attention and encourage buying decisions. Therefore we start by looking at the traditional model of consumer decision-making, which breaks down the process into five stages: problem recognition (1), information search (2), evaluation of alternatives (3), purchase (4), and post-purchase (5) (Mohammadi & Mohamed, 2010; Santos & Gonçalves, 2021). Although this model is prevalent due to its simplicity, it is also heavily criticised for its representation of consumers as rational decision-makers who seek to optimise satisfaction by evaluating all alternatives. Research shows, however, that consumers spend very little time making decisions at the point of purchase, rarely compare different brands, and therefore may be making suboptimal decisions due to time constraints, the lack of cognitive capacity to process vast amounts of data, or the lack of information (Bertilsson & Tarnovskaya, 2017; Erasmus et al., 2001).

Packaging goes beyond being a functional container and serves as a significant touchpoint for consumers to interact with brands, construct their self-concept, and interpret symbolic meanings (Elliot & Church, 1997; Keller, 1993). Through both lived and mediated experiences, packaging provides unique benefits in terms of functionality, aesthetics, and symbolism, influencing consumer-brand relationships and resolving cultural contradictions (Underwood, 2003). Packaging narratives and symbolism can trigger nostalgia and create connections with the past, underscoring the powerful role of packaging in shaping consumer perceptions and brand identities in the dynamic world of consumer culture (Kniazeva & Belk, 2007; Roberts, 2014). Due to the competitive offering in the FMCG industry, packaging should be aimed at

attracting consumer attention in a short amount of time (Bialkova et al., 2013). Understanding the symbolic value of packaging is crucial in order to design packaging that appeals to consumers and succeeds at outcompeting other FMCG companies with an almost identical product.

In this thesis, we will explore FMCG packaging from a brand activism perspective, in order to better understand the particular ways that consumers understand and interact with brand activism on packaging. Although brand activism has become a fairly popular topic among many researchers, there are several facets that need further investigation. We discuss those facets in the following section as we present the gaps in the existing literature

## 1.2 Research gap

Political polarisation among the public is evident and can be manifested in various ways, including in the marketplace. When brands become involved in social or political causes, it contributes to this polarised market landscape. This development creates both risks and opportunities for those brands that are taking a stand on such issues, such as boycotts and buycotts, new possibilities for segmentation, targeting specific consumer groups, brand loyalty and product selection. When companies become involved in social or political causes, it can cause divisions, introducing both risks and chances for those who are involved. Existing studies on brand activism have explored different forms of communication such as advertisements, social media posts, PR activities and corporate social responsibility projects. Nevertheless, the part that packaging plays as a way to communicate brand activism has been largely ignored. One marketing element that has often been overshadowed in the theoretical development and communication of a brand is product packaging (Underwood, 2003; Kniazeva & Belk, 2007; Lydekaityte & Tambo, 2020). Nonetheless, there have been notable contributions that have illuminated this area of study. Karedza (2017), for example, sheds a light on the influence of packaging design on consumer purchasing behaviour in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector. Sharma (2022) provided an analysis of contemporary trends in packaging and their impact on the industry, emphasising the rise of sustainable and eco-friendly packaging, the focus on convenience and smart packaging, and the transformative role of e-commerce in packaging innovation. Furthermore, Brennan et al. (2021) conducted a thorough study of consumer perceptions concerning the importance of packaging in reducing food waste. The study showed that consumers consider packaging to be a valuable tool for extending food shelf life and are willing to pay more for environmentally friendly and sustainable packaging. Although existing research addresses aspects of corporate social responsibility around packaging, it mostly discusses the environmental impact and focuses primarily on functional elements. Among research around packaging and communication of activism, current research focuses primarily on communication of sustainability activities rather than social and political activism. But what are consumers' perceptions when a brand takes a social or political position



and uses product packaging as a medium for brand activism? And how do consumers engage with that packaging, or more directly with the brand activism on the packaging? These are questions that guide this study.

Much research in packaging has touched upon functional aspects such as materials, but packaging is much more. Packaging not only acts as a communication tool to convey symbolism, but is important because of its own symbolic contribution to the overall understanding of the company or brand. Recognizing packaging as a cultural phenomenon (Kniazeva & Belk, 2007), our study specifically investigates brand activism in the FMCG packaging realm.

With this lack of consensus in previous research, it is clear that the effects of packaging and brand activism are multifaceted. This gap in research necessitates research into consumer perceptions and engagement of the ways in which packaging is used to convey political, social and environmental viewpoints.

### 1.3 Research purpose

The purpose of this research is to explore the role of brand activism on packaging among fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG). This study aims to analyse the impact of packaging that communicates a brand's position on contemporary social and political topics. It investigates consumer responses towards brand activism on packaging, as expressed on the online platform Reddit. This research focuses on analysing two cases of product packaging with brand activism, specifically Walmart's Juneteenth ice cream packaging and the grey Skittles packaging in honour of Pride Month. Examining these cases will provide a better understanding of how consumers perceive and respond to brand activism on product packaging. The findings from this study will provide fresh insights on both the advantages and disadvantages of using brand activism on Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) packaging. As a result the main research question concerns:

*How do consumers perceive and engage with brand activism on FMCG packaging?*

### 1.4 Contribution aim

With an optimistic spirit, we aim to bridge the knowledge gap in the current literature by examining the underexplored aspects of packaging as a medium for brand activism. Packaging is an under-researched topic (Underwood, 2003; (Kniazeva & Belk, 2007; Lydekaityte & Tambo, 2020). This research is one of the first netnographic studies to focus on consumers' reactions to brand activism on packaging, opening new avenues for research in this area. With an exploratory approach, this research aims to contribute to a better understanding of consumers' perceptions and engagement of packaging with brand activism.

This research highlights the conflict between the informational and symbolic elements of packaging and offers valuable insights into how brand activism on packaging can influence consumer decision-making and product categorization. Besides that, the study uncovers the tension and scepticism amongst consumers towards brand activism on packaging, which contributes to the ongoing discourse around brand authenticity and opportunism in marketing strategies. Furthermore, the research uncovers the unique challenges that come with the use of packaging as a medium for brand activism. Lastly, this research offers a new perspective on how brand activism has become more tangible through the way consumers use brand activism on packaging. In doing so, these new insights can help brands make choices on how to use brand activism on packaging.

Lastly, this research adds to the area of consumer behaviour within a specific context, which is accomplished through direct observation on the American social news aggregation, content evaluation and discussion website Reddit



## 2. Literature review

In this chapter, we will analyse existing scholarly studies concerning our thesis in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the subject. Firstly, we will look at the concept of packaging, and the research on its marketing function. Secondly, we discuss some of the tension in today's postmodern consumer culture and how this may cause consumer resistance. In the next chapter, we discuss the topics of brand activism and political polarisation, as this literature provides us with the theoretical lens needed to bridge the theoretical gap of packaging as a medium for brand activism.

### 2.1 Decoding the significance of packaging in FMCGs

One marketing element that has often been overshadowed in the theoretical development and communication of a brand is the product packaging. Yet packaging is crucial for FMCGs, as it is both an element of the product and the primary source of information for consumers. (Underwood, 2003; Kniazeva & Belk, 2007; Lydekaityte & Tambo, 2020). It serves as a main communication tool for the product itself. So why is it that it has received little attention in research? Before diving into our own research, we first discuss theoretical models in the context of consumer behaviour in the decision-making process in general and with respect to packaging and FMCG.

#### 2.1.1 Decision-making

It is essential to familiarise ourselves with the consumer decision-making process when talking about customer behaviour in relation to fast-moving consumer goods and packaging. By grasping the core variables that shape consumer decisions, packaging can be developed more successfully that grasps a consumer's attention as well as encourages buying decisions. The first theoretical models exploring consumer decision-making were developed in the 1970s. Those early theoretical models on the decision-making of consumers are referred to as the "grand models" (Erasmus et al., 2001). These models view consumer decision-making as a problem-solving process, resulting in satisfaction or dissatisfaction. From the grand models a simplified five-stage model emerged that became known as the traditional model of the decision making process. The traditional model breaks down the decision making process into the following five consequential steps: (1) problem recognition, (2) information search, (3) evaluation of alternatives, (4) purchase, (5) post-purchase (Mohammadi & Mohamed, 2010; Santos & Gonçalves, 2021). Despite the emergence of new studies and theories, this traditional model is still considered the most popular and well-known consumer decision making model due to its simplicity (Bertilsson & Tarnovskaya, 2017; Erasmus et al., 2001). However, this model has received criticism. One major issue is its representation of consumers as rational decision-makers who seek to optimise satisfaction by assessing all available options. In reality,

consumer behaviour is more intricate and varied. Dickson & Sawyer (1990) found that people normally spend under 12 seconds in a product section at a grocery store, with little consideration for other brands. Simon (1955) was the first to propose that the consumer should be viewed as something other than a rational actor, suggesting that they evaluate potential choices one after another until they find an adequate option. His concept of bounded rationality gained widespread acceptance and suggested that consumers can be limited in their decision-making due to not having enough information, time, or cognitive capacity to process the vast amount of available data (Bertilsson & Tarnovskaya, 2017; Santos & Gonçalves, 2021).

### 2.1.2 Packaging and its functions

Pendergast & Pit (1996) identified that packaging has two main functions: a logistical and a marketing function. Packaging's logistical purpose is to ensure safe preservation and transportation of goods. Meanwhile, packaging's marketing purpose is to attract consumer's attention by presenting the product, brand, and its unique selling points. Sagir (2004) emphasised that packaging is classified according to its level into primary, secondary and tertiary packaging. Primary packaging is the first layer of packaging around the product, and accordingly secondary packaging is the second layer. Primary packaging always holds a marketing function, whilst secondary and tertiary packaging most often exclusively have a logistical function. The marketing function of packaging is of most interest to us, which is why in this research we focus on primary packaging levels.

Further research by Hine (1995) identified graphics and structure to be the two major elements of primary packaging design. The graphic elements are the packaging's colour, typeface, logo, and visuals used on the packaging, and the structural elements are the size, shape, and materials of the packaging. Silayoi & Speece (2004) contrast this classification by stating that visual and informational elements are the two main packaging elements. The graphics used on packaging and its size and shape are the visual elements. The informational elements are the product information provided on the packaging and the packaging technologies used. The visual elements appeal to the emotional side of decision making, with graphics and colours being particularly influential. Moreover, the informational elements tend to appeal to the cognitive side of decision making (Silayoi & Speece, 2004).

Realising that the FMCG industry is highly competitive with numerous brands and products competing for consumer attention and that FMCG are usually utilised and bought often, packaging is a key factor of FMCG as it works as the major communication tool and an important part of the product itself (Bialkova et al., 2013). There is much evidence that realises packaging has a significant impact on product sales, not only in terms of preserving and transporting goods, but also in the promotion and purchase of them. Studies have indicated that packaging plays a major role when shoppers make their decisions at the checkout (Gray & Guthrie, 1990; Silayoi & Speece, 2004). Research conducted by Kalnikaité et al. (2013) further

showed that packaging is the most influential factor influencing consumers choices while shopping in supermarkets. Additional studies have demonstrated that when price is not the main factor in decision-making, packaging, branding, and sensory elements are given more consideration (Kalnikaitė et al., 2013; Steptoe et al., 1995).

Research has found that consumers are influenced by sensory cues that allow them to classify products or come up with assumptions based on its extrinsic characteristics (Lancelot Miltgen et al., 2015). These external signals generate cognitive reactions - such as what a buyer predicts the product's flavour will be - as well as emotional responses associated with hedonic anticipations - for example, how pleasurable eating a certain food might be. For example, the colour of packaging influences predictions consumers make about the taste and smell of products (Lancelot Miltgen et al., 2015). A 2012 survey revealed that 76% of a customer's decisions while in a grocery store are spur-of-the-moment choices made at the shelf or point of sale (Heneghan, 2012). As previously mentioned, when someone shops for an item in a supermarket they will usually only compare multiple brands in 15% of cases (Dickson & Sawyer, 1990). A so-called "competitive clutter" prevails in supermarkets due to the wide variety of brands offering nearly identical goods. Packaging is considered one of the tools brands can use to break through this clutter and capture consumers' attention (Bialkova et al., 2013).

