Activism in Brands

A qualitative analysis of Generation Z' perception on environmental brand activism as employed by fast fashion brands.

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ABSTRACT

Brand activism is a recently introduced communication strategy which refers to the attempt of brands to adopt activism practices and show their societal face to their stakeholders. It is considered as the evolution of Cause - Related Marketing and Corporate Social Responsibility. Although brand activism has been widely used as a marketing strategy by many businesses the recent years, it still lacks theoretical knowledge and there has not been yet an extensive academic research on the topic. This study aims to contribute to brand activism scholarship by focusing particularly on environmental brand activism. It explores the perception of Generation Z on environmental brand activism as employed by fast fashion brands. It focuses particularly on Generation Z because they are considered more environmentally and socially active and they have more expectations from businesses that the previous generations. Brand activism will be examined under the light of cultural branding theory, which is used to explain how fast fashion brands use societal changes as opportunities for brand innovation. Twelve in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with people who belong in the Generation Z and have a European nationality. The interviews were then analysed qualitatively, via thematic analysis. The findings of the study indicate that Generation Z is very concerned on the way fast fashion brands are using environmental brand activism. They express their scepticism on brand activism as a phenomenon because they feel that it is driven mostly by profit and advertising incentives. Moreover, participants underlined the importance of perceived brand authenticity and trust when they evaluate environmental brand activism. The major drawback that the fast fashion industry faces is that consumers perceive it as inauthentic. Overall, participants seemed concerned both for the implementation of environmental brand activism in the fast fashion brands' communication strategy and they also perceived it as inauthentic.

KEYWORDS: *Brand activism, Generation Z, Fast fashion brands, Cultural Innovation, Brand authenticity*

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1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a shift in brands' stance on controversial matters accompanied by a growing interest of companies to position themselves publicly on socio-political or environmental issues, described as a "corporate political shift" by Manfredi-Sanchez (2019). This corporate political shift eschews the traditional belief that brands should be distant or neutral from societal changes (Korschun et al., 2019) and aims to embrace a proactive stance in the way brands respond to controversial matters. Thus, the term brand activism has been constructed to define the communication strategy that "seeks to influence citizen-consumers by means of campaigns created and sustained by political values" (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019, p. 243). Another term used to describe brands' public demonstration on sociopolitical issues is Corporate Sociopolitical Activism (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Big brands like Nike, Ben & Jerry's, Patagonia, Bodyform have released campaigns positioning on various controversial issues, from racial and gender inequality to climate change, proving that brand purpose is now on the forefront.

Although studies show that brand managers perceive brand activism as a risky gambit and businesses are yet not ready to take a stand on political matters (Moorman, 2020), consumers have unceasing expectations for brands (Sobande, 2019). Brand activism is a recently introduced marketing and communication strategy that can add great value to the brand if implemented correctly on the business model of the company (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Shetty et al., 2019). However, brands should be conscious when positioning because a wrong stance or an inconsistency between claims and action may lead to a backlash on the company (Romani et al., 2015; Shetty et al., 2019). Consumers evaluate brands as authentic according to their perceptions of what is genuine, sincere, real, and true (Portal et al., 2019). Therefore, authenticity is inherently connected to brand activism, as it can determine its marketing success (Çetinkaya et al., 2021).

Younger consumers are particularly concerned about brands' societal impact (Shetty et al., 2019), and at the same time, they are more alert in recognizing brands' marketing gimmicks. Moreover, they are determined to make a difference in the world (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). There is no precise classification of the people who belong to Generation Z, but the broadest accepted range is between 1996-2011 (Witt & Baird, 2018). Generation Z is incredibly demanding and challenging consumers (Priporas et al., 2017), expecting brands to address controversial issues and be transparent with their policies (Lee & Yoon, 2020). According to Witt and Baird (2018), the most effective way for brands to catch Generation Z attention and create brand loyalty is to emphasize on "building a community around shared values and demonstrating your commitment to those ideals" (p.174). As brand activism aims to attract consumers who share the same values with the

company (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020), it can be perceived also as an attempt of brands to create a community with these people.

When brands fail to adapt to their customers' needs and they use inappropriate brand strategies, a cultural chasm is created between the company and the stakeholders (Holt & Cameron, 2010). Fast fashion brands are an illustrative example of this cultural chasm between them and their stakeholders, who in the past years have become more concerned about environmental issues (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). Fast-fashion brands became popular in the early 2000s, and this mass clothing production has changed the dynamics of the fashion industry (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). In order to please consumers, who want to follow the fast-moving trends of fashion, fast fashion companies are pushed to a rapid and massive production, which has been a subject of severe criticism for the last years.

Despite its popularity, the fast fashion industry is among the world's most polluting industries, with huge environmental impact (Brewer, 2019). Their cultural chasm lies in that they have to find a way to convert their business from being directed exclusively to the mass market into an enterprise that is also socially and environmentally conscious. The solution to bridge this chasm and regain their trust is "cultural innovation", which implies adopting innovative ideologies to become appealing to mass-market consumers (Holt & Cameron, 2010). Embracing the environmentally friendly ideology, fast fashion brands started engaged in corporate social responsibility (CSR) and environmental brand activism practices (Nguyen et al., 2020). Therefore, environmental brand activism is for fast fashion brands both an innovative ideology that meets younger generations' demands for value-driven brands and a way to regain the trust of their lost customers.

However, fast fashion brands have experienced consumers' backlash again since their sustainable claims are contrasted with their practices, raising the question of how they can keep large-scale production while being sustainable (Brewer, 2019). Consumers' recurring reactions prove that there is a need to understand and clarify consumers' needs and views regarding the implementation of environmental brand activism by fast fashion brands.

1.1 Research Question and Aim

While consumers put incredible pressure on brands to engage in political, societal, or environmental issues and be values-driven (Lee & Yoon, 2020; Stoppard, 2020) they do not trust them when they do so, contesting brands' authenticity (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Addressing this oxymoron, the research question was formulated:

How do young people, who belong to Generation Z, perceive environmental brand activism as employed by fast-fashion brands?

The study takes a consumer perspective and aims to understand how Generation Z interprets and evaluates the phenomenon of environmental brand activism as employed by fast fashion brands. The theoretical concepts of cultural innovation (Holt & Cameron, 2010) and brand authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015; Södergren, 2021) are closely interrelated with brand activism, and they will guide the theoretical approach of the analysis.

Based on these concepts, two following sub-questions are introduced to help with the approach of the main research question. The first sub question, "*How cultural innovation, as used by fast fashion brands, is interpreted by Generation Z?*", looks at brand activism from the lens of cultural branding theory. In cultural branding, brands are analysed from a societal perspective, as they are considered an integral part of society. Societal changes create the opportunity for brand innovation (Holt & Cameron, 2010). Cultural innovation, the process of adopting innovative ideologies, helps brands to stay relevant in an ever-changing market. This sub-question aims to understand what Generation Z thinks of fast fashion brands adopting a more sustainable and environmentally friendly ideology as a way to break through culture.

The second sub-question, "*How does Generation Z perceive brand authenticity in environmental brand activism practices as employed by fast fashion brands?*", is based on the concept of brand authenticity. In the last years, consumers' search for authenticity in brands has increased notably (Heine et al., 2016; Tran & Keng, 2018). However, consumers encounter difficulties when it comes to recognizing what is 'real' and 'fake' (Napoli et al., 2014). Studies have shown that brand trust is the main prerequisite for customer loyalty (Eggers et al., 2013). As brands search for ways to earn consumers' trust, the distinction between what is authentic and inauthentic becomes a subjective process for individuals, built on social or personal standards (Napoli et al., 2014). The purpose of this sub-question is to see whether Generation Z regards fast fashion brands' environmental brand activism practices as authentic or superficial.

According to (Holt, 2002) "heated competition is raising the bar on what is considered authentic" (p. 85). Cultural innovation gives brands' a chance to stand from the crowd and enhance their authenticity. This is what fast fashion brands tried to do when they started adopting environmental brand activism practices. The aim of the study is twofold. It contributes to the growing literature of brand activism by examining whether Generation Z finds this attempt of fast fashion brands as convincing and authentic. Also, it provides practical information for marketers on how to employ brand activism in their marketing and communication strategies and by offering insights into Generation Z' consumer behaviour.

1.2 Scientific and Social Relevance

Despite that brand activism has been subject to criticism due to its questionable origins of

CSR and activism (Hassinen, 2018), the practice has been adopted by many companies (Çetinkaya et al., 2021). Brand activism has gained great popularity in business industries; academically, however, it receives limited attention. There is no thorough investigation concerning young consumers' perspective on environmental brand activism. Also, there are aspects of brand activism that remain underexplored, like the role of authenticity in it (Södergren, 2021). Additionally, most of the analyses relating to brand activism adopt a management perspective (Koch, 2020; Moorman, 2020; Smith & Korschun, 2018). This research employs a consumer perspective, aiming to gain an understanding of its interpretation by consumers. Since brand activism practices are often accused of woke-washing (Sobande, 2019), it is important to see how young consumers evaluate brands' positioning and authenticity. Moreover, businesses have been only focused on gaining Millennials as their target audience, neglecting Generation Z, a potential consumer group that differs substantially from the previous generation (Gale, 2015).

Thus, academically, the study aims to contribute to the growing literature of brand activism by examining the perception of Generation Z for this phenomenon. Furthermore, Koch (2020) suggests for future theoretical explanation of the phenomenon due to its "ambiguous nature" (p.2). The qualitative approach of the study brings a new perspective to the literature of brand activism, as most of the research so far is conducted quantitatively (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Shetty et al., 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). This thesis aims to complement the few other qualitative research projects concerning consumers' perception of brand activism (Broberg & Doshoris, 2020; Kubiak & Ouda, 2020), however to the best of the researcher's knowledge, it is the first study focusing particularly on Generation Z and the fast fashion industry.

In terms of social relevance, in the light of climate crisis and environmental problems, fast fashion brands try to leverage these issues and implicitly profit from them by engaging in CSR or environmental brand activism. Since consumption is considered a form of production (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006), consumers have great responsibility when purchasing from brands. Now that fast fashion brands employ environmentally friendly practices, it is important to see how Generation Z perceives this shift because their reaction -or passivity- may determine the continuation or not of phenomena as such. Sobande (2019) criticizes brand activism as shifting people's attention, from focusing on resistance and structural shifts to consumerism. However, political consumerism, which is the action of boycotting or buycotting products or services based on one's views (Copeland & Boulianne, 2020), is becoming a popular tactic that ultimately influences the way brands position on matters. This opposition exemplifies that brand activism needs to be further examined from the consumers' perspective and take into consideration the societal and cultural role of consumption as

well.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

This section refers to the thesis structure in order to cover the topic of the study and provide the relevant methodological and theoretical explanation to answer the research question.

The second chapter consists of the theoretical framework of the study. It starts with conceptualizing brand activism as a phenomenon. To do so, it discusses similar concepts that have influenced brand activism like activism, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Cause-Related Marketing. Then, it continues with brand authenticity, which provides the theoretical background to answer the second sub-question concerning the influence of brand authenticity in the perception of environmental brand activism. Finally, cultural branding and cultural innovation are presented, which serve as the theoretical lens with which brand activism is analyzed as a fast fashion brand strategy. The concept of cultural branding aims to help in answering the first sub-question.

The third chapter focuses on the methodological approach of the study. It explains why a qualitative approach was taken and discusses the data collection process extensively. Moreover, the operationalization of the study is presented, explaining the connection between the theoretical framework and the methodological approach used. The following section presents how thematic analysis was conducted in the study. The quality of the research is also evaluated, and the researcher reflects on matters of credibility and ethics.

Chapter four proceeds with the discussion of the results. The chapter is divided into three subsections based on the three emerging themes of the analysis: Consumers' Concerns, Request for Environment-Driven Brands, Request for Authentic Brands. It discusses each of these themes by providing fragments of the interviews complementing them with the existing literature. The final chapter of the thesis summarizes the main findings and answers the research question, followed by the theoretical and social implications of the study. Finally, it approaches the limitations of the research and provides future suggestions based on these limitations.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter is divided into three sections, each discussing a concept deemed essential for a comprehensive understanding of environmental brand activism. The first section provides theoretical knowledge around the phenomenon of brand activism and its emergence, which serves as a basis for this study. The concepts of activism, Cause-Related Marketing (C-RM), and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) are analyzed in the first subsection because they are seen as central ideas behind brand activism. The second section refers to the relation of consumers with the brands and the concept of brand authenticity. Brand authenticity is important because it can determine consumers' trust in the brand and, therefore on the cause that it supports. The last section discusses cultural branding theory, which is used as a theoretical foundation explaining why brands engage in brand activism.

2.1 Rise of Brand Activism

Brand activism is not the first attempt that businesses have made to play a role in society. Cause-Related Marketing (C-RM) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) are marketing and communication strategies developed by businesses long before brand activism, acknowledging the rise of public awareness and consumers' need to feel that they contribute to a cause. The aforementioned strategies have paved the way for brand activism to emerge (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). To understand the opportunities that this phenomenon offers and the risks it entails, it is essential to look further into C-RM and CSR practices since they share many similar elements with brand activism.

Four principal factors have contributed to the rise of brand activism the past decade: the accelerating political and social impact of social media, the expansion of Non-Governmental Organization (NGOs) and Internet campaigns aiming to raise awareness about critical issues, brands' continuous implementation of a sustainable and eco-friendly profile, and finally the permeating notion of the responsible consumer (Dauvergne, 2017). The following sub-sections present the concepts of activism, Cause-Related Marketing and Corporate Social Responsibility in order to draw the connections with brand activism phenomenon.

