

## **A Marketing Utopia**

*Why brand managers are reenvisioning the world through activism*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Over the past years, brands have been more bold in speaking out on controversial socio-political issues such as race equality, same sex marriage, abortion and the refugee crisis. Sportswear brand Nike spoke out on police brutality in the United States when featuring American NFL-player Colin Kaepernick in a campaign, while ice-cream brand Ben & Jerry's caused controversy when speaking out about white supremacy and calling for the impeachment of democratically-elected President Donald Trump. Simultaneously, academia suggests that brands are using cultural expressions to enhance relationships with stakeholders more frequently. Prior studies on this new development in marketing, called brand activism, have mainly focused on defining the characteristics of brand activism and on presenting the risks associated with this development. Consequently, studies suggest that engaging in brand activism causes significant risk for brands, including consumer alienation and boycotts. However, relatively little attention has been given to the managerial perspective on brand activism and on what motivates brands to engage in activism. Therefore, this study explored why brands choose to take a stance on controversial socio-political issues in spite of the high risks associated with it. For this purpose, an inductive content analysis driven by Constructivist Grounded Theory was conducted. Herein, brand managers and marketing experts from various brands within the consumer goods industry were interviewed in-depth, in order to comprehend their beliefs and opinions in regards to brand activism. Based on the data, this study found three core categories: building a brand through activism, reenvisioning the world through marketing and walking the talk. Specifically, the findings of this study indicated that brand activism can enhance consumer-identification and consumer-relationships, in addition to attracting and engaging with employees that have similar values to the brand. As such, the findings of this study suggested that brand activism can help brand growth and increase sales, next to engaging stakeholders. Theoretically, this thesis included the Analytics of Cultural Practice approach, where cultural mediation and marketing as a form of government were observed to be significant in relation to brand activism. In the context of this study, the findings concluded that managers held strong beliefs on socio-political issues and utilized their jobs to raise awareness amongst consumers and to educate stakeholders. Finally, this study concluded that managers believed that their brand taking a stance on controversial socio-political issues was the right thing to do for the world, in spite of the high risks associated with it.

**KEYWORDS:** *Brand Activism, Marketing, Political Activity, Branding, Cultural Mediation*

## Table of Contents

<i>ABSTRACT</i> .....	2
<i>1. Introduction</i> .....	5
1.1. Aim and research questions .....	7
1.2. Synopsis of the research method.....	8
1.3. Relevance.....	8
1.4. Overview of thesis structure.....	9
<i>2. Theory</i> .....	10
2.1. Theoretical framework .....	10
2.2. Conceptual framework .....	12
2.3. Brand activism and consumer implications.....	14
2.4. Brand activism and organizational implications.....	17
2.5. Conceptual framework in brief.....	19
<i>3. Methodology</i> .....	20
3.1 Research design and justification of method .....	20
3.2 Sampling and data collection .....	22
3.3. Operationalization.....	24
3.4. Data analysis .....	24
3.5. Credibility .....	26
3.6. Research design in brief.....	27
<i>4. Analysis and results</i> .....	28
4.1. Building a brand through activism.....	28
4.2. Reenvisioning the world through marketing .....	30
4.3. Walking the talk .....	32
4.4. Results chapter in brief.....	34
<i>5. Discussion and conclusion</i> .....	36
5.1. Brand's motivation for activism .....	37
5.2. The implications of brand activism .....	39
5.3. Limitations .....	41
5.4. Future research .....	41
<i>References</i> .....	43
<i>Appendix A</i> .....	49
<i>Appendix B</i> .....	50
<i>Appendix C</i> .....	51

<i>Appendix D</i> .....	52
<b>Initial coding</b> .....	53
<b>Axial coding</b> .....	53
<b>Selective coding</b> .....	55

## 1. Introduction

“We must dismantle white supremacy. Silence is not an option... Four years ago, we publicly stated our support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Today, we want to be even more clear about the urgent need to take concrete steps to dismantle white supremacy in all its forms.”

—Ben & Jerry’s (2020)

“People should have values. Companies are nothing more than a collection of people. So by extension, all companies should have values. As a CEO, I think one of your responsibilities is to decide what the values of your company are, and lead accordingly.”

—Tim Cook, CEO, Apple (Kessler, 2017)

On January 6, 2020, supporters of the former United States President, Donald Trump, stormed the U.S. Capitol in protest of the newly elected President Joe Biden. Soon after the news surrounding the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol reached the public, brands and prominent business leaders took to social media to condemn what happened, with famous ice-cream brand Ben & Jerry’s calling for the impeachment of President Trump on Twitter (Liffreing, 2021). Increasingly, consumers are expecting brands to move beyond corporate social responsibility by taking a stance on more ‘hot-button’ issues such as abortion, immigration, gun rights or same-sex marriage (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Thus, this research revolves around why brands choose to take a stance on controversial socio-political issues, despite the high risks associated with it.