Today, consumers do not differentiate between package and product, as the packaging is an integral part of the product in the consumer's mind (Ahmed et al., 2005). It was discovered that claims of low-fat packaging caused an increase in consumption compared to regular packaging, because it leads people to think that the food has fewer calories (Wansink & Chandon, 2006). A similar health halo effect was observed with packages that carry fair trade labels, causing customers to believe those items with fair trade labels are healthier (Berry & Romero, 2021). The halo effect of packaging can also influence sensory appeal as eco-labeled products are believed to taste better by consumers (Sörqvist et al., 2015). This shows that packaging has another important underlying aspect, which is symbolic meaning. Aaker (1997) subsequently suggested that product packaging is a tool for brands to build brand personality. However, from a consumers' perspective, packaging has an additional, symbolic relevance to customers.

### 2.1.3 The symbolic relevance

The majority of research concentrates on its role helping consumers to make decisions at the point of sale, however a smaller portion within research looks into how it contributes to consumers' lives through its symbolism. Keller (1993) posited that packaging is not related to the product itself, but rather "an element of the purchase and consumption experience that generally does not tie in with what is required for product performance." Non-product-related attributes typically serve symbolic benefits, which are the extrinsic advantages that come with consumption. Packaging therefore helps consumers in constructing and communicating their

self-concept to the outside world (Keller, 1993). Underwood (2003) highly disagreed with Keller on the designation of packaging as a non-product-related attribute, as it conceptually limits packaging's impact on the brand to being primarily symbolic. Packaging also delivers function and experiential benefits especially in the case of low involvement nondurable goods. Underwood (2003) understands packaging as a product-related attribute, that is in itself a cultural product as well as an essential brand communicative vehicle. In a broader sense, Underwood (2003) argues that packaging communicates meaning through both lived and mediated experiences. He claims that packaging is more tangible than other marketing strategies, like advertising, so people tend to spend more time with it and it can often be seen in homes. It is through the lived experience, or purchase and usage of the product packaging by the consumer that we understand how packaging can provide unique benefits in terms of functionality, aesthetics and symbolism (Underwood, 2003). These unique benefits of packaging through the lived experience can build new or improve existing consumer-brand relationships. Similarly, functional disutility of packaging negatively impacts the lived experience and most likely damages the consumer-brand relationship. Moreover, Underwood (2003) argues packaging can also provide symbolic advantages through the mediated experience, as visual, structural and informational components on packaging can contain social or cultural implications. Packaging undeniably contributes to the general comprehension of the brand as it permits to coordinate both visual parts (logo, symbols, and colour), structural components (shape, size, and material), and informational elements (slogan, brand name, product information). Brands can communicate their identity as well as that of the consumer through common social understandings that are associated with their packaging design. Brands and consumers that are environmentally conscious attempt to communicate this through the use of green colours in packaging (visual elements), the use of paper based packaging (structural elements), the disclosure of information on how the brand minimises its footprint (informational elements) (Underwood, 2003). Thereafter it is up to consumers to decide whether this packaging reflects environmental friendliness, whether the brand genuinely cares about the environment and whether to choose this product among all other alternatives (Underwood, 2003).

Just like with advertising, there is always a mediated relation between matter and meaning. The mediated experience in the social world is the evaluation of symbolic meaning by consumers. Then, individuals make use of goods and their symbolic meaning to construct the social world around them and their own self-identity (Elliot & Church, 1997; Underwood, 2003). Another perspective on the symbolic significance of packaging is the finding that packaging also plays a role in myths that resolve cultural contradictions. Kniazeva & Belk (2007) identified that brands use packaging as a vehicle for spreading consumer myths. Myths on packaging take the form of narratives that usually have a plot and a central heroic character. Kniazeva & Belk (2007) build on Holt's (2004) theorization of myth markets, where brands position themselves as a solution to cultural tension. In myth markets, consumers make use of goods for their

heightened symbolic value that helps to resolve cultural contradictions, and alleviate consumers' feelings of anxiety and desire (Holt, 2004; Bertilsson & Tarnovskaya, 2017). Underwood (2003) found that continuity in a brands' packaging design and an emphasis on the brand's history and craftsmanship has the power to evoke feelings of nostalgia. This feeling of nostalgia emerges as individuals assign meaning to brands they consumed during their childhood. Packaging can trigger associations between the brand, the consumer's childhood and the consumer's family history (Underwood, 2003). Packaging narratives may for example portray today's society as a hopeless and troubled place, where values of family, morality, peace, and simplicity have faded. Brands build such narratives through associations with the past by using both visual and informational elements in packaging. Roberts (2014) demonstrates that Vodka and Chocolate brands in today's post-soviet times actively produce nostalgic myths of the Great Russian Past through the use of historical buildings, figures and slogans such as 'Vivat Rossiya!' ("Long live Russia".) on its packaging (Kniazeva & Belk, 2007; Roberts, 2014).

We conclude that there is a gap in the research on packaging, since packaging as a medium for brand activism has not been researched before (Belk & Kniazeva, 2007; Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014).

## 2.2 Consumer resistance in postmodern consumption culture

According to Holt (2002) brands have caused conflict & tensions in today's postmodern consumer culture. Consumers use brands to reflect their self-identity, communicate their personal values, and to create a sense of belonging (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Reed, 2002). Consequently, according to Arnould & Thompson (2005), brands & products are not only functional objects but also are cultural symbols that carry meaning and associations. Although it may seem like we are free to consume whatever we want, it is not seen purely as an individual activity. That is because it is believed larger social, institutional, and cultural forces are at play (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holt, 2002). As such, marketers are portrayed as cultural engineers, narrating how consumers should think and feel through branded products. Over time, brands pursued more aggressive cultural engineering techniques to provide unique cultural resources, which did not go unnoticed by consumers and critics. Consumers became more sceptical of branding techniques as the firm's underlying profit motive became more apparent. One of the tensions in today's postmodern consumption culture is that consumers feel as if their personal sovereignty is commodified due to a perceived pressure to conform to brand norms and expectations, even if those are in conflict with their own values. Furthermore, it also becomes increasingly harder to distinguish between authentic and commercial cultural branding techniques, as a brand's intentions may not be apparent to consumers (Holt, 2002). Consumer resistance is not a concise concept, as it may take many different forms in different contexts. Resistance may be directed towards a specific firm or towards a marketplace practice,



and may be voiced collectively, individually or kept quiet. Furthermore, central to consumer resistance is a change in either attitude, intentions, and/or behaviour (Penaloza & Price, 1993). According to Roux (2007), the term consumer resistance has a double meaning, and therefore should be subdivided into the motivational state of resistance and the manifestations of resistance. The manifestations of resistance are the negative responses that consumers produce in reaction to practices that they deem unacceptable. The motivational state of resistance, on the other hand, refers to the consumer's motivation to oppose and or counter the firm or market practice. The motivational state should be regarded as the trigger to the manifestation of resistance (Roux, 2007).

## 3. Theoretical lens

In the following chapter, we present the topics of brand activism and political polarisation. Those topics provide us with theoretical lenses needed as the theories are used to analyse the empirical data. We start by first explaining the concept of brand activism, and subsequently discuss the topic of political polarisation.

### 3.1 Brand activism perspective

The phenomenon of Brand Activism (BA) is a not-so-new concept in the literature of practical strategic marketing. But the roots of this powerful movement can be traced back to the principles of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which sparked the idea that companies are not just out there to make profit, but would also be agents of a positive change in society. A social contract between businesses and society is important (Davis, 1960; Carroll, 1979; Wood, 1991). Bowen (1953), often called the father of CSR, argued that businesses have a responsibility to contribute to the social welfare of the communities in which they operate, and that this responsibility is separate from the pursuit of profit maximisation. Davis (1960) focused on the relationship between business and society and argued that companies cannot afford to ignore their social responsibilities. He emphasised the benefits of enlightened self-interest; stating that companies that embrace social responsibilities can improve the public image, and potentially improve economic efficiency. Building on this, Freeman's (2015) stakeholder theory revolves around the idea that companies should create value for all stakeholders, not just shareholders. Building on Carroll's (1979) Corporate Social Performance framework, Wood (1991) provides a four-part framework that includes economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary responsibilities of business that should be integrated into a company's overall business strategy.

Although Bowen (1953) argued that taking responsibility in CSR issues is separate from the pursuit of profit maximisation, Porter & Kramer (2011) challenge his view and argue that companies should look for new ways to create shared value (CSV), by addressing both social and environmental issues while making profits. CSV could entail strengthening the relationship with your stakeholders for example with employees (Porter & Kramer, 2011). In line with this, Bhattacharya et al., (2008) argues that a company's CSR activities comprise a legitimate, compelling and increasingly important way to attract and retain good employees. In this way, CSR becomes a strategic imperative in which companies can differentiate themselves and gain competitive advantage (Bhattacharya et al., 2008; Pahlia et al., 2014).

While CSR is often seen primarily as an economic or social phenomenon, Detomasi (2008) argues that the concept of CSR is inherently political and that businesses have a responsibility to engage in political processes in a responsible manner (Detomasi, 2008). The growing power of large, often multinational corporations renders their political role and responsibility inevitable. In fact, it is believed that globalisation also seems to imply an erosion of state sovereignty and a weakening of government capabilities, which may further strengthen the political role of business (Djelic & Etchanchu, 2015). With this evolving political responsibility companies seem to have (Matten & Crane, 2005; Detomasi, 2008), the traditional concept of CSR is challenged with an extension of this concept, namely Corporate Political Responsibility (CPR) (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). As well as for CSR, CPR or also referred to as CPA (Corporate Political Activity), are beneficial to a company to engage in because it can enhance a company's reputation (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011), increase trust (Matten & Crane, 2005) as well as create a competitive advantage (Detomasi, 2008).

Although the terms discussed above are very similar, they are different phenomena. BA takes place whenever a business or brand links and associates social, economic, environmental, cultural and community issues with the company's fundamental principles and outlook. BA could be expressed through an open declaration in the public sphere, advocating for the cause, contributing funds to the particular cause, and making a proclamation connected to the cause through their promotional and advertising materials.

Bhagwat et al. (2020) refer to the phenomenon of “corporate socio-political activism” (CSA) as a way for firms to demonstrate their commitment to responsible behaviour in the public arena by publicly supporting one side over another in partisan socio-political disputes. Drawing on this, “brand political activism (BPA)”, according to Moorman (2020), signifies the participation of a company in public dialogues or activities concerning partisan subjects, leveraging its corporate or individual brand identity. Brands can express their opinion on a variety of topics, such as climate change, transgender rights, racial justice, minimum wage issues and gun control. Some of these involve taking a stance against rather challenging political institutions like same-sex marriage and other social conventions such as prejudice based on race. In relation to CSR and CPR, BA can also serve as a (marketing) strategy for companies to communicate their stance on these matters to differentiate themselves and gain competitive advantage.

From a company's perspective, it is clear that utilising these concepts in their strategy has various advantages. But what about from the customer's point of view? According to Barton et al., (2018) most recent global research for Accenture, 62% of consumers want companies to take a stand on societal and cultural issues, as they find it important that brands stand for something bigger besides the products they are selling.

Consumers are becoming more conscious of the values and beliefs associated with the brands they support. They seek companies that align with their own values. Bhattacharya & Sen (2003) explain this through their Consumer-company identification framework, consumers increasingly identify with companies whose values and beliefs align with their own, affecting their purchasing decisions and loyalty. The role of personal values on green consumer behaviour was examined by Thøgersen & Ölander (2002) and found that people with strong altruistic and biospheric values are more likely to adopt sustainable consumption patterns, seeking out companies that match their personal values.

