Course:	SKOM12
Term:	Spring 2024
Supervisor	Jörgen Eksell
Examiner	

The Myth Of The Moral Protagonist: Brand Activism and Consumer Interpretation Of Rebranding Strategies

VEERLE SMITS

Lund University
Department of strategic communication
Master's thesis

Abstract

The Myth of The Moral Protagonist: Brand Activism and Consumer Interpretation Of Rebranding Strategies

In recent years, brands have increasingly embraced activism as a strategy to rebrand themselves in the marketplace, reflecting a broader trend of companies striving to resonate with consumers' evolving expectations. However, most available literature on rebranding and repositioning is inward-looking, 'outcome-driven', and diminishes the agency of the consumer; at the same time, literature on brand activism oversimplifies the diverse perspectives consumers bring to brand activism and focuses predominantly on authenticity. Therefore, this thesis approaches this problem from an interpretive consumer-centric approach based on the Consumer Culture Theory tradition. It uses the lenses of marketplace mythology and the myth of consumption as moral protagonism to analyze how consumers interpret and react to brand activism and activist rebranding. Based on 14 semi-structured interviews using photo elicitation techniques, it becomes apparent that consumers use moralistic narratives and mythic structures to imbue their consumption choices with more profound moral significance. As such, the results show that consumers interpret brand activism and activist rebranding endeavors through the moral protagonist lens as an entity that does or does not share their moral quest. They see the brand as a moral protagonist, the brand as an antagonist, or the brand as an anti-hero. These consumer interpretations are further shaped by prevailing consumer ideologies and social pressure, influencing the consumer and the brand. As such, consumers perceive three tensions and dilemmas when interpreting activist rebranding: idealized society vs reflecting reality, brand responsibility, and internalized moral dilemmas. In addition, the consumers can interpret changes in brand identity as losing their competitive distinctiveness and note that by listening to social pressure, brands all become the same. This tension between societal pressures and consumer expectations underscores the complex interplay between brands, consumers, and the broader cultural landscape. It forms a paradox of maintaining relevance while preserving their unique brand identities.

Keyword: Brand Activism, Rebanding, Marketplace Mythology, Consumer Culture Theory

Acknowledgement

First of all, writing this master's thesis has been a mythical journey, intellectually and creatively challenging at every step. This finalized work marks the culmination of a six-month process. This thesis would not have been possible without the invaluable contributions of the participants in this study. In addition, I am deeply grateful for the guidance and support provided by my supervisor, Jörgen Eksell, and additionally Rickard Andersson. Your insights and encouragement were instrumental. Thank you to everyone involved for your support and assistance throughout this journey.

Table of contents

Chapter 1 Introduction

Strong brands are crucial in cultivating customer loyalty and driving profitability (Keller, 2000; Vomberg et al., 2015). As such, brands have evolved into assets that organizations can effectively manage. The necessity for brand management is underscored by the dynamic nature of the competitive environment, where brands risk becoming obsolete if they fail to adapt to evolving market conditions (Gotsi & Andriopoulos, 2007; Roy & Sarkar, 2015). To combat this challenge, brands often engage in rebranding efforts, which may involve altering their visual identity or repositioning themselves to reshape consumer perceptions (Shin & Cheon, 2013).

This imperative for brands to adapt has been fueled by shifting dynamics between brands and consumers. In contrast to the end of the 20th century, when brands were mainly seen as a visual identity used to make a profit (Parris & Guzman, 2017), a gradual shift occurred, making brands see past their for-profit motivations and integrated benefits for society and business within their corporations, such as CSR. This progression reached the point where consumers expect brands to incorporate and be more vocal about their socio-political stances (2019). When brands take stances on polarizing issues to drive societal change, it is termed authentic brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Research from Edelman (2020 & 2023) pointed out that 59% of consumers nowadays expect brands to take a sociopolitical stance and more social involvement from businesses on issues such as energy shortages, climate change, and (economic) inequality. This demand from consumers inevitably increased brands originally not associated with brand activism incorporating socio-political stances into their communication efforts and corporate strategies (Koch, 2020; Aboelenien & Nguyen, 2023) and is seen as a strategic approach (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Whereas research on brand activism has predominantly focused on the conceptualization, impact, outcomes, and degree of authenticity, little attention has been given to brand activism as a repositioning tool. But the use of brand activism as a (re)positioning tool poses various challenges.

Firstly, corporate rebranding aims to modify the image or the perceived self, reflecting

a change in identity or the core self to external audiences (Muzzelec et al., 2006). Here, brand identity is perceived as a creation and management endeavor undertaken by the organization, with the intended transfer of this identity to consumers. Organizational image represents the external view of the organization, although it remains constructed and managed from inside the organization. Image, in this sense, represents what do 'we' want others to think we are (Brown et al. 2006; Parris & Guzman 2017). Despite this demarcation there is strong emphasis in the literature on the organization's ability to influence and shape consumer perceptions without significant hindrance. Communication is often employed to signal stakeholders about changes within the organization during rebranding, which is viewed as a unilateral process with an 'outcome-driven' focus and diminishes the agency of the consumer (Urde & Koch, 2014) . It can therefore be argued that the current research problem lies in an oversimplified normative view of rebranding and control which is problematic in a time where power is increasingly wielded by consumers (Parris & Guzman, 2019). Secondly, even though there is a substantial area of scholarly literature about identity change, this research is inward looking and focuses on employees or members of the organization. Fewer studies look at how external stakeholders are taken into account while planning and implementing identity change (e.g., Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Trispas, 2009). This is surprising since along with internal audiences, organizational identity has an impact on external audiences as well. (Van Riel et al 2016). Thirdly, research on brand activism is predominantly approached from an authenticity perspective and even though this perspective acknowledges that consumers can be critical towards the motifs of brands to use brand activism, it mainly focuses on how brands can become more 'authentic' by aligning their marketing with their purpose. However, this implies that the usage of brand activism is inherently favored by consumers if the brand is able to showcase a true commitment to activism. However, this perspective also diminishes the agency of consumers by reducing them to actors who, despite their critical stance, can be won over through perceived authenticity. It overlooks the complexity of consumer behavior, where interpretations of brand activism are not merely black and white. Therefore oversimplifying these engagements and underestimating the diverse perspectives consumers bring to brand activism.

Therefore, to approach this research problem, this study derives from an interpretivist consumer centric approach which is based on the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) tradition and puts pronounced emphasis on consumer agency, wherein the consumer is viewed as an

active agent who consciously and critically navigates the marketplace and market-mediated messages (Arnould & Thompson, 2023). From this perspective, this research departs from a point of view where the consumer can be seen as a moral protagonist following the myth of consumption as moral protagonism.

Marketplace mythology provides a powerful framework for understanding these dynamics. Myths, as specific, powerful stories within the broader marketplace mythology, shape values, meanings, and ideals that help individuals make sense of the world (Thompson et al., 2023). They smooth over everyday tensions, allowing people to create purpose in their lives and cement their desired identities (Holt, 2004). Thus, marketplace mythologies and myths are used to analyze how consumers interpret and react to brand activism and activist rebranding. It offers an alternative way of thinking about the relationships between different marketplace articulations and consumers' lifestyles and identity narratives (Holt, 2004). The myth of the moral protagonist offers a durable narrative framework for these rhetorical struggles, capable of accommodating various ideological interpretations and resources from the marketplace.

In the contemporary landscape of brand activism and consumer engagement, the concept of consumption as moral protagonism holds particular relevance. Brands increasingly position themselves as moral agents, taking active stances on socio-political issues, and mythologize the products and lifestyles they promote. This process shapes an ideal consumer ethos and immerses consumers in values and opinions about conscious or ethical consumption. The engagement of consumers encompasses a spectrum, extending from tacit adherence to prevailing depictions of consumer identity and lifestyle ideals portrayed in advertising and mass media, to intentional deviation from these ideological constructs (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

By embracing an interpretivist approach and embracing the insights offered by CCT this study is set to explore the nuanced manner in which consumers engage with and interpret such endeavors within the broader context of consumer culture. Through this exploration, the research seeks to contribute to a richer understanding of how interpretative strategies and marketplace mythology interact to shape consumer perceptions and reactions to activist rebranding initiatives.

Research questions and aim

The main aim of this study is to investigate how consumers understand and interpret the activist rebranding efforts carried out by brands and how consumers attribute meaning to and make sense of these branding activities. This study contributes to the field of strategic communication by providing insights into how brand activism functions as a repositioning tool from a consumer-centric perspective and examines consumer interpretations and sensemaking, specifically focused on ‘'Zillennials’. It uses the lens of market mythology and consumption as moral protagonism to shed light on this phenomenon. The findings offer practical guidance for organizations seeking to strategically leverage social issues in brand positioning, while also advancing theoretical understanding of consumer agency and moral protagonism within CCT.

To conduct this study, the following two research questions have been created.

1) How do consumers interpret and make sense of brand activism within the context of rebranding efforts, considering their roles as moral protagonists and the influence of marketplace mythologies?
2) In what ways do consumers engage with and respond to brand activism initiatives during rebranding processes?

Chapter 2 literature review

The following chapter looks at past relevant literature. The chapter is separated into two main themes which a literature review was conducted on. As this study investigates corporate rebranding which is seen as a separate construct compared to corporate branding, both these topics are touched upon. The first part is about Corporate branding and Corporate rebranding. An overview of the main concepts is provided and it is explained how corporate branding and rebranding differ, and how consumers respond. The second part is about brand activism. It outlines the different research streams found in the brand activism literature such as the antecedents and perceived authenticity. Last in this part is a short section about brand activism as a repositioning technique.

Corporate (re)branding

Corporate branding and rebranding are predominantly seen as two related but contracting concepts. Corporate branding in literature, although a thoroughly researched field, is often conceptualized in very different ways but includes brand identity, brand values, and brand positioning as interrelated constructs to the practice of corporate branding (Abrott & Mingion, 2022). In contrast, corporate rebranding, often seen as a contrast to corporate branding as it is a separate process that involves making changes to an existing brand identity and is dominantly defined as ‘the disjunction or change between an initially formulated corporate brand and a new formulation’ (Merrilees & Miller, 2008, p. 538). In this sense corporate rebranding can only take place after corporate branding has taken place.

Traditionally, corporate branding and the corporate brand is treated as an aspirational construct, embodying the ideals that companies or management aspire to achieve (Da Silveira et al., 2013). Scholars demarcate a strong differentiation between the organization's identity and image, where identity resembles an internal perspective towards "who we are," and image represents the external view of the organization or what do 'we' want others to think we are (Brown et al., 2006; Parris & Guzman, 2017). However, the image, although an external view,

remains constructed and managed from inside the organization.

More contemporary research has acknowledged this traditional perspective is not as clear-cut and unilateral as argued before. This is particularly due to the changing dynamic environment and the increasing power wielded by consumers (Parris & Guzman, 2019). Thus, consumers are perceived as being able to contribute to the brand identity. Scholars in recent literature underscore this by arguing that identity is not only constructed by management but it is actually co-created by a myriad of various stakeholders (Voyer et al. 2017, Parris & Guzman, 2019) and should be seen as a process of social construction through which actors in and around organizations claim, accept, negotiate, affirm, stabilize, maintain, reproduce, challenge, disrupt, destabilize, repair, or otherwise relate their sense of selves and others" (Gioai et al.) In this sense, identity is created by interactions with others. It is not limited to a one-way process but acknowledges a two way, iterative reciprocal perspective where brands contribute to the identity of stakeholders and where stakeholders shape the identity of the brands (Voyer et al. 2017). This is further illustrated by Hatch and Schultz (2003) who explain the interrelation between culture, identity and image, explaining identity is neither wholly cultural or wholly imagistic but consists of a set of processes interrelated by the two. Their theory shows how reflection embeds identity in organizational culture and how brand identity leaves an impression on others and how the brand identity mirrors the image others have. This is in line with what Black & Veloutsou (2017) describe, identities are borrowed among the brand, the individual and the brand community.

Even though approaches on brand identity did change, scholars criticize these because the conceptualizations do not take into account the concept of identity as seen in social psychology theories which view identities as dynamic, fluid and culture bound with the ability to change over time (Voyer et al. 2017). This criticism adds a more philosophical notion to the discussion about brand identity and image and the degree to which it should be seen as a ‘human-identity' (Voyer et al. 2017).

Rebranding has received some scholarly attention in the last years however, its is still very limited.The concept of rebranding has been researched in several other fields such as strategic change and identity change which predominantly utilizes an inward organizational focus and do not use the word rebranding but rather ‘identity change. Thus, this research stream is very fragmented. Both fields acknowledge that a change in an organizational identity varies in degree. Rerup et al. (2022), adopting an identity change perspective, refers to these

changes as continuous or discontinuous. Where Discontinuous change is radical and replaces the old identity completely. In contrast, continuous change elements of the original identity remain while adding new identity elements. Merrilees & Miller (2008) and Merrilees et al. (2014), differentiate between four types of rebranding elements repositioning, redesign, renaming and relaunch, also underpinning that rebranding can be far reaching, ranging from relatively modest, minor change, to major radical change. However, In both fields, changes in identity driven by changes such as decisions, events or processes causing a change in a company's structure, strategy or performance of sufficient magnitude to suggest the need for a fundamental redefinition of its identity (Muzellec et al 2006) (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2020). Merrilees and Miller (2014), underpin rebranding happens as part of external or internal triggers. They differentiate between four different drivers: change in ownership, change in competitive position, change in corporate strategy, change in external environment. The drivers of change also raise several questions intersecting with studies in strategic change and how this is associated with identity change/rebranding and whether a change in strategy implies a change in identity and vice versa. Van Riel, 2016, showcases this in the DELA case study where decisions related to product and services or business strategy more broadly, led to a change in identity claims; further, implementing this change required a communication strategy. Thus, in some sense, strategy and identity had a reciprocal relationship with one bearing upon the other.

The signaling of change based on the various drivers of change is often done through the change of a brand's name, visual identity or positioning (Miller, Merrilees, & Yakimova, 2014). Whereas changing the brand's name and/or visual identity is straightforward in its meaning, the (re)positioning of a brand has a more ambiguous notion. Various theoretical fields like marketing, branding, and strategy have embraced the notion of positioning, leading to a lack of consensus on its definition, as noted by Urde & Koch (2014). Most scholars agree that (re)positioning is the deliberate, proactive, interactive process of defining, measuring, modifying, and monitoring consumer perceptions of a marketable object (Merrilees & Miller, 2008). Specifically repositioning, it is about changing the brand, altering beliefs about the brand, introducing neglected attributes, and/or finding a new market segment (Doyle & Stern 2006).