In 2016, the American public was more polarized ideologically than at any time in the twenty years before (Pew Research Center, 2016). Moreover, similar trends of political and ideological polarization have been observed all over the world (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Against the backdrop of political polarization, brands have been taking a stance on often controversial and divisive socio-political issues, called ‘brand activism’ (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

For example, Nike’s campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick, an NFL athlete who kneeled during the national anthem in protest of police brutality, sparked fierce backlash amongst conservatives, while also increasing their sales by 31% (Pengelly, 2018). On the other side of the spectrum, Chick-Fil-A publicly opposing same-sex marriage resulted in consumers showing their support on Chick-Fil-A Appreciation Day, while liberals and LGBTQ activists responded with outrage (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

Consequently, research has shown that the greatest risk of brand activism - being often divisive - is the alienation of a large group of stakeholders (Holt, 2002). Interestingly, Ben & Jerry’s was even voted as the most innovative social good company in early 2021 by The Fast Company, for their pioneering of corporate activism (The Fast Company, 2021). Corporate social responsibility is defined as a company acting to benefit society beyond its economic purpose (Chandler, 2019;

Bhagwat et al., 2020). For example, a company's sustainability efforts are often part of a CSR strategy. Whereas corporate social responsibility (CSR) is often perceived in a positive way by stakeholders, the controversial nature of brand activism causes it to be more susceptible to scrutiny and risk (Eilert & Cherup, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Taking a stance on a topic - such as abortion or immigration - that the public is polarized on, increases the risk of groups of stakeholders in disagreement with the brand's stance feeling alienated (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Though a brand such as Ben & Jerry's might publicly side with the LGBTQ+ community, that does not mean that consumers opposing same sex marriage do not enjoy eating Ben & Jerry's ice cream. In other words, why do brands take the risk of alienating a large group of possible consumers by supporting either side of a controversial issue? In a similar vein, Pepsi pulled an advertisement featuring their famous drink uniting protesters and police officers during a Black Lives Matter protest due to extremely negative feedback from various stakeholders, including consumers and the media (Victor, 2017). Furthermore, some of Nike's consumers took to social media to post videos of them burning their Nike product with the hashtag #JustBurnIt, after Nike used Colin Kaepernick in their campaign (CMO Survey, 2018).

Thus, though brand activism might have positive outcomes, the risks included seem difficult to predict (Vredenburg et al., 2020). In 2018, a study found that only 21.4% of questioned marketers found that it was appropriate for their brand to take a stance on a politically-charged issue (CMO Survey, 2018). Yet, the events of 2020 and 2021 showed more brands taking a stance on COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, the refugee crisis and the national elections in the United States.

Nevertheless, prior research regarding brand activism remains highly focussed on the perspective of external stakeholders such as consumers. Previous empirical research by Vredenburg et al. (2020) and Moorman (2020) have examined the characteristics of brand activism, in addition to distinguishing it from other cause-related corporate strategies such as CSR and cause related marketing. Furthermore, relevant studies by Bhagwat et al. (2020) and Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) have focussed on the implications brand activism can have for various groups of stakeholders such as consumers and employees. When brands become activists, their underlying motives are questioned (Holt, 2002), in addition to backlash having the ability to negatively affect business returns and brand equity (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Regardless of how consumers or employees respond to brand activism, the question as to why businesses choose to put their brand at risk remains largely unanswered.

Consequently, this thesis revolves around brand activism from a managerial perspective. In other words, how do brand managers and marketing experts experience brand activism, and why do they believe that taking a stance on socio-political issues is appropriate? This thesis focused on a cultural approach to marketing using the Analytics of Cultural Practice theoretical framework (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Moisander & Valtonen (2006) explored how marketing can be used to influence and shape consumers' opinions and lifestyles. In addition to this, the conceptual

framework of this thesis presents the characteristics and implications of brand activism. The next section of this chapter will present the research questions and aim of this research.

### 1.1. Aim and research questions

Despite brands and business leaders involving themselves in socio-political issues increasingly, the research on brand activism is sparse. Moreover, current research mainly focuses on brand activism from a consumer perspective, resulting in a gap in the literature. As marketing practices become more politicized (Vredenburg et al., 2020), brand's motivation for engaging with activism remains an area that is not studied to a great extent. In order to achieve a greater understanding of brand activism and its implications for consumers, organizations and society as a whole, a comprehension of brand activism from a managerial perspective is warranted. Therefore, this study explores brand activism from the perspective of brand managers and marketing experts. More specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

(Research question) Why do brands take a stance on controversial socio-political issues in spite of the high risks associated with it?

(Sub-question 1) Why do managers believe that taking a stance on socio-political issues creates value for their brand?

(Sub-question 2) Why do managers believe that a brand taking a stance on socio-political issues is (in)appropriate?

(Sub-question 3) How do managers believe that brand activism can be a successful strategy for their brand?