There is a correlation between the values of consumers and their purchasing habits. In other words, if a company helps in maintaining or enhancing its customers' self-concept (Sirgy, 1982), then those consumers will most likely purchase that company's products. Belk (1988) defines this as the concept of the extended self and argues that material objects play a crucial role in constructing and expressing one's self-identity. While self-identity focuses on how one perceives oneself and one's personal attitudes, Reed (2002) explores the notion of social identity theory which is based on how people form relationships with companies and brands based on their membership in various social groups. Individuals tend to seek out brands and companies that reflect their self-identity within a social context (Reed, 2002). In line with this, Escalas & Bettman (2003) found that consumers often use brands as a means to communicate their values; seeking products and companies that align with their self-concepts or social affiliations. People can feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to others by choosing products or companies that they associate with their reference groups (Escalas & Bettman, 2003).

Companies are not the only ones who reap rewards from incorporating activist ideas into their business or marketing strategy. From the customer's point of view, it is beneficial to find businesses whose values match their own, as this helps them build and maintain a stable sense of self, create a feeling of community among their peers, and express their values to others.

### 3.2 Exploring a new - polarised market landscape: what it means for businesses and consumers

As mentioned above, it has become increasingly common in recent years for companies to assume responsibility for participating responsibly in political processes (Detomasi, 2008; Matten & Crane, 2005; Djelic & Etchanchu, 2015; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). This reflects a shift in the way companies are taking on responsibilities and tasks that were formerly solely carried out by government agencies. Several factors have influenced this shift, including changing societal expectations of businesses, a growing awareness of social and environmental problems and the failure of governments to address them effectively. Take, for example, how companies address diseases and try to prevent its spread with prevention programs. Rosen et

al. (2014) argue that if a company does business in a developing country where AIDS is prevalent, it is not just a public health issue, but it should be the company's responsibility to address these problems. The Rana Plaza catastrophe in Bangladesh had major effects on businesses and their duties. Although the government was largely responsible, firms, especially global brands, were directly connected and afterwards faced mounting pressure to elevate labour standards and workplace conditions. While companies may choose to address particular issues to their own benefit, they also seem to be obliged to contribute to positive change (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). But not everyone seems to agree with the way this has been done and criticise the responsibility companies take on. Henderson (2001) questioned the CSR doctrine and subjected it to fundamental scrutiny. In his article, he opposed prior research that had a favourable view of corporations taking on certain responsibilities. His thought-provoking text stated that these activities do not fit with the economic role of business, which is to make a profit. He argued that CSR is a way for individual companies to be profitable in the long run and gain public support for the market economy. Henderson (2001) described how CSR has given capitalism a "human face."

As mentioned before, Porter & Kramer (2011) argued that when businesses focus on both social and environmental concerns, it can be a mutually beneficial situation; however, it is evident that this can also be seen as a tactic used by businesses to conceal the negative impacts they may have on society, which is known as CSR-washing (Mattis, 2008; Pope & Wæraas, 2015; Delmas and Cuerel Burbano 2011). CSR-washing is a term used to describe a company's misrepresentation of its dedication to social responsibility, which can lead to creating an illusion of their commitment to ethical and responsible practices. However, in the realm of brand activism, Vredenburg et al. (2020) use the phrase "woke-washing" - when a brand disconnects its activist statements from their purpose, values and actions, this constitutes insincere brand activism that may create misleading messages for consumers and consequently damage both the value of the brand and actual potential for positive social change (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Consumers may harbour scepticism towards brands engaging in social issues, suspecting these issues to be leveraged as marketing strategies to boost product sales (Edelman, 2019). This doubt arises when brand activism appears disconnected from the brand's core purpose and values and fails to align with its business practices. In fact, one study that involved 420 U.S. consumers revealed that 29% of the participants perceived companies' support for social movements as profit-driven, while a slightly smaller proportion (28%) believed that companies genuinely cared about the issues associated with the movement (Cox, 2019). Furthermore, Edelman's Trust Barometer Report (2019) uncovered that more than half (56%) of respondents saw brands as taking advantage of social matters mainly to drive up sales figures. Consequently, when consumers perceive organisations' actions as inauthentic, commercial, or opportunistic it can damage a brand's reputation and lead to resistance from consumers in the

form of boycotts (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022). In this vein, it is evident that taking a public stand on certain issues does not always ensure value, on the contrary some even say that taking a stand has never been more divisive or risky (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Still, businesses seem to be able to increase their value by addressing certain issues, which makes it a conscious move for them, yet at the same time consumers' expectations are also shifting and expecting more responsibility from them. Because of this, it appears that businesses have acquired a higher status of power and find themselves increasingly involved in a political sphere as their role has also shifted towards a more political one. One view on politics is that politics is linked to the welfare of the public and involves the use of power, authority or influence. This view of politics as linked to the use of power offers a broader idea that transcends the state level and facilitates the use of the concept for economic institutions such as businesses or industry groups (Scherer et al., 2013). As the structure of governing appears to be unable to adequately tackle the issues of global public goods or control global business for the benefit of everyone, corporations are facing an increase in social and ecological requirements, being held accountable for matters that concern public welfare (Scherer et al., 2013). Today, it is not only the responsibilities that corporations take on, but also, as mentioned earlier, the ever-increasing power of large corporations also renders their political role (Djelic & Etchanchu, 2015). In doing so, it is not always the case that companies themselves choose to take on this role, stakeholders push companies to get involved in sensitive social and political issues, especially as they see governments failing in this regard (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, certain researchers (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018) argue that brands nowadays cannot afford to remain neutral on important issues and must take a stand for positive change. When brands get involved in these issues, they must choose a side and challenge or defend the status quo (Moorman, 2020). However, taking a stand on these issues fuels an increasingly polarised political landscape and may even challenge the foundation of liberal democracy as such (Ulver, 2022). Moreover, today's digital media landscape with the accompanying algorithmic culture also contributes to the political polarisation as it creates so called 'echo chambers' which further reinforces individual's political beliefs. Simply stated, political polarisation is generally thought of as the divide between those on opposite ends of the political spectrum, but Weber et al. (2021) suggest it can be seen as a gap among people in different political groups that results in greater separation, less common ground, heightened animosity and/or a sense of greater disparity. Political polarisation would affect consumer psychology, which in turn has implications for marketers, policymakers and consumer welfare, alongside elevating political identities, changing dynamics between and within groups and reinforcing cognitive biases (Weber et al., 2021). This polarisation leads to a new market landscape and consumer culture. Kjellberg & Helgesson (2010) contend that markets are frequently the focal point and origin of political debate, yet research into consumer behaviour suggests that the growth and alteration of markets does not solely rely on traditional "manufacturing and production processes." In

fact, prior research suggests that customers play a role in forming markets, and are instrumental in creating value (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Choi & Burnes, 2016).

Ulver (2022) talked about a so-called “conflict market” in which consumers are engaged in commodified conflicts, not in a depoliticizing way, but in an increasingly un-politicizing, de-dialectical and polarising way. Weber et al. (2021) identified concrete changes in consumer’s expectations and consumption of brands in times of political polarisation. Alongside political polarisation individuals started to avoid correct information and choose self-confirming media instead, which results in a positive and reinforcing feedback loop. Because of this, not only consumers’ purchasing behaviour is affected, but also the relation towards other consumers. Consumers behave increasingly negatively towards groups that do not share the same political beliefs, and derogate so-called ‘out-groups’. This act in itself further divides and polarises the population. As a consequence of this polarisation, consumers start to look for goods that hold political symbolism, in line with their own beliefs, further reinforcing their political identity. In this conflict market, the role of the marketer is to capitalise on politically sensitive issues by creating conflict, deliberately rejecting large groups of consumers and feeding the political extremes.

Nonetheless, consumers are nowadays more knowledgeable and aware of contemporary issues in the world and use their buying power to shape the market (Schwalb et al., 2022). As Stigzelius (2018) suggests, consumers can impact markets by what they buy; in other words, "voting with their pennies". As governments' authority has decreased, citizens have taken on a larger role in decision-making since they understand that their political influence is based on their consumer power (Schwalb et al., 2022). In doing so, we can observe that the shift to a more polarising situation has given way to the emergence of a growing consumer activism as a new form of political engagement. We speak of political consumerism (PC) when we refer to consumers' conscious decisions to choose or reject certain products or services based on political, ethical or environmental reasons (Schwalb et al., 2022; Stolle et al., 2005). Simply put, PC can be defined as the conscious decision to purchase certain products, goods, or services for political reasons (Quintelier, 2014). Dessart & Cova (2021) refer to this concept as “the deliberate buying or avoidance of products, goods or services for political reasons.” Baek (2010) previously defined PC as a consumer's decision to selectively choose products or brands based on ethical, social, or political considerations as a means of punishing or rewarding private companies. While research on the PC phenomenon often emphasises boycotts, which involve a conscious refusal to purchase a particular product or brand, it can also encompass buycotts, where consumers make purchases to show support for a specific product or brand (Baek, 2010; Schwalb et al., 2022).

Recent research suggests that PC occurs due to varying motivations and emotions, as found by Dalakas et al. (2022). Individuals’ political identity also influences other consumer behaviours,

such as the anthropomorphization of products, risk-taking behaviour, charitable behaviour, and sustainable behaviour. The last observed consequence of political polarisation on consumption behaviour is that consumers increasingly expect brands to take on a political stance to help spur social change. Additionally, consumers even start to assign political identities themselves to brands even though those brands refrain from engaging in political activism. When consumers were asked to rate brands on the liberal-conservative spectrum, the majority of brands were assigned a conservative identity, as consumers perceive brands that refrain from political activism to hold on to traditional values and reject social change. Therefore, it has become more effective to segment consumers based on their political identity (Weber et al., 2021).

Flight & Coker (2022) found that targeting consumer's political ideology is an effective way to build consumer-brand relationships as brand attachment levels varied over consumer's political ideology. This presents a unique challenge to brands that serve the mass market as consumers attach political meaning to the brand even when brands explicitly wish to avoid taking a political stance (Jung & Mittal, 2020; Weber et al., 2021). Irmak et al. (2020) showed that political consumerism can be influenced by smaller informational elements on packaging such as warning labels. The researcher found that conservatives' purchasing intentions increase significantly when front-of-pack warning labeling on nutritional and environmental aspects of the product are tied to a governmental organisation in comparison with warning labels tied to a nongovernmental organisation. The negative and conflicting response of conservatives to warning labels is caused by the belief that governmental regulations are a restriction of individual freedom. This research study was conducted in the United States, where political orientations are different, and therefore more research is needed in different countries on this topic. Additionally, the researcher's focus was on the effect of governmental involvement in front-of-package warning labels (one packaging element) on political consumerism. Our research focuses on how consumers in today's polarised society react towards brand activist messaging on packaging.

### 3.3 Chapter summary and relevance

The previously examined literature elucidates the foundational principles of Brand Activism (BA) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which assert that companies should extend their contributions to society beyond the sole pursuit of profit. The integration of activist ideologies into business and marketing strategies can present numerous advantages for companies. From the consumer standpoint, aligning their consumption behaviour with corporations that share congruent values aids in constructing and preserving a robust sense of self-identity, fosters communal bonds, and facilitates value communication.

Furthermore, it is becoming more and more common for customers to choose products based on their personal ideals and the values of society. This reveals an evolutionary shift in corporate roles within society, particularly emphasising the expanding responsibilities traditionally shouldered by governments. This transition has been catalysed by shifting



societal expectations, an increasing consciousness of social and environmental issues, and perceived government shortcomings. The studies discussed, also point to companies being dragged into larger political debates as they gain strength and influence in society. As corporations become more powerful, they are expected to tackle delicate social matters and political problems. The literature discussed, provides valuable insights into how corporations and consumers engage with brand activism, and how this interaction leads to market changes. This understanding is essential to perceive packaging from an unexplored perspective.

Traditionally, packaging has been analysed from a purely rational point of view in terms of marketing. However, we propose that packaging goes beyond this rational perspective and includes a socio-cultural dimension when brand activism is used. This theoretical lens provides an important perspective for our research to better understand the marketing function of packaging from a socio-cultural point of view.