Koch (2014) and Koch & Gryd-Jones (2019), also differentiate between position and positioning. A brand's position is often described as the strategic choice of a position of a

brand (intended position) and the result (actual position). However, the scholars argue that it should be seen as a dynamic process and therefore 'positioning' is used .Thus, positioning is the process that seeks to establish a new position in the markets and minds, or that modifies (fortify or change) an existing one (Koch, 2014). Within this positioning field, two major schools of thoughts exist; 1) image perspective on positioning and 2) identity perspective on positioning. The viewpoint of image regarding positioning holds significant relevance in product branding. This perspective acknowledges that the true influence in shaping a brand lies within the perceptions and accumulated knowledge customers have developed over time. It is however more used in product branding and not corporate branding. More recently, the identity perspective emerged. In this context, positioning capitalizes on a particular facet of identity, within a specific timeframe, within a defined market, and in competition with a set group of rivals (Kapferer, 2012). Adopting an identity-based perspective strengthens the significance of a brand for both customers and non-customers.

Furthermore, the research existing within the rebranding field has predominantly focused on the creation of rebranding frameworks. These frameworks try to integrate all aspects of the rebranding process. Merrilees and Miller (2008) and Miller et al. (2014), noted three broad phases in the rebranding process (that is, brand re-vision, stakeholder buy-in, and rebranding strategy implementation). While this linear model provides a useful start for understanding and investigating corporate rebranding processes, Urde & Koch (2014 note that it leaves many relevant questions unanswered: Where and when do such processes occur within an organization? What exactly drives these processes to occur? What are the actual mechanisms involved? . However, Merrilees & Miller also provide certain tensions which emerge from their model such as stakeholder disconnect. This is also found by Gotsi & Andriopoulos, C. (2007), who by analyzing executives' interpretations of the key pitfalls in corporate rebranding, concluded four key pitfalls in corporate rebranding. These are: 'disconnecting with the core', 'stakeholder myopia', ' emphasis on labels, not meanings', and 'the challenge of multiple identities'. In line with the latter, Lee & Borne (2017) looked at managing dual identities in not for profit rebranding. They found that two types of identity, normative and utilitarian were identified. Utilitarian identity claims emphasize drivers around market position and awareness, income generation, and acceptability with potential partners. In these examples, object stakeholders (funders, influencers, and customers) are prioritized and the underlying purpose appears to be in enhancing the commercial aspects of the charity's

identity. Normative identity claims, on the other hand, emphasize drivers around heritage, purpose, core values and beliefs, and subject stakeholders (members, volunteers and users) are prioritized. While Merrilees & Miller and Gotsi & Andriopoulos focus on the broader implications of stakeholder disconnect and the pitfalls in rebranding, Lee & Borne highlight a more nuanced balance between normative and utilitarian identity claims.

As also seen from the literature mentioned in the paragraphs above, most research about rebranding and identity change is inward looking, focussing on the organization or employees such as Joseph et al (2021), who concluded that employees are more likely to buy-in when they feel a higher sense of belonging to the organization and are engaged emotionally and behaviourally in their roles, or focus on visual changes such as Bolhuis et al. 2018, who focused on how visual identity change affects consumers and employees. Fewer studies look at how external stakeholders are taken into account while planning and implementing identity change.This is surprising since along with internal audiences, organizational identity has an impact on external audiences as well (van Riel et al. 2016). One of the scholars focusing on consumer response to strategic changes is Gaustad et al. (2019), They illustrated that when managers implement strategic marketing decisions inconsistent with how consumers integrate the brand into their self-concept, highly engaged customers—often the most valuable—react adversely. This may result in a reduction of their brand connection as they strive to maintain their individual identity. The consumers who strongly identify with a brand react unfavorably to brand changes, such as acquisitions or repositioning, that alter its meaning. The authors attribute this effect to the shift in the brand's communicated identity. However, Plewa et al (2011) found that specifically that a rebranding exercise can be used to enhance the members' perceptions of, and relationship with, the brand.

Brand activism

Nowadays, Brands are expected to take a stance on socio-political issues (Banet-Weiser 2012; Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg, 2021; Schmidt, 2022). This demarcates a movement that Banet-Weiser (2012) describes as branded movements where there is a focus on who “does good by buying good”. In contrast to the end of the 20th century when brands were mostly seen as a visual identity used to make profit, a gradual shift occurred making brands see past their for-profit motivations and integrated benefits for society and business

within their corporations. In the early 2000s, there was a shift in focus towards sustainability, with growing recognition of the strategic significance of environmental, social, and ethical considerations in evaluating both the financial and non-financial, short-term and long-term outcomes of brands (Parris and McInnis-Bowers, 2017). More recently, there has been an emphasis on sociopolitical activism as a focal point for brands, (Ahmad et al., 2022; Bhagwat et al., 2020). The usage of socio-political issues in a company's marketing and strategy is conceptualized as brand activism and defined as 'the alignment of a brand's explicit purpose and values with its activist marketing messaging and prosocial corporate practice" (Vredenburg et al. 2020, 445). Successful implementation of brand activism empowers brands to function as agents of social change.

Within the research field of brand activism, there has been a major focus on the conceptualization, antecedents and outcomes. When brands align their activist message, purpose and values with prosocial corporate practices, brands participate in what Vredenburg et al. (2020) define as 'authentic brand activism'. The researchers suggest that the genuine commitment of a brand to activism, demonstrated through consistent alignment with its values in both messaging and actions, is crucial for achieving success in marketing endeavors and has the potential to bring about positive social change through the adoption of brand activism as a strategic approach. In the same line of thought, Mirzaei et al. (2022) use the term authentic woke branding to describe the same process as authentic brand activism. It consists of actions taken by a firm to fulfill its strategy and can occur through different means, such as statements, actions, and/or sponsorships, either individually or simultaneously (Plumeyer et al. 2024). There are thus two important elements towards this. First, brands should publicly engage in activism and not 'behind the scenes' as Verlegh (2023) notes and the brand should voice its opinion by using campaigns, advertisements, PR-efforts, or a combination of those. Secondly, it should include social, economic, political or environmental issues that can be divisive. It is therefore different from CSR which places greater emphasis on actions and their resulting outcomes, and necessitates minimal internal implementation, whereas brand activism demonstrates a strong alignment between messaging and practice (Vredenburg et al. 2020; Verlegh, 2023). However, when consumers perceive a company to not align their actions with their declared values, this can result in the consumer questioning the true motivation of the brand (Banet-Weiser, 2012). In other words, brands are seen as inauthentic and are often accused of 'woke washing' (Vredenburg et al 2020). The term "woke" initially

denoted an understanding of social injustice and discrimination. Nevertheless, it is currently commonly employed to critique companies in situations where there are inconsistencies between their sociopolitical convictions and their brand's values, purpose, or conduct (Warren, 2022).

Given these possible accusations of brand acting ‘inauthentic’ or ‘woke, ' another major research stream of brand activism focuses on identifying the antecedents of authentic support for political and social causes, exploring different dimensions to enhance the perception of authenticity. Ahmad et al.2024, Identified two types of woke washing; ‘congruent woke washing when brands commit to something through their activist message but fail to fulfill that promise’ and ‘incongruent woke washing’ when brands have fulfilled the activist commitment but fail to address the same problem inside the organization. To overcome these issues Moorman (2020), suggests using concrete internal messages to focus on changes made within the organization itself and involve highlighting the tangible actions and modifications being made internally to support a particular cause. The external concrete messages focus on the activities the brand is supporting outside of its own organization by communicating the contributions made outside of the organization (Vredenburg, 2020). Similarly, Ahmad et al. 2024, showed that concrete internal woke washing has larger negative consequences on brand authenticity than concrete external and abstract woke washing. But, if internal concrete messages are used it can also lead to a stronger alignment between the brand and the socio-political issue which will in turn lead to a higher perception of brand authenticity.

There is also a debate among scholars about what is perceived as brand authenticity when paired together with brand activism. Several scholars suggest that certain aspects of brand authenticity, such as integrity, sincerity, or consistency, used to assess brand authenticity may not be entirely suitable or relevant when evaluating brands that are actively engaging with and taking positions on contentious and polarizing issues (Mirzaei et al. 2022). The study by Mirzaei et al. (2022) therefore suggest a new framework which suggests six dimensions of brand activism authenticity: social context independency, inclusion, sacrifice, practice, fit, and motivation. They deem the dimension of social context independency as very important as it on one hand can magnify the support or backlash which a brand receives when engaging in brand activism and on the other hand it can affect how the fit between activist/woke topics and the brand's image or positioning impacts brand authenticity. Low social context independency

and a low fit may even lead to consumers receiving the perception of corrupt motivations. Mirzaei et al. (2022) illustrate this fit by providing examples such as Dove, Gillette, and Pepsi. In the case of Dove, using the Me Too movement in their campaign is considered a better fit, aligning with the company's values. On the contrary, Gillette's use of Me Too to convey 'the best a man can be' and Pepsi's Black Lives Matter campaign, where a celebrity ends discrimination by offering a Pepsi to a police officer, are deemed poor fits. This is because both Gillette and Pepsi do not align their internal actions with the values portrayed in their communication efforts. Thus, a low fit might be strategically advantageous, A high fit is essential to authenticity perception whereas a low fit can result in the perception of inauthenticity and profit-seeking motivations (Fritz et al. 2017). In this line of thought, Baner-Weiser (2012), notices that what is perceived as authentic is often because it is seen as not commercial. Thus, being perceived as inauthentic is often perceived as commercial. When consumers perceive a brand as using activist stances insincerely and solely for profit, it can lead to backlash, boycotts, and criticism (Pöyry, & Laaksonen, 2022).This, in turn, can severely damage the trust, reputation, and image of the brand.

To overcome these issues and to be perceived as ‘authentic’ Schmidt et al. 2022 emphasize the need for a long-term commitment which aligns with the brand’s strategy and values and that it should be related to the brand’s purpose Ahmad et al. (2024). Verlegh (2023) introduced the Alignment Activism Model, which suggests that brand activism should harmonize on three levels. Firstly, internally, alignment is gauged by how closely the issue resonates with the brand's core values or ideal identity. Secondly, from an external viewpoint, consumer reactions hinge on whether the brand's stance aligns with their personal beliefs. Lastly, there's the consumer's perception of the brand's activism: do they perceive the activist message as congruent with the brand's overall image, communication style, and corporate conduct?

Furthermore, the field of brand activism is slowly expanding the scope shifting from a consumer perspective to a brand perspective such as how to utilize brand activism as a positioning strategy (Koch, 2020). Scholars such as Aboelenien & Nguyen (2023) investigated the strategies these brands use to legitimize changes in their values and in turn also allowed to illustrate how market actors resist claims of de(legitimacy), indicating the forthcoming dynamic processes involved in both market creation and market transformation. They found four strategies brands use to sustain their legitimacy and change. The strategies

are: revamping, surgerying, attaching. The strategies are used to highlight the change in brands' assumptions, values beliefs, and rules in compliance to changed logics. Other researchers like Koch & Ulver (2022), employ this brand centric perspective to identify framing strategies brand's use. They discuss how markets are influenced by conflicts over perceptions and how discrediting existing industry products while promoting their own as aligned with broader values, aiming to legitimize an alternative. Oatly, for instance, frames the dairy industry as negative to delegitimize it and promote their own product as better aligned with consumer values. They propose a conflict framing as a new framing tool brands utilize.

Chapter 3 Theoretical framework

In this chapter, the theoretical lenses are presented and discussed in depth to accurately distinguish between theories and previous findings of various research. This thesis uses ‘marketplace ideologies and consumer interpretive strategies as a main lens which is part of the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) research stream. First a broad outline of CCT is provided and discussed, Second, relevant concepts of *marketplace ideologies, mythologies* and *consumer interpretive strategies* are elaborated on. Secondly, market mythology is briefly explained with a specific focus on consumption as moral protagonism as this framework emphasizes a complex interplay of mythical structures, ideological conflicts, and market dynamics that consumers navigate when asserting their preferred belief systems through moral conflicts mediated by the market. The last part focuses on three interpretative strategies as identified by Hirschman & Thompson (1997).

Consumer Culture Theory

CCT is a field of theoretical perspectives that addresses the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace and cultural meanings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). It sees a consumer culture as a complex interplay of material possessions, economic transactions, symbolic meanings, and social connections, functioning both as a lens through which individuals interpret the world and as a framework for societal norms (McCracken, 1986). Consumer culture in this sense refers to the dominant mode of consumption that is structured by the collective actions of firms in their marketing activities (Holt, 2004). With regards to interpreting and sensemaking, CCT provides a comprehensive system of values, beliefs, and norms that shape how consumers perceive notions of trendiness, obsolescence, attractiveness, unattractiveness, desirability, and undesirability. It also functions as a cultural blueprint, as it provides consumers with behavioral scripts and both formal and informal guidelines that govern and structure their actions (Arnould & Thompson, 2023).

This consumer-centered stream of research emerged in response to and dissatisfaction

with the rigidly structured approaches within consumer behavior, which depicted the consumer. as passive, easily influenced, and restricted by rationality and information processing. Within the realm of CCT, there exists a pronounced emphasis on consumer agency, wherein the consumer is viewed as an active agent who consciously and critically navigates the marketplace and market-mediated messages. Moreover, consumers are recognized as co-producers and constructors of their own identities (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011), and researchers often aim to understand the relationship between consumption and macro-level phenomena like socio-economic inequality, climate change, and globalization. In doing so, they seek to show both how seemingly disparate consumption activities often share underlying commonalities, and how seemingly similar acts can take on different types of meanings.

By utilizing CCT and examining brands and rebranding as cultural phenomena, which serve as ways of interpreting and organizing the world, this approach acknowledges that branding and rebranding extend beyond a managerial perspective focused solely on solving managerial problems. Instead, it encompasses a constellation of understandings, including the relationship between individuals and society. This branding approach regards consumer culture and brands as a symbolic repertoire for constructing identities and shaping consumer preferences (Cayla & Arnould, 2008).