2.1.1. Activism

As brands are in search for alternative ways to attract consumers and differentiate from their competitors (Portal et al., 2019), activism seems to be a prospect. After all, in a capitalistic society "all areas of social relations and cultural life are commercialized" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 6)

– even activism. In that sense, it is not odd that brands seek activism as a way to take a stand and come closer to their stakeholders. Activism is defined as "the action that movements undertake in order to challenge some existing element of the social or political system and so help fulfil movements' aims" (Saunders, 2013, para 1). Activists' interests can be personal or universal (Harlow & Guo, 2014). Smith and Ferguson (2010) believe that public relations play an important role in activism because it is through them that activism can pursue its goals. In a similar way, brands use their publicity to position on various controversial socio-political issues. Protesting, educating the public, or participating in direct actions are some of the most prominent activism practices (Fielding et al., 2008). Brand activism adopts these practices in order to reach its audience, but it usually takes a digital form, through the brand's social media accounts.

As Dennis (2019) believes, digital media gave the power to everyone to change the world with one click, companies included. This easy access to activism through blogging or social networking sites has brought some problematization to scholars about the value of activism and whether this type of activism can actually have an impact (McCafferty, 2011). This gave rise to a new term describing this phenomenon, named "slacktivism" (Harlow & Guo, 2014). The term originates from the words "slacker" and "activism" referring to "the disconnect between awareness and action through the use of social media" (Glenn, 2015, p. 81). According to Dennis (2019) this term is also used interchangeably with the term "clicktivism" which refers to a lower effort of online engagement. Interestingly, a study found that although people distinguish between real and perceived activism, they consider them equally effective (Harlow & Guo, 2014).

In the case of brand activism, however, it is not only the digital aspect of it and its implications, that problematizes the consumers, but also the fact that it is profit and marketing driven. Clicktivism and slacktivism may have given the opportunity to everyone to be an activist, including brands, but it is questionable whether brand activism can be considered activism in its pure form, as it does not operate with social nor political obligations. It is also questionable whether consumers find real and perceived brand activism as equally effective for the brand, like the study about activism by Harlow and Guo (2014), as authenticity plays a great role in brand activism practices. This aspect becomes clearer in the following sections when the origins of brand activism are examined.

2.1.2 Cause-Related Marketing

During the late 1890s, the first instances of businesses establishing a commercial bond with a charity for reciprocal benefits are observed. Although there was no name given back then, almost a century later, in 1981, American Express first introduced the term, Cause-Related Marketing (C-

RM), as it is known now (Adkins, 2007). C-RM is now a well-known marketing initiative, defined as "a commercial activity by which businesses and charities or causes form a partnership with each other to market an image, product or service for mutual benefit" (Adkins, 2007, p. 17). An example of Cause-Related marketing is the "One for one" campaign of TOMS, in which for every pair purchased, TOMS donates a pair of shoes to a child in need. Besides product giving it can also be a certain amount of money that derives from the sales of the product (Berglind & Nakata, 2005). Most people have a positive attitude towards C-RM since they feel that their purchase contributes to a good cause (Yoo et al., 2018). In that sense, C-RM proves to be a win-win situation for all three factors involved: the company, the non-profit organization, and the consumers (Y. J. Kim & Lee, 2009). Similarly, brand activism can be beneficial for the company, for the cause that it supports, and for the consumers who feel that they strengthen the cause with their purchase.

What scholars highlight in C-RM practices is the importance of choosing not only the charity that the company will give the amount of money or products but also the choice of the cause that it wishes to support (Chang & Chu, 2020; Robinson et al., 2012; Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). Each brand has its own identity, and it is known to embrace specific values. The choice of the cause should reflect those values and, most importantly, respect the principles of stakeholders that support the brand. The alliance between the value of the firm and the cause is what is referred to as brand cause-fit (Das et al., 2020). Another element to consider when engaging in C-RM is the size of the donation, as it can determine consumers' participation (Yoo et al., 2018).

Research has shown that brands adopting C-RM arises philanthropical feelings to the consumers, who feel that by purchasing the product, they help those in need (Chang & Chu, 2020). This results in an increased purchase intention (Chang & Chu, 2020). However, there is a great danger that consumers will be in doubt of the underpinning motives or express distrust in the advertising claims (Y. J. Kim & Lee, 2009). There is a general perception, that firms employing C-RM use marketing gimmicks to manipulate consumers; therefore, they tend to be more questionable regarding the firm's motives and be less inclined to believe them (Bae, 2018).

The companies dealing with brand activism are also experiencing the same positive reactions with C-RM but they also have to face the same amount of scepticism. The importance of brand cause-fit can then, be assumed for the companies engaging in brand activism as well. They should be aware of both the positive and negative implications that may arise when choosing a particular cause and focus on establishing an accurate brand cause-fit, that will also be valuable to the brand's stakeholders. Fast fashion brands in particular have to face stakeholders' scepticism because they feel that they are not eligible to be advocates of environmental issues, due to their massive production. This distrust of consumers proves that a high alliance between a cause and a

brand is necessary if brands want to develop a deeper connection with their audience.

2.1.3 Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility is the other communication strategy that brand activism is based on (Eyada, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). C-RM is perceived as a type of CSR activity addressing mainly the same societal and environmental issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Defining CSR is not an easy task due to the complexity of the issues it deals with and because of the other factors that are involved, like political agendas and interests (Sheehy, 2015). There is a difficulty to determine firstly the type of issues that should be publicly brought up and in the second phase, which organization or business is qualified to speak up about which problems (Sheehy, 2015). Werther and Chandler (2010) break down the term in its three components and define it as the "view of the corporation and its role in society that assumes a responsibility among firms to pursue goals in addition to profit maximization and a responsibility among a firm's stakeholders to hold the firm accountable for its actions" (p. 5).

The benefits brought to the company by CSR are many including increased financial profits, stronger relationship with the employees and the consumers, and an improved corporate image (Arrigo, 2013). Fast fashion brands invest in CSR initiatives in order to reduce risk to their reputation, develop a stronger relationship with the end consumers, and gain a competitive advantage (Arrigo, 2013). Although the same motives guide fast fashion brands to engage in brand activism as well, the difference is that the latter is considered a riskier gambit because the brand engages in controversial matters and it can potentially alienate the customers if it is not implemented correctly (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Brands have two motives when engaging in CSR: intrinsic and extrinsic (Du et al., 2007, as cited in Ford & Stohl, 2019). Intrinsic motives refer to the brands having true intentions for the purpose they support. Companies do not only see it as a way to increase their profit but they are also motivated to contribute to society. On the contrary, the interest of companies with extrinsic motives lies merely in profit-making and business performance.

This profit motivation is perhaps what makes many people sceptical about CSR, and brand activism as well. Chandler (2003), talking about companies' authenticity, claims that "it is no surprise that every opinion poll rates the trustworthiness of business people with that of journalists and politicians or that the general public believes that profit is put before principle" (p. 33). In response to that criticism, Werther and Chandler (2010) consider businesses as the "engines of society that propel us toward a better future" (p. 4) highlighting the contribution of brands to society.

This debate concerning the authentic intentions behind brands' decisions to engage in CSR

remains the same when discussing about brand activism, since consumers' scepticism towards brands' intentions has increased (Portal et al., 2019). Similar to CSR, the financial prospect when engaging in brand activism may be very appealing, however companies should have in mind that consumers can identify their motives behind their actions. Authenticity in brands, and especially when they engage in environmental initiatives, like CSR and environmental brand activism, is vital and it consists principal criterion for consumers' trust.

2.1.4 The phenomenon of brand activism

Brand activism can take many forms: It can be presented as a campaign (Figures 2.1 and 2.3); a statement on a post in social media platforms (Figure 2.2); donating money to a cause, like Patagonia establishing the Earth Tax, giving $10 million for climate change awareness (Willingham, 2018); implementing a cause to company's business model, like Starbucks commitment on hiring 10.000 refugees over five years in 75 countries where it does business (Disis, 2017).

Six categories of activism are identified: Social, Workplace, Political, Environmental, Economic and Legal (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018), but sometimes the boundaries between these categories may blur. As this research examines the positioning of fast fashion brands on environmental matters, it focuses on environmental activism. Environmental brand activism is concerned with issues of ecosystem conservation, air and water pollution, emission control and environmental laws and policies (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Broberg & Doshoris, 2020). Bhagwat and colleagues (2020) state that, similar to CSR, brand activism deals with socio-political issues which are "salient unresolved social matters on which societal and institutional opinion is split, thus potentially engendering acrimonious debate among groups" (p. 2). It is also important to note that, the controversy of socio-political issues changes throughout the time and what once was considered as provocative, now may be normal (Bhagwat et al., 2020). This implies that brands should be in sync with the times and address contemporary problems that society faces.

Corporate Social Responsibility and Cause-Related Marketing, as previously discussed, showcase that brands have made efforts throughout the years to approach societal and environmental issues. But after CSR has failed to deliver to the consumers the values that a brand embraces (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018) and since C-RM practices have been questioned about their transparency and honesty (Berglind & Nakata, 2005), brand activism is now considered "the future of marketing" (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018, p. 4). The differences that lie between these strategies and brand activism, is firstly that the latter is purpose and values driven, whereas the others are marketing driven (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Moreover, given that the focal issue in brand activism is controversial, there is a great danger of polarizing company's stakeholders, who may have an

opposing view from the one the company publicly supports (Korschun et al., 2019; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). This makes brand activism a riskier gambit than any other corporate initiative for social contribution (Bhagwat et al., 2020).
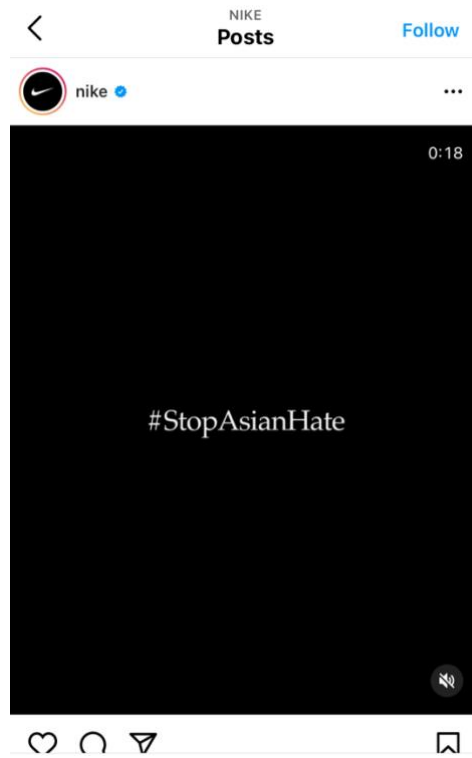

Figure 2.1. H&M Instagram Post

Figure 2.2. Nike Instagram Post

Figure 2.3. Mango Instagram Post

As the literature of C-RM and CSR has also showcased, brands should be cautious on two things: firstly, the issues they choose to support or to condemn, and second, they should deliver the

promises that they have committed to make. The cause that the brand supports should align with the values that the firm is known to embrace, otherwise it risks company's reputation. Younger generations are known to have high standards from brands and they are also alert in identifying companies' marketing gimmicks which aim at financial benefits, and not on societal change (Shetty et al., 2019). If brand activism is perceived as inauthentic form the stakeholders, the company will experience severe criticism which might result in backlash.

In an attempt to identify which brands stay true to their activist practices and which are inauthentic, Sarkar and Kotler (2018) developed the "Common Good" framework which was also applied by other scholars later on (Broberg & Doshoris, 2020; Kubiak & Ouda, 2020). They classify brand activism strategies as regressive or progressive. Regressive activism occurs when the stakeholders' view on a topic is ahead of the brand's perspective, resulting in a values gap between the brand and the consumers. These brands are known to employ practices that are harmful for the "Common Good" of the planet. On the contrary, progressive activism is employed by brands which contribute to the "Common Good" by looking beyond profit-seeking and by publicly positioning on controversial matters. Although this distinction has been made by marketing scholars, consumers seem to understand the difference between the brand strategies and there are many instances of brands being exposed on the Internet for their greenwashing practices. That is why the interview guide included questions that were both about brand activism in fast fashion brands and brands in general, to make a comparison between the companies' intentions.

Although brand activism has been praised both from scholars and journalists, there is still some problematization around it. Most of the concerns are around the consumerism aspect of brand activism. Companies tend to encourage consumers to buy their products, as an act of doing good. As Banet-Weiser (2012) accurately puts it "consumer activists are authorized as citizens to do good by buying good" (p. 127). The major problem that this notion brings to the forefront is that purchasing becomes a substitute of politics (Simon, 2011). Consumers are being misled in the sense that, when purchasing the product, they feel to contribute to a cause and make a difference, while it remains unsure whether any concrete actions are made. This blurs even more the boundaries between the factual action and the symbolic transaction, that is what the purchase symbolizes (Simon, 2011).

Regardless of the aforementioned oppositions, companies no longer can remain neutral (Korschun & Smith, 2018). Literature withing brand activism highlights that, especially the younger generations expect from brands to actively contribute to the pressing socio-political issues that exist (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Shetty et al., 2019). Marketplace is not static and this transformation invites organizations to (re)consider their roles in society (Korschun et al.,

2019). Bhagwat and colleagues (2020) believe that even if the company engages in activism for economic interests, it is still considered brand activism because it faces the risk of stakeholders' backlash. If the company manages to overcome consumers' scepticism, investments in CSR and activism can be very beneficial for the company, contributing to purchase intention, willingness to buy, and brand image promotion (Shetty et al., 2019).

2.2 Consumers and Brands

According to Holt (2002), this is an era that brands are being transparent about their commercial incentives and cannot hide them from consumers. Consumers not only expect transparency from brands in terms of the company's economic incentives, but they are also interested in "the way in which companies treat people when they are not customers" (Holt, 2002, p. 88). Indeed, almost twenty years later, as brands constantly seek ways to show their social interests, this statement is still accurate, exemplifying consumers' need for a deeper connection with the brands.