Precise definitions of the concepts used in the research questions are necessary. First, the American Marketing Association defines marketing as “the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large” (AMA 2017). Thus, it is of importance to highlight that marketing is concerned with the effects of businesses on *society at large* in addition to how various actors *create, communicate, deliver and exchange* offerings that *provide value* (Korschun et al., 2020). Furthermore, brand activism is defined as an emerging marketing tactic in which brands publicly take a stance on controversial or divisive socio-political issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Bhagwat et al., 2020). A variation of this definition is used by the majority of scholars discussing brand activism, which is why it was deemed appropriate for this research.

In addition to this, socio-political issues are described by Nalick et al. (2016, p.386) as “salient unresolved social matters on which societal and institutional opinion is split, thus potentially engendering acrimonious debate among groups.” Thus, socio-political issues are often partisan and polarizing in nature (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Yet, it is important to understand

that socio-political issues are usually highly dependent on time, politics and culture, meaning that such issues evolve or are resolved in time (Bhagwat et al., 2020). For instance, though women's voting rights were a controversial topic in the early 20th century, it is no longer a controversial topic in the Western countries of today. Hence, this thesis aimed to find out how brand managers and marketers perceive the development of activism in relation to marketing and brands, in order to find out why brands choose to take a stance on socio-political issues in spite of the risks involved.

## **1.2. Synopsis of the research method**

The research method for this thesis consists of a qualitative method in the form of inductive content analysis driven by Constructivist Grounded Theory. More specifically, in-depth interviews with brand managers, marketing experts and communication experts from various brands were conducted and transcribed verbatim. All of the participants worked in the consumer goods industry, with the majority (9 out of 10) working in the foods and beverages industry. Additionally, 7 out of 10 participants work for Unilever brands, in addition to one participant having worked at Unilever in the past for approximately 10 years.

Furthermore, Constructivist Grounded Theory was chosen for the data analysis process. This inductive, data-driven approach was used by applying three rounds of coding - open, axial, selective - and constant comparison to the interview transcripts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Through critically interpreting the codes and comparing the emerged codes and categories to the existing literature on brand activism, the research questions were answered. The detailed methodology of the study can be found in the third chapter of this thesis.

## **1.3. Relevance**

Consumers and other stakeholders are increasingly pushing brands to take a stance on socio-political issues and to use their influence to advocate for certain causes (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Yet, the risks associated with brand activism are significant, with the alienation of groups of stakeholders, consumer boycotts and reputational damage not being unreasonable (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

However, existing research has mainly been concerned with describing brand activism and with how consumers respond to brands taking a stance on divisive issues. Though scholars seem to agree on the idea that engaging with brand activism is an endeavour filled with risk, relatively little is known about what motivates brands to publicly take a stance on socio-political issues, in spite of the risks involved. Thus, it is of scientific relevance to study brand activism from the perspective of brand managers and marketing experts. Considering that this thesis approaches brand activism from a managerial perspective, this study contributes to the existing theory on brand activism while filling the gap in the literature related to brand's motivation to engage with activism, which has not sufficiently been addressed in current academic research.



### *Societal relevance*

The Edelman Trust Barometer of 2021 showed that businesses were ranked as the most trusted institutions by consumers, more so than governments and NGOs (Edelman, 2021). Arguably, businesses being the most trusted institutions in addition to the rise of brand activism might have implications for society as a whole. By exploring how brand managers and marketers perceive the value added to their organization and society through brand activism, this thesis offers insights as to how brand activism is relevant for society at large. Considering the rising importance of cultural expressions and symbolism in marketing in addition to marketing techniques being designed to influence consumers (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006), this thesis explored why brand managers are motivated to use activism for their brand. Moreover, the current study contributes to understanding marketing in a cultural context and its' influence on society by researching how brand managers and marketers perceive their power over consumers.

Next to the scientific and societal relevance of this study, this thesis will be of practical use for organizations and brands seeking to adopt brand activist strategies. Considering the risks associated with brand activism (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020), brand managers and marketers can use the results of this study to develop an understanding of how and why brand activism is a valuable marketing strategy. Furthermore, the insights of the brand managers and marketing experts interviewed for this thesis can motivate brands to take a stance on an issue close to their brand purpose, possibly resulting in higher consumer engagement (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

#### **1.4. Overview of thesis structure**

The first chapter of this thesis aimed to introduce the topic of the study, namely brand activism and brand's reasons for taking a stance on socio-political issues. Additionally, it presented the research questions while justifying the relevance of this thesis. The second chapter of this thesis presents the existing relevant literature and theoretical approaches on brand activism. Furthermore, the second chapter presents the conceptual frameworks consisting of the defining characteristics of brand activism by Vredenburg et al. (2020) and the lenses of brand activism by Moorman (2020).

In addition to this, the third chapter of this thesis consists of the methodology used for the study, explaining the use of in-depth interviews, the sampling procedure and the use of Constructivist Grounded Theory. The fourth chapter of this thesis presents the main findings and analysis of this study. Finally, the fifth chapter of this thesis consists of a detailed discussion of the results of the study. Furthermore, the fifth chapter includes the limitations of this study in addition to suggesting directions for future research.