## 4. Methodology

The upcoming chapter provides an overview of the methodological plan employed in this research. Initially, we delve into the research strategy, outlining the chosen approach and justifying the choice for netnography as our qualitative research method. Following that, we explore the research design and outline the data collection process using netnography. Subsequently, we elucidate the data analysis procedures, address ethical considerations, and acknowledge any limitations.

### 4.1 Research strategy

In the deductive approach, the researcher starts by reviewing the existing theory, after which the researcher tests the theory by forming and subsequently testing the hypothesis, which is known as the scientific method (Easterby-Smith., 2018). Contrary to the deductive approach, an inductive approach starts by analysing empirical material and is an appropriate way to construct theory on a topic (Saunders et al., 2007) We opted for the abductive approach, a mix between deductive and inductive approaches, as there was a fair amount of theory available on both packaging and brand activism, however not on the convergence of the two. To develop a holistic understanding of our topic, we repeatedly went back and forth in between empirical observations and theory (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). This approach can be very useful when certain areas are not fully understood. Since, as mentioned earlier, packaging is such an unexplored topic, this approach allows us to gain a different perspective as it encourages the exploration of different theories and explanations. Hence, we started by exploring the literature on packaging, after which we found that packaging in itself as a cultural product is under-researched, let alone packaging as a medium for brand activism (Belk & Kniazeva, 2007; Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014). Subsequently, we collected in-depth qualitative data, and found enough relevant empirical material to study the phenomenon from the consumer's perspective. After which, we started to explore the theory on brand activism and political polarisation as this helped us understand and analyse the empirical material. Furthermore, in the analysis, we adopted Thompson's (1994) hermeneutic approach and engaged in an iterative process, shifting between theoretical frameworks and empirical observations. In line with the purpose of our research we opted for netnography as our qualitative method for data collection. Kozinets (2015) found netnography immensely useful to reveal personal narratives, communal exchanges, practices, rituals, forms of collaboration, and manifestations of creativity. Furthermore, Heinonen & Medberg (2018) described netnographic enquiry as an excellent method for firms that attempt to understand and address matters such as consumer conflicts, tensions, resistance and activism in relation to their operations. Netnographic research is also useful in helping understand the meaning people see in actions (Easterby-Smith., 2018). We

attempt to understand how consumers make sense of brand activism on packaging, by looking at the use of the cultural product, by looking at tension in the evaluation of authenticity, and by looking at the conflict that arises in today's polarized landscape. Therefore, this method seems to be the most appropriate, as it also allows us to access large amounts of data in a timely manner. We selected two empirical cases on the use of brand activism on packaging by brands. Firstly, we made sure to have variation in the social causes the brands decided to take a stand on. Secondly, we made sure that enough empirical evidence was available to us, by looking at the amount of comments. Lastly, we ensured that we would develop a holistic understanding on the topic in today's polarized landscape by ensuring that the discussion groups represented different topics. We did this by looking at the diversity in subreddits, which is the online community people can subscribe to. Both empirical cases included discussions in more politically polarized subreddits such as r/conservative, r/lgbtq, and r/blackradicaltradition, as well as discussions in more neutral subreddits such as r/news and r/midlyinteresting.

## 4.2 Research design

In this quest to understand the phenomenon of brand activism on FMCG product packaging, we are driven by the following critical questions:

- ★ How do consumers use the symbolic aspect of brand activism on packaging?
- ★ What factors contribute to consumers' positive or negative perceptions of brand activism on packaging, and how do they relate to perceived authenticity or opportunism?
- ★ What are the potential implications for brands that incorporate brand activism on their packaging, given both the potential for increased consumer interest and the risk of generating skepticism or backlash?
- ★ What are the unique challenges for firms when using packaging as a medium for brand activism?

Each question serves as a compass, guiding us deeper into the exploration and getting us closer to answering our central research question: How do consumers perceive and engage with brand activism on FMCG product packaging? However, finding the answers to these compelling sub-questions requires more than just intellectual curiosity. This requires a research strategy and in the below section, the method of data collection is explained.

### 4.2.1 Data collection method

There is a need to obtain qualitative data to find out consumers' perceptions towards packaging that communicate a brand's stand on social-political issues. To investigate this, we chose an

international online context as the empirical scope for the study. Given that brands that take a stand are widely debated on various online platforms and public forums, netnography was chosen as the research method.

#### 4.2.1.1 Netnography

Sandlin (2007) argued that learning around consumption issues takes place in many informal places, including in casual settings where individuals come together to discuss issues of consumerism and consumption in general, as well as social movements that advocate for consumers and oppose consumption. Many of these informal community groups are also present on the Internet, where individuals gather in cyberspace to learn from each other, discuss, share information and participate in collective and individual self-directed learning (Sandlin, 2007).

Marketing researchers, whose goals include identifying and understanding consumer tastes, decision-making processes and desires, have increasingly turned to online communities as they have become more popular (Kozinets, 2002). Marketing researchers, whose goals include identifying and understanding consumer tastes, decision-making processes and desires, have increasingly turned to online communities as they have become more popular (Kozinets, 2002). Netnography gives the researcher access to consumer discussions through observation of and/or participation in communications in publicly available online forums (Nelson and Otnes, 2005). Netnography has been used in the field of marketing and consumer behavior to explore a number of topics and consumer groups, including new social movements of consumer activism such as online anti-brand communities (Brandão & Popoli, 2022), brand rejection (Dessart & Cova, 2021) but also research on social identity, social comparison, self-categorization and brand culture (Ewing et al., 2013).

It was in the late 1990s when marketing researchers began to adapt and expand market-based ethnographic methods for use in online contexts, what Kozinets (1998) called "netnography." Netnography, otherwise known as Internet-based ethnography, is a sophisticated qualitative research method that modifies traditional ethnographic techniques to examine customer cultures and communities generated through computer-mediated communication (Kozinets, 2002). It is specifically handy for investigating online consumer behaviours and cultures. Compared to the more complex ethnography approach, netnography needs less time for implementation (Kozinets, 2002). Thus, it is frequently utilised when looking into virtual customer cultures and societies. In addition, compared with traditional ethnography methods, netnography is more straightforward and takes a shorter period of time to complete (Kozinets, 2002).

Unlike traditional ethnography, netnography can be conducted completely unobtrusively if so desired. As with the conventional ethnography, netnography is a form of naturalistic research that captures people and groups as they perform their standard activities in their natural

environments (Sandlin, 2007). Moreover, since netnography can be both unobtrusive and naturalistic, it provides continuous access to consumers' behaviours and perceptions in specific social conditions online (Kozinets, 2002).

By acting as passive or full observers, the purpose of this study was to obtain rich texts by observing only and not participating in discussions (Bertilsson, 2015; Kozinets, 2002). Moreover, since this research method is ideally suited for collecting text-based discussions and communications (Kozinets, 2002; Sandlin, 2007), it was used to analyse and collect empirical data from online consumer debates and discussions.

The netnography was conducted on the platform named Reddit. The title is a pun for "I read it." Reddit is one of those Web sites for which it is difficult to assign a specific category, however it is essentially a forum-like site. Reddit or reddit.com is user-generated and, as it were, collectively creates a news and discussion website consisting of freely accessible thematic or demographic discussion communities known as "subreddits." According to Wise (2023), in April 2023, it had over 1.5 billion registered users, out of which 430 million were active monthly and another 52 million used the platform on a daily basis. As opposed to conventional social media platforms, Reddit employs the model of a forum, meaning that while it satisfies some criteria of social media platforms, it is still distinct from them (Wise, 2023). Part of Reddit's uniqueness comes from its anonymity, which brings both advantages as well as disadvantages. Anonymity can encourage users to share honest opinions and experiences without fear of social stigma or repercussions. Moreover, it attracts people who like to participate in the conversations to refute their most extreme comments. However, at the same time anonymity limits us because it is almost impossible to identify the identities and credibility of the respondents since they can stay anonymous or use false names. This makes it difficult to figure out the demographics of the people they are studying. Nevertheless, is this a convenient platform as users engage in extreme discussions while simultaneously being accessible to the mainstream.

Despite the lack of information about who is submitting comments, it is likely that most of them come from the United States. Data shows that in the six months up to May 2022, 47.13 percent of visits to Reddit.com were from American users while 7.48 percent were from people in the United Kingdom (Bianchi, 2023). Moreover, the usage of Reddit in the United States is more widespread among younger online audiences. In a survey conducted in February 2021, 36 percent of internet users aged 18 to 29 and 22 percent of those aged 30 to 49 reported using Reddit. The platform's reach sharply diminishes with age. Furthermore, about 23 percent of male adults in the U.S. access Reddit while only 12 percent of women do the same.

In order to obtain the data required, we have chosen to conduct a netnographic study among two posts on Reddit. Both posts discuss two different brands, namely Skittles and Walmart, that have modified their packaging to communicate their stand on a particular social or political

issue. Below the discussion follows of how we selected the empirical cases and subsequently some context is provided regarding these cases.

### 4.3 Empirical cases

For the purpose of this study we have selected two empirical cases on the use of brand activism on packaging by brands. We started by classifying the cases based on the social issues the brands take a stand. Subsequently, we looked at the number of discussions and number of corresponding comments, to ensure that enough empirical data was available. In the end we selected the following two cases as it provided us with the desired variation and amount of empirical evidence. Below we provide you with the necessary context to understand the analysis and discussion of the consumer's perceptions of the brand activist packaging.

#### 4.3.1 Walmart's Juneteenth ice cream

Our first case is Walmart's introduction of a 'Celebration Edition' Ice Cream for Juneteenth under its private label Great Value. Walmart's new ice cream was flavoured 'Swirled Red Velvet and Cheesecake', and was introduced at the end of May in 2022. As it says on the packaging, the purpose is to 'share and celebrate African American culture, emancipation and enduring hope.'. Juneteenth, became a federal holiday in 2021, and is celebrated on June 19th to commemorate the end of slavery in the United States (Karni & Broadwater, 2021). Almost immediately after its launch, it became a hot topic of discussion online, as people were outraged about the various different aspects of the product (Valinsky, 2022). Roughly a week after its launch, Walmart decided to discontinue the product on May 24th and issued the following statement 'Juneteenth holiday marks a celebration of freedom and independence. However, we received feedback that a few items caused concern for some of our customers and we sincerely apologise. We are reviewing our assortment and will remove items as appropriate' (Oladipo, 2022).



Figure 2 (adapted from Maryland Today 2022) presents Walmart's Juneteenth 'Celebration Edition' ice cream.

### 4.3.2 Skittles' pride edition

In 2017, Skittles for the first time ditched its rainbow theme by introducing a limited edition, all-white version of the candy for the German and UK market. According to Skittles, during pride, only one rainbow matters and therefore to show their support to the LGBTQ+ community, Skittles gave up their rainbow so that Pride's rainbow can be at the centre of attention. Over the years Skittles expanded their pride edition to other markets all over the West and experimented with different designs. We focused on several variations of Skittles' pride packaging during our analysis of consumer perceptions. To provide readers with a visual representation of the discussed packaging design, three of these variations are showcased in Figure 3. Furthermore, it may be interesting to note that in 2020, Skittles changed their white design to grey, as they received backlash from consumers with allegations that they would promote white supremacy. Furthermore, it is worth noting that Skittles' campaign goes further than their limited edition product, as they donate \$1 per product sold to a good cause, up to the limit of \$100,000 (Ebrahimji, 2020).



Figure 3: (Adapted from Towleroad 2017, Creative Review 2019 & Totally the Bomb n.d.) presents examples of the pride Skittles packaging this paper discusses.

## 4.4 Data analysis

According to Kozinets (2002), there are two initial steps for the preparation of conducting a netnography. Firstly, a researcher must define a specific marketing research question, and identify the appropriate online forums in the search for the answer. Secondly, a researcher should attempt to learn as much as possible about the online forums, the groups, and the individuals that are being studied to create a better understanding. As we previously discussed, we opted for Reddit as the forum is the largest in terms of users in its category of discussion forums.