Consumers do not choose products solely based on their utility anymore; rather they see consuming as a way to satisfy other needs (Kumar et al., 2021). Neilson (2010) postulates that consumers consider their purchase as a vote and uses the term "political consumerism" to describe how consumers adopt activist practices, like buycotting and boycotting when choosing brands. Simon (2011) expresses a similar view, suggesting that consumers of the last decade are practicing "an alternative and not necessarily more narrow model of politics" (p. 149). Political consumerism can be explained through the lifestyle politics theory, which implies that citizens make everyday decisions based on their political views (Copeland & Boulianne, 2020). These everyday decisions may include instances from people becoming vegetarians to boycotting and/or buycotting brands and services based on their views (Copeland & Boulianne, 2020).

The use of (digital) media has played an essential role in political consumerism since they are a source of information about corporate practices and connect people with the same interests (Copeland & Boulianne, 2020). The importance of digital media in political consumerism and the relationship of consumers with brands becomes even more intense when the consumers are Generation Z who technology savvy and were raised with an opportunity for 24/7 access to information (Witt & Baird, 2018).

Burnett and Hutton (2007) stated that brands developing a deeper relationship with their stakeholders would have a competitive advantage over the brands focusing only on delivering fine products and services. Nowadays, the plethora of product choices makes it very demanding for brands to create and maintain a connection with their consumers and reach brand loyalty (Oh et al.,

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2019). Thus, brands are searching for alternative ways to diversify from their competitors (Portal et al., 2019) – by becoming political and environmental activists for instance. However, brand activism as a standalone practice is not enough as consumers are very clear on what they seek on brands: authenticity (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018; Guèvremont, 2018; Oh et al., 2019; Tran & Keng, 2018).

2.2.1 Brand Authenticity

Brand authenticity is an important aspect in establishing a trusting relationship between brands and consumers (Fritz et al., 2017; Joy et al., 2012; Portal et al., 2019). Many scholars have operationalize brand authenticity and they have ascribed many attributes to it complementing each other (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014). Fritz and colleagues (2017) have revised these attributes and incorporated them defining brand authenticity as the

> perceived consistency of a brand's behaviour that reflects its core values and norms, according to which it is perceived as being true to itself, not undermining its brand essence or substantive nature, whereby the perceptual process involves two types of authenticity (i.e., indexical and iconic authenticity). (p. 8)

The distinction of authenticity in two types, indexical and iconic, was made by Grayson and Martinec (2004) who were among the firsts to touch upon brand authenticity. Iconic authenticity, emerging from the word icon which means symbol, refers to consumers' beliefs on how the brand's image should look like, based on their personal and cultural perceptions. Indexical authenticity is used to describe all the factual information that people seek in the brand in order to associate it with what they know as the real thing (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Both types can co-exist in the minds of people. Based on this division, Morhart and colleagues (2014) theorize that perceived brand authenticity arises from a combination of objective facts (indexical authenticity), subjective mental associations (iconic authenticity), and another aspect which is the existential motives connected to a brand. In the context of branding, existential authenticity refers to the feelings that the brand arises to the consumers.

After the eruption of many corporate scandals concerning societal or environmental issues, transparency was a value to be sought about from people and to rely upon in times of instability (Fritz et al., 2017). Scandals as such, also justify consumers' scepticism on environmental brand activism practices: just because a company is seemingly portraying a socially responsible image, does not meant that the company is perceived as socially responsible (Alhouti et al., 2016).

In an attempt to conceptualize brand authenticity several concepts have been attributed to it (Heine et al., 2016). Södergren (2021) ascribed brand trustworthiness, sincerity, brand heritage, while Morhart and colleagues (2015) continuity, credibility, integrity, symbolism. These associations

make it apparent that it is a challenging concept to concretely define (Burnett & Hutton, 2007), it is multidimensional phenomenon, and depends on several factors.

Södergen (2021) has developed a framework about brand authenticity based on the Antecedents-Decisions-Outcomes (ADO) conceptual framework. He defines the antecedents as the key characteristics of brands that consumers link them with authenticity. Antecedents are divided into two categories: perceived connection to the past, and brand virtuousness. Decisions consist of the managerial approaches that are adopted to present authenticity to stakeholders. It refers to communication, commitment, coolness, and connection. Outcomes are considered all the assets that company gains from being authentic, which include brand trust, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and cultural iconicity. In Södergen's (2021) framework, Corporate Social Responsibility practices belong in the antecedents category and particularly in brand virtuousness. Brand activism on the other hand, is placed under the decisions category, in coolness. He also connects brand activism with the transparency of the company, indicating that is an integral part of brand's pratices.

Consumers' increasing demands have raised the bar for brands urging them to find ways to enhance consumers' trust. Benet-Weiser (2012) claims that "the branding of politics -represented by CSR and green branding among others- is both an extension of and a response to nostalgia about "authenticity"" (p. 129). Moreover, when brands employ anthropomorphic elements in their communication strategies enhance consumers' perception of authenticity, as it is easier for consumers to recognize the values represented by the brand and identify with it (Morhart et al., 2015; Portal et al., 2019). In this case, activism may be a practice known to be employed by individuals, however now it can be seen as an attempt of brands to employ anthropomorphic elements and enhance consumers' trust. But brands implementing activism in their business model is not enough, as brand authenticity and trust will ultimately determine stakeholders' positive reactions.

Vredenburg and colleagues (2020) identify four forms of brand activism: Absence of Brand Activism, Silent Brand Activism, Authentic Brand Activism, and Inauthentic Brand Activism. The aforementioned forms are based on the (high or low) degree of the brand's activist marketing messaging and the (high or low) degree of its prosocial corporate practice. Four factors characterize a brand activism strategy as authentic: "being purpose and values-driven, controversial or polarizing, dealing with progressive or conservative issues, and embodying message and brand practice" (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 9). Engaging in activism may result in backlash, due to a potential incongruency between the brand and its stakeholders (Bhagwat et al., 2020). That is why there was an extensive discussion on the interview guide about whether particopants consider

brand activism as authentic, whether they trust the brands that claim to be environmentally conscious, and whether they perceive brand activism as *real* activism. Fast fashion brands seek to enhance authenticity by employing environmental brand activism practices. Authenticity, in turn, brings brand trust, which is at the centre of an activist marketing campaign, because at the end this is what will determine the alignment of the audience with the brand's cause.

2.3 Cultural Branding Theory

Cultural branding is used to explain the strategic steps and process through which a brand becomes an integral part of culture (Holt, 2004). Cultural branding is an alternative branding model that serves as the primary theoretical lens under which brand activism will be examined. It looks at brands from a societal and cultural perspective, what brands mean to society, examining how societal changes create demand for brand innovation. Being part of culture is deemed more essential than brand performance, especially in the lifestyle industries, like food and clothing (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006).

According to Holt (2004) previous conventional branding models regard persuasion as the ultimate goal when it comes to attracting consumers' attention, relying on advertising to convince about the quality and the benefits of the product. Moreover, conventional models stand firm in any societal changes and believe that being neutral is an integral part of a brand's identity. Yet, all these perceptions that companies hold dearly have no potential of building iconic brands. In contrast to traditional branding models, cultural branding wants to narrate a story, create a myth around the product aiming to make its purchase a unique experience for the consumer.

Instead of linking products with abstract associations, Holt (2004) suggests that the identity of the product should follow the unique characteristics of the brand. These characteristics are named cultural expressions of the brand, and they construct the myth around the product, as well as the way in which this myth will be then communicated through advertising. Some prominent examples of brands that have created a myth around their brand name consist of Coca-Cola, Nike, Harley-Davidson. Each with their own unique identity and features have managed to become icons, not by inventing innovative products but by being part of culture (Holt, 2004).

Brands play an active role in society, for they are part of culture. Thus, their identity should be created and expressed based on historical contexts, not abstract concepts that have no meaning to the people. A similar view is seen in Beverland (2009), who theorizes that the meaning behind some brands stems from "three sources: consumers, marketers, and cultural forces" (p. 18). Cultural forces or, to put it simply, culture is usually established by wider subcultures (Beverland, 2009; Holt, 2016). Although subcultures may not be so popular among the mainstream from the

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beginning, they give rise to a myth, to a compelling story that then the brand uses to encapsulate its product. In the same vein, by the time that fast fashion brands realized that an environmentally conscious lifestyle was not only followed by a small subculture, but it has become a worldwide movement, they started changing their practices to become more appealing to a bigger audience. CSR and, later, environmental brand activism the attempts of fast fashion brands to create an interesting storytelling, a myth, social media platforms have played -and still do- a major role, as it is a way to convey their identity. Some examples consist of launching their sustainable clothing lines and asking consumers to bring their old and reused garments to the shops for recycling.

Moisander and Valtoten (2006) see marketing and consumption as "inherently cultural phenomena" (p. 5). As culture changes, companies should embrace new marketing techniques which will reflect society's needs. Brands that stay consistent while times change will not secure their identity; rather, they alienate their stakeholders since they could no longer identify with it. A few years later, Holt and Cameron (2010) will name this gap between the stakeholders and the brand a "cultural chasm", which to be resolved, it needs cultural innovation.

2.3.1 Cultural Innovation & Environmental Activism

In this ever-changing world, a company's biggest concern is not only to stay relevant but to innovate. Holt and Cameron (2010) examine the cultural chasm created between the brand and its stakeholders when the first cannot keep up with the constant cultural changes, adopts incompatible brand strategies, and thus, does not align with people's needs. Fast-fashion companies, for instance, although they are appealing to a vast audience, they still have to face boycotts, not only from environmental activists but also from everyday consumers who, now more than ever, are looking for value-driven brands. This cultural chasm urges fast fashion brands to convert their business, from being directed exclusively to mass market, into an enterprise that is also socially and environmentally conscious. This endeavour of fast fashion brands to become environmentally conscious is motivated by the increased competition that, in turn, gives rise to brand innovation.

Holt and Cameron (2010) believe that cultural innovation is not always about introducing an innovative product; instead, it is about using a product to break through culture in an innovative way. This is what fast fashion brands attempted to do when they introduced their sustainable clothing lines and started engaging in CSR.

Firstly, a company should find the right moment to establish its novel ideology into a part of the popular culture (Holt, 2016). Although the environmentally conscious ideology has been popular since the 1970s, it was not until the 2010s that big corporations have decided also to position on environmental problems. Unilever for instance, in 2010 launched a campaign with the

slogan "What you buy at the supermarket can change the world. Small actions, big difference." in order to disclaim to its consumers that the palm oil they use is sustainably farmed (White et al., 2019). Similarly, in the beginning of the 2010s, after experiencing intense pressure for their adverse environmental impact, H&M was the first fast fashion brand to launch an organic collection and become more transparent with its practices (Binet et al., 2019). Up to that time, brands were unaware of how they should address environmental issues, and the only brands doing so were Patagonia and Esprit (Binet et al., 2019).

This shift was initiated from younger generations, who in the light of climate crisis, were more sensitive towards environmental issues and thus, have started to demand more from the brands (Kanchanapibul et al., 2014). As notions like environmental consciousness, responsible consumerism, and eco-consumerism have started gaining ground and permeating society at that time, fast fashion brands could no longer postpone their contribution to a more ethical, green fashion. This societal change, from people being ignorant about environmental problems to people boycotting brands with negative environmental impact, became a fertile ground for fast fashion brands to culturally innovate: CSR practices were developed, and environmental brand activism initiatives were organized in order to address the needs of the people who support these ideologies.

According to Holt and Cameron (2010), for a brand to convey a novel ideology to the market, it capitalizes on cultural expressions. Cultural expressions describe all the substantial social, political, and existential constructs that guide people's perception of the world and construct their identity and status. Such examples consist of race, gender, social class, sexuality, and ethnicity, which then influence standards like beauty, health, work, ethics, and more. Mass media and commerce, and particularly brands, are responsible for the dissemination of cultural expressions to the public (Holt & Cameron, 2010).

Cultural expressions consist of three elements: Ideology, Myth, and Cultural codes. Ideologies are concepts that have been socially constructed, and they have been so popularized and naturalized among people that they are considered as the "truth". They can be very useful for consumer markets because it is a way to categorize people's views and preferences and target consumers through these ideologies (Holt & Cameron, 2010). In this case, the ideology adopted by fast fashion brands is the environmentally conscious and responsible consumer.

Ideologies are delivered to people when they are imparted by myths (Holt & Cameron, 2010). Myth is the story that each brand chooses to narrate to the people in order to support the promoting ideology. It is the way to make the ideology comprehensible. Fast-fashion brands imparted the environmentally conscious ideology by narrating compelling stories through their

social media accounts and websites. An example consists of the creation of hashtags to promote their collections of sustainable clothing: H&M uses the hashtag #conscious, Zara uses #JoinLife, Mango uses #Committed. Each brand launches campaigns using hashtags, as part of their own story and identity. So, on their website, H&M encourages consumers to shop consciously, and it declares that the brand has a Conscious concept to make all the products from recyclable and sustainable material by 2030 (H&M GB, n.d.). Zara states that it is working to reduce the environmental impact of its products and wants to give a second life to the clothes that are not needed (Zara, n.d.). Mango states that it has a "commitment to achieve a more responsible fashion industry" (Mango Pressroom, 2021). Although the ideology remains the same (i.e., environmental consciousness), each brand decides how to deliver its story based on its brand image and identity.