## **2. Theory**

### *Chapter Overview*

This chapter presents the theoretical foundation of brand activism and its implications for consumers and organizations. The literature of this study primarily stems from the media and communication field, with a main focus on marketing, branding and consumer behavior. The first section of this chapter presents the theoretical framework used in this study. The second section of this chapter will conceptualize and analyze brand activism. The third section of this chapter will explain and analyze brand activism in relation to consumers. Lastly, the fourth section of this chapter will explain and analyze brand activism's implications for organizations.

### **2.1. Theoretical framework**

This section will present the theoretical framework used in this thesis, namely the Analytics of Cultural Practice (ACP) theoretical framework. This study approached the literature, data and analysis from a cultural marketing and consumer behavior perspective, using the ACP framework. In the current study, the theoretical perspective presented assumes that social reality is culturally constructed (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Furthermore, the cultural approach to marketing and consumer behavior is grounded in the assumption that “we live in a culturally constituted world, and that in contemporary Western society this constitution largely takes place in and through the market.” (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006, p.7). Herein, culture refers to the way of life of a social group that is continuously produced, contested and negotiated in everyday habits and actions of the members of that culture (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006).

Thus, when the constitution of culture takes place in and through the market, marketers and advertisers can be viewed as “cultural mediators” (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006, p.10), seeking to meet their consumers' needs whilst attempting to manipulate consumption patterns to align them with the brand's strategies (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). On the one hand, marketing professionals shape products and campaigns based on consumer expectations, connecting their brand's products to consumption (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). On the other hand, marketing professionals can be understood as molders of taste and preference, using their powerful position within the marketplace to shape consumer-lifestyles (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Similarly, Holt (2002, p.71) portrayed marketers as “cultural engineers, organizing how people feel and think through branded commercial products.”

Moreover, Moorman (2020) constructed the seven lenses of brand activism to understand how brands make decisions on activist strategies. In a similar vein to Holt's (2002) and Moisander and Valtonen's (2006) explanation of cultural mediation, the ‘Cultural Authority View’ indicates that brands are powerful cultural actors that can shape stakeholders and society (Moorman, 2020). In other words, brands have earned a powerful position in society giving them the opportunity to speak out on socio-political issues to further distinguish themselves from competitors (Moorman, 2020). Furthermore, the ‘Brand as Educators View’ is used by brands that want to move consumers in a

direction that the brand sees as better for society (Moorman, 2020). Brands can change products or packaging to make them better for society, in order to push social or environmental change (Moorman, 2020).

In the fields of advertising and brand management, a rising interest in symbolism and meaning has been observed (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Marketers and advertisers seem to be more concerned with utilizing cultural knowledge and creativity to induce their stakeholders to develop deeper connections with the brand and the products (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Moreover, the cultural and symbolic aspects of brands - how the product or service affects the consumers' lives and what it can offer them - has been increasing in significance (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Holt (2012) argues that brands have become the most important form of expressing culture. In a similar vein, Solomon (2003) emphasizes the increase of the importance of what a brand stands for, in addition to the general performance of the brand. Simultaneously, brands have been taking a stance on controversial socio-political issues more frequently and more aggressively over the past few years (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2019; Moorman, 2020).

Therefore, it is of importance to critically analyze brand activism within cultural practice. If marketers are today's cultural engineers, do they use brand activism to shape consumers' lifestyles? According to Moisander & Valtonen (2006), behaviors and interactions in the marketplace are inherently political. More specifically, marketing techniques act upon the actions of others, which results in the exercise of power (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). In the context of cultural practices, marketing and consumption have an effect on social relations and social reality (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006).

For this reason, it is of importance to take into account the roles of various market actors such as marketers in relation to the power involved in consumption and production processes (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Considering marketing techniques are designed to influence and modify the behavior of consumers and other stakeholders, marketing can be understood as a form of 'government' (Moisander & Valtonen). Not referring to political entities such as nation states, but rather to the way in which marketing is able to direct, shape and guide the behavior of individuals and groups (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006).

Therefore, marketing as a form of government refers to calculated practices that shape and work through the desires and lifestyles of consumers (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). However, Foucault (1980) suggested that governing people is not necessarily forcing people to do something; it consists of versatile techniques including seduction and influencing. Thus, marketing and brand management are not only about persuading consumers to purchase a product, but more so about choreographing the daily lives of consumers in a manner that their consumer-lifestyle lines up with the complexities of a particular product or brand (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). In other words, marketing as a technique of government is a set of "cultural techniques for the production of particular modes of being" (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006, p.202).

In summary, the theory suggests that branding and marketing practices have the ability to

shape and influence the lifestyle of consumers through cultural practice. Furthermore, a trend has been observed where brands use cultural expressions to enhance relationships with consumers. Moreover, the theory argues that marketers and brand managers can be understood as cultural mediators or cultural engineers, allowing them to organize how people think and feel. Considering brand activism consists of cultural practices in the form of socio-political expressions, it is important to understand how brand managers and marketers perceive brand activism as a development in marketing, and why they believe they are contributing to a better world. In other words, are they truly cultural mediators aiming to influence and shape the socio-political stances of their consumers?