In the contemporary landscape of brand activism and consumer engagement, the concept of consumption as moral protagonism holds particular relevance. Brands increasingly position themselves as moral agents, taking active stances on divisive issues, and mythologizing the products and lifestyles they promote. This process shapes an ideal consumer ethos and immerses consumers in values and opinions about conscious or ethical consumption. As a result, ideological tensions are more pronounced than ever before in the marketplace.

Marketplace mythology and consumption as moral protagonism

Marketplace mythologies refers to narratives and symbolic frameworks that are created within the context of specific markets to fulfill different ideological objectives. These narratives are influenced by broader cultural myths (Thompson, 2004; Thompson et al. 2023).

Myths are commonly seen as specific, powerful stories within the broader marketplace mythology. They shape values, meanings, and ideals that help individuals make sense of the world (Holt, 2004; Thompson et al., 2023). These myths are characterized by compelling binaries, such as good and evil, nature and culture, or life and death (Cayla & Thompson, 2008). Most importantly, the concepts of myths and marketplace mythology offers an alternative way of thinking about relationships between marketplace expressions (such as brands, products, and advertising) and how they interact with and influence consumers' lifestyles and their stories of personal identity

Luedicke et al. 2010, introduced the concept of consumption as moral protagonism which is a complex interplay of mythical structures, ideological conflicts, and market dynamics that consumers navigate when asserting their preferred belief systems through moral conflicts mediated by the market. Within this framework, the myth of the moral protagonist offers a durable narrative framework for these rhetorical struggles, capable of accommodating various ideological interpretations and resources from the marketplace. In the contemporary landscape of brand activism and consumer engagement, the concept of consumption as moral protagonism holds particular relevance. Brands increasingly position themselves as moral agents, taking active stances on activist issues, and thereby mythologizing the products and lifestyles they promote. This process shapes an ideal consumer ethos and immerses consumers in values and opinions about conscious or ethical consumption. Thompson (2004) however notes that this means brands create a ‘discourse of power’ in which they promote a particular set of values, beliefs, and ideologies. This discourse of power works two fold, because when consumers adopt elements of these myths and narratives into their own self-identities, they are engaging with the various forms of power and influence that are present in their daily lives. Essentially, consumers are not just passively influenced by these brand messages; they actively integrate these ideas into their own understanding of who they are and how they should live. They thereby participate in the broader discourses of power that shape society (Thomspon, 2004). As a result, ideological tensions are more pronounced, often sparking intense debates and discussions among consumers.

In the moral protagonist myth, a central figure defends sacred virtues and ideals against the transgressions of an immoral adversary. Consumers adapt this myth to their own lives, attributing morally redeeming meanings to their consumer identities by implicitly or

explicitly confronting other consumer groups perceived as deviating from a normative order. This confrontation often takes the form of critiques of mainstream consumer culture or differentiation between "authentic" and "inauthentic" consumption practices or the establishment of boundaries between different consumer communities based on perceived moral distinctions. There is often a symbolic or ideological confrontation between different consumer groups or ideologies within the narratives of moralistic identity work. It can aslo take for a countermemory, which functions as a narrative that provides alternative viewpoints to the prevailing cultural discourse (Thompson, 2004). As such the concept of consumption as moral protagonism offers a valuable theoretical framework. This framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how consumers interpret and respond to brand activism, navigating ideological conflicts and mythic narratives when asserting their preferred belief systems through consumption choices.

Moreover, the myth of the moral protagonist provides consumers with a rhetorical tool to connect their consumption practices and personal identities to a larger, collectively shared moral project (Thompson, 2004). By framing their consumption choices as part of a moral crusade against perceived threats to society, consumers can protect themselves from feelings of disconnection, doubt, alienation, and insecurity in today's fluid and uncertain world. Luedicke et al. (2010) illustrate this collective project through their analysis of hummer enthusiasts and antagonists as moral protagonists. While enthusiasts defend American values, antagonists see themselves as defenders of the collective good against socially irresponsible brands like Hummer. By evoking the narrative structure of the morality play, consumers engage in a dialectical exchange of mythic roles, portraying themselves as defenders of the greater good against perceived adversaries.

In the case of activist rebranding activities, the consumer has to make sense and navigate the changes in brand identity and ideological values which prompt consumers to engage in sensemaking activities, evaluating the moral implications of brands' actions. Sensemaking involves the interpretation of brands' motivations, intentions, and alignment with consumers' moral values. Consumers may respond positively to brands that demonstrate genuine commitment to social causes, while skepticism may arise towards brands perceived as opportunistic or insincere in their activism (Schmidt et al. 2022). However, as seen by the Hummer example, the moral protagonist and antagonist are two sides of the same coin as both see themselves as the moral protagonist and the other as the antagonist. By contrasting

themselves with the perceived traits or behaviors of mainstream consumers, thereby elevating their own sense of identity and morality. By using the framework in this way, it moves away from focusing too narrowly on consumer moralism as demonstrations of anti-corporate or anti-consumerist ideology. Through this dynamic of moral protagonism, consumers infuse their consumption practices and the brands they identify with sacralized meanings, anchoring their consumer identities in a system of ideological beliefs depicted as inherently virtuous. Morality plays thus offer individuals a way to assuage uncertainties, doubts, and anxieties in a moral universe characterized by clear and unambiguous contrasts. (Barthes 1972).

As noted by Schmitt et al. (2022) any area of consumption can be seen as reflecting ideological beliefs and morality. They illustrate this by the simple decision to buy a cup of coffee. While it may appear mundane, this choice involves a series of conscious and unconscious decisions that carry implicit ideological implications. Questions such as whether to add milk, and if so, what type, or whether to opt for coffee from a local shop versus a global chain, all reflect underlying consumer values and beliefs about product ingredients, sustainability, and community engagement. In this sense, coffee consumption serves as a representation of consumption ideology. This includes considerations of health, such as the ingredients in coffee, environmental concerns related to packaging, community dynamics. In terms of consumer attitudes, individuals may either align with prevailing ideologies and feel connected to them, or they may feel disconnected and even adopt activist roles, such as protesting against the perceived dominance of certain coffee chains like Starbucks. It can therefore be noted that ideology incorporates every aspect of individuals' lives, including their consumption patterns. Consumption ideology becomes intertwined with consumers' social realities as they engage with products, services, and experiences in the marketplace. Consumers are inevitably influenced by ideology, whether consciously or unconsciously, as they interpret and enact ideological beliefs through their consumption choices (Thomson, 2004). This understanding is relevant because it shows how deeply ideological meanings are embedded in everyday consumption choices. It highlights the importance of examining how consumers interpret and respond to activist rebranding efforts, emphasizing the need to consider the broader ideological contexts that shape consumer behavior and attitudes in the marketplace.

The application of consumption as moral protagonism to the thesis can provide new insights into the sensemaking aspects of consumers. This thesis therefore deploys from the

stance that every consumer sees themselves as the moral protagonist, navigating the marketplace and making sense of everyday life and consumption practices by differentiating between which brands align with their moral values and which brand are seen as the antagonists promoting values not in line with. Brands position themselves and take active stances about divisive/polarizing issues. This works two ways since on one hand consumers demand brands to refrain from a neutral stance. On the other hand, consumers are submerged into more beliefs, opinions and ultimately emphasizing consumption choices say more about a person. Making consumers side with brands they support or causes they support. When brands and advertisements mythologize the products and brands they promote, they simultaneously shape an ideal consumer lifestyle.

Consumers' interpretive strategies

This theory by Hirschman & Thompson, 1997, who built upon Hall's (1980) critique of the consumer as merely a recipient of the ideological system, was initially crafted to explore consumer interpretations of advertisements featuring celebrities. This framework offers a versatile and insightful lens through which to examine consumer interpretations across various media forms, including activist rebranding initiatives.

In their work, Hirschman & Thompson identified three interpretative strategies consumers employ to form relationships with media 1)Motivational interpretations: inspiring and aspiring, 2) Critical interpretations: deconstructing and rejecting, and 3) Personalizing Interpretations: identifying and individualizing.

Considering the first interpretive strategy, the media is often perceived as representing an ideal self, often focusing on an unattainable aspect of the self which becomes a driver to strive towards a goal of the ideal self. These media images serve as sources of motivation, prompting individuals to invest personal time, effort, and make sacrifices to attain a desired body type or lifestyle. The second strategy stands in opposition to the first in many respects. It involves criticism directed at the unrealistic representations and economic motivations prevalent in the capitalist marketplace. This approach distinguishes between deconstruction and rejection, where deconstruction does not necessarily lead to rejection, but rejection is seen as a logical outcome of deconstruction. Hirschman & Thompson observe that many individuals perceive the media as a manipulative agent attempting to compel consumers to

conform to arbitrary aesthetic standards, thus infringing upon personal freedom and authentic self-identities. Consumers often view idealized media and advertising portrayals as unrealistic constructs embodying undesirable values such as materialism, superficiality, and self-objectification.

The third strategy, identifying and individualizing, elucidates the diverse approaches consumers adopt to navigate their self-perceptions and individual aspirations in response to idealized media representations. Consumers interpret media content as reflecting their own life experiences and attributes. Identification encompasses two primary dimensions: firstly, the perception that the media image embodies a desirable value or significance, and secondly, the conscious choice by the consumer to identify with or emulate the image as a means of affirming possession of the desired value or significance. Individualizing reflects consumers' efforts to reconcile the inherent contradiction in modern society. It underscores the need for individuals to cultivate a distinct self-image or sense of individuality while adhering to cultural norms propagated in mass media and embodied in tangible goods (Davis, 1992).

These interpretive strategies are visualized by Hirschman & Thompson as a dyad consisting of mass media vehicles and their consumers. On one side of the dyad lies the formal "text" of a media vehicle or advertisement, reflecting the intentions of its creators—in the case of this thesis, the brand and its content. On the other side lies the consumer, interpreting the ‘text’ through their own frame of reference. Linking the two are the interpretive strategies consumers employ as part of their sensemaking process.

Thus, I believe this framework provides a nuanced understanding of how consumers engage with media representations. Whether individuals are motivated and inspired by idealized depictions, critical and resistant to perceived manipulations, or seeking to personalize and individuate their responses, these strategies offer valuable insights into the complex dynamics of consumer behavior. In the context of this study, the applicability of Hirschman & Thompson's framework extends beyond celebrity endorsements, but shifts its focus to activist rebranding initiatives and the interpretation of these by consumers. It recognizes the consumer as an active agent who can be both positive and critical towards the context of evolving brand identities. thus, while Hirschman & Thompson's framework may have originated in a specific domain, its adaptability and relevance transcend its original context. It offers a rich theoretical foundation for investigating consumer behavior in the contemporary marketplace. By integrating this framework into the present study, we endeavor

to uncover the intricacies of consumer interpretations and responses to activist rebranding initiatives, contributing to the broader discourse on consumer culture and brand activism.

Chapter 4 Methodology

The following chapter outlines the research paradigm, tradition and the research design. In the first part, I explain the tradition, the second part elaborates on the method of in-depth interviews and photo elicitation, the sampling and analysis of the empirical material, followed by the third part, which discusses the importance of reflexivity and ethical considerations.

Research Approach

The interpretivist paradigm and the CCT tradition

This research project adopts a qualitative interpretivist approach aiming to achieve a comprehensive understanding of how individuals interpret and make sense of rebranding efforts from brands that integrate brand activism into corporate strategy. Specifically, this research adopts the Consumer Culture Theory tradition as put forward by Arnould & Thompson (2005), who noticed various confusing labels ascribed to what is currently seen as CCT. Terms like "relativist," "post-positivist," "interpretivist," "humanistic," "naturalistic," and "postmodern" have been used but have said to fail to capture the core theoretical commonalities and connections within this tradition. Instead, they either overly emphasize methodological differences or create unnecessary contrasts with presumed dominant research paradigms in consumer studies.

Following the CCT tradition, this study views reality as socially constructed, shaped through perception, interpretation, and interactions between individuals (Tadajewski, 2004). This ontological perspective acknowledges the absence of a singular reality, recognizing that each individual's experiences contribute to their unique interpretation of the world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Epistemologically, this study posits that knowledge is constructed through social interactions rather than discovered independently of social and cultural influences (Damon & Halloway, 2011). This perspective aligns with the understanding that consumer

interpretations of activist rebranding initiatives are shaped by their interactions within their social contexts. CCT rejects the idea of a homogeneous culture with universally shared meanings, instead exploring the varied distribution of meanings within the backdrop of globalization and market capitalism. It underscores that consumer culture is socially constructed, emphasizing that the meanings attributed to products, brands, and consumption practices are socially produced through interactions among individuals and within societal structures. This understanding is crucial in the context of activist rebranding, as it acknowledges that consumer interpretations are not inherent but shaped by broader cultural systems (Arnould & Thompson, 2023). Additionally, CCT often examines power dynamics within consumer culture, including issues of social class, gender, race, and other forms of identity. It thus recognizes that consumption is not neutral but is shaped by unequal power relations that exist within society (Thompson & Arnould 2005, Thompson & Arnould 2007). Thus, the study operates under the assumption that every consumer perceives and interprets the world differently, including what is deemed morally right or wrong, as in line with the chosen theoretical framework.

Material selection

To ensure relevance and richness in the material presented to participants, inclusion criteria were established based on insights from the literature review on rebranding and brand activism. The selected material should depict real changes stemming from corporate brand transformations, focusing on fundamental shifts associated with repositioning (Merrilees & Miller, 2008). Moreover, the chosen brands and materials should exhibit a sustained commitment to activism rather than being driven by short-term or marketing objectives (Vredenburg, 2020).

With these criteria in mind, campaign materials from Victoria's Secret and Abercrombie & Fitch were selected. Both brands, popular between 2000 and 2016, underwent significant rebranding efforts due to criticisms regarding unrealistic body standards for women and men. Importantly, they have integrated activist stances into their corporate strategies. This selection process ensures that the materials presented to participants are not only relevant to the research objectives but also offer varied insights into how consumers engage with and interpret activist rebranding initiatives.

Victoria Secret

Initially known for its use of supermodels as 'Victoria's Secret Angels' and extravagant annual runway shows, the brand faced backlash for promoting unrealistic body standards. In response, it undertook a comprehensive rebranding in 2018, emphasizing women's empowerment and inclusivity. This included featuring diverse models and establishing the VS Collective, comprising accomplished women of varying ages and body types (Friedman, 2022; Ellen, 2023).