This netnography into consumer's perception of brand activism on packaging began by identifying interesting empirical cases of brands that employed this. We decided to focus on

the following two instances: the introduction and subsequent abolition of Walmart's Juneteenth ice cream flavor, and the introduction of Mars Incorporated's pride branded skittles. By searching for "Walmart Juneteenth" and "Skittles Pride", we found multiple discussion threads with more than five hundred comments. We could gain quite a lot of information by examining the subreddit where the queries were posted; some of these subreddits include r/conservative, r/blackradicaltradition, r/lgbtq, and r/conspiracy. Individuals are able to follow a certain subreddit and will subsequently receive those discussions on their feed. We analysed nearly 30 postings with collectively over 4000 comments.

Kozinets (2002) says that two most important elements to netnography are firstly the unaltered data that researchers directly copy from the online community, and secondly the data that researchers inscribe with meaning through their observations of the community and the interaction between its members. Thompson et al., (1994) noted that a person's understanding of the world reflects broader cultural viewpoints that are adapted to the unique contexts of one's life experiences and implicitly conveyed through language. Similarly a researcher's interpretation of language is also subject to cultural viewpoints and preconceptions. To develop a holistic understanding of the language used in the reddit community and consumers' interpretation of brand activism on packaging, we adopt an hermeneutic approach. This approach should be understood as a constant and circular process of reading, reflective writing and interpretation. In the process, a part of the data is interpreted and later on reinterpreted in relation to the developing understanding of the 'whole'. By applying a part-to-whole reading of the data, we create a holistic understanding of the material, as we cannot understand an individual part without understanding the whole, and similarly we cannot understand the whole without understanding the individual parts (Lavery, 2003; Kozinets, 2002; Thompson et al., 1994; Bertilsson, 2015; Thompson, 1997).

## 4.5 Ethical considerations

According to Kozinets (2002) there are two ethical concerns with netnography, firstly, are online forums to be regarded as public or private websites. And secondly, how should researchers go about the principle of informed consent. As we discussed earlier, Reddit has 52 million active daily users, and discussions are accessible for everyone as it is not required to log in or have a membership to get access to the communities and the coherent discussions. Because of those 2 facts, we regard Reddit as a public space. We did change the nicknames of the members of the online community to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality. Furthermore, we consider the subjects that were discussed to be non-sensitive. Sudweeks & Rafaeli (1995) stated that informed consent was implicit in the act of posting a comment in a public space, such as Reddit. Additionally, Mann & Stewart (2000) note that obtaining the informed consent from the online users can in itself be complicated. Therefore, we did not



obtain informed consent from the members of the online communities, but we did anonymize their names to ensure confidentiality.

## 4.6 Methodological limitations

There are several limitations to our research and the chosen methods that will be discussed in this section. Firstly, according to Kozinets (2002), the research quality highly depends on the researcher's interpretive skills, especially in an online environment where little is known about the research subjects. Therefore, transparency in the data collection and analysis process is essential in order to ensure reliability. To ensure transparency in the data collection, we disclosed the data collection method, the empirical cases chosen, the online discussion forum chosen, and the unmodified but anonymized data by directly quoting users' responses, which is consistent with Kozinets's (2002) approach. However, anonymity can lead to reliability and validity problems: the anonymity of consumers who are on reddit limits us in providing a consumer profile; in other words, it makes it difficult to provide demographic data.

Furthermore, in the data analysis process, we have followed Thompson's (1994) hermeneutic approach to ensure an holistic understanding of the data. Secondly, according to Kozinets (2002) results from the sample of online communities may hold limited generalizability towards the broader group of consumers. Additionally the generalizability is further weakened as our research only focuses on two brands, with one of which only American consumers are familiar with. In doing so, our research also addresses only two of the multiple current socio-political issues that brands are advocating. Other than generalizability, the validity of our chosen methodology should also be discussed. According to Easterby-Smith et al., (2018) validity is increased if enough perspectives are included. Given that people, as in reality, have diverse opinions and views when talking about a subject, we have put together a wide range of comments to make sure that many different online groups are represented. We believe that this wide range of consumer perspectives provides us with a certain degree of generalizability (Easterby-smith et al., 2018). Despite analysing a number of Reddit posts related to each topic, the impact of moderators cannot be ignored; as moderators are responsible for upholding rules and regulations which can shape conversations and interactions within the subreddit. This could lead to biased data results as moderators may manipulate user discussions and behaviour.

## 5. Empirical data

In this chapter, we present empirical data collected through netnography. The empirical data were collected by collecting consumer responses on Reddit in discussions about packaging about which a particular socio political point of view is communicated. The collected empirical data presented in this chapter resulted from a diverse set of consumer meanings about the two chosen discussions on Reddit about brand activist packaging, namely: Walmart's Juneteenth ice cream packaging and the grey Skittles packaging in honour of pride month. Three main themes have emerged.

### 5.1 Brand activism and its tangible role

Consumers' textual interactions regarding aspects of packaging were found to be largely based on an understanding of non-product attributes (Keller, 1993). Of the selected responses in the forum, the following all have something in common, namely, that consumers intentionally use or, conversely, refuse to use the brand activism on packaging. We can see that the operation of these non-product attributes have symbolic value and that through its symbolism it contributes to consumers' lives in various ways (Aaker, 1997).

The forum provides an insightful glimpse into the role brand activism plays within the context of packaging, serving as a symbolic characteristic. An intriguing observation arises from the manner in which consumers engage with this aspect of brand activism. Underwood (2003) contends that the tangible nature of packaging makes it a more enduring marketing strategy than other ephemeral techniques, such as advertising. Consequently, consumers frequently interact with it, especially within their homes. The symbolic aspect of packaging (in this sense brand activism) is now being "used" by consumers. From comments it is interpreted that consumers use or, on the other hand, refuse to use the symbolic aspect (brand activism) of packaging. We employ the term "using" due to the fact that we observe consumers utilising brand activism on product packaging for various objectives. We realise this is distinct from a regular advertisement with brand activism. While this may sound confusing, it is about consumer engagement with brand activism on packaging. Consumers are now able to practically use or decline to use the brand activism on the wrapping, something that would not take place if this were a normal brand activism ad on a billboard.

As Underwood (2003) argues, packaging can provide symbolic benefits through mediated experiences, as visual, structural and informational components on packaging can have social or cultural implications. This was clear from the above points. But it is through consumers'

lived experience and use of product packaging that we understand how packaging can provide unique benefits in terms of functionality, aesthetics and symbolism (Underwood, 2003). The functional utility of packaging influences this lived experience (Underwood, 2003), as shown in forum comments in which consumers see brand activism on packaging as a functional element. Take the example of forum member "Pasta\_gurl":

#### **Pasta\_gurl**

*"While I was on vacation this summer, I found some pride skittles and bought some. I cut the package up like some weird art project and pinned it my wall lmao-"*

"Pasta\_gurl's" interaction with the packaging clearly demonstrates the extended functionality of brand activism on packaging. This user has transformed the brand activism on the packaging into a physical piece of art. Brand activism, because it is on packaging, has found its way to becoming more tangible. There is something about the way consumers engage with the brand's activistic packaging, something different. Because it would not have been possible for consumers to make an art project out of it if the brand activism had just been a billboard or online ad. But now that brand activism is used on packaging, consumers interact differently with brand activism. Given that being said, let's have a look at the other comments to glean how brand activism has gained a more tangible role through packaging and how it has emerged into different usages.

#### 5.1.1 The construct of one's self

What became observable from certain comments was that brand activism was (not) used on packaging as a means of constructing the concept of self or self-identity.

#### **Showerwithclotheson\_1**

*"My girlfriend gave me these to celebrate pride month with me (I am lesbian) , I would buy them myself, they are dope!"*

This is explicitly expressed by member "Showerwithclotheson\_1". In her posting, "Showerwithclotheson\_1" literally describes that she is lesbian and this was bought for her because she is lesbian and together with her partner celebrates pride month with this. So she uses the symbolic aspect (brand activism) of the packaging, as it were, to not only celebrate pride, but it also reflects who she is. In particular, the commenter points out that she would therefore buy it herself for that reason. The tangibility of the packaging allows these people to express that pride is celebrating, thanks to the brand activism on it. Had that same brand activism been displayed on a billboard, there is no way they would have been able to use it and express themselves in the same way. A similar but opposite way of utilisation can be inferred from the comment of "Icounthands."

#### **Icounthands**

*“I would go to the store to buy this but i cannot for multiple reasons:*

*Covid*

*The closet”*

An interesting comment was found that contrasts with how the member "Showerwithclotheson\_1" uses the packaging. The member "Icounthands" intentionally refuses to use the brand activism on the packaging. The opinion expressed by "Icounthands" implies that this person would like to purchase the product in question, but is unable to do so since they are still in the closet. This suggests that this person belongs to the LGBTQ+ community and identifies itself with this product. Thus, this comment appears to convey that while this person- even if this person wants to- cannot physically use or possess this product because of personal reasons, it has a symbolic meaning for him which is part of his identity. This reasoning around using products for self-concept mirrors Sirgy's (1982) definition, which says that if a company helps in maintaining or enhancing its customers' self-concept then those consumers will most likely purchase that company's products. Belk (1988) defines this as the concept of the extended self and argues that material objects play a crucial role in constructing and expressing one's self-identity. However, this differs to the extent that these comments specifically point to consumers' use of brand activism on packaging in relation to self-identity. We can make a similar observation if we look into the comment of the member "True\_tea\_6713".

#### **True\_tea\_6713**

*“As a mom of a gay child- she may be dropping hints to you that you can come out to her. I dropped heavy hints to my kid before I finally got sick of the hints as just asked him is is gay or bisexual. 🙄 (to be clear this may not be safe for everyone- my son and I are close)”*

This mom talks about how you can use the brand activism on the packaging as hints to show who you actually are. While self-identity focuses on how one perceives oneself and one's personal attitudes, Reed (2002) explores the notion of social identity theory which is based on how people form relationships with companies and brands based on their membership in various social groups. Individuals tend to seek out brands and companies that reflect their self-identity within a social context (Reed, 2002). Going back to the comment of "Icounthands" we see that using the brand activism of packaging, also plays a role in the social context. The individual is passionate about purchasing this item as it relates to their self-image. However, "Icounthands" understands that the packaging can be used as a strong tool to express and share one's personal identity with others. As this person is still in the closet, meaning they are not open about their sexuality even to those closest to them, "Icounthands" is hesitant to buy this package as it may cause them to reveal their sexuality externally. Nevertheless, again, we can observe that brand activism has become more visible, more tangible, due to its presence on the

packaging. It allows consumers to interact with it in a way that wouldn't be possible through another medium, let's think again of a billboard as an example. Thanks to the package, this mother was even able to take the brand activism home with her.

### 5.1.2 Raising awareness

Using the symbolic value of packaging for self-identity is not the only purpose used in a social context. In fact, it can also be used to use your power and responsibility as a consumer to create awareness around a particular socio-political issue, for example. This was interpreted from several comments.

#### **Womando44747**

*"I would totally buy this*

*Because fuck yeah we should be celebrating the end of slavery. And ice cream is wonderful"*

#### **Ibinizeriscrooge**

*"... Look, I'm a middle class white guy 150+ years removed from the event. Juneteenth has ZERO significance for me. I barely even knew it was a thing until a few years ago. It's an important part of our history and it's sad that it isn't more significant. Each year I have no reason to really even think about it, but then as I'm walking through Walmart looking for party plates for my son's birthday I see the Juneteenth stuff.. I see the red velvet cake Juneteenth ice cream...*

*And I think about it.*

*Better yet, my son sees it and asks, "Dad, what's Juneteenth?"*

We see that member "Womando44747" would buy this product and use the brand activism on the packaging to celebrate the end of slavery. This person wants to take responsibility and use (buying) power as a consumer to advocate against slavery. Likewise, we may also examine user "Ibinizeriscrooge's" comment from this perspective. "Ibinizeriscrooge" indicates that he finds the celebration of Juneteenth very important, although it has no meaning for him personally. His comment shows that he feels it is unfortunate that there is little awareness of this issue. He indicates that the products with the symbolic elements that reflect Juneteenth raise awareness for the issue. If these products did not exist, his son probably would not have known what Juneteenth was.