Furthermore, understanding the beliefs and perceptions of brand managers and marketers will contribute to gaining a broad understanding of why brands choose to take a stance on socio-political issues in spite of the risks involved. The next section of this chapter will present the conceptual framework of this thesis, describing in detail brand activism and its implications for organizations and other stakeholders.

## **2.2. Conceptual framework**

This section will consist of an in-depth discussion of relevant previous research on brand activism. Stakeholders have long pressured organizations to provide social value in addition to economic value, traditionally in the form of corporate social responsibility (Bhagwat et al., 2020). However, in a time where political polarization has been increasing, large groups of stakeholders are expecting brands to demonstrate their values by publicly supporting either side of partisan socio-political issues such as climate change, LGBTQ+ rights and immigration (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Thus, stakeholders are pushing brands to not only aim for profit maximization, but to become activists.

### *The nature of brand activism*

In Western countries, brands have become one of the most important forms of generating cultural expression (Holt, 2012). Moreover, cultural branding strategies can create deeper relationships with consumers by exploiting cultural disruptions and societal changes (Holt, 2016; Holt & Cameron, 2010). Considering the growing public mistrust of institutions and political polarization throughout the world, the recent political and social activities of brands have become more relevant in academic literature (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). In addition to this, a shift in young consumer values has been observed, causing brands to feel the need to speak out on societal and political issues (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019).

In their research, Sarkar and Kotler (2018) described the six broad spheres of brand activism. First, social activism includes areas such as equality, education, healthcare, consumer protection and social security (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). For example, brands might create campaigns calling for equal rights of heterosexual and homosexual couples, or speak out about police brutality. Second, workplace activism includes areas such as corporate organization, labor rights and CEO pay (Sarkar

& Kotler, 2018). Third, political activism includes voting rights, policy making and privatization (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). For example, brands might speak out on whether or not undocumented people should have the right to vote. Fourth, environmental activism includes areas such as pollution and environmental laws (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). When a brand is activist on an environmental level, they might speak out on fighting climate change or polluted oceans. Fifth, economic activism includes areas such as tax policies, especially when these affect wealth inequality (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Brands might speak out on this by supporting higher taxes for the rich. Lastly, legal activism includes areas such as citizenship and employment laws (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

When attempting to grasp the concept of brand activism, it is understandable to think only of progressive topics. However, brand activism can also be regressive in nature, such as speaking out on why abortion should be banned, or why gay-marriage should be made illegal (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Regardless, brand activism is almost always highly controversial, whether progressive or regressive in nature (Knight, 2010; Korschun et al., 2019). Thus, what sets brand activism apart from other forms of corporate social behavior is that brand activism tends to relate to controversial and partisan socio-political topics that the public has yet to reach consensus on.

#### *The defining characteristics of brand activism*

The most widely accepted perspective within marketing is that brands should not be political unless they can do so in a way that is consistent with their brand and can be communicated in an authentic way, called the 'Brand Authenticity View' (Moorman, 2020). Thus, a brand will only take a stance on issues that directly relate to their brand or mission, such as a sustainable fashion brand speaking out about climate change. Ultimately, the use of this 'lense' results in less brand activism, since brands fear the loss of stakeholders that perceive the brand's actions as inconsistent or unauthentic (Moorman, 2020).

Regardless of the intentions of brands, brand activism can be perceived as authentic or inauthentic. Authentic brand activism is defined as the alignment of a brand's purpose and values with its activist marketing messaging (Vredenburg et al., 2020). As will be explained further in the next section of this chapter, the use of inauthentic brand activism can significantly harm a brand (Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

In their research, Vredenburg et al. (2020) define the four characteristics of authentic brand activism: (1) the brand is purpose- and value-driven, (2) it addresses a controversial or contested issue, (3) the issue is progressive or regressive in nature, (4) the brand contributes to a socio-political cause through practice and messaging. Furthermore, Vredenburg et al. (2020) propose four types of brand activism: (1) the absence of brand activism, (2) silent brand activism, (3) authentic brand activism and (4) inauthentic brand activism. When there is an absence of brand activism, a brand has yet to adopt prosocial corporate practices and activist messaging (Vredenburg et al., 2020). When brand activism is silent, prosocial corporate practices or activist actions are present, but happen quietly behind the scenes of the organization (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Brands who's brand activism

is perceived as authentic have aligning brand purpose and activist messaging, such as ice-cream brand Ben & Jerry's or outerwear brand Patagonia (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Lastly, inauthentic brand activism happens when a brand embraces activist messaging but fails to align their activism to their brand purpose or social actions (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Consequently, inauthentic brand activism can result in negative feedback from consumers and employees, reputational damage and loss of profit (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Bhagwat et al., 2020). In 2017, the soda brand Pepsi launched a brand activist campaign featuring model Kendall Jenner, where Jenner was seen walking in a Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest. At the end of the campaign, Jenner offered a police officer a can of Pepsi, after which the protest turned into a cheerful celebration between the protesters and the police.