Burnett and Hutton (2007) suggest that brands should "create a master narrative that reflects company's core values" (p. 345). In order to articulate this narrative in an appealing way, cultural codes are necessary to deliver this experience to the consumers (Holt & Cameron, 2010). Cultural codes should be used precisely and pertinently in order to allow consumers to understand and experience the intended meanings easily. In this case, social media posts with photos from campaigns depicting women being close to nature or videos showing how the brands make clothes from reusable materials and reused garments are the cultural codes that will help the brand express its "myth" easily and clearly to consumers. For a brand to become culturally recognizable, it needs to adopt the right ideology, deliver it with a touching narrative "expressed with the right cultural codes" (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p. 176). Manfredi-Sanchez (2019) has a similar view. In this plethora of brand choices, he believes that an attribute that shapes corporate identity and therefore distinguishes it from the others is the cultural or personality traits that it adopts.

Considering that all these polarizing socio-political and environmental issues are an ideological opportunity for brands to stay relevant, the cultural theory is helpful in explaining how brands succeed in breaking through culture by infusing new ideologies to consumers. By capitalizing on the occurring problems and engaging in activism strategies, brands attempt to position themselves in innovative ways, aiming to stimulate consumers' responses (Koch, 2020).
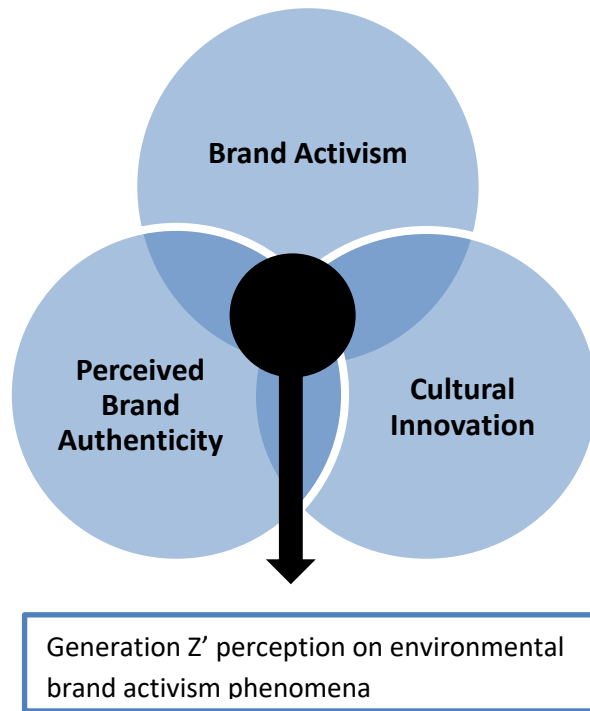
Figure 2.4 Connection of the Theoretical Framework Concept

3. Methodology

The present chapter outlines the methodology of the study. The research design explains that a qualitative analysis is the most appropriate to address topics concerning people's perceptions on brands. Twelve interviews were conducted in total, with participants being from eight different European countries. A detailed explanation of why purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used, and also of the recruiting process is given. The main concepts of the theoretical framework were operationalized in the topic guide. The final part addresses any limitations along with issues of validity, reliability and ethical implications of the research process.

3.1 Research Design

The nature of the study is explorative, meaning that the researcher aims at clarifying a problem which is not precise in nature and/or attempts to examine phenomena from another perspective (M. Saunders et al., 2009). This can be done by analyzing participants' behaviour and perception on a social phenomenon (Matthews & Ross, 2010). In the case of this study, the aim of the researcher is to gain a deeper understanding on environmental brand activism and particularly on how it is perceived by young consumers.

According to Owen (2002) qualitative approach is the most appropriate when studying consumers' perceptions on brands, because it is designed to address each research question specifically, in contrast to quantitative methods that are known to employ fixed measures for each issue. Qualitative data are the data that have a non-numeric form, and their creation requires a reciprocal process of the researcher and the respondent (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). In contrast to quantitative methods that the researcher collects the data, qualitative researcher is responsible of developing them and that is why there is diversity, flexibility and not a standard form in collecting techniques (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018; Tracy, 2013). Qualitative approach is used when the researcher aims "to understand how people construct the world around them" (Flick, 2018, p. 5). One of the greatest advantages of qualitative work is that it is a flexible method, which gives a holistic explanation of social phenomena by identifying the in depth meaning behind people's sayings (Babbie, 2007). Therefore, in order to answer the research question "**How do young people, who belong to Generation Z, perceive environmental brand activism as employed by fast-fashion brands?**", a qualitative approach is followed, via interviews and thematic analysis.

3.2 Data collection

Primary data will be used for the research, gathered with in-depth, semi-structured interviews. In-depth interviews are in person encounters among the researcher and the respondent aiming to understand respondent's perceptions and experiences in their own words (Taylor et al., 2015). Interviews differ from regular conversations in terms of having a clear structure and purpose (Tracy, 2013). In-depth interviewing is a popular research method in societal studies which allows the exploration of people's subjective experiences, views and "unspoken assumptions about life and the social world in general" (Healey-Etten & Sharp, 2010, p. 157).

Choosing a research method varies according to the purpose and nature of the research (Taylor et al., 2015). In exploratory research as such, in-depth, semi-structured interviews are usually employed (Matthews & Ross, 2010), as it is a valuable tool to discover new information and gain deeper insights on phenomena which would otherwise be difficult or impossible to observe (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility and they can be beneficial when researching participants' view on a topic and the manner that they will communicate their opinion about it (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Semi-structured interviews have a common set of questions, but the way that the questions will be introduced and the follow-up questions that will arise, differ to each interviewee (Matthews & Ross, 2010).

A valuable tool when conducting semi-structured interviews is an interview guide. The interview guide is an agenda of topics, that the researcher wants to touch upon throughout the interview, indicating the order of the topics, suggesting how the issues will be approached, and finally ensuring that all the subjects have been covered (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Although topic guide is a beneficial in the interviewing process, the researcher does not need to stick on it (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

While interviewing, a qualitative researcher is encouraged to be responsive in order to uncover participants unconscious feelings and elicit the answers s/he needs (Owen, 2002). Taylor and colleagues (2015) highlight the social interaction that the interviewing process requires and claim that this social interaction has implications both for the interviewer and the interviewee. In case that the researcher fails to interpret the respondents' answers in the right way there is a danger of a superficial exchange of information, which affects the validity of the study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Also, researchers should be cautious when interpreting the interviews because although they often need to make assumptions about informants, there is high possibility that these assumptions are incorrect (Taylor et al., 2015). Finally, it is important to mention that recording the interview can influence the way the interviewee perceives this interaction.

3.2.1 Sampling method

Selecting the potential research participants when collecting data is called sampling strategy and it is the first step in the data collection process (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). According to Etikan and colleagues (2015, p. 2) "data is meant to contribute to a better understanding of the theoretical framework". Choosing a sample is a demanding and challenging process because the researcher needs to ensure that the sample is representative but also limit the possibility "that the way the sample is chosen influences the outcome of the research" (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018, p. 138). For selecting the interviewees, this study employed snowball and purposive sampling methods.

Snowball sampling facilitates the data collection by finding participants using referrals from already existing participants (Neuman, 2014) through word of mouth, for instance. However, to address the research question, snowball sampling as a standalone type was not adequate, and purposive sampling was also employed. Purposive sampling is the deliberate choice of a participant based on the qualities that s/he fulfils (Etikan et al., 2015).

The criteria for purposive sampling are based on the suitability and representativeness of the participants (Babbie, 2007). For this study, the interviewees had to satisfy five conditions. Firstly, since the unit of analysis is Generation Z, the participants should fulfill the age criterion, which was restricted to young people who belong in the generation Z (i.e., 18 to 25 years old). The respondents were all either students or graduates of higher education. Moreover, since the study is focused particularly on fast fashion brands, to obtain useful data the respondents should be regular consumers of fast fashion brands and/or follow fast fashion brands on social media platforms. As the interviews will be conducted in English, the participants should be able to express themselves fluently in the English language. To ensure that, the respondents chosen were either studying in English or they had a B2 English level. Finally, the sample is restricted to young people from European countries because the intercultural differences between the continents may influence the validity of the research. Nevertheless, the researcher acknowledges that even countries from the same continent can differ in terms of cultural beliefs, so this can be a limitation in the research process. For a purposive sampling to be effective, the participants should also have knowledge on the topic of discussion (Matthews & Ross, 2010). However, in this study, it was expected that some of the interviewees might not be familiar with the term brand activism. The topic was operationalized in the form of questions that will be understood by the participants and facilitate the conversation.

Before proceeding with the interviews, the researcher conducted a pilot study first. Pilot testing is a way to test the data collection method before the main data gathering begins

(Matthews & Ross, 2010). Moreover, it can maximize validity and reliability of the study (M. Saunders et al., 2009). The interviewee fulfilled all four criteria mentioned above. It lasted for 45 minutes and it was recorded. The researcher covered all the topics mentioned in the interview guide. Notes were taken during the process, and particularly when the participant found it hard to comprehend some question or when she needed further clarification. After the pilot interview, certain changes were made in the interview guide. Firstly, the order of the questions changed; also, some questions were removed, and some extra questions were added, inspired by the follow up questions that the researcher made. The pilot testing gave to the researcher the assurance that the answers were aligned with the discussions of the theoretical framework and it was also an efficient way to become familiar with interviewing process.

Most of the participants were recruited through LinkedIn. A recruiting statement was posted in the researcher's LinkedIn profile, where the requirements for the research were mentioned (see Appendix A). At the end of the interviews with the participants, the researcher asked from some of the interviewees to spread it to other people that they may be interested. Snowball sampling via word of mouth played an important role on how some of the respondents were recruited.

Twelve interviews were conducted in total, excluding the pilot testing. The interviews were held between 12th of April to 27th of April, 2021 and the interviewing process lasted between 50 minutes to 70 minutes. All the respondents agreed on being recorded and had received a consent form one day prior to the interviews (see Appendix B). The interviews were transcribed using a transcription software called Otter.ai, in order to facilitate the data analysis. To improve the accuracy of the transcriptions, the researcher listened to recordings again and made any necessary corrections to the transcriptions. Table 1 provides detailed information about the participants. The participants are placed with the chronological order of the interviews. The research sample was heterogeneous, with a balance between male and female participants. Also, an attempt was made to include participants from different academic backgrounds and nationalities, in order to achieve maximum variation. Having a broad spectrum of participants aims at having a thorough understanding of the phenomenon (Etikan et al., 2015). To the best of researcher's knowledge there has not been previous academic literature on Generation Z consumers' perception on environmental brand activism. That is why a heterogeneous sample was useful for capturing a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon. However, at the same time, the participants share some homogeneous elements, which are their age group, their high educational level and their preference in purchasing fast fashion brands.

Although interviews are better to be in person in order to build rapport with the informant,

the interviews for the current study were conducted remotely, via Zoom, mostly due to COVID-19 restrictions and for safety reasons, but also due to geographical distance. Moreover, the fact that four of the participants are Greek may limit the diversity of the study, however they are all living abroad the last couple of years, adopting to the other cultures.

Interviewees	Nationality	Gender	Age	Occupation
Pilot interview	Greek	Female	24	BSc Graphic design
Respondent 1	Dutch	Male	23	MSc student in Communication Science
Respondent 2	Greek	Female	25	MSc student in Integrated Product Design
Respondent 3	Spanish	Male	25	MSc student in Integrated Product Design
Respondent 4	Austrian-Greek	Male	22	BSc student in Tourism and Hospitality Management
Respondent 5	Dutch	Female	25	Marketing and Communication
Respondent 6	Belgium	Male	25	Administrative and Research Assistant
Respondent 7	Bulgarian	Male	24	Marketing and Communication Officer
Respondent 8	Greek	Female	24	Lawyer
Respondent 9	Greek	Female	23	MSc student in Chemistry
Respondent 10	Greek	Female	25	Lawyer
Respondent 11	French	Female	21	MSc student in Digital Marketing
Respondent 12	Czech	Female	24	BA student in History of Arts

Table 1. Overview of the respondents' demographics.

3.3 Operationalization

The main objective of this study is to explore how Generation Z realizes and responds to environmental brand activism practices of fast fashion brands. To that end, two sub questions emerged:

Sub question 1: *How cultural innovation, as used by fast fashion brands is interpreted by Generation*

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Z?

Sub question 2: *How does Generation Z perceive brand authenticity in environmental brand activism practices as employed by fast fashion brands?*

As it was illustrated from the theoretical framework, fast fashion brands capitalize on the notion of the responsible consumer, in order to "culturally innovate" and break through culture, by engaging to CSR and environmental activism practices. It is then essential to direct the attention on how young consumers interpret this attempt of fast fashion brands to cultural innovation (*sub question 1*). Moreover, consumers tend to evaluate brands' values when employing brand activism practices. As consumers' scepticism towards brands that claim to be environmentally conscious has increased, it is important to understand how participants perceive these attempts of fast fashion brands to engage in environmental activism and whether they consider those initiatives as authentic, trustworthy or fake (*sub question 2*).

The dominant concepts that have emerged from the theoretical framework, were then operationalized in the interview guide (see Figure 3.1). These concepts were used as a foundation for the interview topics and as a stimulus to construct the topic guide. The figure 3.1 indicates some examples of how the topics were translated into questions. The interview questions which were based on the topics of cultural innovation and brand activism were mostly developed to address the first sub question, while the questions concerning the consumers' values and brand authenticity were used to answer the second sub question. However, it should be noted that since the topics were related and connected to each other, a clear categorization of the questions was not always possible and there were instances of overlapping of one topic to another. Also, the follow-up questions, that were made based on participants' answers, were sometimes shifting the conversation from one topic to another making the classification of the topics even more challenging.

Brand Activism

- How do you feel about brands trying to position themselves on socio-political issues?
- How do you feel about brands trying to position themselves on environmental issues?