The materials used for the photo elicitation are gathered from different campaigns which aired after the rebranding. The materials collected were selected to provide a comprehensive image of the changes. The campaigns used for Victoria Secret were the 2021 undefinable campaign, 2023 love cloud campaign, bare neutrals 2020 campaign which all focused on inclusivity and body positivity. Besides these materials, the participants were given information about the activist activities carried out by Victoria secret such as the development of a mastectomy bra and VS collective. This information was given to show the brand's commitment to activism. The materials can be found in appendix 1.

Abercrombie & Fitch

Abercrombie & Fitch, a clothing brand popular among teens and young adults during the 1990s and 2000s, faced criticism for its lack of inclusivity in both its advertising campaigns and internal policies.. Since 2019, it has undergone a rebranding focused on inclusivity and diversity, exemplified by gender-inclusive collections and collaborations with LGBTQ organizations like the Trevor Project (Button, 2023). The brand also fosters a culture of inclusion through employee-led initiatives and resources (A&F, nd.).

The materials used for the photo elicitation from Abercrombie & Fitch were gathered from from the 2020 December campaign, Pride 2022 & 2023 campaign and the face your fears 2020 campaign. All campaigns focus on gender equality and inclusivity. Besides these materials, the participants were given information about the activist activities collaboration with the Trevor project, the employee-led initiatives that foster a culture of inclusion and belonging. This information was given to show the brand's commitment to the new values.

The materials can be found in appendix 1.

Collection of the empirical material

Semi-structured interviews

As presented earlier, the aim of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the perception and interpretation of consumers as moral protagonists when encountering activist rebranding activities undertaken by brands. The semi-structured interview format allows for a nuanced exploration of these interpretations, enabling participants to articulate their moral judgments and engage with the underlying mythologies embedded within brand activism. By encouraging participants to reflect on their personal experiences and moral frameworks, the methodology facilitates a deeper understanding of how consumers navigate the complexities of ethical consumption in the context of rebranding efforts. Thus, semi-structured interviews were chosen as a suitable method for data collection while using photo elicitation techniques to gain a deep understanding of consumers' impressions of rebranding efforts and the meanings that they associate with it (Thelander, 2014). I specifically chose to use visual elicitation within the interviews as this approach allows the participants to articulate their thoughts and emotions prompted by visual stimuli. The visual images of activist rebranding initiatives served as powerful prompts, allowing participants to engage with the symbolic meanings embedded within brand messaging and imagery. By utilizing tangible materials, particularly visual images showcasing brand activism, participants are encouraged to draw upon their personal experiences and consumption patterns. (Bell & Davison, 2013; (Barton, 2015).

Furthermore, this method helps to reduce power imbalances between researchers and participants, as it encourages a collaborative dialogue where participants play an active role in shaping the conversation. By empowering participants to guide the discussion based on their own interpretations and experiences, the methodology ensures that the research is grounded in the lived realities of consumers.(Clark- Ibáñez, 2004, Barton, 2015). It is also vital to mention that the elicitation technique can diminish potential awkward silences and eliminate the necessity for direct eye contact. This may make the participants feel less self-conscious about taking notes or using recording equipment, as inquiries primarily revolve around materials

rather than the respondent. Even when researchers delve deeper into participants' responses, the inclusion of tangible materials, especially visual images can mitigate the perceived intimidation of the process (Barton, 2015).
The empirical material for this study is gathered from 14 in-depth semi- structured interviews, while using the photo-elicitation technique.

Sampling and participants

For the selection of the interview participants, a purposeful sampling strategy and snowball sampling was employed based on two selection criteria (Merriam & Tisdale). Firstly, participants were required to fall within the age range of 20 to 30 years, The specific age delineation was chosen because previous research indicated that Generation Z holds strong sentiments regarding brand activism. However, since Generation Z encompasses a broad age category spanning between 2012 and 1996, with the youngest individuals being 12 years old, the decision was made to focus on the "Zillennial" cohort. Zillennials refer to a small cohort born between the early 1990s and the early 2000s. These individuals have experienced Victoria's Secret and Abercrombie & Fitch at the height of their commercial success and remain within the brands' target demographic post-rebranding. Secondly, participants should possess a basic familiarity with Abercrombie & Fitch and Victoria's Secret, albeit not necessarily an in-depth understanding of the brands.

To connect with individuals matching the sampling criterias, various posts were published on the author's social media pages, both Instagram and LinkedIn. In these posts, the aim of the study was briefly explained and asked if anyone matching the criterias was interested to participate. In total 14 interviews were conducted allowing the researcher to discover multiple perspectives and ideas. From these 14 participants, 10 participants identified as female and 4 participants identified as male. Most interviews were conducted in Dutch since this was the mother tongue of most participants. Only 2 interviews were conducted in English.

Data gathering process

As discussed before, semi-structured interviews with photo elicitation were used to gather the data. The interviews were held either in person or via Google Meet, since part of the interviewees were not able to meet in person due to location restrictions. In total 4

interviews were conducted in person. Before the interview, participants were asked to sign an informed-consent form (see appendix 2) and were asked for consent to record the audio.

The questions asked in the interview were created with the theoretical framework in mind and based on the six types of questions as described by Merriam & Tisdale. This six types of questions are 1) experience and behavior questions, 2) opinion and values questions, 3) feeling questions, 4) knowledge questions, 5) sensory questions, 6) background/demographic questions. While not all six question types were explicitly incorporated into the premade interview questions, they served as a guideline for posing probing questions. As recommended by Merriam & Tisdale, a pilot interview was conducted to assess whether the questions elicited the desired information and whether any adjustments were necessary in terms of phrasing or wording. Based on this, I altered the wording to provide more clarity and two visuals were replaced. Therefore, the pilot interviews are not taken into account when analyzing the data.

The interviews themselves were divided into three parts. At the beginning of each interview the aim of the study was presented, the participants were informed about confidentiality and background and neutral descriptive questions were asked to make the participant familiar with the interviewer and interview style. Subsequently, questions were asked about moral values the participants believe are important when deciding from which brands to buy. In the third part, the participants were prompted to respond to questions based on their personal associations with selected brands to ensure they spoke from their own experiences. The final segment involved the elicitation process, wherein participants were presented with materials depicting Victoria's Secret and Abercrombie & Fitch before and after the rebranding. This part of the interview focused on the interpretative strategies and how the consumers made sense of the brand changes. Probing questions were interspersed throughout all phases to encourage further elaboration and rationale (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). I took notes during the interview and audio recordings were transcribed within 5 days via Google Collaborate and Python.

Data analysis

Following transcription, data analysis was conducted utilizing an abductive approach as outlined by Eksell & Thelander (2014). I started the coding process from the stance that every consumer sees him/herself as a moral protagonist, based on this stance the data was coded using an open coding approach where each separate idea I found in the material received a new code. During this stage, first-level descriptive codes and in vivo codes were mostly assigned to stay as close as possible to the meaning of the original text. This process was repeated several times to ensure paying attention to valuable data (Tracy 2020). Secondly, I proceeded by combining similar first-level codes and cluster overlapping open codes together. Here, I put the material into groups which share similar characteristics,(Daymon & Holloway, 2011), categories created are summarized using descriptive labels. After this stage, I used my theoretical framework to see how these concepts relate. Hirschman & Thompson's (1997) interpretative strategies were used as categories to relate back to the way consumers interpret media. These premade codes or themes, included motivational interpretation, critical interpretation, personalized interpretation.

Throughout the coding process, constant comparison was employed to elucidate the relationships between different facets of the data, facilitating a holistic understanding of consumer interpretations within the context of activist rebranding. Furthermore, attention was paid to how inductive and deductive codes intersected and complemented each other, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in both empirical data and theoretical constructs. Within the analysis section, all participants are addressed with a pseudonym.

Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity Statement

Qualitative research inherently acknowledges the subjectivity involved in interpreting reality and underscores the researcher's pivotal role in establishing credibility (Tracy, 2020). Therefore it is important to address ethical dilemmas and issues to establish trustworthiness and address the role of the researcher (Kvale & Brinkman, 2015). Ethical integrity guided every phase of the study to ensure participant protection and respect (Merriam & Tisdell,

2016). Participants were provided with comprehensive information about the study's purpose and objectives, and their voluntary consent was obtained (Kvale & Krinkman, 2015).. To safeguard anonymity and confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from transcripts, which were securely stored on a private laptop. Furthermore, participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Despite efforts to maintain confidentiality, there remains a potential risk of participants responding in socially desirable ways, particularly concerning the nature of brand activism and the materials used for photo elicitation.

Consequently, the knowledge gained and conclusions drawn from data analysis reflect the researcher's viewpoint (Tracy, 2020). I acknowledge that my role as a researcher could have potentially led to socially desirable answers from participants. I tried reflecting on this and tried to mitigate this by explicitly stating confidentiality, anonymity and that there is no right or wrong opinion.

I also considered my own biases during the selection of the elicitation material. My primary intention was to create a realistic and nuanced representation of the brand by incorporating visuals from various campaigns, not all of which reflect explicit activist stances. But, since the selection process was influenced by my own understanding of what is a ‘realistic’ image, this may not fully align with other consumers’ perspectives.

Additionally, I recognise that my personal values and perspectives on activism may have influenced the selection process. I believe brands are capable of contributing to social change. This belief might have subconsciously guided me to choose visuals highlighting this belief.

Chapter 4 Analysis and findings

The following chapter analyzes the empirical data through the lens of consumption as moral protagonism, marketplace mythology and consumer interpretative strategies. The analysis departs from the stance that all consumers see themselves as moral protagonists navigating the marketplace based on the theory and by consuming and aligning their consumption behavior with their perceived values (Luedicke et al. 2010). The empirical material is then analyzed following an abductive approach as outlined in the methodology section.

Consumer interpretations

Brand as the moral protagonist

Various different responses and interpretations were noticeable when participants reviewed the selected materials provided and elaborated on their thoughts regarding these changes. One line of responses focused on the positive aspects of including different types of women with different body shapes into the advertisements. For instance, Charlotte commented on material from Victoria's Secret's Bare minimum campaign. She discusses her interpretation of the rebranding by Victoria's Secret, and the usage of different types of body images in the campaigns.

> 'This is much better because now I look at the picture, and I can resonate with at least one woman, and also if you are bigger, those people also exist. But that is also part of the discussion right; you could also see this some time ago with the mannequins who were 'a size bigger'. People did not like that. So, I think it helps to put this image in society to make a change' (Charlotte).

Here Charlotte indicates other consumers are sometimes opposed to the use of inclusivity and body positivity, demarcating both an us versus them approach and a moral

superiority of what he thinks should be considered ‘right’ in society. She aligns with the values of the brand, believing it is a moral quest to convince other people the values portrayed in the campaigns are morally virtues. In this sense, Charlotte aligns herself with both the counter ideology of’ body positivity’ and the moral quest of the brand to advocate for this as a normative construct (c.f Thompson, 2004) As such, Charlotte indicates that she believes the brand is doing the right thing and interprets the changes in brand meaning as something positive that can change the values surrounding body image.

Similarly, Eliza and Laurinda also discuss their interpretation of Abercrombie & Fitch’s same-sex advertisements. Here it can be implied they believe exposure to values, which they currently consider non-normative, can contribute to normalization of said values. Laurinda elaborates on that *when you see these values more often, then you also find it more logical to see it in the streets*, echoing the sentiment of Eliza:

> “I think if all companies, all clothing stores, all supermarkets, or whatever, just start featuring things you see a lot on the streets, it will slowly get into everyone's minds like, "Oh, that's just a topic, for example, LGBTQ+, that's just a topic that is now very normal and apparently accepted, so I'll just accept it too." (Eliza) .

By advocating for greater visibility of social issues in mainstream commercial spaces, both Laurinda and Eliza acknowledge the power of brands to influence cultural narratives and promote social change. Moreover, it can be implied that both participants position themselves in favor of this brand to advocate for same-sex couples and to play a proactive role in promoting acceptance and understanding (Schmidt et al., 2022). By endorsing the idea of mainstream acceptance through commercial representation, she reinforces the notion of consumption as a means of expressing and enacting moral beliefs (Thompson, 2004). By expressing support for the normalization of topics like LGBTQ+ rights, she positions herself as an agent of moral progress within the marketplace narrative. However, by implying that the more frequently consumers encounter these values, the more normalized they become, they also suggest that consumers' ideological beliefs are malleable without much resistance, with the preferred ideological beliefs of the participants being morally righteous and deserving of acceptance. The participants then contribute to establish the idea of the market mythology of

the moral protagonist by differentiating between the progressive values she is in favor of , and the conservative values she is opposed to. They imply they are positioning themselves within the narrative as advocates for progressive causes. The act of delineating between these viewpoints contributes to the construction of moral boundaries within society and therefore, delineating between progressive and conservative viewpoints reinforces the narrative of the moral protagonist as a guardian of moral integrity and social progress (Thompson, 2004).

This belief in brands' ability to evoke change is shared among consumers who view brands as equal moral protagonists striving and defending the same values. Several participants acknowledge that brands are often criticized for their advocacy behavior or are seen as inauthentic, ingenuine, and deploying activism for a marketing strategy which is emphasized by Schmidt et al. (2022). However, the interviewees which indicate they see the brand as defending their own and societal values are not very concerned with these accusations. Instead, they focus on the 'greater good' and interest of society, which is that it should not matter if the brand acts out of for-profit motivations or not. The main aim is to advocate for the right beliefs which can be traced back to the morally virtuous behavior (c.f Luidiecke et al., 2010). This is, for instance, shown in the following exert:

> "Yeah, I think they will probably criticize it again, saying it's not believable because you used to be different. But that doesn't mean you can't change your stance or perspective. So, you're choosing a different approach now... Yeah, that doesn't detract from the goal." (Charlotte)

Here, Charlotte elaborates on the changes of both Victoria's Secret and Abercrombie & Fitch. She thinks a change in position should not be criticized if it concerns a 'greater goal or aim', in this case Charlotte believes the greater goal is more inclusivity and acceptance of inclusivity in society. She sees the rebranding as a positive event as the brands now align with her values and moral quest for inclusivity.