Interestingly, Pepsi received an enormous amount of negative feedback on their campaign, with consumers accusing Pepsi of trivializing the BLM movement who, amongst other issues, fight police brutality against people of color (Victor, 2017). In the case of Pepsi, their brand activist campaign was not perceived as authentic by the public since they failed to align the activist message to their brand purpose. In other words, consumers perceived Pepsi's campaign as a marketing gimmick, missing the gravity of the situation.

### **2.3. Brand activism and consumer implications**

#### *Section overview*

This section will discuss the implications of brand activism for consumers. More specifically, this section will explore relevant academic literature in order to understand the effect of brand activism on brand-consumer relationships, in order to comprehend how consumers experience brand activism.

#### *The asymmetric effect of brand activism*

Brand activism sets itself apart from other business strategies such as CSR or cause related marketing by being inherently divisive, often touching on topics such as gay-marriage, immigration laws or abortion rights (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Nalick, et al., 2016). In contrast, CSR and cause related marketing rarely elicit negative responses from consumers since they are usually not divisive in nature, considering most people agree with supporting education or disaster relief (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

However, when brands choose to publicly take a stance on a controversial socio-political issue, consumers react. For example, a recent study mentioned by Bhagwat et al. (2020), 64% of global consumers will choose to either buy from a brand or boycott a brand based on the brand's stance on societal issues. In addition to this, they stated that though strategies such as brand activism might strengthen the bonds with some stakeholders, it will damage the relationship with the other stakeholders that do not agree with the brand's taken stance (Bhagwat et al., 2020). The theory that brand activism can result in alienating a large group of stakeholders has been replicated by other

scholars (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020).

Brand activism risks the alienation of a large group of stakeholders because of 'brand-self similarity'. Brand-self similarity refers to the degree of similarity between a consumer's perception of their personality and morals, and the characteristics and morals of the brand (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). As consumers pay more attention to the symbolic and cultural aspects of brands, brands become more associated with human characteristics and opinions (Holt, 2012; Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). As a result, consumers tend to avoid brands they associate with groups they do not relate to (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). Furthermore, brand-self similarity contributes to consumer-brand identification, meaning how much a consumer can identify with a brand (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). The higher the self-brand similarity, the more a consumer tends to identify with the brand, resulting in positive marketing outcomes (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Hambrick & Wowak, 2021).

In other words, the more a consumer's values align with the brand's perceived values, the more likely it is that consumers will favor the brand and purchase its products. In their research, Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) found that when it comes to brand activism, consumer's brand attitude is affected negatively when the consumers do not agree with the brand's socio-political stance, whereas there was no significant effect for brand attitude when the consumers agreed with the brand's socio-political stance. Thus, brand activism has a negative effect on consumer-brand identification when the consumers do not share the same moral foundation as the brand (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Bhagwat et al., 2020). However, failing to take a stance can also have a negative effect on stakeholder identification, as a growing number of studies suggest that political preferences play a significant role in consumers' self-concepts and brand identification (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021).

One of the most significant negative effects of brand activism occurs when consumers choose to boycott a brand. The boycotting of a brand by consumers is defined as an attempt by an individual or a group to urge people to refrain from making purchases from a brand (Klein et al., 2004). Boycotting is seen by psychologists and prosocial behavior, in which consumers decide that punishing a company for immoral or wrong behavior is more important than their own consumer desires (Klein et al., 2004). Ultimately, the boycotting of a brand can lead to loss of profit, reputational damage and a decrease in consumers' trust (Klein et al., 2004; Shetty et al., 2019).

Considering the age of social media where negative word-of-mouth spreads faster than ever before, consumers standing together and calling for the boycott of a specific brand can have disastrous effects for organizations (Vredenburg et al., 2020). When brands decide to take a stance on a controversial issue, the risk of a large group of stakeholders that is in disagreement with the brand's stance boycotting the brand is significant (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Fernandes, 2020). Moreover, younger generations such as Millennials and Generation Z are more aware of marketing gimmicks than older generations, in addition to generally being more actively involved in socio-political issues (Shetty et al., 2019; Machedi-Sánchez, 2019). Additionally, the Edelman Earned

Brand Global Report (2018) found that young consumers do not hesitate to boycott brands if their stance on a social issue does not align with their own.

Thus, the risk of being boycotted increases immensely due to social media and the voices of younger generations, reflecting an increase in consumer power (Klein et al., 2004). However, according to the study conducted by Klein et al. (2004), the majority of consumers that perceive a company's behavior as wrong will choose to not boycott the company. Reasons for this vary from consumption restriction to social pressure (Klein et al., 2004). In other words, brand activism has an asymmetric effect on the relationship between consumers and brands. Regardless of a brand being authentic or inauthentic in their brand activism, other factors such as the socio-political preference of consumers can still affect the relationship between brands and their stakeholders. This might result in alienating a group of consumers, since they are not able to identify with the brand anymore. As Vredenburg et al. (2020) stated in their research: "Yet, even clear transparency about brand practice and values in support of a socio-political cause does not shield brand activists from controversy." (p.444).