Cultural Innovation

- Why do you think that fast-fashion brands feel the need to disclaim to people that they are sustainable and environment friendly?
- How do you feel about fast-fashion brands claiming to be environment-friendly?

Environmental Brand Activism in Fast Fashion Brands

Consumers' Values

- What does it mean for you to be a responsible consumer?
- How do your personal values shape the way you approach fast fashion brands?

Brand Authenticity

- What are your criteria to evaluate a brand which takes a stand on environmental issues as authentic?
- Would you consider a fast-fashion company as authentic and why?

Figure 3.1: Topics discussed on the interview guide

3.3.1 Interview guide

As stated previously, the interview guide was slightly changed after the pilot interview. The final questions were rearranged to keep a coherence during the interview. The questions were designed aiming to answer the main research question and the sub-questions. That is why they were all conceptually based and divided into topics emerging from the theoretical framework (see Appendix C). The participants were not fully aware of the topic of the interview, and the only clue that they were given from the recruitment post was that the discussion will be about fast fashion brands. This eliminated participants' biased answers. Acknowledging that not all interviewers might be familiar with the concepts that were about to be discussed, the researcher gave the definition of brand authenticity, and activism during the interview to ensure the respondents have understood clearly these topics of discussion. Since the interviews aimed at understanding how Generation Z perceives brand activism, a clear definition of this term was not provided; rather, real-life examples of the phenomenon were given because the researcher expected to see how the respondents conceive it.

The interviewing process had started with some ice breaking questions that are not

included in the topic guide and were not recorded. The researcher aimed at establishing a more friendly relationship with the participants and building rapport. Thus, during the first ten minutes, participants were asked about their interests, their studies and/or the country about they live in. Then, the core of the interview started with some general questions regarding brands and then fast fashion brands in particular. The questions were gradually becoming narrower, starting from consumers' values and whether their values are connected with their brand choices and escalated on brands' activism practices. Although the study focuses on environmental brand activism and fast fashion brands, it was still important to gain insights on their perception about other forms of brand activism, like social or political, and how they are employed by other clothing brands which are not fast fashion. This aimed at finding whether there was a variation between respondents' feeling on environmental activism and fast fashion brands, in comparison to other activism forms and brands. The concept of brand authenticity was the last to be discussed, because it firstly required an extensive discussion around brands and brand activism to conclude whether the respondent consider brand activism as authentic, or whether s/he trusts fast fashion brands.

The interview guide proved to be valuable tool during the semi-structured interviews as it helped the respondents communicate their thoughts, but at the same time stay in the topic. Although the topic of discussion was the same with each interviewer, the discussion differed each time, mostly due to the participants' background. The follow up question were bringing new themes every time.

3.4 Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves three aspects: data management, data reduction and conceptual development (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). As the data tend to increase rapidly in a project the researcher needs to manage them, usually by the help of software tools (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). For this study, the transcribed interviews were uploaded on Atlas.ti, a computer software used for facilitating the organization and analysis of data. Data reduction is the realization that not all data are critical, and that the researcher needs to focus only on what is relevant to the research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). To identify which parts of the data are most essential, the researcher read each interview multiple times, highlighting the excerpts that deemed significant for the context of the study. The final part, conceptual development, consists of the emergence of themes and concepts which, as the analysis proceeds, they become more closely connected. In the same vein, Neuman (2014) postulates that qualitative data analysis requires systematic organization of the data and simultaneously seeking for patters and relationships in them.

To achieve conceptual development, thematic analysis was employed when analysing the

data. Thematic analysis is primarily conducted when the researcher works on raw data (Matthews & Ross, 2010), as in this case in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis is used for "identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns and themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79), aiming to convert "the data into findings" by dismantling the data into codes and reassembling them to more prominent themes (Boeije, 2010, p. 94). According to Boeije (2010) there are three important principles behind qualitative analysis: constant comparison, analytic induction, and theoretical sensitivity. Constant comparison, as the name suggests, refers to constantly confronting the findings of the analysis with the preliminary ones. Analytic induction is the researchers' attempt to "find the best fitting theoretical structure for their research material" (Boeije, 2010, p. 86). Theoretical sensitivity is the researcher's ability to develop themes from the analysis and interpretation of the research data. The researcher should acknowledge that codes are not just a categorization of the findings, rather they are a substantial part of the research (Boeije, 2010).

Braun and Clarke (2006) believe that there are six phases of thematic analysis and the initial one begins from the moment that the researcher starts transcribing the data and notices the first patterns. Boeije (2010) distinguishes three types of coding within qualitative analysis: open, axial, and selective. The data analysis was guided by a combination of Boeije (2010) and Braun and Clarke (2006) guidelines to thematic analysis. Specifically, the researcher followed the three coding steps (open, axial, selective), as proposed by Boeije (2010), and then proposed three themes extracted by the selective coding. A detailed description of how these steps were applied by the researcher follows.

After conducting the interviews, open coding begins. It is the beginning of the conceptualization of data, in which the researcher examines the data carefully to find fragments that are meaningful to the topic (Strauss & Corbin, 2007, in Boeije, 2010, p. 96). This is considered as the second phase for Braun and Clarke (2006), when the researcher starts to identify what is interesting in the data and starts generating the initial codes. The codes that are assigned to each fragment result in a coding scheme (Boeije, 2010). The researcher read the interviews multiple times and underlined the meaningful excerpts. Some abstract notes were made, which then would be condensed into more descriptive words. For instance, the comment "highlights the advertising and promotional reasons behind brand activism" became "scepticism towards brand activism incentives" and "scepticism towards brands' campaigns". Even though Boeije (2010) suggests assigning one code to each fragment it was difficult to be applied, as in many cases, it was more complex to be described with one code. The result of this step was a coding scheme of 265 different codes.

In the axial coding, the researcher identifies the dominant codes and reorganizes the

dataset into categories and sub-categories. In order to do so, the researcher needs to find the connections between the categories (Strauss & Corbin, 2007, as cited in Boeije, 2010). Axial coding has two aims: to distinguish the dominant codes from the insignificant ones, and the rearrangement and reduction of data (Boeije, 2010). Therefore, as Boeije (2010) suggests, the researcher merged any codes that were considered to be synonymous or that were used to describe the same fragments. Moreover, codes used only once were either crossed out, or others were merged with synonymous codes used more often. As a result, 28 axial codes remained (see Appendix D).

Since the preliminary ideas were refined and the prominent categories were made, selective coding follows. After merging the axial codes, seven selective codes were created: "brands have impact", "environmental brand activism needs a rationale", "consumers as informed citizens", "scepticism towards brand activism", "setbacks on sustainable choices", "importance of authenticity", "fast fashion industry lacks authenticity", (see Appendix D). These were then organized in three final themes aiming to answer the research question: *Request for Environment-driven brands, Consumers' Concerns, Request for Authentic Brands*. These themes will be discussed, compared, and contrasted in relation to and based on the previous literature on the next chapter.

3.5 Research Quality

Even though doing consumer and brand research with qualitative approaches is commonly accused of subjectivity, Owen (2002) believes that in-depth interviews are more valid than quantitative methodologies. The hermeneutic problem of meaning implies that communication between people is not always straight forward and there is always a chance of mistranslation and misinterpretation of the question. This is a substantial problem in brand research because it makes it difficult for the researcher to get meaningful and intelligible access to consumers' perceptions of brands. Surveys are not sufficient because the researcher will never be sure that all the respondents interpret the questions in the same way. Also, through the interviewing process, the researcher can bring to the surface consumers' associations with brands or unravel unconscious and repressed meaning, which would otherwise remain hidden. These prove that qualitative work in consumer and brand research helps to limit any reliability and validity issues (Owen, 2002).

To secure the credibility and validity of the research process, the researcher presented a detailed analysis of the data collection and data analysis to make the process transparent to the reader. Remote interviewing may have resulted in a limited perception of respondents' body language and establishing a deeper connection with them, but it was very helpful in getting a varied sampling since there were no geographical restrictions. In terms of research limitations, it should be

disclaimed that, as in any qualitative research, the impact of the environment and the researcher's values can play an essential role in interpreting data (Silverman, 2011). To avoid such risk, the researcher continually compared and contrasted the findings with the previous literature (Silverman, 2011). The researcher also recognizes her contribution to the production of meaning during the interview process and the implications which may arise. To restrain that, a pilot interview was conducted to familiarize the researcher with the interview process and eliminate any mistakes before the original interviews take place. Finally, the researcher cannot assure that the study results can be generalized and represent the whole Z Generation. However, the study aims not to generalize the findings but to complement and/or challenge the existing literature on environmental brand activism.

Ethical implications may also occur from the interviewing process (Johnson, 2001), but since this study does not cover any sensitive topics, no ethical approval was needed. The recordings of the participants and the transcriptions were stored in the researcher's private computer, where no other has access to it. The researcher ensured the anonymity of the participants, by substituting the original names of the interviewees with numbers. Also, an informed consent form was distributed beforehand. The form included the interview topic and ensured the participants that they could avoid answering any of the questions and/or withdraw at any stage.

4. Results

Three major themes arose from the analysis of the interviews: Consumers' Concerns, Request for Environment-Driven Brands, Request for Authentic (see Table 2). The analysis of the themes follows the two sub-questions. The first two themes address the first sub-question regarding young consumers' views on the attempt of fast fashion brands to culturally innovate by employing environmental brand activism practices. The last theme answers the second sub-question and discusses the importance of authenticity, as perceived by Generation Z. The coding tree (see Appendix D) explains in detail the coding process under which these themes were retrieved.

THEMES	SUBTHEMES
CONSUMERS' CONCERNS	Consumers as informed citizens
	Scepticism towards brand activism
	Setbacks on sustainable choices
REQUEST FOR ENVIRONMENT-DRIVEN BRANDS	Brands have impact
	Environmental brand activism needs rationale
REQUEST FOR AUTHENTIC BRANDS	Importance of authenticity
	Fast fashion industry lacks authenticity

Table 2. Overview of the themes and subthemes

4.1 Consumers' Concerns

This theme aims to answer the first sub question "*How does Generation Z perceive cultural innovation, as used by fast fashion brands?*". Cultural innovation refers to the attempt of brands to become appealing to the mass market and transform their identity by employing an innovative ideology (Holt & Cameron, 2010). In the case of fast fashion brands, the innovative ideology is environmental consciousness which has seen a steady rise the recent years from the aspect of consumers. Thus, fast fashion brands are trying to engage in environmental brand activism practices to become appealing to younger generations who are known to be more concerned about environmental issues. Although this transformation is occurring because they aim to bridge the gap

with their stakeholders, fast fashion brands' environmental actions seem to be falling into the void, as young consumers' scepticism intensifies.

Young consumers are becoming more informed and thus more concerned on the claims of the brands. Media have played a central role on uncovering fast fashion brands' misconducts which then leads to more scepticism from the perspective of the consumers. This section deals with consumers' concerns in regard to the environmental actions of fast fashion brands and explores how the fast dissemination of information, their scepticism towards brand activism phenomena and factors like clothing price and aesthetics influence the way they perceive the attempt of fast fashion brands to adopt cultural innovation.

4.1.1 Consumers as informed citizens

Traditionally the role of the consumer is known to be placed in opposition to the role of a citizen since terms like consumerism come in sharp contrast with the notion of responsible, conscious consumer (Shen & Wang, 2021). However, nowadays, consumers use their power to support causes that interest them. Their purchase -or opposition to purchasing- symbolizes a political statement (Neilson, 2010). Thus, the term political consumerism has emerged, which refers to how consumers use their purchases to support or condemn a cause (Neilson, 2010). The evolution of Web 2.0 and the instant dissemination of information and ideologies that were brought with it are considered the most popular explanations for the prevalence of political consumerism (Kelm & Dohle, 2018). Ten out of twelve of the interviewees highlighted the media's contribution on informing them about various environmental and socio-political issues. The following quote by respondent 7 is an example of that:

> But the more I got to be involved in ethical issues, or the more I read about certain companies, especially because these fast fashion brands are constantly on the media with some scandals or some issues that media addresses, the more your eyes are being open.

The statement mentioned above proves that information is strongly interrelated with media usage (Copeland & Boulianne, 2020). People use social media as a mean to educate themselves and make the appropriate decisions based on what they read. This is ironic for fast fashion brands which may use social media platforms as a mean to convey their sustainable and eco-friendly ideology, but at the same time it is via these platforms that they are getting the most criticism by the stakeholders. Besides social media, three participants mentioned the role that Netflix and its documentaries have played on informing the public for various controversial issues. This constant information which stems from media, confronts consumers with their responsibilities and, according to respondent 8, urges them to try "to buy clothes from trademarks that have a

stronger moral frame.". Eleven interviewees mentioned that media have been a stimulus for them to be more sceptical towards brands' claims. This in turn has influenced their purchasing behaviour and helped them adopt a more responsible way of living.

In general, a significant number of respondents acknowledged that not only brands have societal responsibilities, but also that consumers share responsibilities for the society as well. For example, during the sixth interview, when the participant was asked how important it is for him to be responsible in his purchases, he replied:

> I think, kind of the same as, how is it important if you vote or if you don't vote? (laughs) You know what I want to say? Like, okay, maybe one vote doesn't make a lot of sense. But many votes can do in a political system, but also many, many customers can, on mass they can, they can- they can influence like, the company's choices as well.

This statement is of particular interest for two reasons. First, the participant parallelizes the act of purchasing with voting, exemplifying the political aspect of consumption (Neilson, 2010; Stolle et al., 2005). Secondly, it illustrates that consumers have realized that their power extends beyond a simple purchase and may have implications for society. This aligns with Endres and Panagopoulos's (2017) view, who perceive political consumerism as an extension of "lifestyle politics", which is the penetration of politics in the non-political aspects of people's lives. Although this was the only statement that made an explicit connection with purchasing behavior and voting, nine out of twelve of the respondents mentioned that their purchases are based on their political views. To some of the respondents, the feelings of power and impact they carried brought together a sense of responsibility. During the eighth interview, the participant explained that "when you understand your power as a consumer, you might have the bigger picture and understand that you have a responsibility too."