This practice reflects a strong connection between Davis' (1960) emphasis on the benefits of enlightened self-interest; arguing that corporations that embrace social responsibilities can improve the public image. Only here it is not corporations, but consumers who embrace social responsibilities. Frimer et al. (2011) argue that enlightened self-interest underlies virtuous behaviour, in which the best way to advance one's own interests is to advance the interests of others, and vice versa. However, we cannot conclude from the comments that they want

something in return. On the other hand, we do interpret from these comments that these individuals use their buying power (Schwalb et al., 2022) and thus use brand activism to create awareness. It is as if they feel a sense of responsibility to deploy their buying power and work hard to engage in political processes in a responsible manner. This is in line with Detomasi's (2008) theory on the concept of CSR, only the difference is that he says it is companies that have a responsibility to engage in political processes. Nike is a brand that also advocates for different issues and uses brand activism in its marketing, which can be seen on social media ads and billboards (Donaldson, 2022). The difference is that consumers can buy Nike items without being able to see from the product that the company actively supports certain causes. Only people with a strong interest in the issue and who are familiar with Nike's activism can make this connection, but it will not be obvious at first glance. As a result, customers cannot use Nike's brand activism as a way to raise awareness, something that is possible when brand activism is used on packaging.

### 5.1.3 An open debate

Finally, we see that the symbolic elements, brand activism, of packaging can be used by individuals as a means of communication to express their opinions. It is almost like an open debate to express one's opinion on socio-political issues.

#### **Womando44747**

*"I would totally buy this*

*Because fuck yeah we should be celebrating the end of slavery. And ice ceam is wonderful"*

#### **Ibinizeriscrooge**

*".... Look, I'm a middle class white guy 150+ years removed from the event. Juneteenth has ZERO significance for me. I barely even knew it was a thing until a few years ago. It's an important part of our history and it's sad that it isn't more significant. Each year I have no reason to really even think about it, but then as I'm walking through Walmart looking for party plates for my son's birthday I see the Juneteenth stuff.. I see the red velvet cake Juneteenth ice cream..."*

*And I think about it.*

*Better yet, my son sees it and asks, "Dad, what's Juneteenth?"*

Looking again at the comments of "Womando44747" and "Ibinizeriscrooge", we see that they both have an opinion about Juneteenth. "Womando44747" thinks that we should celebrate the end of slavery and "Ibinizeriscrooge" thinks that there should be more attention around Juneteenth and that the products play a helping role in it. They utilize brand activism on packaging to express one's opinion. Moorman (2020) says brands can express their opinion on a variety of topics, such as climate change, transgender rights, racial justice, minimum wage

issues and gun control. Here again, the difference is that it is not the companies but the consumers who then use the symbolic aspects of packaging to express themselves on socio political topics. Consumers using brand activism on packaging in this way become increasingly involved in commodified conflicts in an increasingly unpolitical, de-dialectical and polarizing way (Ulver, 2022). However, on the other hand, we see that using brand activism on packaging to express one's opinion carries risks because you are communicating your point of view (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Thus, we see that people actually refuse to use the brand activism on the packaging express because they do not want to express their opinion or communicate something they do not support. This is especially evident from the member's "BonniBetail" comment.

### **BonniBetail**

*“Swirled red velvet and cheesecake. I was mad because the flavor sounded good lol, but didn't want to be caught buying it 😂”*

This person clearly wants to buy the product because of the product-related attributes (Keller, 1993) but the non-product related attributes, or in other words the brand activism of the packaging holds this person back. This person does not want to be spotted with the product because of the brand activism on the packaging. We interpret this to mean that this person does not want to openly participate in the conversation about Juneteenth. To compare this again with how brand activism is communicated by way of other mediums, billboards or social media, for example, it again becomes clear that the tangibility of packaging allows for open discussion and allows consumers to communicate their opinions on brand activism issues.

## **5.2 Consumer scepticism towards brand activism on packaging**

We found both scepticism and devotion among consumers towards the chosen examples of Skittles & Walmart and the introduction of brand activism on packaging. Those comments reveal a novel tension that is unique to packaging as a medium for brand activism. Furthermore, we also discuss the more commonly discussed tension in consumer's perception of brand activism, between authenticity and opportunism.

### **5.2.1 Opportunism in packaging as a medium for brand activism**

#### **Arab\_Bear:**

*“Target partnered with black artists to create packaging and flavors that are meaningful to the black community. Walmart put a label on an existing flavor.”*

#### **Brocoliboy:**

*“Don't fell into cheap marketing tricks, pride is for the people, not for the companies.”*

**Burnttabacco:**

*“It's some packaging and a swirled red velvet and cheesecake flavor to celebrate Juneteenth.”*

**Toyotalover1:**

*“So why did they release the product? Ofc it wasn't the end all be all of racial inequality, it was a cheap attempt at solidarity when in truth nothing is really being done.”*

From the comments above we sense scepticism from consumers towards two divergent elements that are intertwined in our chosen examples, namely a form of scepticism towards the brand's motivations for taking a stand on a social issue and a form of scepticism of the brand taking a stand on a social issue through packaging specifically. Member “Arab\_Bear” criticises Walmart for simply putting a label on an existing flavour, and thinks they put in little effort compared with Target, one of Walmart's biggest competitors. In reality Walmart did come up with a new flavour for this celebration edition, however this may not be obvious to those who are not familiar with Walmart's regular ice cream offering, as they do not explicitly mention this.

“Brocoliboy” clearly thinks that skittles adopted a “cheap marketing trick”, “Toyotalover1” also perceives it as a “cheap attempt”. Furthermore, “Burnttabacco” describes Walmart's action as “some packaging and a flavor”. We observe in all these responses a reflection of consumer sentiment that packaging is a cheap and commercial medium for brands to take a stand on social issues. According to Wallace (2001) packaging design in consumer products is believed to be the most sales-effective and cost-efficient marketing tool out there. The cost of redesigning the packaging is only a small fraction of the production cost of a 30-second commercial. Additionally, a large sum of money is spent on paid advertising in order to reach the consumer with such a commercial. Meanwhile, the new packaging design is distributed through the existing network of retailers and will naturally reach the consumer (Wallace, 2001).

In brand activism, advertising is a more prevalent and expensive medium, as opposed to the less costly use of packaging as a medium for brand activism. However, the comments above radiate that consumers are critical of brands' use of packaging to spread activist brand messages because they may suspect cost-saving motives. A study by Mirzaei et al., (2022) found that if firms make financial sacrifices in their support for social causes, this may positively impact the consumer's perception of authenticity. Financial sacrifices can be made in the form of giving up profits, or investing in solutions for the social issue. By choosing packaging instead of advertising to take a stand on social issues, brands save costs and therefore deliver less financial sacrifices (Mirzaei et al., 2022). We see several consumers criticising brands for using this “cheap” medium. In doing so, we conversely found evidence that it can negatively affect perceptions of authenticity when brands try to cut costs on brand activism campaigns. This ‘cheap’ aspect of packaging further upsets “Toyotalover1”, who is already skeptical of



Walmart's motive for taking on a stand, as he says that in reality nothing is really being done about racial inequality by Walmart. "Brocoliboy" voices a similar opinion but goes even further to say that pride is not for companies. These comments illustrate the second and more mainstream form of criticism which is directed towards the use of brand activism in general. As is the case with brand activism through advertising, it is important that consumers think that the brand's intentions are genuine, authentic and credible. If a brand's actions are seen as opportunistic, commercial or inauthentic, this may damage the brand's reputation and lead to consumer boycotts (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022). "Obese\_giraf" calls for people to stop buying brand-activistic products, as the corporations behind do not genuinely care about the social issue as he describes their actions as pandering. Vredenburg et al. (2020) emphasises that brands should align their purpose, values and actions with their activistic message, and that insincere activism damages the brand.

**Obese\_giraf:**

*"All the corporations do the same thing for gay pride month. I blame the people that buy into the pandering who I believe are rarely the target demographic being pandered too.*

*Wish people would stop buying their products until they spend at least as much money fixing problems plaguing communities as they do developing 'pretty labels'.*

*They're just 'raising awareness.' Like no, the entire fucking world is very much aware of lgbtq+ (perhaps not so much Juneteenth, but I'd wager a majority of America is). If you want to really support them and not just their money, then do that."*

Meanwhile, in the literature on brand activism, Davis (1960) argues that companies cannot afford to ignore their social responsibilities. And, FMCG companies do possess the means to raise awareness for social issues through packaging. However, Freeman (2015) emphasizes that companies should create value for all their stakeholders and not simply for the shareholders. Consequently, the discussion arises whether companies create enough value for consumers through Brand Activism on packaging. "Obese\_giraf" and "Ibinizeriscrooge" disagree on this matter. "Ibinizeriscrooge" says the creation of awareness for the social issue through the packaging is in itself already reason enough for the product to exist. In contrast with this, "Obese\_giraf" believes that the packaging is meaningless and should not be bought.

**Ibinizeriscrooge:**

*"... I'm walking through Walmart looking for party plates for my son's birthday I see the Juneteenth stuff.. I see the red velvet cake Juneteenth ice cream..."*

*And I think about it.*

*Better yet, my son sees it and asks, "Dad, what's Juneteenth?"*

### 5.2.2 Authenticity of brand activism and packaging as a medium for brand activism

Holt (2002) states that in the post-postmodern paradigm, brands can no longer afford to rely on the cultural work of others and will be judged by consumers based on their own contribution as a cultural resource itself. Consequently, consumers look for creative, original, and relevant cultural products to build their identities. As such, brands that inspire, provoke, stimulate and help consumers in making sense of the world around them will be rewarded in this post-postmodern paradigm. Furthermore, consumers will get rid of brands that provide cultural materials if they do not trust the brand and their intentions. "Snowpow" speaks in favour of the power of consumers and illustrates how consumers can more easily voice their distrust towards Walmart's intentions through their purchasing decisions. If, in fact, Walmart simply put a new packaging or label on an already existing product that includes activist messaging, the brand will be able to precisely measure the effectiveness of this marketing technique. If the brand truly does not care enough about the social cause it supports through the adaptation of its packaging, it will not be willing to make financial sacrifices. However, when enough consumers find the brands' activist message sincere and the packaging's symbolic meaning worthy, then the brand will be rewarded through an increase in sales.

#### **Snowpow:**

*"Something to keep in mind when talking about corporations capitalizing on holidays...if people didn't buy (insert holiday) stuff companies wouldn't sell it. If you dislike the idea of Walmart making money off a holiday, don't buy the stuff. If enough people join together and make it unprofitable it will stop."*

It is important to remember that not all consumers find the use of brand activist packaging disturbing and that many of them see value in it. Packaging as a medium for brand activism does not only receive criticism because of its cheap nature that makes it seem inauthentic, we also see that it receives praise for its novelty, creativity, and innovativeness, as we will discuss now. The comments from "Cookiemonster", "Little\_Nissan", and "PaymentBomb" makes us believe that they like that Walmart & Skittles did something unconventional with brand activism rather than following the trend. The novel approach to packaging design may not only help brands to differentiate their product in the supermarket shelves (Silayoi & Speece, 2004). It may also make the campaign seem more authentic as consumers value the effort the brands went through to come up with an original and creative take on brand activism. This is in line with previous work on the perceived authenticity of brands in the eyes of consumers that stated that creativity, rarity, and or originality all positively contribute towards brand authenticity (Bruhn et al., 2012; Moulard et al., 2016). Furthermore, Celhay et al., (2020) found that

authenticity, and originality are closely related in consumer's perception of neo-retro packaging design.