#### *Consumer attitude-behavior gap*

Bhagwat et al. (2020) stated that 64% of global consumers take the ethics of a product or brand into account when making a purchase, research related to ethical consumption has revealed a perplexing discrepancy between the ethical intentions of consumers and their actual purchasing behavior (Carrington et al., 2015). In other words, there is an attitude-behavior gap between consumers' ethical intentions and ethical consumption (Carrington et al., 2015). For example, Young et al. (2010) found that while 30% of UK consumers have intentions for ethical consumption, a mere 5% of consumers act on this concern.

Though generalizations are made, the majority of consumers will still base their purchasing decisions on quality, price, brand familiarity and basic self-interest (Carrington et al., 2015; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). The growth of the ethical consumer culture does not take away from the understanding that intentions are relatively poor predictors of behavior (Carrington et al., 2010). Moreover, factors such as social desirability bias, meaning that consumers often feel pressure to give socially acceptable answers to questions regarding their purchasing behavior (Carrington et al., 2010) play a big role in ethical consumption. Additionally, ethical product availability and the discounts of unethical products influence consumer decisions (Carrington et al., 2010).

Arguably, this widely observed failure of consumers to act on their ethical intentions can have implications for brand activism when brands rely on their activist campaigns to engage with consumers and sell more products. In contrast, brand's controversial stances on issues might result in certain groups of stakeholders feeling alienated, leaving the question of why brands choose to take a stance anyways, unanswered.



## **2.4. Brand activism and organizational implications**

### *Section overview*

The following section will discuss the organizational implications of brand activism. Though scholars agree that brand activism can help in engaging consumers, corporate-level outcomes such as firm performance, brand equity and brand reputation may also be affected by brand activism (Korschun et al., 2020; Nalick et al., 2016).

### *Internal stakeholders' responses to brand activism*

The responses of two important groups of internal stakeholders, namely investors and employees, will be explained in this section. According to stakeholder theory, most businesses and their managers encounter situations in which a group of stakeholders has to be prioritized over the other (Chandler, 2019). While consumers are concerned with a brand contributing to society as a whole in addition to prices and quality of products, investors expect firms to maximize shareholder wealth (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Though there is reliable evidence suggesting that brands create a competitive position by adapting to the needs of the external environment (Korschun et al., 2020), investors are often skeptical about venturing into brand activism (Bhagwat et al., 2020). In contrast to traditional CSR activities - which also raise concern amongst investors - brand activism and its controversial nature raise levels of risk and uncertainty (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

More specifically, Bhagwat et al. (2020) theorized that brand activism causes deviation. Because brand activism might deviate from the values of important stakeholders such as employees, consumers, in addition to a brand's image, investors tend to see brand activism as something that will be problematic for the brand (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Additionally, considering that brand activism might happen in the form of statements and actual actions, investors are concerned with activism getting important resources that would otherwise be used for profit-based objectives (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

Though sometimes forgotten when discussing stakeholders, employees are a significant group of stakeholders (Chandler, 2019). Employees that are satisfied with their company's objectives can be true spokespeople for brands, increasing positive word-of-mouth and attracting consumers and future employees (Chandler, 2019). When it comes to brand activism, employees tend to interpret a brand's actions through their own personal values (Gupta et al., 2017). In general, the same rules apply to employees as they do to consumers; meaning that employees that agree with the brand's socio-political stance are in favor of brand activism, whereas those who disagree are not in favor (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

Moreover, brand activism has the ability to engage employees through increasing employees' positive attitudes and satisfaction towards the brand and themselves (Bhagwat et al., 2020). The 'Employee Engagement View' emphasizes how brand activism can help attract and engage possible employees (Moorman, 2020). This view is growing in relevance considering that younger generations such as Millennials and Generation Z desire a deeper meaning in their jobs and

expect social action from companies (Moorman, 2020; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Yet, the greater the deviation between the brand's socio-political stance and the employees' personal value, the more likely it is that the brand receives negative feedback from those employees (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Consequently, this can result in decreased productivity, negative word-of-mouth and strikes (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

#### *Brand's reasons for activism*

Brands influence stakeholders and are influenced by stakeholders, whether internal or external in nature. How brands perceive their relationship with their stakeholders and their existence within society as a whole significantly affects to what extent brands will take a stance on socio-political issues (Eilert & Cherup, 2020). In a similar vein, organizational identity orientation refers to the notion of the organization as a whole and its internal and external stakeholders (Brickson, 2005; Brickson, 2007).