In the same vein, more participants felt that their purchase symbolizes something bigger, something more significant than a simple choice of a product. A quote from the respondent 10 illustrates how half of the participants see it: "So, when you actually know that and you still buy stuff from like this specific brand, you- you support this, you support this whole system, it's not about only supporting the idea, but you're also actually supporting the system". Perceptions as such, make it apparent that the cultural chasm between the fast fashion brands and its stakeholders goes beyond than the product and lies in the different values they share. People see their purchases as an extension of their views, corroborating the ideas of Eyada (2020).

Besides the criteria concerning the product per se (e.g., price, quality, fitting), participants felt that it is consumers' responsibility to also have environment as a principal criterion when purchasing. This also results in consumers having high expectations from the brands in terms of

how cautious they are of environmental issues. Interestingly, when the discussion was evolved around environmental issues, matters of ethics and fair labour arose as well. According to respondent 1, "when you talk about clothing, responsibility and purchases, it's related to buying clothing that is fair. From what you know that yeah, it's not made with uhh... child hands. And it's fair.". The interviews made it apparent that being an informed citizen is an integral part of being a responsible consumer. The statement below summarizes best what nine out of twelve participants shared when they were asked what it means for them to be a responsible consumer:

> To inform oneself definitely, to know what choices you're making, no matter what they are. So for me, an informed h&m consumer, for example, is somebody who knows that they are entering a multinational corporation, who has been accused for multiple labor law rights violations, and whose environmental policies are not what they always seem, or what they always pick them seem. To me, a person who still buys from h&m has to know all of that. (Respondent 4).

> According to Kelm and Dohle (2018), online information and online communication influence political consumerism. This can explain why the majority of the participants were so persistent on how important it is that people nowadays are informed. The constant availability of information makes people feel that getting informed is an obligation, and it is part of their responsibilities as consumers.

4.1.2 Scepticism towards brand activism

Shetty and colleagues (2019) were among the first scholars to talk about young consumers' perception of the phenomenon of brand activism. They theorize that because millennials are more familiar with companies' marketing and advertising gimmicks, they are "sceptical towards the tall claims made by the brand and companies" (p.165). Again, media play an important role here since it is through them that companies' frauds are revealed (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). This, in turn, makes consumers sceptical about any C-RM, CSR, or brand activism activity that brands are involved. Brand activism may be employed by fast fashion brands as a way to bridge the cultural chasm between them and their stakeholders, but interviews showed that young consumers are not easily convinced. Specifically, when interviewees were asked whether they considered brand activism as real activism, the participants had mixed feelings about it, and none of them could give a yes or no answer. The statement above indicates interviewees' indecisiveness and doubt:

> It's just I feel some sort of, like a level of hypocrisy sometimes. But not in case of all brands. And it's problematic, because, you know, like, at least if they have such big platforms, for example, like Nikes and stuff, like it's good that they're making comments of some sorts,

but it's, there's no integrity, like, you know, this is that kind of like contradiction with. (Respondent 12)

 Skarmeas and Leonidou (2013), when examining consumers' scepticism in CSR practices, reported that one of the reasons that consumers' doubts are so high is because the power of negative information weights more than the power of positive information. In that sense, fast fashion brands should be very careful about the claims they make. It does not matter how big societal or environmental investments the company makes, because any negative news that will come out will juxtapose it. This is also illustrated by the following quote: "I think if they don't claim anything, I'm neutral. If they do claim something, and it's not true, then it's negative, but if they do claim something and is positive, then I'm positive." (Respondent 5).

Another question that was commonly addressed by participants, and is related to their scepticism towards the brand, was regarding the intentions of the company. It was hard for them to believe that the reason behind a brand's positioning on a matter is purely for the good of society and the environment. Profit and marketing purposes were the most common answers given when respondents were asked why they believe brands are engaging in brand activism practices. As Generation Z is known not to be affected by the traditional marketing activities (Özkan & Somaz, 2017), this sceptical stance was expected to be observed. An interviewee was questioning the intentions of the brands wondering whether "you really care about or you just do it because you want to create this brand image and generate more profit?" (Respondent 7). Another interviewee was determined that the end goal when fast fashion brands are developing environmentally friendly strategies is "so that they can have more consumers" (Respondent 9). Respondent 10 characterized brand activism as "an advertising method" and she explained that although "you see brands that are trying to indirectly promote the brand by using these advertising methods", at the end "they turn out to be not sincere.".

Another reason that participants are sceptical towards environmental brand activism practices is because they believe that nowadays, brand activism has become a trend. This notion is closely related with the concept of cultural innovation, in which brands are trying to outperform competition by adopting innovative practices (Holt, 2004; Holt & Cameron, 2010). Brand activism is seen as an innovative marketing technique that attracts particularly younger generations which are more politically engaged. Brands capitalize on consumers' increasing interest about environmental issues and they try to adapt their strategies based on their demands. According to respondent 1, "people are behaving more as a critical citizen. We carry more responsibility. So, if there is a time to, yeah, to be active as a brand, I think it's definitely now.". A similar view is expressed by respondent 10 who believes that the last years fast fashion brands "are trying because there is an

actual trend of like, environmental consciousness that they are trying to like, hop on the hype, and try to also to persuade people that they have sustainable departments, sustainable clothing.". Once again, these quotes exemplify that the uprising environmental ideology was seen as an opportunity for fast fashion brands to culturally innovate, that is to break through culture by adopting an innovative ideology (Holt & Cameron, 2010).

Social media have been the main medium through which fast fashion brands try to convey their environmental ideology to consumers. As discussed before, social media has played a crucial role in informing consumers and bringing the environmental topics back to the forefront. As the respondent 12 illustrates:

> Environmental issues are becoming, like, more and more important nowadays [..] now with social media, especially with social media, with the people, they know what happened, they are like, they just follow what happened and follow the news. So they [fast fashion brands] have to change. Like, they have to just go into the wave like and evolve, just evolvement.

Young consumers' increased preference and support for environmentally friendly brands (Shetty et al., 2019) urge fast fashion brands to "hop on the hype" and "just go into the wave", as the respondents 10 and 11 respectively report. What fast fashion brands might not expect was that their environmental attempts will become point of criticism. The fact that none of the interviewees mentioned that fast fashion brands are engaging with environmental brand activism practices due to pure environmental interest depicts their disbelief on the brands' motives. Kim and Hall (2015) discern that there is a growing tendency of fashion brands to engage in green branding initiatives and incorporate them in their management agenda, and apparently the participants have realized that too.

4.1.3 Setbacks on sustainable choices

As it is evident from the interviews, consumers' increased demands have led to scepticism towards brands' environmental activism. However, what has also been observed is an incongruence between participants' environmental stance and their actual practices. During the interviews, participants admitted several times that although they do not want to purchase from fast fashion brands or generally from brands that they do not share the same values as them, eventually, they succumb. When participant 9 was asked whether her values influence her purchases, she recognizes that "the person you are, actually influences your purchases, so and the brands you're following. But again, sometimes I'm not prevented from buying from fast fashion brands.". This is an example of many similar responses that were given during the interviewing process, exhibiting a gap between their environmental intentions and their actual purchase behaviour.

Since responses as such were becoming more and more common among the participants the researcher decided to proceed and expand further the discussion on this matter. This intention-behaviour gap has received great attention from scholars lately focusing, particularly in sustainable apparel products (Jung et al., 2020; Rausch & Kopplin, 2021; Stringer et al., 2020). Several reasons have been identified explaining this incongruency of consumers, who highlight their concerns on sustainable fashion in any chance.

Income was one of the most frequent answers among the participants. This was anticipated since the study is addressed to ages 18-25 years old with the participants either being students, or in the beginning of their professional career. So, when respondents were asked whether they consider themselves as environmentally conscious consumers all of the interviewees mentioned their low budget and high prices as restraint factors. These also align with the findings of Connell (2010) who theorizes that economic resources are a principal barrier to sustainable choices. Respondent 4 admits that he finds himself "reducing my choices to less environmentally friendly ones, because they are more affordable." and he continues by saying that "it's a reality that we live in that more informed decisions can only be executed with the with enough income.". Respondent 7 adds to that view by explaining that his values "go to the second file if I have to make a decision between my financial status and what is important to save money or to buy fair trade because fair trade, most of the times is more expensive.".

Another explanation for the action-willingness gap is the feeling many of the participants shared, that they are not powerful enough to make a change or have an impact on the environment:

> I pay less attention to environmental issues, while I'm aware that they're important. But I, I know that my contribution doesn't make a lot of effect. So maybe that's also a thing that place like, my, my single actions won't have any influence on- on a global scale, or on a scale of the companies. You know, it's like, if I had, if I had most power, I would certainly make other decisions. (Respondent 6)

As Tobler and colleagues (2012) indicate, the feeling of powerlessness to change a situation may lead people to "apathy and resignation and thus will be less likely to address environmental issues" (p. 199). Particularly in global issues, like climate crisis, which is a worldwide phenomenon, people feel often discouraged to take action and tend to disclaim their responsibility (Tobler et al., 2012). Moreover, other reasons may be involved in the purchasing decision, like convenience or when referring to clothes, personal aesthetics and style, fitting, and quality. For instance, during the second interview, the respondent said that "it's always a big part is always about, like, liking what you see, instead of just being responsible. It means to be good looking. It's the first requirement

because you're gonna put it on you.". These quotes illustrate that there are several individualistic reasons that drive purchase, and it is not solely related to income and pricing. As Rausch and Kopplin (2021) sustainable clothing is frequently seen as unstylish and this consists of another restraint factor, especially for younger consumers.

These findings go in accordance with a study conducted to Millennials, which found that price and style, among others, have a positive relationship with purchase intention in fashion apparel industry (Valaei & Nikhashemi, 2017). Even though the participants themselves realized this incongruence between their willingness to be environment friendly and the lack of concrete actions, this does not stop them from having great expectations from the brands, as the following section indicates.

4.2 Request for Environment-Driven Brands

The present theme adds to the previous section of sceptical consumers, addressing the first sub-question as well. Generation Z is known for its high expectations (Priporas et al., 2017) and value-driven purchasing choices (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). What was inferred from the interviews is that a potential reason behind young consumers' increased expectations is that they acknowledge that brands have the power and the means to support an environmental cause. That is why they expect from brands to be environment-driven and not focus solely on profit generation.

After expressing their discontent on how fast fashion industry leveraged environmental issues to culturally innovate, the interviewees said how they expect fast fashion brands to approach environmental brand activism. According to the participants, in order for environmental brand activism to have an impact, there needs to be a well-thought-out plan, a rationale behind the cause. No matter how big or small the brand is, it should be conscious when positioning, have proof of its claims, have an alliance between its claims and actions, and there should be a fit between the brand and the cause it supports.

4.2.1 Brands have impact

According to eleven out of twelve interviewees, bigger brand names, in this case fast fashion brands, have the power to make changes, thus bear greater responsibility in comparison to smaller brands and local stores that do not have the resources to engage in brand activism. As the respondent 6 explains, fast fashion brands "have the money, they have the means to do it. So, they should- this this should give the example for the others.". This statement is also related to a study conducted by Yang and Aggarwal (2019), claiming that a company's size and the consequent

perceptions of power influence how consumers expect the company to communicate. Moreover, there were many participants who found it encouraging that bigger brands are engaging to brand activism, because they feel that this positioning might have an impact to the public. Specifically, the respondent 8 states:

> I think that since they have such a big voice, such a strong and loud voice, because of their followers, but also their economic power, it's them that finally gonna, you know, make the change. So, I think it's good to have activist- to have brands that have activist purposes.

Finally, what is also indicative of brands' power is consumers' commitment to some particular brands. In contrast to the Priporas and colleagues (2017) who claim that Generation Z lacks brand loyalty, many participants claimed that a reason for purchasing a product is due to the brand itself, and the feeling it evokes to them when they purchase it. In fact, when the respondent 1 was asked whether he was purchasing a brand not merely for its product but for the overall feeling that it creates, he refused it in the beginning. However, as the discussion evolved, he realized that being but part of a running team which was sponsored by Under Armour, was a factor that influenced him to start buying from Under Armour. He concluded by admitting that "Under Armour is definitely society thing for me.", meaning that he was purchasing it because it evoked to him a community feeling and developed a sense of belonging with that team. The respondent 4 has realized that "many companies have strived towards creating communities among their consumers.", while the respondent 5 find it positive if brands "can create, like a community based on the values that they have.".

These quotes are linked to the cultural branding theory, according to which brands are trying to outperform their competitors by creating a myth around the brand, targeting subcultures and creating communities around the brand (Holt & Cameron, 2010). This sense of community that emerges, makes consumers identify with the brand and create brand loyalty and trust between the brand and the customer (Shetty et al., 2019). Calder et al. (2018) have also underlined the need for a different branding model that sees "brands as experiences, not merely as things that consumers can be persuaded to buy and use" (p. 221). In this model, brands are perceived as meaningful part of consumers' life and tend to incorporate the brand both mentally and practically into their lives. In this case, brand activism is seen by the interviewees as a way to create a community between customers and brands sharing the same values. What is also very interesting to note is that, when brand activism becomes part of the company's identity it may become a purchasing criterion, as the respondent 5 claims: "if I would have two shoes, Adidas and Nike, I would choose for the Nike one because of their brand values and their image.".