**Cookiemonster:**

*"This is new, I dig it"*

**Little\_Nissan:**

*"I think Skittles were one of the first companies to do this kinda thing, so I respect them for it. Other types of Rainbow capitalism however, that's another story"*

**PaymentBomb:**

*"Honestly, that's nice, I thought the way they interpreted pride into their product was probably the nicest way I've seen any company show support".*

Additionally, the use of certain craft techniques in the styles of illustration on the packaging design also contributes to consumer's perception of brand authenticity (Celhay et al., 2020; Mugge et al., 2015). We observe a similar phenomenon, where consumers value the creative use of art in our cases of brand activist packaging design. The comments from "Arab\_Bear" and "Fairyfirefighter" teach us two things. Firstly, consumers see the use of art on packaging as creative and unique and because of this, consumers find the brand's new packaging design more authentic (Bruhn et al., 2012; Moulard et al., 2016). Secondly, the consumer finds it positive that the brand provides a platform to artists from the community that stands in relation to the social cause, this also leads to an increased perception of authenticity as this puts deed to the brand's word of supporting the community.

**Arab\_Bear:**

*"Target partnered with black artists to create packaging and flavors that are meaningful to the black community. Walmart put a label on an existing flavor."*

**Fairyfirefighter:**

*"It's grey skittles month, and I really love what they are doing this year to celebrate Pride. Having art drawn by LGBTQ+ artists on the packaging is a really lovely touch."*

As we analyzed different consumer's perception of the two chosen examples of brand activism on packaging we noticed that there is a tension in the perceived authenticity of the brand's adoption of this new marketing tool. Firstly, some consumers find packaging a cheap medium for brand activism in comparison with advertisement, and as a result the consumer perceives the action to be less authentic. At the same time, brand activism on packaging is a unique and creative approach to take a stand on a social issue. Consumers not only like it for its creativity but also because of its tangibility. These elements contribute positively to the perceived authenticity of packaging as a medium for brand activism. This tension we observed in perceived authenticity concerns the use of packaging as a medium for brand activism and

further adds to the tension in perceived authenticity that occurs with the use of brand activism through other marketing tools.

### 5.3 The conflict between informative and symbolic elements

Packaging. It is pivotal for FMCGs as it is both an element of the product as well as the primary source of information for consumers (Underwood, 2003; Kniazeva & Belk, 2007; Lydekaityte & Tambo, 2020). It was previously discussed how packaging's non-product elements have symbolic worth and serve to enrich people's lives in a variety of ways (Aaker, 1997). We observed how the symbolic part of packaging, the non-product features (Underwood, 2003) or brand activism as we like to call it, can now be "used" by consumers thanks to the tangibility of packaging. Vredenburg (2020) points out that taking a public stance on certain topics does not always bring beneficial outcomes; in fact, some argue that doing so is more contentious and hazardous than ever. If packaging serves as an important information source for consumers, what are the implications of brand activism in this regard?

The remarks from consumers at the forum demonstrate how certain components, such as the informational elements (Silayoi & Speece, 2004), that are part of packaging are influenced by brand activism. We can infer from these comments that there is much confusion among customers, which in turn impacts their process for making decisions.

#### 5.3.1 Lack of information

What was interpreted from just about all selected comments for this section was that brand activism on packaging generates a sense of confusion. This is evident from the comments of users "Deleted", "Xelemsexual", "JealReil240", "f\_ckdoiknow" and "JJJOJO".

**Deleted**

*"How does it taste?"*

**Xelemsexual**

*"They all taste the same or what?"*

**JealReil240**

*"What does grey taste like? Newspaper?"*

**f\_ckdoiknow**

*"Was wondering what the color of the ice cream was?"*

**JJJOJO**

*"Curious what the flavor would be, though?"*

What these comments all have in common is that they all point to the fact that they question some of the product's characteristics such as flavour, taste, or colour. Users "Deleted," "f\_ckdoiknow" and "JJJOJO" all three literally state that they wonder about the taste of the product. This is the case for both products in question, with "Deleted" and "JJJOJO" asking what flavor the Skittles are, and "f\_ckdoiknow" asking what colour the ice cream is. These comments indicate that consumers are looking for the informational elements on the packaging (Silayoi & Speece, 2004) but cannot find them due to the brand activism on the packaging. The brand activism on the packaging confuses more consumers than it helps consumers in making choices.

We can also notice confusion among users "Xelexsexual" and "JealReil240". Both users indicate that because of the brand activism on the packaging they already have a certain association with the taste. User "Xelexsexual" thinks because of the brand activism on the packaging that all Skittles taste the same since they are all depicted identically. As a result of the brand activism on the packaging, "JealReil240" thinks the Skittles taste like a newspaper. Like the users discussed above, these users are looking for informational elements on the packaging, but now seem to use the brand activism on the packaging as an informational element. Also, this information consumers take in seems to be reinforced by the sensory properties that help consumers categorise the product or form inferences based on the extrinsic characteristics of the product (Lancelot Miltgen et al., 2015).

On the one hand, it seems that brand activism on packaging causes the informational elements to be less visible. On the other hand, brand activism also seems to cause consumers to use precisely the brand activism on the packaging as informational elements. The activist message, or the brand activism, on the packaging now tells them something about the product. Ahmed et al. (2005), already showed this before and argued that consumers nowadays do not differentiate between package and product. Whether it is one or the other, it is clear that the decision-making process is influenced by the brand activism on the packaging. Using the classical theories around consumer decision-making, the second step in the process is information seeking (Mohammadi & Mohamed, 2010; Santos & Gonçalves, 2021). This step is clearly influenced by brand activism on packaging and are even limited in making choices by their lack of information (Simon, 1995). Thus, the brand activism on the packaging attracts consumers, but therefore they do not read the informative elements of the packaging or consumers use the brand activism instead of the informative elements to tell themselves something about the product.

### 5.3.2 Misinterpretation and a different outcome

As argued above, consumers may use brand activism on packaging to inform themselves about the product. What we also noticed from the comments was that brand activism on packaging not only leads to confusion, in fact, it goes further, it may also lead to misinterpretations.

**Jaythekay\_1**

*"I cringed hard for a second at first because I thought it said chocolate"*

**JealReil240**

*"What does grey taste like? Newspaper?"*

**Hulapoloma110**

*"I'm sort of outraged that this isn't chocolate ice cream"*

**Xelemsexual**

*"They all taste the same or what?"*

This was evident from the comments of users "Jaythekay", "JealReil240", "Hulapoloma110" and "Xelemsexual". Something all the comments tend to have in common is that they all indicate that they think the product has a certain flavour than what the actual flavour of the product is. For example, users "JealReil240" and "Xelemsexual" both say something about the taste of the Skittles due to the brand activism. "JealReil240" thinks the Skittles taste like a newspaper and "Xelemsexual" thinks all Skittles taste the same because of the packaging. Looking at the comments of "Jaythekay\_1" and "Hulapoloma110", we can observe that both users think the ice cream has chocolate flavour instead of red velvet cheesecake, the actual flavour of the product. As mentioned earlier, consumers do not differentiate between package and product (Ahmed et al., 2005). The halo effect of packaging can also influence sensory appeal, as consumers believe that eco-labeled products taste better (Sörqvist et al., 2015). This shows that packaging has another important underlying aspect, symbolic meaning. The observations demonstrate how brand activism on packaging creates a kind of cognitive bias for consumers that causes them to make snap judgments. This is in line with what previous researchers refer to as the halo effect (Berry & Romero, 2021; Sörqvist et al., 2015; Wansink & Chandon, 2006). This causes consumers to "over-rely" on one element, in this case brand activism, that they see from the packaging. Thus, we could argue that this subsequently leads to misinterpretation.

**Hulapoloma110**

*"I'm sort of outraged that this isn't chocolate ice cream"*

Thus, if misinterpretation occurs in the decision-making process, but the consumer buys the product anyway, the outcome for the consumer may be different. Erasmus et al. (2001) argued that in the last step of the decision-making process, the post-purchase step, an outcome of either satisfaction or dissatisfaction occurs. Upon further examination of "Hulapoloma110's" comment, it can be deduced that the customer's expectations may not align with the outcome, which could lead to either satisfaction or dissatisfaction. This particular member mentioned

that, due to the brand activism on the product packaging, they were expecting a chocolate flavour instead of red velvet and cheesecake. Therefore, this may result in disappointment for "Hulapoloma110", as they would have preferred a chocolate taste. Nevertheless, it is impossible to tell if this individual will actually be dissatisfied when tasting the actual flavour - red velvet cheesecake - as we cannot predict their reaction. Nevertheless, we may argue that the presence of brand activism on the packaging can influence a consumer's post-purchase evaluation, potentially leading to either satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Erasmus et al. 2001).

Our observation on the comments shows that the brand activism on the packaging, influences the informative elements on the packaging. This is in line with previous research that packaging serves as an informational or functional aspect (Underwood, 2003; Silayoi & Speece 2004). Packaging has a significant role in the decision-making process (Gray & Guthrie, 1990; Kalnikaitė et al., 2013; Silayoi & Speece, 2004; Steptoe et al., 1995), and our analysis demonstrates how brand activism affects the decision-making process. Additionally, we have discovered that sensory properties -in this case, taste- are important for aiding consumers in organising the product into categories and developing expectations about it, which corroborates Lancelot Miltgen et al.'s (2015) previous findings.

## 6. Discussion

Through a netnographic study of the online platform Reddit and the concept of brand activism on packaging in FMCG, the goal was to use an exploratory approach to better understand consumers' perceptions and engagement with brand activism on FMCG product packaging and in doing so, close the knowledge gap in the current literature by examining the underexplored aspects of packaging as a medium for brand activism. From the analysed data emerged three key themes that are related to brand activism and packaging: (1) brand activism and its tangible role, (2) consumer scepticism towards branding on packaging, and (3) the conflict between informative and symbolic elements.

### 6.1 Brand activism and its tangible role

The findings of our study revealed an overriding theme that highlights the importance of understanding consumers' engagement with brand activism as expressed on packaging. This central theme, focusing on the tangible impact of brand activism on packaging, reveals several crucial sub-themes: (1) the aspect of self-identity construction, (2) its function in raising public awareness, and (3) its potential to stimulate open discourse.

The self-construction aspect of brand activism on packaging was a theme that could be strongly observed from the results we obtained. The results showed that consumers appeared to use the symbolism on packaging as a reflection of their self-identity, in line with the concept of the extended self proposed by Belk (1988). Therefore, the outcomes imply that the tangibility of brand activism on packaging enabled consumers to express their identity more easily than through traditional platforms for brand activism. Whether people embraced symbolism to express themselves or consciously avoided it for personal reasons, packaging provided a unique opportunity for self-expression and identity formation.

In addition, the results strongly demonstrate that the power of brand activism on packaging helps consumers raise awareness around a particular socio-political issue. This means that, thanks to their buying power, consumers could use brand activism on packaging to advocate socio-political issues. The results showed that consumers want to take responsibility, contribute and thus create awareness. This pattern is close to Davis' (1960) concept of enlightened self-interest. In doing so, it is also close to Detomasi's (2008) theory of CSR, only there is a difference in responsibility, where Detomasi's (2008) theory focuses more on corporate responsibility, in this study we talk about the responsibility taken by consumers themselves. As such, brand activism on packaging offers consumers a tangible means of raising awareness and participating in political processes.



Finally, the results showed a third theme of how brand activism on packaging was used by consumers. The results strongly tell us that brand activism on packaging can be seen as a kind of medium or platform for open debate, allowing consumers to voice their opinions on socio-political issues. This is strongly related to the previous sub-theme emerged, only we see from the comments here that the social aspect is important. The results from our study show that consumers use brand activism on packaging to share their opinions with others. On the other hand, it also shows that consumers refuse to use brand activism on packaging as a result of not wanting to communicate certain opinions with others. This analysis demonstrates a correlation with Moormans' (2020) definition of "brand activism", albeit with a shift from companies to consumers. Packaging enabled active participation in commodified conflicts, a phenomenon highlighted by Ulver (2022). But just as Vredenburg et al. (2020) warned, such overt expression also carried risks, as evidenced by the reluctance of some consumers to buy products because of brand activism on the packaging.