Moreover, except for implications for society, participants did also draw upon their internal feelings and moral protagonistic values when activated during consumption and interaction with the elicitation material. Fawn talks about this aspect when she looks at material 7 showcasing the Pride campaign from the Abercrombie rebranding and talks about her own experience with buying from brands that are in line with her values. She mentions

that " *it kind of makes me feel good that I support something that also supports the things that I do, especially if they like to donate money"*. Here it can be interpreted that buying from a brand which aligns with her values serves as a reimbursement of the desired value or meaning the participant associates with the brand (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). When adopting the lens of morality, it serves as a positive affirmation of what the participant thinks is morally right, strengthening her own values and elevating the moral virtuous feeling of consuming something the participant believes in. The participant hereby also engages in the creation of ideological fantasies about the consumption practice and the mythology of the protagonist. This transformation of a mundane consumer activity into a heroic act serves to mythologize the participant's role in the consumption process, casting her as a virtuous agent striving towards positive social impact (c.f Luedicke et al. 2010).

In a similar line of thought, Phillip responds tot the specific instance of pride collections. "Sometimes it's about making people feel good about themselves because they're actually solving a problem ….*It's more about making yourself feel good, like when you buy those socks and think, 'Oh, I'm really doing something good, I'm truly a proud ally.'* (Phillip). This participant also believes people buy from these brands to feel good about themselves although being more critical towards the idea of this feeling. He underscores this by questioning whether consumers buy from these brands because they see themselves as contributors to the solution of the problem, e.g buying from the Pride collection helps with spreading awareness, or if it is merely a facade in which consumers engage in the process of mythologizing and the creation of a a new myth surrounding themselves as moral protagonists, using consumption as a means to elevate feelings of moralism without contributing to actual problem-solving. Here, it can be implicated that mythology and fantasy exist solely as a form of self-verification (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997).

Thus, by associating the consumption choices with feelings of moral righteousness and by affirming their values through purchasing decisions, the participants reinforce the mythology of the protagonist. They construct a narrative in which their behavior contributes to the mythic portrayal of themselves as a virtuous individual making a difference in the world through their consumption practices. This narrative not only validates the moral beliefs, but also reinforces the sense of the self as a protagonist.Thereby perpetuating the mythology of the moral protagonist within the context of consumption.

In conclusion, the participants view brand activism and the rebranding as a positive force that contributes to the discussion and normalization of advocated values. They believe that these values should become a norm and brands should contribute to this change, no matter what their previous stances were. Participants perceive moral values as motivational constructs and believe that these values should be inspired and aspired to within society (c.f Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). From a moral protagonist standpoint, participants view brands as a moral protagonist and their rebranding activities as morally right and consistent with the consumer and dominant interests of society. In this context, the brand contributes to the moral quest, aligning with the interviewee's perception of what is morally right or wrong, or with the dominant interests in society that the interviewee believes are right and should be advocated for. Participants see the rebranding and improved brand as a savior or defender of the values that are important to them. This is similar to Luedicke et al. (2010) study on moral protagonism as identity work that found that consumers see themselves as moral protagonists and other consumers who do not share the same values as antagonists. However, here the consumers see the brand as an equal moral protagonist.

Brand as the antagonist

Another line of responses from the participants concerned a more critical interpretation towards the usage of inclusivity within the campaigns. When Beatrice, Cleo and Tristan reacted to the visual stimuli used in the interview, the interpretations stemmed more from a perspective aimed at safeguarding their own values. This can be very explicitly seen in the example from Beatrice..

> Because how much is maybe 1% of the population? And everyone can be who they want, but does everything have to have a label? So extensively represented everywhere. Well, I have thoughts on that. You're drawing so much attention to it. If you're 'normal', then that's almost considered deviant or something. For that 1% of the population who feels different and for whom feels different, does the whole world have to adapt to that? Yeah, I think that's bullshit. (Beatrice)

In this excerpt the participant talks about the topic of gender and responds to visual 7, which shows Abercrombie & Fitch's collaboration with the Trevor Project for their Pride collection. Beatrice expresses strong negative feelings towards the inclusivity which is increasingly showcased in advertisements and other media. Here it can be interpreted that she positions herself as a defender against perceived adversaries and brands as provoker of the perceived adversaries. Her response reflects skepticism towards the prevailing narrative of inclusivity and diversity, and she challenges the myth of progressivism and questions whether the promotion of, in her eyes, non-normative identities is truly beneficial for society as a whole. Her notion of feeling *'abnormal for being normal'* further indicates she does not recognize herself in the material, feeling even alienated. Subsequently, the participant mentions the feeling that herself and other people need to adapt to a very small percentage of the population, which she considers to be not desirable. This further shows she believes the current values in society need to be kept sacred. It can also be seen as the creation of a counter-memory in which she challenges the new cultural narrative of inclusivity and acceptance by questioning the extensive representation and labeling of minority groups.

In a similar line of thought, Cleo, when seeing the same material from the Abercrombie campaign, mentions that she does not want the 'non-standard' values such as same-sex couples to be emphasized the whole time, indicating that she believes brands emphasize norms which can be seen as deviating from more conventional beliefs such as, hetero sexual couples. Thus, it can be indicated that this participant views these changes in brand identity and ideological values as inherently unvirtuous, feeling disconnected from the perceived ideology (c.f Ludiecke et al., 2010), and she is expressing a desire for less emphasis on inclusivity.

The negative response can also be seen in more implicit remarks from the participants. Tristan mentions that he believes brands should 'just stick to the basics.' Although Tristan does not explicitly express negative feelings towards the usage of more inclusivity, the main premise of his argument follows the same reasoning as Bernice's, wherein he prioritizes familiarity and conformity to established norms. Tristan's implicit rejection reflects skepticism towards the efficacy of inclusivity and diversity as (re)branding strategies, suggesting a preference for narratives that resonate with established cultural norms and conventions.

To conclude, participants such as Beatrice, Tristan, and Cleo interpret the rebranding and brand activism with more negative connotations. Whereas the participants still see themselves as moral protagonists defending the values deemed important, they see the brands as increasingly using narratives they dislike, such as LGBTQ and bodypositivity. They position themselves as critical evaluators rather than enthusiastic supporters. This characterization aligns with the role of an antagonist, as they are depicted as challenging or opposing the narrative presented by the brand. This aligns with Luidecke et al. (2010), who stated that consumers see themselves as moral protagonists and the other consumers opposing their values as the antagonists, albeit in this case, the participants extend this view of the antagonist to the brand, which in this sense moves from being used as an ideological resource to a double role where it is seen as an entity with a different moral quest. As such, the participants can reject brand activism as a repositioning tool.

Brand as the anti-hero

In addition to the interpretations where consumers feel in opposition to the brands, some participants seem skeptical of the change in narratives the brands try to convey by using different narratives and brand identities but still believe in the "greater good" it brings. Here, the rebranding activities were interpreted with a critical perspective, often involving skepticism about the financial aspects of the activist movementIn this line, participants assumed that brands used the LGBTQ community and different body types to increase their profits and remain relevant.To illustrate, Holly and Eliza mention they think it is difficult for brands to be perceived as genuine because a brand's main aim is to make a profit. Here Holly mentions "*when brands suddenly turn 180 degrees to the other side I think it's more of a marketing thing.*" This can be interpreted that Holly and Eliza think that brands strategically capitalize on social causes for marketing purposes and are cynical towards corporate motives and challenge the authenticity of brands' activism efforts. Brands that are perceived as exploiting social causes for marketing purposes are viewed as villains in the market mythology, reinforcing consumer skepticism and distrust. To further illustrate, Phillip mentions the following:

> "And there's also a bit of a marketing model behind it. Indeed, a lot of money is made during Pride month. So many companies have pride collections and

all. And the other 11 months of the year... then they just sell things made in China by Uyghur children." (Phillip)

Phillip specifically voiced his critique when looking at the Abercrombie & Fitch Pride campaign. He believes the profit perspectives have more influence on the brand, indicating he believes a form of hypocrisy is at play. Namely, caring about inclusivity but not caring about other ethical considerations. From this perspective, he seems to see the brand as an antagonist, exploiting social causes for financial gain.

These participants show in a very explicit way that they are suspicious of the rebranding activities, specifically mentioning the for-profit motives such as 'inclusion is good for marketing' and the fact that they make money from brand initiatives such as merchandise for pride, which is line with other research on the authenticity of brand activism.. Nevertheless, they seem not to question the use of inclusivity or body positivity, which indicates they align with the values. This is further illustrated by Katheryn who talks about the creation of pride collections and Black History Month collections by Abercrombie & Fitch.

"I just said that I always wonder if a company does it because they actually want to support it, but either way, they do support it. Whether they do it because they truly believe in it or not, the effect is that they are seen as a company that supports it, and that others will see them as someone who supports it, and that's always good, of course." Even though being curious about the reason behind the creation of pride collections,' (Katheryn)

Katheryn indicates that regardless of brands' motivations, their public support for social issues enhances their reputation and fosters positive consumer perceptions. Despite questioning the brands' motives, she recognizes the symbolic value of using inclusivity which is in alignment with her progressive values. Indicating there is a duality at play.

Not all interviewees have such explicit opinions but do showcase criticism towards the change. Jeffrey for example mentions the following: *"It's kind of weird in a way... saying you support someone's sexuality and then selling all kinds of products related to it. Well, that's, I find it a bit contradictory."* This indirectly highlights the questioning and rationale behind brands (in this case Abercrombie & Fitch) use of pride month for clothing items. It can be

seen as a concern about brands potentially exhibiting a double standard by advocating for certain values while simultaneously profiting from those same values. This also prompts a consideration of authenticity, an aspect frequently studied in conjunction with brand activism (c.f Schmidt et al. 20220.

Thus, the participants interpret the use of brand activism as a rebranding tool as both critical and aspirational (c.f Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). They showcase skepticism towards the motive of the rebrand but are not opposed to the values advocated for by the brands. These critical and motivational interpretation strategies are in line with Hirschman and Thompson (1997) consumer interpretative strategies. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, they differentiated between the critical interpretation which sees the consumer as an active participant in the marketplace, questioning the conformity to the consumption culture, and the motivational interpretation in which the consumer interprets the media as representing an ideal self. In this case, the ideal self can be seen as an ideal situation which aligns with the moral quest of the consumers. However, in Hirschman & Thompson's theory, consumers only used one interpretation strategy at the time. I propose that there the consumers use both the critical and motivational interpretation simultaneously, leading to seeing the brand as an anti-hero. This morality play type possess characteristics that are morally ambiguous, flawed, or even contrary to societal norms. Despite their shortcomings, anti-heroes may still be the protagonists of their stories, blurring the lines between right and wrong. It is therefore a combination between the moral protagonist and antagonist (c.f Luedicke et al. 2010).

Reflection on the three interpretation strategies

This short overview encapsulates the primary findings concerning the interpretation strategies discovered. Three distinct interpretation strategies emerge through the moral protagonist lens: the brand as a moral protagonist, an antagonist, or the newly proposed category of an anti-hero. These interpretation strategies can be further linked to those described by Hirschman and Thompson, 1997. The brand as the moral protagonist is seen as a motivational interpretation, the brand as an antagonist as a critical interpretation, and the brand as the anti-hero as a combination of the motivational and critical interpretation. By interpreting the brands based on a differentiation between moralistic values, the participants transform a mundane consuming activity into a heroic interpretation, mythologizing the

consumer's and brand's role in the consumer culture (Thompson, 2004). Activist rebranding provides a catalyst for these interpretations. However, these consumer interpretations are also influenced by societal pressure and lead to different dilemmas and tensions.

Societal influence

Social influence greatly affects both consumer actions and the stances taken by brands. Many interviewees mentioned social pressure as a big influence on how they believe brands profile and position themselves, but also as a way in which consumers themselves behave and adhere or resist to these social norms. In case of the rebranding activities, the interviewees mentioned that they perceived the brands are pressured by society to become more activist and therefore try to rebrand themselves. Belle and Kimberley both discuss this influence by mentioning social pressure. "*I think it just comes back to the social pressure that companies feel to change with what's considered very important in society, and now that's diversity and inclusivity.*"(Belle) and "*I do think companies are more ethically responsible, but I also think it's because it's kind of expected, not necessarily because they want to do it themselves.*"(Kimberley).

From this perspective, Belle and Kimberley express a belief that brands are responding to social pressure to align with prevailing values of diversity and inclusivity, indicating a shift in societal attitudes toward ethical responsibility in business practices. conforming to societal expectations suggests a tension between genuine ethical commitment and perceived performative activism. This tension is also indicated when Jordan and Fawn comment on the rebranding of Victoria's Secret. They both mention they think the brand has become generic. "And because this is expected of everyone, everyone also starts doing the same thing, and then everyone also becomes a bit the same." (Jordan). Also Fawn mentions that she believes Victoria Secret now looks like 'any other brand'. Thus, both participants indicate by rebranding as activists, Victoria's Secret has lost its differentiation factor. This indicates the loss of the brand's mythos and of its once-iconic status. Jordan draws further on to this by implying that brands change because of a cancel culture. As such, Jordan mentions the following:

> ‘But we also somewhat live in the age of cancel culture nowadays. And I believe they need to be cautious not to be too firm in their true beliefs. They may find themselves complying again because they fear ending up in such cancel culture and facing boycotts for statements or acts deemed unacceptable.’ (Jordan)

This indicates the cancel culture is in play because consumers are increasingly seen as stakeholders wielding the power in contemporary society. When brands do not adhere to desired values created by consumers and society, they face the risk of being canceled. This reflects an awareness of the power dynamics inherent in modern consumer culture, where brands are susceptible to public scrutiny and criticism for actions or statements deemed unacceptable (c.f Schmitt, 2022). In this sense the context of culture can be seen as a contributing factor to the myth of consumption as a moral protagonist. By rejecting the values or ideas presented by brands, the consumers reproduce the myth as they contrast mythic narratives of values or actions deemed good versus evil. From this perspective, the society and the pressure it opposes can be seen as the rhetorical tool to connect their consumption practices and personal identities to a larger, collectively shared moral project (Leudicke et al. 2010), and the consumption choices are formed collectively based on the dominant ideology in society forming a moral crusade against brands who threat society with their old traditional values thus defy societal norms.