However, for a brand to get to a point where positioning is considered an integral part of its

branding model, it depends on the history and background of the company and the effort it puts to be as close as it can with its stakeholders' views. The next section will explore what participants request from brand in order to feel that their environmental brand activism initiatives have an effect in society.

4.2.2 Environmental brand activism needs rationale

As discussed in the second chapter, companies engaging in brand activism should be ready to be scrutinized by stakeholders. Younger generations are known to be more demanding and, as the interviews demonstrated, participants have specific criteria that they expect brands to satisfy. As the brand activism literature suggested, brands should be cautious to align the identity of the brand with the cause that it supports, and to think whether this company is eligible to speak up about environmental matters (Robinson et al., 2012; Sheehy, 2015). The respondent 1 believes that when a brand, in this case fast fashion brand wants to take a stance on an environmental issue there are two factors that has to take into consideration: "First is the willingness. Do you really want to do that? If it's there, then good. Definitely. And the second thing that plays a role in there is, are you the right brand to do that?". Similar to this view, the respondent 3 says:

> When a company tries to claim that they're going to be environmental activists, I think, you know, they kind of should reflect on themselves, and how can we make our own company more environmentally friendly by looking at how we're making our products or making our clothing. I think that's the first step.

Like the aforementioned views, participant 7 states that a company should have an internal consistency when taking a stance on environmental issues explaining that "if you want to be super green, super fair trade and all the stuff, you need to first change your mindset as a company to that and then be a brand activist and then challenge the status quo". This means that a brand's environmental stance should be supported both within the company and publicly by promoting sustainability and environmental values.

Ten of twelve of the participants agreed that brand activism has several forms and that not every brand can have the background to support every form because, as the respondent 4 puts it "then it will just be political organization and not a clothing brand anymore.". Similarly, when respondent 5 was asked whether there are brands that are more appropriate to talk about some issues she answered with questions: "… do they ever talk about such topics? Does it match? Is there like, the identity in general?". Therefore, participants suggest that a brand's identity and historical background plays a role when taking a stance on social or environmental issues. There needs to be the right cause for the brand and be supported with concrete actions.

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When participants were asked what fast fashion brands should do to be trusted about their environmental incentives, the most common answers were about proving their claims with actions. For instance, respondent 4 paused many interesting questions that he expects companies to answer like, "where do you take your materials to be recycled? How do you do that? What do you make out of the recycled materials? Who profits from that?". Respondent 8 suggested that "they should prove it in practice, and they should maybe give more- more money to this kind of purposes. To fund researches, to… maybe to fund an education to people too like this donate more money for this purpose.".

Overall, seven out twelve participants expressed a positive perception on environmental brand activism. Although most of the participants claimed that fast fashion brands are not yet in a place where they can publicly state that they are sustainable or that they promote eco-friendly living, they also acknowledged that some of their initiatives can be beneficial for society. According to respondent 2:

> Even though an intention might be not very clear, but then if the result is what we need, then, you know, it's always- it's always the result that affects us. Even- even if it's not, really activism in the intentions, is just about making better profit, if it results into building a better society, I am okay with it.

What needs to be clarified is that respondents' positive reactions towards environmental brand activism are only under the condition that the brands incorporate brand activism as part of their branding strategy. An instance of a brand that was constantly mentioned during the interviews, as a basis for comparison for an environment-driven brand, was Patagonia. By adopting genuine environmental brand activism in its business model, Patagonia has managed to build rapport and loyalty with its customers (Kumar, 2021). The next section will delve into the importance of authenticity when engaging in brand activism practices and will explore what is missing from fast fashion industry to be considered as authentic too.

4.3 Request for Authentic Brands

This theme addresses the second sub-question "How does Generation Z perceive brand authenticity in environmental brand activism practices as employed by fast fashion brands?". The previous sections focus on consumers' scepticism and requests on the application of brand activism practices (e.g., how well does the cause fit with the identity of the brand and how well it is communicated). However, according to Portal and colleagues (2018), brands should start focusing more on what they stand for as organization instead their brand performance.

Therefore, this section focuses on the importance of authenticity behind a brand's cause

and how transparent and trustworthy the initiative is considered by the interviewees. The significance of brand authenticity and trust for the development of a strong connection among brands and consumers has been extensively discussed by many scholars (Eggers et al., 2013; Fritz et al., 2017; Morhart et al., 2015) Although there is not yet extensive research conducted on the importance of authenticity in brand activism, the already existing ones highlight that authenticity is a principal factor determining the success of brand activism as a phenomenon (Broberg & Doshoris, 2020; Kubiak & Ouda, 2020; Shetty et al., 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020)

4.3.1 Importance of authenticity

According to Oh and colleagues (2019), customers feel that the transparency of the process contributes to brand authenticity. Consumers want to know the process under which the products are made. Fast fashion brands lack this transparency because, like all the big firms, there is not enough information given in terms of the conditions under which the clothes are produced. The participant 2 thinks that fast fashion brands "should focus a lot on the transparency of the company. So, numbers and conditions, so they can prove to people because the saying the label is like, okay, you say that, but in what extent?". Respondent 11 realizes that consumers "don't know nothing about usually company we don't even know who is the director and this type of thing. And this is a lack of transparency, which is really bad for the company usually. I think this is really important.".

Moreover, what makes trust even more challenging is that there is no tangible entity that people can identify with behind the brand. Participant 3 was doubtful of the company's intentions when taking a stance and it raised questions as such: "when it's not a real person, it's like, you know… what does that mean that a company cares about a cause? Like, what does that actually mean?". Therefore, not knowing the person behind these big corporate brands acts as a restraint factor in trusting the brand. This is linked with the notion of brand anthropomorphism (Morhart et al., 2015; Portal et al., 2019) which refers to the humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions and emotions that are attributed to brands (Portal et al., 2018). Brand anthropomorphism makes consumers feel more connected with the brand's inner values, which makes the company perceived more as more authentic and trustworthy (Morhart et al., 2015; Portal et al., 2019).

However, transparency about brand activism practices alone is not enough for stakeholders; the true motives of the brand are also scrutinized (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Many participants expressed disbelief on brands' claims, even when they were fully transparent in their websites, social media accounts, and product labelling. This aligns with Heine and colleagues (2016), who theorize that a perspective of authenticity is moral authenticity, in which consumers

are interested more in brands' motives and genuine intentions instead of the products. Also, their eco-friendly clothing line has been questioned:

"I do know that, for example, of course, H&M, and Zara and so on, they have they're environmentally or environmental friendly producing a clothing line. But I don't really know if it's really that environmental friendly." (Respondent 5).

According to many interviewees a brand's values can also determine how authentic and trusted a brand might be. Most of them acknowledged that their values have changed throughout the years, which in turn, has influenced the way they approach fast fashion brands and purchases in general. Participants seem to seek for brands that carry the same values they embrace. Respondent 7 acknowledges that "it's a very important thing to have this connection, because not always do you have connection with brands.". When the respondent one was asked whether he trusts the brands from which he purchases clothes he answered: "Yeah, I think yes. Yeah. Because trust is very important in establishing a relationship. Also maintaining this relationship.". This comes in accordance with Burnett and Hutton (2007) view, that successful brands are those that establish "a deep connection with the individual" (p. 344). Throughout the interviews, participants made it clear that they expect authentic, value-driven brands, particularly when engaging in environmental brand activism. This raises the bar for fast fashion brands which are already being targeted by stakeholders.

4.3.2 Fast fashion industry lacks authenticity

According to participants, fast fashion industry tries to find ways to appear sustainable without making any concrete actions. Once again, social media are considered as a tool through which they can make generic statements about their environmental identity, but at the same time not supporting any claims:

> I guess a lot of activism nowadays is done by young people. And the young people of our generation, use social media almost as a news, that's where they get maybe most of their information. So, it makes sense to target what the youth want through social media, you know. You can say anything you want; you can make big statements without really showing any data. (Respondent 3)

The role of social media in the communication of a brand activism practice has been discussed before, but here it takes another dimension. It is perceived as a marketing tool to target younger generations, which makes them lose any trust towards fast fashion brands' declarations.

When participants were asked what stance fast fashion brands should keep in order to be considered as authentic and trustworthy nine of them agreed that the most efficient way to regain

trust is "to completely go small scale with production. I think that's a contradiction in techniques (laughs). And become very sustainable, very ethical, and so on." (Respondent 6). However, as the respondent points out as well, this change in production implies a complete reorganization of the industry, since massive production is the main characteristic of fast fashion brands. Because of that contradiction, there were also many respondents who claimed that fast fashion brands cannot have an environmental stance at all because they are the source of the problem. In particular, when they were asked why fast fashion brands feel this need to disclaim to people that they are environmentally active most of the interviewees blamed them to be "the biggest part of the problem" (Respondent 8) and that they are also trying to "draw attention by doing that" (Respondent 1). Statements as such, indicate not just consumers' scepticism as it was discussed in the 4.1 subsection, but a complete lack of trust towards fast fashion brands.

Another reason for the distrust of interviewees towards fast fashion brands is the accusation of promoting and intensifying consumerism. "Having this massive production and low prices, fast fashion brands are alleged to "educate, they train people to buy cheap clothes, and be more reckless about it." (Respondent 8). This brings an intense problematization to the interviewees in terms of whether fast fashion brands can actually contribute environmentally "because the biggest issue is just the consumerism aspect of it." (Respondent 3). Brewer (2019) has also touched upon this phenomenon naming it as the fashion paradox referring to what extend can fashion industry constantly produce new items, while being sustainable at the same time. As a participant very accurately says: "I think the term is a mistake from- from the start, I mean, you cannot be a fast fashion brand that produces very quick things and a quantity of things and can claim that your environmental friendly" (Respondent 9).

This high consumption of low-price and low-quality garments is a restraint on the evolution of fashion industry into a sustainable industry (Boström et al., 2019). Also, Heine et al. (2016) believe that massive production comes in sharp contrast with moral authenticity which implies limited production, with creators that are highly involved in the production. Moreover, the repetitive environmental and labour scandals that have occurred throughout the years make them completely untrusted, unless a complete restructure takes place. However, this restructure seems difficult since, according to half of the participants, it is quite impossible "to distance themselves from the term fast fashion, and rather focus on rebranding the company itself and what they stand for." (Respondent 7).

Holt (2002) believes that competition raises the bar on what is considered authentic. Although Napoli and colleagues (2013) postulate that postmodern consumers find it hard to differentiate between real and fake, the interviews showed that young consumers are fully aware

on what it is authentic and when brands are making claims that are not supported by actions. In this case, fast fashion brands have a long way to go to gain stakeholders' trust, who cannot be easily mislead.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the perception of Generation Z on the environmental brand activism phenomenon, as employed by fast fashion brands. To do so, a theoretical framework was first developed, which helped to establish the critical concepts. When empirical data were collected, the theoretical framework was a guiding tool for analyzing the data and their connection with the literature. Based on the twelve in-depth interviews conducted, the researcher managed to answer the research question and gain a deeper understanding of Generation Z' views on environmental brand activism.

The majority of the interviewees claimed that they are choosing products based on the brand's identity and values towards societal and environmental issues and not solely based on the qualities of the product. This stance relates to the notion of political consumerism, in which consumers are deliberately boycotting or buycotting a product, a service, or a company, based on their personal views (Copeland & Boulianne, 2020). Participants seemed very informed about current socio-political and environmental issues and, even those who have not expressed a strong interest in getting informed and educated about them. Social media platforms have contributed a lot to this constant access to information. The constant exposure to information has also increased participants' scepticism towards any societal or environmental action that brands initiate. Specifically, media have played a great role on informing consumers about scandals involved around fast fashion brands and they also consist of a motivation for a more responsible and eco-friendly living. That is why brand activism has evoked mixed feelings in the participants. Throughout the interviews, five principal factors have been identified to determine respondents' concerns with fast fashion brands, employing environmental brand activism practices: they consider environmental brand activism a trend, they believe is driven by profit, there is not a brand cause-fit, fast fashion brands do not align their claims with their actions, and finally fast fashion brands lack authenticity.

Holt and Cameron (2010) theorize that when there is no connection of the brand with reality, there is a cultural chasm, and consumers will start seeking other brands that are more in sync with the times. In the same vein, Sarkar and Kotler (2018) believe that when there is a value gap between stakeholders' views and brand's view, the last will deteriorate, and stakeholders will choose brands that carry the same values as them. Although these opinions were supported by the empirical findings, the responses showed that for a brand to position on an issue is more complicated than just decide upon a cause and support it. When a brand takes a stance only because it is considered as the right thing to do, consumers understand it and perceive it as fake

and superficial. The fact that brand activism may be driven by profit is also the main reason participants could not perceive brand activism as pure activism. Positioning needs to be presented as part of brand's identity and values. While Patagonia was praised from the interviewees for successfully implementing environmental brand activism in its business model, none of the fast fashion brands was praised for their environmental actions.

What it seems that Nike and Patagonia did right, and it also consists of a criterion for determining the success of brand activism, is that they have a brand-cause fit between the brand's identity and the cause they advocate. The importance of the nature of the cause has been established both in CSR in the C-RM literature, but the interviews have proven its importance in brand activism too. Another criterion that shapes respondents' perception of brand activism is the alliance between the claims and the actions they make. In this case, respondents were very sceptical about whether fast fashion brands were actually doing what they were preaching to do. Also, many of the respondents underlined that when a brand takes a stand on environmental issues, it should be ethical in other forms as well, like not taking advantage of its employees. In these terms, fast fashion brands were considered unauthentic, and very few respondents could appreciate the positive impact they may bring to the environment.