The three sub themes emerged in this key theme from the results tell us something new about how consumers engage with brand activism through FMCG product packaging. Unlike conventional interactions with brand activism such as in advertisements or billboards, consumers interact with the symbolic value of packaging in several unique ways. The tactile element of packaging facilitates a more intimate connection between consumers and brand activism. This extends the marketing approach from mere passive reception to an environment of active participation. The results in this first main theme show us how brand activism on packaging is a powerful tool in marketing strategy, with its unique tangible nature providing new ways for consumers to engage in brand activism. Observed consumer interactions reinforce the importance of brand activism in packaging design, as it can contribute to consumers' lives in various ways, ranging from self-identity construction to active participation in socio-political discourses.

## 6.2 Consumer scepticism towards branding on packaging

The second main theme that emerged from our results is more focused on consumer perceptions towards brand activism on FMCG packaging, an important part of the previously stated aim of this study. The findings point to a complex web of consumer perceptions towards brand activism on packaging. The data, in the form of online comments, reveal a tug-of-war between scepticism and appreciation, authenticity and opportunism, which are worth exploring further. The results from this study reveal two sub-themes in this key theme, namely (1) opportunism and (2) authenticity.

From the analysis, results in this study show that some consumers are sceptical of brand activism on packaging. The scepticism of consumers towards the use of brand activism on

packaging is in line with the previous research. Holt (2002) states that in today's postmodern branding paradigm, the commodification of culture has brought on deep rooted conflicts in the minds of consumers. The results from our research tell us that one such inherent conflict in consumers' minds concerns the brand's motivation to contribute as a cultural resource. Although consumers benefit from the brand's contribution as a cultural resource in building their identity, for example, the results indicate that consumers are also skeptical of the brand's underlying profit motives. Do brands truly want to help consumers or do they simply want to make as much money as possible? This tension has been discussed in the existing literature on brand activism, as consumers often are sceptical towards brands that engage in social issues (Edelman, 2019). In line with previous research, we also found that brand activism on packaging may lead to behavioural resistance in the form of consumer boycotts when brands do not align their purpose, values and actions with their activist messages (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Additionally, our research extends the literature as we found that consumer's scepticism towards brand activism is further bolstered by the cheap and unsophisticated nature of packaging. Since packaging is a considerably cheaper medium for brand activism than advertising, some consumers suspect cost-saving motives. Furthermore, when brands put in little effort by merely introducing a new packaging design to an already existing product, some consumers will perceive it as an opportunistic action of pandering (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Wallace, 2001).

The findings demonstrate that certain packaging can enhance the perception of authenticity in the eyes of consumers. This is because the use of brand activism on packaging is rarely seen, so customers view it as something innovative and inspiring. In comparison to other results, this suggests a beneficial impact of packaging as a form of brand activism on consumers' perception of authenticity. As a result, the consumer perceives the brand's stance on a social issue to be more authentic as the brand had to put in effort to come up with an unique take on brand activism. These findings support previous work suggesting that creativity, rarity, and originality all positively contribute towards brand authenticity (Bruhn et al., 2012; Holt, 2002; Moulard et al., 2016). Furthermore, the results show that the use of art as visual packaging elements also further contributes towards the perception of a creative and unique design, and therefore also to perceived authenticity. These findings align with previous studies conducted by Celhay et al., (2020) and Mugge et al., (2015) who found that the use of craft techniques in visual packaging elements contribute towards the consumer's perception of brand authenticity. Companies should be aware of how customers feel about brand activism on their packaging, as some may find it inauthentic while others might appreciate its uniqueness. It is also worth noting that a customer's sense of sincerity can lead to more trust in the company, whereas opportunism has the opposite effect.

### 6.3 The conflict between informative and symbolic elements

The final theme that emerged from this study related to the unforeseen consequences that occur when brand activism is applied to FMCG packaging. Packaging holds an important informational function as consumers make decisions fast, and with little consideration for other brands (Silayoi & Speece, 2004; Dickson & Sawyer, 1990). From the analysis we can conclude that brand activism on packaging may not only confuse consumers, it may also lead to misinterpretation and potentially dissatisfaction. The results show that consumers are often confused as they are having a hard time finding out the products' flavour, taste, and colour. Although the packaging that includes brand activism still carries a textual description of the product's flavour and colour, it no longer includes a visual representation of the products' flavour and colour as with its typical packaging. As a result, not only are consumers confused, also will consumers start to treat brand activism as an informational element. This is in line with Ahmed et al., (2005) who found that consumers do not differentiate between the package and product. This over-reliance on brand activism as the primary source of information on the product is in support of the halo effect previous researchers identified (Berry & Romero, 2021; Sörqvist et al., 2015; Wansink & Chandon, 2006).

This implies, then, that brand activism is capable of obscuring the informational elements on packaging to some extent. As a result, brand activism on packaging may lead to misinterpretation when its informational function is neglected. The findings of this study indicate that consumers who have mistakenly bought a product due to misinterpretation may become dissatisfied when their expectations are not met, and they will hold the brand accountable for misinforming them. As a result, it is clear that packaging should not be solely devoted to brand activism, since it is not a "blank slate" like a billboard. Consequently, it is essential for brands to take into account the balance between providing pertinent product information and including brand activities in order to avoid misunderstandings, improve consumer comprehension, and ensure that expectations are in line with the actual product. By tackling this dilemma companies can increase customer satisfaction and fortify their connection with consumers.

## 7. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to explore how consumers perceive and engage with brand activism on FMCG packaging, a topic significantly underrepresented in current literature. By conducting a netnographic study of online discussions on Reddit, our research provides invaluable insights into the consumer psyche, revealing three core themes: the tangible role of brand activism, consumer scepticism towards branding on packaging, and the conflict between informative and symbolic elements. To answer the research question, "How do consumers perceive and engage with brand activism on FMCG product packaging?", we break the answer down into three parts considering the three divergent key-themes that emerged from this study

Looking at the first key theme from this research, our first finding highlights the tangible role of brand activism on packaging that shapes consumers' engagement. FMCG packaging as a medium of brand activism provides consumers with a physical entity that symbolises a socio-political cause, aiding their identity construction, facilitating public awareness, and promoting open discourse on societal issues. The tangibility of packaging fosters a more profound and intimate connection and bridges the gap between consumers and activism, something that cannot happen when a brand attempts to promote activism through media such as billboards or social media. This highlights how brand activism on packaging is different. The study reveals that the tangible aspect of the packaging creates more engagement and contributes to consumers' lives.

Considering the second key-theme, our study revealed that consumers' perceptions concerning brand activism on FMCG packaging varied, going from doubt and mistrust to approval and admiration. People were suspicious of the companies' intentions, perceiving the use of activism as a way to make a profit. However, creative and original brand activism on packaging was connected with genuineness and seemed to result in positive feedback from customers.

Finally, in the third key theme, the study identified an under-recognised conflict between the informational and symbolic functions of packaging. It was found that excessive brand activism on packaging can obscure product information, leading to consumer confusion, misinterpretation and ultimately dissatisfaction.

### 7.1 Managerial implications

Below, again divided by theme, we will discuss managerial implications that contribute to the marketing and branding field and consumer research.

1. Leverage the unique ways consumers use brand activism through packaging:

The study highlights that packaging is used by consumers to express their self-identity, raise awareness about socio-political issues, and to stimulate discussion on socio-political issues. By giving customers the power to influence through their purchases, businesses can increase recognition and include them in social and political debates. Additionally, marketers can offer consumers a way to engage with the brand's messaging by including interactive elements or characteristics that invite people to interact with the packaging. This allows shoppers to become an active part of the company's efforts at promoting causes, helping build a sense of community and fostering stronger connections between company and customer which leads to long-term commitment.

2. Understand the potential risks that come with brand activism:

While brand activism on packaging offers unique opportunities, it also comes with some challenges. This study found that some consumers may reject or avoid products that include overt brand activism on packaging. Marketers should be aware that taking a stand on certain socio-political issues may lead to the alienation of certain consumer segments of the target market. Furthermore, we advise brands to collaborate with stakeholders, experts, and organisations involved in the socio-political issue to gain the necessary insights to design a well-informed, impactful and meaningful brand activism campaign.

3. Tackle any tension in perceived authenticity:

Recognize that there is a tension among consumers regarding the authenticity of brand activism on packaging. Some see it as cheap, while others appreciate its novelty and creativity. Brands should take into account what customers think of their packaging and strive to diminish the notion that it is a low-priced way to be socially conscious. This could be done by giving money to a charity that is devoted to addressing the relevant problem. For example, tying the contribution to each item sold, like contributing a particular sum for each package sold, can make consumers recognize how much of an effect they are making and may motivate them to buy more.

4. Innovate packaging by leveraging its tangible component:

As brand activism on packaging becomes more mainstream, brands must continuously innovate to keep it perceived as novel and creative. Explore ways to create symbolic value for consumers by leveraging cultural resources from the art, music, and film industries by using cultural texts, icons, design, and imagery on packaging to elevate the new packaging design. Additionally, thanks to the tangible component of packaging, brands can turn packaging into a cultural product itself. There is an opportunity to design packaging with an extended purpose that provides value even after consumption. Consumers could take packaging that

promotes LGBTQ+ rights and transform it into a pride flag to be used at pride parades. This encourages and motivates the customer to reuse the product packaging in order to back up or contribute to the social issue being discussed. As a result, this allows the brand to involve their customers in their activism endeavours, making a stronger bond between them and their consumers.

#### 5. Balance brand activism on packaging with the informational purpose:

It is essential to be aware that people frequently make impulsive choices when they are buying something and opt for the first available option that meets their requirements. Although colourful and eye-catching packaging might seem attractive at first, keep in mind that packaging serves an informative purpose. Marketing managers should ensure that brand activism campaigns through packaging do not overpower or overshadow the important task of providing relevant product information. Create packaging with product information that is clear and can be easily found. Be aware that in absence of certain information about the product itself, consumers could make assumptions about the product based on the eye-catching brand activism on the packaging. This may lead to confusion, misinterpretation and ultimately disappointment.

## 7.2 Social implications

According to Ulver's (2022) new logic, the role of digital marketers in this conflict market is to capitalize on politically sensitive issues by creating conflict online. While this strategy may be effective and seemingly innocent in an algorithm-powered media ecosystem, we believe it to hold more dangerous consequences when implemented in the physical world through the use of brand activism on packaging. We suspect that the use of packaging as a medium for brand activism may not only hold benefits due to its tangibility but also holds risks due to its tangibility. Last week, on the 24th of May, 2023, Target decided to pull some of Pride collection items from the shelves as the campaign became hostile. Not only did the stores experience damage to products and displays, but employees were also subjected to threats (Helsel, 2023; Meyersohn, 2023). Because of this we have to ask ourselves the question whether brand activism on packaging may be more provocative, dangerous, and divisive than the more common applications of brand activism. While it may be accepted to create conflict online through advertisements on social media, it raises the question whether it is safe to create conflict in the physical world through the use of packaging for brand activism?

## 7.3 Limitations & recommendations for future research

The research focuses solely on two empirical cases of brand activism on packaging, which may not represent the broader landscape of the FMCG industry correctly. Similarly, the study concentrates on American consumers, and this may also not represent the broader population

accurately. Those two factors obstruct the generalizability of this research, and therefore we suggest future research to expand the knowledge by including larger and more diverse samples of brand activism cases on packaging across various geographical markets and social causes. Furthermore, our study relies on a single online discussion platform and this may not capture the full spectrum of consumer perspectives, a multi-platform netnographic analysis may therefore be useful. Additionally, researchers studying environmental consumerism identified a gap in consumer's attitude towards environmentally friendly products and their actual consumption behaviour (Joshi & Rahman, 2015). We identified both positive and negative attitudes of consumers towards brand activism on packaging, stating that they would adjust their consumption behaviour, however the question remains whether in fact consumers stick to their word and adjust consumption behaviour. Therefore, in order to better understand consumer behaviour and the potential decision-making consequences, we recommend future research to further explore the topic of brand activism on packaging by adopting a quantitative approach.

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