This risk of ‘getting canceled’ does not only affect the brand but also the consumer but can be seen as dialectic. Multiple consumers mention that they are afraid of a cancel culture as well which showcases they believe there is a pressure to conform to the social norms and a perceived inability to speak freely.

> In my view, a lot of companies and people participate in this nowadays. People are afraid to speak up. Even in real life, when you're having a drink at the bar, if you say something that goes against the grain, you'll get some strange looks, especially from certain groups, and you see this more often with the left-leaning side as well. (Tristan)

Here the participant showcases that he thinks it is not socially accepted to have an opinion which deviates from what is considered socially acceptable. This restricts the participants in voicing their true opinion, even if this opinion is not in line with what other people believe. This also creates a dilemma about the pressure to conform. Participants

believe the cancel culture and pressure to conform with emerging inclusive norms is because of an increased exposure to these opinions via social media. This specific example is seen by the answers from Eliza.

> "I think maybe social media has helped to address these kinds of topics. So what I'm saying is that I still don't think about it. Yeah, when there are only super slim women, then I notice that. But when it comes to color or something, that's less noticeable for me. I never really thought about it. But then, I think that became a much bigger thing because of social media, that you also encounter a lot of feedback yourself, so to speak. So I think a much larger group has come forward to say something about it."(Eliza)

From this excerpt, it can be indicated that social media works as an amplifier for criticism which consumers have towards brands. These criticisms are easily shared, making it accessible to a wider population. Here the media amplification can be seen as a fruitful ground which has given rise to the countercultural values which rose in opposition to the prevalent consumer ideologies of exclusivity, promoting new marketplace ethos focusing on inclusivity (Thomspon, 2004). When brands do not adopt these new inclusivity ideologies, the media is easily used to criticize and react to. Making the brand easily the antagonist by amplifying the same moral values are not shared. This thus contributed to the activation of consumers and their more critical approach to brands and their marketing efforts. At the same time, it works as an amplifier for criticism which consumers have towards brands.

Lastly, in a similar note, Beatrice mentions that the media also has another amplifying effect which is that if it is covered by media it becomes emphasized since it receives attention. She believes that *'as a company, you almost can't do otherwise, because whenever you stumble over that, everyone knows about it. I think the more attention you give it, the more it grows. Everything you highlight grows.* This highlights trending receives even more attention because of the initial attention it got. In case of activism, the more attention issues get, the more important it is in society, the more brands will reflect these issues and change themselves according to the social interest.

Through the lens of moral protagonism, consumers position themselves as moral protagonists within a broader societal discourse, where their consumption choices become a means of asserting and validating their ethical stances. The notion of societal influence,

particularly through social pressure and culture, underscores the power dynamics at play (c.f Thomspon, 2004 and Schmitt, 2022),, wherein brands are compelled to align with prevailing moral imperatives or risk facing backlash. This dynamic highlights the evolving role of brands as moral agents within society, wherein their actions and messaging are scrutinized against the backdrop of collective moral expectations. Moreover, the amplifying effect of social media serves as a catalyst for consumer activism, enabling individuals to voice dissent and exert influence on brands' ethical conduct (Schmitt, 2022). Thus, both consumers and brands navigate the complex terrain of societal influence, asserting their moral agency while negotiating the pressures of conformity and societal expectations.

Tensions and moral dilemmas

an idealized society vs a reflection of reality

Based on the aforementioned interpretations of the brand as a moral protagonist, antagonist, or anti-hero, various tensions and dilemmas were noticeable when participants reviewed the elicitation materials and talked about their own experiences. One of these tensions was brought to light when the participants indicated they see the brand as a moral protagonist advocating for the same values. For example, The participants elaborated on both brands used in the photo elicitation part and how the changed ways of displaying body images and inclusivity can be seen as a new fantasy the brand seeks to convey. Whereas before the rebranding of Victoria Secret, the participants thought this fantasy or ideal was illustrated in the type of body or ‘aesthetic’ displayed, which used to be about aspiring to adhere to an ideal self-concept (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). For instance, the appearance of the Victoria Secret models and Angels is seen as the ideal type of body, creating a longing and desire to the something participants deemed as unattainable. To illustrate, Katheryn expressed that the unattainable still is the ideal when she is looking at material X. *“for me at least, that remains the ideal, because it's sort of like, yeah, I think, 'Oh, that would be really special and nice if I looked like that, but we'll never achieve it, so there's always this sort of longing or something.'"* This excerpt underpins the aspirational construct some participants identify with and find appealing to the brand narrative and where the myth around the brand resolves serve as sources of motivation, prompting individuals to invest personal time, effort, and make

sacrifices to attain a desired body type or lifestyle (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). As well as how the participant creates its ideological fantasie about the desire of the consumer and the outcome of the consumption (Schmitt et al.2010).This highlights the paradoxical nature of aspirational imagery in consumer culture. From a market mythology standpoint, this paradox stems from the tension between the mythic ideal presented by brands and the reality of consumers' lived experiences. While consumers may aspire to embody these idealized images, they are acutely aware of the inherent impossibility of achieving such standards, leading to feelings of longing and inadequacy.

Similarly, other participants mention similar thoughts when talking from their own experience and about other brands. Fawn noted that most brands *weren't focusing on anything and now they're like, oh, we need to do everything and represent everyone".* As such, the new ideal brands try to convey does not resolve about the consumer itself per se, but can be seen as a type of ideal where brands want to contribute to and adhere to a more 'inclusive' society where the brand is striving to represent everyone and make everyone feel values. As Jeffrey mentions, *"I don't think they really have one ideal, one image, so to speak, that they portray. This is already hyper-inclusive, especially when you look at this... But in a way, that also plays into an ideal of wanting to represent everything."*. Thus it indicates that brands transition from an excluding narrative to a 'hyper inclusive' narrative meaning brands aim to represent a broad spectrum of diverse identities and perspectives in their marketing and communication efforts. In this sense, it can be seen as the creation of a new motivational interpretation, one where the brand is seen as morally right, signaling an alternate reality where the focus is on acceptance of everyone regardless of personal values and looks, thereby also positioning themselves as advocates of this displayed narrative and defenders of these values.

However, it can be said that this hyper inclusive reality sometimes stretches the boundaries of inclusivity. The brand's focus shifts from the 'everyday standard' to minority groups, neglecting the majority. This example is shown by Holly who illustrates this by mentioning *"That they only really have either very thin models or truly plus-size models. You think, 'But 80% of society still falls in between. So you still don't see them represented.'"* This participant earlier mentioned she believes the brand was doing the right thing by using more inclusive advertisements. So here, although she is seeing the brand as a moral protagonist, the participant still sees this moral quest as defender of the values that more body types should be

represented, but also feels disconnected from the brand since the representation is still adhering to an idealized image of society and not as a reflection of reality. The pursuit of this hyper-inclusive ideal can sometimes be perceived as tokenistic or superficial, with brands merely paying lip service to diversity without addressing systemic issues This perspective aligns with Thomson and Haytko's (1997) view that consumers can feel both alienated and engaged with brands promoting dominant narratives. Despite their critical stance, participants still conform to these new narratives.

Brand responsibilization vs personal values

Another line of response noted from the participants involved a tension about brand responsibilization. Similar to the participants who showcase themselves as defenders of values, a critical interpretation can emerge towards the brands. But, this does not imply opposition to all activist rebranding activities. This is exemplified by passages from participants Eliza and Tristan.

> But at a certain point... Being overweight is just very unhealthy. That's a difference I do see. But promoting all kinds of sexual orientations and genders, that's fine with me. But at some point... I do start to think about... Weight and so on, it just has to stop (Eliza).

> And I think that's just unhealthy. And I don't think that should be encouraged. We shouldn't reason from a standpoint where everyone should feel like everything is okay. Because not everything is okay. In my opinion, anyway. Yeah. For example, that's mainly about being overweight from my perspective. I don't think that's something that should be encouraged. (Tristan).

Based on these passages, it can be seen that the participants who are opposed to some values displayed by the rebranding are tied to two aspects. First, the participants show that the incorporation of plus size models is undesirable as it could promote unhealthy behaviors. They argue against the idea that everything should be accepted or deemed as positive, highlighting their belief that not all behaviors are inherently good. Here, the participants position themselves as a moral protagonist advocating for health and wellness, while also

critiquing societal attitudes and ideologies that may endorse or overlook unhealthy behaviors and thus creating a countermemory by resisting the brand-driven myth of body positivity and inclusivity, advocating for a different set of values centered on health and wellness. (c.f Thompson, 2004). It implies a sense of moral judgment and a desire to uphold certain standards of well-being, positioning them in opposition to the normalization or promotion of unhealthy habits (Luedicke et al. 2010).

The second aspect is elaborated on by Jeffrey who mentions *"brands just shouldn't go too far. You need to draw a line at what you know is good. And not necessarily draw a line at what you know will be accepted."* Here the participant depicts that brands further go to extremes by pushing the boundaries to what is still expected and not to what is right. The participant's emphasis on "what is good" suggests that brands hold a significant influence, setting an ideal for the mainstream consumer and showcasing what is right or wrong (Thompson, 2004). In this sense, the consumers believe the brands holds a sense of power which is also described by Thompson, 2004, who states that when consumers form relationships to multiple discourses of power which circulate in everyday life, that is, a discourse that seeks to channel consumers' identities and lifestyles in a particular ideological direction. Thus, for these participants the new body standard of promoting people which they consider wrong is a ideological direction they want to reject, even though the overall idea of the activist movement and body positivity idea is something that should be strived towards. Resulting in an ideological paradox of mythic contrasts (c.f Thompson, 2004).

In analyzing the ideological paradoxes and contradictions emerging from the text through the theoretical framework of moral protagonism and consumer ideology, it becomes clear that participants have multifaceted and at times conflicting perspectives regarding activist rebranding. While some participants position themselves as moral protagonists, defending certain values and advocating for social change through their consumption choices, they also grapple with ethical boundaries and contradictory beliefs. For instance, participants may express support for inclusivity and body positivity while simultaneously critiquing certain representations as promoting unhealthy behaviors. This highlights the tension between aspirational ideals and pragmatic concerns within consumer ideologies. Ultimately, the analysis unveils the intricate interplay among consumer ideologies, brand influence, and societal norms in shaping attitudes toward activist rebranding endeavors.

Internalized moral dilemmas

The final tension identified centers on the consumers' efforts to manage a fundamental paradox of contemporary society which says that consumers must construct a unique self image or sense of individuality while at the same time conforming to the cultural code (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). To illustrate, Katheryn's narrative offers a good example:

> "But for me, I think there's still this stamp of those standards, and yeah, it's nice to see a woman on there who isn't just XS, but maybe that's just a personal feeling for me, but I still prefer to compare that to wanting to be thin. Because I still feel like that's more beautiful, that it remains the beauty ideal, even when there are people next to it who don't have that.. Whereas if it were someone else up there, I think, yeah, I wouldn't long for that, even though I think she's a really beautiful woman, so it's actually quite strange now that I think about it, that I find that less appealing, even for myself." (Kateryn))

In this insightful passage, Katheryn explains her own perspective on body image and how her perspective resembles the ideal and aspiring image the brand used to display. However, even with the new social norms advocating for different body types and that there is no 'ideal body type' the speaker still experiences an internal struggle which stems from a preference for a thin body type, influenced by 'old' societal beauty standards, despite acknowledging the importance of body diversity promoted by the brand's rebranding efforts. Here it can be interpreted that the individual's struggle exemplifies the tension between aligning with brands' progressive messaging (acting as a moral protagonist) and resisting or feeling discomfort with these messages due to personal beliefs (acting as an antagonist). This leads to an internalized moral dilemma where the interviewee is aware of the internal struggle which results in confusion. It thus reflects a simultaneous myriad of opposing values e.g good versus bad (c.f Schmitt, 2022). Similarly, Charlotte also implicitly talks about an internalized moral dilemma from an implicit point of view about same sex-couples.

> "That a minority, or yeah, they do exist, of course. And they should also get a platform or be promoted. But yeah, I find that sometimes... Does it always have to be so obvious? On TV, for example, you always see two men or two women... ...then I think,

yeah, I wouldn't walk down the street like that with my partner either. There's a lot of emphasis being placed on it now. And with these men kissing, yeah, it's intense. Look, I'm fine with it. It doesn't bother me much. But I think, yeah, I wouldn't walk down the street like that with my partner either. I don't know, it's good that we're being confronted with it, in a way."

This participant addresses that she thinks there is a lot of emphasis on same-sex couples when reviewing the December campaign from Abercrombie & Fitch 2020. This suggests a tension or a dilemma in the personal values or preferences and the advocated norms, similar to what Katheryn was experiencing. The internalized moral dilemma experienced by the participants does not involve ideological confrontation with others or contrasting themselves with perceived traits or behaviors of mainstream consumers, as discussed in the theory by Luedicke et al. (2010). Instead, the contrast and ideological confrontation takes place within the participants' sense of self and moral stance. In this sense, the moral crusade by which consumers normally protect themselves from feelings of disconnection, doubt, alienation, and insecurity, becomes the catalyst of this feeling of disconnection, doubt, alienation, and insecurity.

This results in the conception of 'moral dilemmas' when the preference or desired self of the consumer is not in line with the societal norm. It can be seen as a paradox where the desire to construct a unique self-image clashes with the pressure to conform to societal expectations. While brands increasingly use activist stance to align with values and societal movements, consumers' internalized moral dilemmas complicate this narrative. Activist rebranding thus becomes a battleground where consumers negotiate their moral values amidst competing influences. Hirschman & Thompson's concept of individualizing interpretation provides a valuable framework for understanding this dynamic, where the individualizing interpretation can be seen as the internal struggles as individuals reconcile their moral compass with the values espoused by brands.

Reflection on the tensions and moral dilemmas

From the interviews, it becomes apparent that there are three tensions which take place; ’ an idealized society vs a reflection of reality’, ‘brand responsibilization vs personal values’ and ‘internalized moral dilemmas’. These tensions reflect the interpretation of the

participants as paradoxical, showcasing both identifying and individualizing interpretations simultaneously (c.f Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). Here all tensions exemplify what Hirschman & Thompson (1997) depict as identifying, where there is a desirable construct, at the same time individualizing represent con struct a unique self image or sense of individuality while at the same time conforming to the cultural code presented in the mass media and embodied in tangible products. These tensions demonstrate the complex interplay between the identifying and individualizing processes. On one hand, consumers strive to align with the moral protagonist myth propagated by brands, which embodies desirable societal constructs. On the other hand, they seek to maintain their individuality and personal values, even when these conflict with the cultural codes presented by the brands. This dual process of identification and individualization highlights how marketplace mythologies and the moral protagonist narrative influence consumer behavior, perceptions, and identities.