Finally, the empirical findings suggested that authenticity is an essential factor that determines how environmental brand activism is perceived. Authenticity is closely interrelated with the transparency of the brand and the values that the company embraces. Respondents perceive fast fashion brands as unauthentic, and therefore this influenced the way they perceive their environmental brand activism practices. To consider brand activism as authentic, respondents focused more on the brand's identity and less on whether they found advertising convincing. Although transparency was considered positive, brands were also scrutinized about their true motives. And that is another aspect that fast fashion brands were lacking. Regardless of fast fashion brands' attempts to become more environmentally conscious, they were still not trusted.

5.1 Theoretical and Social implications

This section explains the theoretical and social implications that this study provides. Firstly, the study confirmed previous findings that regard young consumers as more conscious about societal and environmental matters and that they purchase based on their values (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Shetty et al., 2019; Witt & Baird, 2018). However, there were many participants expressing their second thoughts on purchasing sustainable products. The major restraints were the high prices of the sustainable products in contrast with the low income of the interviewees, aligning with the findings of Connell (2010), but contrasting the findings of Rausch and Kopplin (2021), who claim

that economic resources are not considered a barrier for consumers anymore.

Moreover, this study aligns with the scholars Kotler and Sarkar (2018), Vredenburgh and colleagues (2020), Shetty and colleagues (2019) and Bhagwat and colleagues (2020) who claim that stakeholders, especially of younger generations, have put a long pressure to brands to be value-driven and engage in activism practices. Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) has observed that businesses have started to take a stance on various socio-political and environmental issues, a practice that has not been unnoticed by the interviewees as well. However, the interviews showed that it is not always beneficial for the company to surrender in the pressure of its stakeholders and position on an issue, without having a rationale behind it. Brands which are employing brand activism practices recklessly and because it is nowadays considered a trend, have the opposite results, and make consumers concerned and sceptical. The concerns that interviewees expressed for brand activism were similar to those discussed in the C-RM and CSR literature, proving the argument of Sarkar and Kotler (2018) and Vredenburg and colleagues (2020) that brand activism is an evolution of C-RM and CSR. Similar to the findings of Vredenburg and colleagues (2020), interviews showed that complete transparency about brands practices does not imply brand trust; brand activism should become part of the business model.

Companies should rethink the way they approach Generation Z and, as Francis and Hoefel (2018) also suggest, brands should reconsider how they create value to their consumers. In a society that endorses consumerism as an act of solving important problems, brands should work hard to prove to their stakeholders that brand activism is not another marketing gimmick aiming to profit from them. The findings showed that Generation Z is not easily convinced by the marketing strategies of the firms and that young they need concrete actions. Younger generations are now more informed and willing to make a difference, and this is also reflected on their purchasing choices. If companies want to attract the attention of younger customers, brand managers should acknowledge that activism as a standalone practice will not increase their brand value unless it is accompanied by authentic incentives and a true willingness to contribute to the society.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

Although the methodological approach followed was chosen as the most appropriate to answer the research question and sub-questions, the researcher should acknowledge the limitations of this research and provide future suggestions based on those.

The main limitation of the study lies in the demographics of the sampling. Although an attempt was made to include people from various European countries, due to the lack of time, not all interviewees come from different European countries, and four of the participants are from

Greece. That is because the recruiting statement was posted on the researcher's LinkedIn profile and then shared by many of the researcher's Greek friends. However, twelve participants from eight different countries were interviewed, resulting in a heterogeneous sample. Another limitation of the sampling is the age of the participants. Unfortunately, there are not any participants in the age of 18-20 years old. Finally, a potential constraint to consider is that this study focuses only on European nationalities to prevent intercultural differences between different continents. This implies that the findings may vary if the same study would be conducted among other continents, and they cannot be generalized to represent the whole Generation Z. Nonetheless, this study does not aim to generalize the findings; instead, it aims to extend the current literature of the phenomenon.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, this is the first study concerning the perception of Generation Z on environmental brand activism, focusing mainly on fast fashion brands. It is then expected that to gain a deeper understanding and a clear picture of the phenomenon further research needs to be conducted. The findings presented above can be a solid basis for future studies. Considering that brand activism is a phenomenon that depends both on the consumers and the brands, future research can include interviews from brand managers and the consumers of the same brands to see whether there is an alliance between how managers implement brand activism and how customers perceive it. Moreover, the target audience of this study is known to be more environmentally active and informed than preceding generations. Thus, it would be interesting for a future study to explore the perceptions of older generations to see whether they express the same views or whether there are any differences lying. Since brand activism is a newly introduced phenomenon that has not yet received great attention from scholars, further research is encouraged.

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Antonia Skiada
MA Student in Media and Business
1mo · 🌐

Dear network,

I am currently writing my master thesis regarding fast fashion brands. I need participants who are willing to share their thoughts and views about the topic, in an interview which will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes.
If you are:
• a fluently English speaker,
• purchasing from fast fashion brands, or follow them on social media
• between 18 to 25 years old,
• European,
then you are the perfect candidate for me!

Please help me graduate by contacting me to schedule an interview. But even if you don't feel like participating, please help me spread it via sharing it.

Thank you in advance for your time!

👍❤ 13   6 comments · 1,120 views

👍 Like   💬 Comment   ↪ Share   ✈ Send

📊 **1,120 views** of your post

Appendix B – Consent Form

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Antonia Skiada

571178as@eur.nl

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in a research about fast fashion brands and environmental brand activism. The purpose of the study is to understand how university aged students of Generation Z perceive environmental brand activism as employed by fast fashion brands.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms,

- the questions of the interview will be related to your opinion about fast fashion brands
- your participation in the interview will be related to your demographic characteristics and interest in fast fashion brands
- my observations will focus on the meaning-making processes behind your responses

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will use a video recorder for the interview.

You are always free not to answer any particular question.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. Yet, you are free to decide whether I should use your name or other identifying information that may arise throughout the course of the interview in the study. If you prefer, I will make sure that you cannot be identified, by: pseudonym, general identification, or only mentioning age and gender, etc. I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take approximately 45-60 minutes. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish— Débora Ramos Antunes de Silva (Debora.antunes@eshcc.eur.nl).

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you DO NOT NEED to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study:

Name   Signature   Date

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study:

Name   Signature   Date

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.

Appendix C – Interview Guide

General Questions

- ➢ Studies/interests
- ➢ What do you think of fast fashion brands?
- ➢ Do you follow fast fashion brands on social media? / Why?
- ➢ Can you tell me some particular clothing brands that you prefer to purchase from?
- Are you interested on looking up whether these brands are environmentally conscious? Do you feel that you need to?
- Do you follow any of these brands on social media? Do you visit their website?
- ➢ Generally, what are your criteria when you choose a brand over the other?
- ➢ Think about a clothing brand that you buy often. What qualities does it have and why you choose it over the others?
- ➢ Do the criteria that you choose a brand have changed throughout the years? Why do you think this is the case?
- ➢ How would you describe yourself as a consumer? *Let's stick to the apparel industry*
- ➢ Do you consider yourself an environmentally conscious consumer?
- ➢ How important is it for you to be responsible in your purchases?

Consumers' values

- ➢ What does it mean for you to be a responsible consumer?
- ➢ How do your personal values shape the way you approach fast fashion brands?
- ➢ How important it is for you to share the same values with a brand that you purchase?
- ➢ How do you feel when a brand has the same values as yours?
- ➢ How do you respond when a brand supports a cause that you also support? *(i.e., Do you like to tweet about it, maybe share it with your friends, or purchase more from the brand to support the cause?)*

Brands as activists

- ➢ What expectations do you have from brands as a consumer?
- ➢ What expectations do you have from brands as a citizen?
- ➢ How do you feel about brands trying to position themselves on socio-political issues?

- How do you feel when you buy products from brands that are supporting a particular cause?

- Are there any issues or topics that you would prefer that brands would not touch upon?

- Does brand activism create any ethical dilemmas for you? *For example, do you consider whether it is right or wrong, or true and fake?*

Brands and environmental activism

- What do you think of people being environmentally active?

- What does it mean for you that a company is engaged in environmental activism?

- How do you feel about brands trying to position themselves on environmental issues? or

- How does a brand's environmental stance shape your perception of the brand?

- Why do you think that fast-fashion brands feel the need to disclaim to people that they are sustainable and environment friendly?

- What stance would you think that fast-fashion brands should keep towards environmental issues?

- Are you aware of any environmental initiatives that have been organized by brands or fast fashion brands? *(i.e., In H&M you can bring your old garments or clothes and they will recycle them and reuse them, or PATAGONIA)* If you are, how did you learn about these initiatives? Website, social media platforms, word of mouth?

Brand authenticity and consumers' trust

- *Think of a brand you consider it as authentic.* What characteristics does it have? (*It can be a unique or innovative product, lasts in time etc..) According to literature an authentic brand is not easy to define but there are several dimensions: Continuity, credibility, integrity, or if it symbolises something to the consumer (for ex. Disney).*

- What are your criteria to evaluate a brand which takes a stand on environmental issues as authentic?

- Would you consider a fast-fashion company as authentic and why?

- What a fast fashion brand has to do to consider it as trustworthy?

- What "steps" or which initiatives should a fast fashion brand do to convince the consumers that its purpose is authentic?

- What is your opinion about brands supporting or condensing a particular cause?

- How do you feel about fast-fashion brands claiming to be environment-friendly and sustainable?

➢ How do you believe you would react if you realize that a brand's claimings do not align with its practices?

➢ How important is it for you to trust a company that you buy things from?

➢ Do you perceive brand activism as "real" activism? Why? *Wait for an answer, then define Activism: The action that movements undertake to challenge some existing elements of the social and political system and so help fulfil movements' aims.*

➢ Do you feel that brands actually do that?

Is there something else that you want to add?

Is there something that you feel that I probably should have asked you?

THEME	SELECTIVE	AXIAL	OPEN
REQUEST FOR ENVIRONMENT-DRIVEN BRANDS	Brands have impact	Brands carry responsibility	Brands activism as obligation, brands are responsible for society, brands should focus on society
		Big brands are powerful	Brands initiate action, big brands can make society better, power of branding, brands successful activism depends on publicity
		Brands create communities	Brands connect people together, brands as a collective experience, devotion on brands
	Environmental brand activism needs rationale	Brand activism needs consciousness	Brands should be cautious when positioning, wrong positioning leads to damage, brand activism as a risky gambit, positioning needs courage
		Environmental brand activism needs proof	Environmental brand activism needs commitment, campaigns as activism is not enough, environmental brand activism needs consistency
		Brand cause-fit	Brand activism depends on the topic, brand activism depends on brand's

			identity, brand activism depends on brand's background
		Brands should align claiming with practice	Expect consistency in brands, authenticity is related to consistency
		Environmental brand activism as positive	Fast fashion brands make good environmental steps, appreciation of environmental initiatives
CONSUMERS' CONCERNS	Consumers as informed citizens	Informed consumers	Critical consumer, purchase based on research, environment as a purchasing criterion, consumers need more information, attempts on being sustainable, consumers' values evolve over time, consumers' increased expectations,
		Political consumerism	Consumers expect actions, consumers expect ethical brands, consumers have become activists
		Consumers have responsibilities	Consumers should be informed, consumers should do recycling, consumers should be environmentally conscious
		Media as educational mean	Social media contribute to brand activism, social media carry brand's identity, power of eWOM,

			media as source of influence, social media contribution to make socio-political issues known
		Doubtful of environmental brand activism	Environmental brand activism as a strategic move, doubtful of brands' environmental campaigns, skepticism towards brands' environmental activism contribution
		Distrust towards brands	Distrust towards ways of production, distrust towards brands' environmental claims, brands are inconsistent, brands present distorted image on social media, brands are lying
	Scepticism towards environmental brand activism	Environmental brand activism as a trend	Swift in advertising, right timing for environmental brand activism, brands should be up to date, environmental brand activism should be up to date
		Environmental brand activism as a marketing gimmick	Environmental brand activism is good for the company's image, ads are manipulative, environmental brand activism depends on, depends on consumers preferences

		Environmental brand activism is driven by profit	Brands are driven by profit, environmental brand activism as competitive advantage
	Setbacks on sustainable choices	Individualistic reasons drive purchasing	Fast fashion brands are the easy choice, fast fashion brands to keep up with fashion trends, convenience drives purchase, uninterested on brands' values, quality determines purchase, fitting defines purchase, hard to be sustainable
		Income defines purchasing	Price as purchasing criterion, fast fashion brands are accessible to students
		Inconsistency between willingness and practice	Need of more persistence in environmental choices, inconsistency between interest and action, inconsistency between willingness and practice
		Disclaiming responsibility	People turn away from the problem, people don't realize the importance of environmental responsibility, feeling of powerlessness to make a change
REQUEST FOR AUTHENTIC		Values connect brands with consumers	Consumers' values define purchase, brand values as purchasing criterion,

BRANDS			associate personal values with brand's values, consumers and brands influence each other
	Importance of authenticity	Consumers demand transparency	Transparency is trusted, authenticity relates to transparency, brand activism needs transparency
		Consumers want brand personification	Brand personification helps with consumers' connection, authenticity relates personification, authenticity relates to personal connection
		Environmental brand activism needs trust	Importance of trust in consumers-brands relationship, purchase needs trust, importance of brand trust in environmental brand activism
		Distrust towards fast fashion brands	Fast fashion brands put no effort to improve, fast fashion brands should do concrete actions, fast fashion brands don't focus on real issues, fast fashion brands are unethical, are unpersonal, are not trustworthy, not original, demand attention
		Fast fashion brands need complete	Fast fashion brands should change their way of production,

		reorganization	fast fashion brands can potentially improve, fast fashion brands should keep up with reality, fast fashion brands are the source of the problem, should limit production, should be transparent
	Fast fashion industry lacks authenticity	Association of fast fashion with consumerism	Regular consumers of fast fashion brands, association of fast fashion with capitalistic way of thinking