Chapter 5 Discussion and conclusion

This chapter concludes the study's findings, marking the culmination of this thesis. It outlines the research's broader theoretical and practical contributions, along with suggestions for future research and limitations.

This thesis departed from the research problem of 1) an oversimplified normative view of rebranding and power, which is problematic in a time where power is increasingly wielded by consumers, 2) a lack of consumer-focused studies on brand identity change, and 3) an oversimplified view on brand activism which is limited to authenticity. It derived from the aim to provide deep insights into the nuanced ways in which consumers engage with and interpret brand activism initiatives implemented by organizations undergoing rebranding efforts. By examining the influence of interpretative strategies and consumer ideologies in shaping consumer interpretations of brand activism, thereby providing insights for both theoretical understanding and practical implications in the realm of strategic communication and brand management.

Restated research questions:

1) How do consumers interpret and make sense of brand activism within the context of rebranding efforts, considering their roles as moral protagonists and the influence of marketplace mythologies?
2) In what ways do consumers engage with and respond to brand activism initiatives during rebranding processes?

Discussion and contribution

In the analysis, it is evident that consumers navigate the marketplace as active consumers who are able to critically evaluate organizations' rebranding strategies. Grounded in the notion that consumers act as moral protagonists who base their consumption on their ideological preferences, and therefore defending values important to them, it becomes

apparent that consumers use moralistic narratives and mythic structures to imbue their consumption choices with deeper moral significance and to construct identities that align with their perceived moral virtues (c.f Luedicke et al. 2010). As such, I conclude that consumers interpret brand activism and activist rebranding endeavors through the moral protagonist lens as: the brand as a moral protagonist, an antagonist, or the newly proposed category of an anti-hero. These consumer interpretations are influenced by dominant consumer ideologies and social pressure which both work as a dialectical construct, influencing not only the consumer but also the brand. As such, three tensions and dilemmas arrive. The most contributing conclusions are further discussed in the following section.

Firstly, this study concludes that consumers make sense and interpret activist branding and rebranding as either a moral protagonist, an antihero or an antagonist influenced by the individual's moral values and societal ideologies. When consumers interpret the brand as a moral protagonist, they align themselves with the values of the brand and their moral quest to convince people the values portrayed in the campaigns are morally virtue. Activist rebranding is seen as a positive force that contributes to the discussion and normalization of advocated values. Conversely, when the consumer interprets the brand as an antagonist, they position themselves as a defender against perceived adversaries and brands as provoker of the perceived adversaries, while the interpretation of the anti-hero may exhibit ambivalence or skepticism toward the brand's activism. While these findings find some overlap in current literature such on brand authenticity and the notion that consumers are more critical towards the genuinity of brand activism (Schmidt et al. 2022), the result to backlash, boycotts, and criticism when perceived inauthentic (Pöyry, & Laaksonen, 2022) and the rise of the internet as a powerful tool for consumer power (Holt, 2002). This study also extends current frameworks and contributes to new perspectives.

While the original model by Luedicke et al. (2010), only investigated the consumer as either a moral protagonist or antagonist and allocated the brand as an ideological resource that both these consumer groups interacted with and derived their meaning from, this study highlights that consumers also perceive the brand itself in these roles. Thus, moving beyond viewing the brand solely as an ideological resource, consumers see it as an entity that shares or does not share their moral quest. With this, the consumers also create ideological fantasies about the consumption practice and the mythology of the protagonist (c.f Thompson, 2004). By associating consumption choices with feelings of moral righteousness and affirming their

values through purchasing decisions, the participants reinforce the mythology of the protagonist. They construct a narrative in which their behavior contributes to the mythic portrayal of themselves as a virtuous individual making a difference in the world through their consumption practices. This narrative not only validates the moral beliefs, but also reinforces the sense of the self as a protagonist. Thereby perpetuating the mythology of the moral protagonist within the context of consumption.

Furthermore, the identified types of interpretation strategies are akin to and overlap with Hirschman & Thompson's (1997) description of consumer interpretations. However, despite these scholars noting that interpretation depends on the type of media interacted with and thus, the interpretation strategy varies depending. They argue that consumers only employ one of these interpretation strategies. As such, this research contributes to these interpretation strategies by illustrating that consumers use interpretation strategies simultaneously. In the case of rebranding, consumers employ both motivational and critical interpretation, leading to the brand being interpreted as the anti-hero, meaning as a brand which contributes to the moral quest but at the same time has ulterior motives such as financial gains. This dual perspective allows consumers to recognize the brand's positive contributions while also remaining vigilant of potential inconsistencies or hidden agendas. It also underscores the active agency of consumers, who demonstrate the ability to engage critically with rebranding efforts while simultaneously recognizing aspirational elements

This finding also has considerable overlap with the focus of previous research on brand authenticity and the notion that consumers are more critical towards the genuinity of brand activism (Banet-Weiser, 2012). This has also been found in previous literature surrounding brand activism. Previous researchers have suggested aligning the brand’s activist cause with the brand identity and values to foster better buy-in of consumers by mostly focusing on the authenticity aspect of brand activism (Mirzaei et al.2022). However, thereby it is suggested that the values the brand uses to advocate for are inherently right. This diminishes the moral values from the consumer as a passive by-product that can be convinced of the authenticity of the activism by something as brand-cause fit (Ahmad et al. (2024).Other researchers, such as Verlegh (2023), do acknowledge that consumer reactions are dependent on whether the brand's stance aligns with their personal beliefs, which is in line with the findings from this research.

Secondly, this research identified three tensions and dilemmas that consumers perceive when interpreting the activist rebranding; *idealized society vs reflecting reality, brands responsibilization and internalized moral dilemmas*. The first dilemma stems from the brand's moral quest to aspire to an 'hyper inclusive society' (a more 'inclusive' society where the brand is striving to represent everyone and make everyone feel valued), which in turn does not reflect the reality, which leads to a feeling of disconnection from the brand, in line with (Thompson & Hayko).. The second dilemma is about the brand's responsibilization, where consumers believe brands hold a significant influence, setting an ideal for the mainstream consumer and showcasing what is right or wrong (c.f Thompson, 2004). They resist certain myths and advocate for a different set of values. Participants may express support for certain values while simultaneously critiquing certain representations in line with these values. This highlights the tension between aspirational ideals and pragmatic concerns within consumer ideologies. The third dilemma focuses on the consumers' internalized struggles. This exemplifies the tension between aligning with brands' progressive messaging (acting as a moral protagonist) and resisting or feeling discomfort with these messages due to personal beliefs (acting as an antagonist). The contrast and ideological confrontation takes place within the participants' sense of self and moral stance. Here, the rebranding can be seen as the *catalyst* of these internalized dilemmas.

Thirdly, this study found that social influence greatly affects both consumers and brands in a dialectical way. The rise of a cancel culture restricts both consumers and brands in voicing their opinions , as the actors are at risk of being canceled. This echoes what is found in previous research, such in Holt (2002) .This pressure creates a powerful impetus for brands to engage in activist rebranding (Merrilees & Miller, 2014), as they seek to demonstrate their commitment to social responsibility and relevance in the eyes of consumers. In their quest to conform to societal norms and avoid controversy, brands risk homogenizing their identities, blurring the lines of differentiation that once set them apart in the marketplace. As a result, consumers perceive these changes in brand identity as losing its competitive distinctiveness, and note that by listening to the social pressure brands all become the same. This tension between societal pressures and consumer expectations underscores the complex interplay between brands, consumers, and the broader cultural landscape It forms a paradox of maintaining relevance while preserving their unique brand identities.

Suggestions for further research

Further research could delve into the nuanced ways in which consumers negotiate their moral values and beliefs when confronted with activist rebranding efforts by for example investigating the moral dilemmas present within the consumer. This investigation could delve into the specific moral dilemmas that consumers encounter as they engage with brands' activist initiatives. By understanding these dilemmas, researchers can gain deeper insights into the sense making and decision-making mechanisms that shape consumers' responses to brand activism. Additionally, there is an opportunity to examine how brands can effectively integrate activism into their strategies without compromising their competitive values.

Limitations

Despite the thoroughness and richness of the research methodology and theoretical framework employed in this study, there are several limitations to take into consideration. Firstly, particularly concerning diverse consumer perspectives on activist rebranding initiatives. A broader and more diverse participant pool could have enriched the study by capturing a wider range of interpretations and experiences.

Secondly, even though the elicitation methods were deemed useful and the participants replied positively to the process, there are limitations to consider, such as the selection of visual images. Although the researcher strived for objectivity during the selection of the images, the choices reflect the researcher’s views and understanding of brand activism. And while helpful in sparking conversation, the selection might have unintentionally directed participants' interpretations towards specific images.

Lastly, despite efforts to establish a supportive and non-judgmental environment, by elaborating on anonymity, participants may have been influenced by their desire to present themselves in a favorable light or conform to perceived societal norms regarding brand activism.

References

Aboelenien, A., & Nguyen, C. (2023). From Dr. Seuss to Barbie's cancellation: brand's institutional work in response to changed market logics. *Journal of Brand Management*, *31*(2), 108–125. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-023-00339-4

Ahmad, F., Guzman, F. G. a. G., & Al-Emran, M. (2024). Brand activism and the consequence of woke washing. *Journal of Business Research*, *170*, 114362. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.114362

Anees-Ur-Rehman, M., Wong, H. Y., & Hossain, M. (2016). The progression of brand orientation literature in twenty years: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Brand Management*, *23*(6), 612–630. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-016-0008-2

Arnould, E. J., & Thompson, C. J. (2005). Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty years of research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *31*(4), 868–882. https://doi.org/10.1086/426626

Arnould, E. J., & Thompson, C. J. (2007). Consumer culture Theory (And we really mean theoretics. In *Research in consumer behavior* (pp. 3–22). https://doi.org/10.1016/s0885-2111(06)11001-7

Askegaard, S., & Linnet, J. T. (2011). Towards an epistemology of consumer culture theory. *Marketing Theory*, *11*(4), 381–404. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593111418796

Balmer, J. M., & Podnar, K. (2021). Corporate brand orientation: Identity, internal images, and corporate identification matters. *Journal of Business Research*, *134*, 729–737. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.06.016

Barton, K. C. (2015). Elicitation techniques: getting people to talk about ideas they don't usually talk about. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, *43*(2), 179–205. https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2015.1034392

Bolhuis, W., De Jong, M. D., & Van Den Bosch, A. L. (2015). Corporate rebranding: effects of corporate visual identity changes on employees and consumers. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, *24*(1), 3–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2015.1067244

Carrington, M., Chatzidakis, A., Goworek, H., & Shaw, D. (2020). Consumption Ethics: A review and analysis of future directions for interdisciplinary research. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *168*(2), 215–238. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-020-04425-4

Cayla, J., & Arnould, E. J. (2008). A cultural approach to branding in the global marketplace. *Journal of International Marketing*, *16*(4), 86–112. https://doi.org/10.1509/jimk.16.4.86

Cammarota, A., D'Arco, M., Marino, V., & Resciniti, R. (2023). BRAND ACTIVISM: A literature review and future research agenda. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, *47*(5), 1669–1691. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12967

Clark-IbáÑez, M. (2004). Framing the social world with Photo-Elicitation interviews. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *47*(12), 1507–1527. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764204266236

Cloutier, C., & Ravasi, D. (2020). Identity Trajectories: Explaining Long-Term Patterns of Continuity and Change in Organizational identities. *Academy of Management Journal*, *63*(4), 1196–1235. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2017.1051

Daymon, C., & Holloway, I. (2010). Qualitative research methods in public relations and marketing communications. In *Routledge eBooks*. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203846544

Da Silveira, C., Lages, C., & Simões, C. (2013). Reconceptualizing brand identity in a dynamic environment. *Journal of Business Research*, *66*(1), 28–36. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2011.07.020

Davis, S., & Dacin, P. A. (2022). This brand is who I am. . . or is it? Examining changes in motivation to maintain brand attachment. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, *31*(7), 1125–1139. https://doi.org/10.1108/jpbm-02-2020-2745

Edelman (2023)— *Brand Trust 2023*. (n.d.). Edelman. https://www.edelman.com/trust/2023/trust-barometer/special-report-brand-trust

Eksell, J., & Thelander, Å. (2014). *Kvalitativa metoder i strategisk kommunikation*. Lund University. https://portal.research.lu.se/en/publications/kvalitativa-metoder-i-strategisk-kommunikation

Ellen, B. (2023, October 22). Sorry, Victoria's Secret, your 'woke' rebrand failed because it was performative pants. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/oct/22/sorry-victorias-secret-your-woke-rebrand-failed-because-it-was-performative-pants

Fritz, K., Schoenmueller, V., & Bruhn, M. (2017). Authenticity in branding – exploring antecedents and consequences of brand authenticity. *European Journal of Marketing*, *51*(2), 324–348. https://doi.org/10.1108/ejm-10-2014-0633

Fournier, S., & Alvarez, C. (2013). Relating badly to brands. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *23*(2), 253–264. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2013.01.004

Gaustad, T., Samuelsen, B. M., Warlop, L., & Fitzsimons, G. J. (2018). The perils of self‐brand connections: Consumer response to changes in brand meaning. *Psychology & Marketing*, *35*(11), 818–829. https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21137

Gaustad, T., Samuelsen, B. M., Warlop, L., & Fitzsimons, G. J. (2019). Too much of a good thing? Consumer response to strategic changes in brand image. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, *36*(2), 264–280. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2019.01.001

Gioia, D. A., & Thomas, J. B. (1996). Identity, Image, and Issue Interpretation: Sensemaking during Strategic Change in Academia. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *41*(3), 370. https://doi.org/10.2307/2393936

Gotsi, M., & Andriopoulos, C. (2007). Understanding the pitfalls in the corporate rebranding process. *Corporate Communications*, *12*(4), 341–355. https://doi.org/10.1108/13563280710832506

Hirschman, E. C., & Thompson, C. J. (1997). Why Media Matter: Toward a Richer Understanding of Consumers' Relationships with Advertising and Mass Media. *Journal of Advertising*, *26*(1), 43–60. https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1997.10673517

Holt, D. B. (2002). Why do brands cause trouble? A dialectical theory of consumer culture and branding. ˜*the* œ*Journal of Consumer Research/Journal of Consumer Research*, *29*(1), 70–90. https://doi.org/10.1086/339922

Iglesias, O., Landgraf, P., Ind, N., Markovic, S., & Koporčić, N. (2020). Corporate brand identity co-creation in business-to-business contexts. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *85*, 32–43. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2019.09.008

Iglesias, O., Ind, N., & Schultz, M. (2022). The Routledge companion to corporate branding. In *Routledge eBooks*. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003035749

Joo, B. R., & Kim, H. (2021). Repositioning luxury fashion brands as intentional agents: the roles of consumer envy and admiration. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, *25*(4), 606–624. https://doi.org/10.1108/jfmm-06-2019-0135

Joseph, A., Gupta, S., Wang, Y., & Schoefer, K. (2021). Corporate rebranding: An internal perspective. *Journal of Business Research*, *130*, 709–723. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.04.020

Kapoor, S., & Banerjee, S. (2020). On the relationship between brand scandal and consumer attitudes: A literature review and research agenda. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, *45*(5), 1047–1078. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12633

Kennedy, E., & Guzmán, F. (2017). When perceived ability to influence plays a role: brand co-creation in Web 2.0. ˜*the* œ*Journal of Product & Brand Management/Journal of Product & Brand Management*, *26*(4), 342–350. https://doi.org/10.1108/jpbm-04-2016-1137

Kennedy, E., & Guzmán, F. (2020). No matter what you do, I still love you: an examination of consumer reaction to brand transgressions. ˜*the* œ*Journal of Product & Brand Management/Journal of Product & Brand Management*, *30*(4), 594–608. https://doi.org/10.1108/jpbm-07-2019-2450

Key, T. M., Keel, A., Czaplewski, A. J., & Olson, E. M. (2021). Brand activism change agents: strategic storytelling for impact and authenticity. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/0965254x.2021.1904435

Koch, C. (2020). Brands as activists: The Oatly case. *Journal of Brand Management*, *27*(5), 593–606. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-020-00199-2

Koch, C., & Gyrd-Jones, R. (2019). Corporate brand positioning in complex industrial firms: Introducing a dynamic, process approach to positioning. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *81*, 40–53. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2019.03.011

Koch, C., & Ulver, S. (2022). PLANT VERSUS COW: Conflict framing in the Ant/Agonistic relegitimization of a market. *Journal of Macromarketing*, *42*(2), 247–261. https://doi.org/10.1177/02761467221080442

Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2015). *InterViews : learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. https://lib.ugent.be/en/catalog/rug01:002313337

Luedicke, M. K., Thompson, C. J., & Giesler, M. (2010). Consumer identity work as moral protagonism: How myth and ideology animate a Brand-Mediated Moral conflict. ˜*the* œ*Journal of Consumer Research/Journal of Consumer Research*, *36*(6), 1016–1032. https://doi.org/10.1086/644761

Melewar, T., Gotsi, M., & Andriopoulos, C. (2012). Shaping the research agenda for corporate branding: avenues for future research. *European Journal of Marketing*, *46*(5), 600–608. https://doi.org/10.1108/03090561211235138

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative Research: a guide to design and implementation*. http://digitallib.pps.unj.ac.id/index.php?p=show_detail&id=27892&keywords=

Merrilees, B., & Miller, D. (2008). Principles of corporate rebranding. *European Journal of Marketing*, *42*(5/6), 537–552. https://doi.org/10.1108/03090560810862499

Merrilees, B., & Miller, D. (2008b). Principles of corporate rebranding. *European Journal of Marketing*, *42*(5/6), 537–552. https://doi.org/10.1108/03090560810862499

Miller, D., Merrilees, B., & Yakimova, R. (2013). Corporate Rebranding: An integrative review of major enablers and barriers to the rebranding process. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *16*(3), 265–289. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12020

Mirzaei, A., Wilkie, D. C. H., & Siuki, H. (2022). Woke brand activism authenticity or the lack of it. *Journal of Business Research*, *139*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.09.044

Muzellec, L., & Lambkin, M. (2006). Corporate rebranding: destroying, transferring or creating brand equity? *European Journal of Marketing*, *40*(7/8), 803–824. https://doi.org/10.1108/03090560610670007

Moorman, C. (2020). Commentary: Brand activism in a political world. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, *39*(4), 388–392. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743915620945260

Nandan, S. (2005). An exploration of the brand identity–brand image linkage: A communications perspective. *Journal of Brand Management*, *12*(4), 264–278. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.bm.2540222

Nguyen, D. T., Le, D. H. A., Truong, L. G., Truong, N. G., & Vu, V. V. (2022). The effect of Generation Z's perceptions of brand activism on brand loyalty: evidence from Vietnam. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, *35*(6), 1494–1512. https://doi.org/10.1108/apjml-02-2022-0165

Parris, D. L., & Guzmán, F. (2022). Evolving brand boundaries and expectations: looking back on brand equity, brand loyalty, and brand image research to move forward. ˜*the* œ*Journal of Product & Brand Management/Journal of Product & Brand Management*, *32*(2), 191–234. https://doi.org/10.1108/jpbm-06-2021-3528

Parris, D. L., & Guzmán, F. (2022b). Evolving brand boundaries and expectations: looking back on brand equity, brand loyalty, and brand image research to move forward. ˜*the* œ*Journal of Product & Brand Management/Journal of Product & Brand Management*, *32*(2), 191–234. https://doi.org/10.1108/jpbm-06-2021-3528

Pimentel, P. C., Suter, M. B., & Didonet, S. R. (2023). Brand activism as a marketing strategy: an integrative framework and research agenda. *Journal of Brand Management*, *31*(2), 212–234. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-023-00335-8

Pöyry, E., & Laaksonen, S. (2022). Opposing brand activism: triggers and strategies of consumers' antibrand actions. *European Journal of Marketing*, *56*(13), 261–284. https://doi.org/10.1108/ejm-12-2020-0901

Prasad, P. (2017). *Crafting Qualitative Research: working in the postpositivist traditions*. http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA73122239

Rerup, C., Gioia, D., & Corley, K. G. (2022). Identity transitions via subtle adaptive sensemaking: the empirical pursuit of the intangible. *Academy of Management Discoveries*, *8*(4), 608–639. https://doi.org/10.5465/amd.2019.0212

Rokka, J. (2021). Consumer Culture Theory's future in marketing. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, *29*(1), 114–124. https://doi.org/10.1080/10696679.2020.1860685

Sjödin, H., & Törn, F. (2006). When communication challenges brand associations: a framework for understanding consumer responses to brand image incongruity. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, *5*(1), 32–42. https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.44

Schmeltz, L., & Kjeldsen, A. K. (2016). Naming as Strategic Communication: Understanding Corporate Name Change through an Integrative Framework Encompassing Branding, Identity and Institutional Theory. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, *10*(4), 309–331. https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118x.2016.1179194

Schmidt, H. J., Ind, N., Guzmán, F., & Kennedy, E. (2021). Sociopolitical activist brands. ˜*the* œ*Journal of Product & Brand Management/Journal of Product & Brand Management*, *31*(1), 40–55. https://doi.org/10.1108/jpbm-03-2020-2805

Schmitt, B. H., Brakus, J. J., & Biraglia, A. (2022). Consumption ideology. ˜*the* œ*Journal of Consumer Research/Journal of Consumer Research*, *49*(1), 74–95. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucab044

Shin, Y. S., & Cheon, K. (2013). Brand revitalization by strategic repositioning. *Deleted Journal*, *14*(4). https://doi.org/10.53728/2765-6500.1497

Thompson, C. J. (2004). Marketplace Mythology and Discourses of Power. *The Journal of Consumer Research*, *31*(1), 162–180. https://doi.org/10.1086/383432

Tadajewski, M. (2004). The Philosophy of Marketing Theory: Historical and Future Directions. *Marketing Review/˜the œMarketing Review*, *4*(3), 307–340. https://doi.org/10.1362/1469347042223373

Tracy, S. J. (2012). *Qualitative research methods: collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB14409512?l=en

Verlegh, P. W. (2023). Perspectives: a research-based guide for brand activism. *International Journal of Advertising*, *43*(2), 388–402. https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2023.2228117

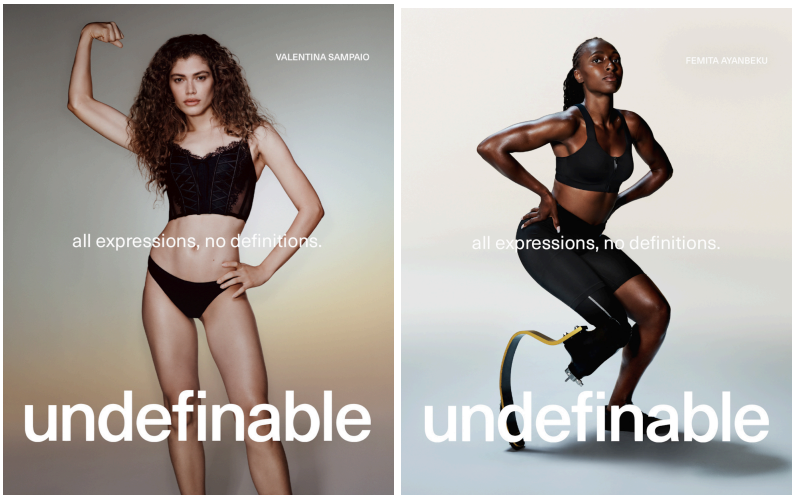
Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A., & Kemper, J. A. (2020). Brands taking a stand: authentic brand activism or woke washing? *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, *39*(4), 444–460. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743915620947359

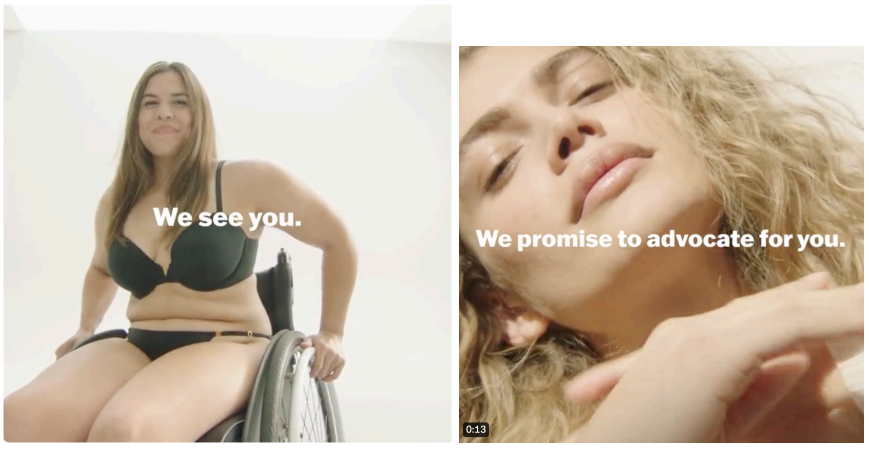
Voyer, B. G., Kastanakis, M. N., & Rhode, A. K. (2017). Co-creating stakeholder and brand identities: A cross-cultural consumer perspective. *Journal of Business Research*, *70*, 399–410. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.07.010

Zhao, Y., Calantone, R. J., & Voorhees, C. M. (2018). Identity change vs. strategy change: the effects of rebranding announcements on stock returns. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *46*(5), 795–812. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-018-0579-4

Appendices

Appendix 1 Elicitation material





Material 1 (Victoria's Secret Undefinable Campaign

Material 2

Material 3

Material 4

Material 5 Abercrombie

Material 6 Abercrombie & Fitch December 2020 campaign


PASSPORT TO
PRIDE 2022
We Belong
Together
Celebrate Pride with us in
our gender-inclusive collection
designed for everyone.
LONDON

Material 7:

Material 8 Abercrombie Face your Fierce campaign

Appendix 2 Example of consent form

Participant Consent From

1. I understand my answers will be treated confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained. It will not be possible to identity me in any way.

2. I understand that my participation is completely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

3. If not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I will be free not to do so.

4. I understand that the information I submit will be analyzed and may be published in an analysis of the researcher's master thesis written for Lund University.

_____	_____	_____
Participant's name	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Researcher's name	Date	Signature

Appendix 2 Interview guide

Interview guide

At the start of the interview.

- Introduction to the project, explanation of the purpose
- Explanation that all data is anonymous, including the data of the participant. The participant will be called participant X or he/she can decide to use an alias
- Before the interview starts, the participant is aksed if it is okay that audio will be recorded and describes
- The participant is informed of the consent form
- Before the interview starts, there will be brief explanation of brand activism and examples of brands
- Explain the interview will exists of 2 parts

Part 1 general questions

- How do you feel about buying from brands that actively support BA causes?
- How do you perceive the impact of brands on social issues through their activism efforts?
- What values are important to you when buying from brands
- How important is it for you to support brands that align/align not with your values?
- Have you ever changed purchasing behavior because of values?
- What role do you think brands have when it comes to advocating for socio-political issues?

Part 2

- Ask participant to describe association with Victoria Secret in his/her own words
- Ask participant to describe association with Abercrombie & Fitch in his/her own words
- Explain to participant they have time to look through the changes and that they csn comment whenever they want.

Rebranding questions

- How do you interpret these changes?

- What do you think of these changes?
- What do you think of these changes personally?
- What values do you see in the changes?
- How do you think the story the brand is telling has changed
- Do you believe the brand can evoke real change by adopting these activist stances?
- When you see a brand engaging in activist rebranding, what meanings or messages do you interpret from their actions?
- Do you believe consumers can be very positive/negative towards these changes
- How do you feel about these changes
- Do you believe it is the responsibility of the brand to show activism?
- How do you think narratives, such as societal ideals or cultural norms, influence the way consumers/you perceive and interpret activist rebranding efforts by brands?
- How do rebranding activities reflect broader narratives?

Probing questions

- Can you elaborate?
- Can you illustrate this?
- Etc.