More specifically, research suggests that organizational identity orientation strongly influences how brands engage in brand activism (Eilert & Cherup, 2020). Organizational identity orientation consists of three distinct orientations. Companies or brands with an individualistic orientation perceive themselves as distinct from others and are generally driven by self-interest (Brickson, 2005; Brickson, 2007). In the context of brand activism, brands with an individual orientation are less likely to engage in brand activism, since its controversial nature might cause risk to the brand (Eilert & Cherup, 2020). In a similar vein, the 'Calculative View' entails that brands will only speak out on an issue if it helps them win in the marketplace (Moorman, 2020). Brands choose carefully which socio-political causes to support, though only doing so if they are sure that it will help them gain consumers or profit (Moorman, 2020).

Furthermore, brands with a relational orientation value relationships with partners, engaging in activities that benefit both their own organization and others (Brickson, 2005; Brickson, 2007). Brands with a collectivist orientation perceive themselves as members of society as a whole and engage in activities that benefit a greater societal welfare (Brickson, 2005; Brickson, 2007).

Thus, brands with a relational or collectivist orientation are more likely to engage in brand activism in order to create change (Eilert & Cherup, 2020). Similarly, the 'Corporate Citizen View' originates from the idea that brands have a responsibility to the world in which they operate (Moorman, 2020). In addition to providing economic value to society, the corporate citizen view indicates that brands must contribute social value as well. However, even though the corporate citizen view can motivate brand activism, it might not drive action since it offers little guidance as to what causes to support (Moorman, 2020). Ultimately, this perspective limits brand activism since brands might decide for safer options such as corporate social responsibility strategies (Moorman, 2020).

A study conducted in 2016 by Nalick et al. (2016) attempted to examine why firms speak out on socio-political issues. For this purpose, Nalick et al. (2016) drew on existing literature on

stakeholder theory, institutional theory and incorporate agency. First, Nalick et al. (2016) theorized that brands take risks on perceived future stakeholder benefits. This perspective entails that brands expect a current divisive socio-political issue will turn out to be non-divisive in the future (Nalick et al., 2016). In other words, brands take a risk by taking a stance on an issue, because they believe that it will become a mainstream value in the long run, making it an investment.

Second, stakeholder pressure recognition stems from the idea that groups of stakeholders can pressure brands to take a stance on issues, after which brands might eventually give in to the coercion of consumers (Nalick et al., 2016). Relating this perspective to what was said about inauthentic brand activism by Vredenburg et al. (2020) and Bhagwat et al. (2020), it can be theorized that stakeholder pressure as a reason for brand activism might result in inauthentic brand activism.

Third, brands might choose to take a stance on socio-political issues because of the personal ideology and values of CEOs and management (Nalick et al., 2016). Consequently, brand managers and CEOs might pursue their personal ideology through the company they work for (Nalick et al., 2016). Similarly, the 'Political Mission View' entails that a brand's entire reason for existence is a political or social mission, as is the case for brands such as Patagonia or Tony's Chocolonely (Moorman, 2020). The Political Mission View is particularly powerful for brand activism, as the products or services are tools to bring about social change (Moorman, 2020). However, existing corporations such as Unilever are evolving into this position, changing their entire business strategy in the process (Moorman, 2020).

Though the research by Nalick et al. (2016) presents some insight as to why brands choose to speak out on socio-political issues, the study can be seen as relatively dated. Considering the rapid advancements of new media technologies, social movements, political polarization and academic and corporate developments in the field of brand activism, brand's reasons for activism have to be revisited. In addition to this, Nalick et al. (2016) used existing theories to interpret brand's reasoning for activism, instead of including brand managers and corporate professionals in their research method.

## **2.5. Conceptual framework in brief**

The conceptual framework has explored the concept and practice of brand activism and its implications for consumers and organizations. The literature reveals that brand activism brings high levels of risk for brands, including the alienation of consumers, boycotts, investor conflict and a decrease in firm performance. However, brand activism might increase stakeholder engagement, create a competitive position for the brand in the marketplace and increase trust and legitimacy amongst all stakeholders. In other words, there is no singular manner in which to conduct brand activism and it is difficult for brands to know how stakeholders will respond to their stance on socio-political issues. The next section of this thesis will present the methodological chapter, which explains what methods were used to answer the research questions presented in the first chapter of this thesis.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *Chapter Overview*

This chapter will outline the methodological approach of this thesis. The aim of the chapter is to define a methodology for investigating why brands take a stance on controversial socio-political topics in spite of the risks associated with it. In the first section of this chapter, an introduction to the research design is presented, after which the chosen method is explained and justified. The second section presents a detailed description of the sampling and data collection process. The third section of this chapter will consist of the operationalization. Furthermore, the fourth section of this chapter will describe the analysis process of this thesis. The final section of this chapter presents how the credibility of this thesis was ensured.

#### **3.1 Research design and justification of method**

In order to investigate why brands choose to take a stance on controversial socio-political issues in spite of the risks associated with it, a qualitative approach consisting of semi-structured interviews and Constructivist Grounded Theory was deemed an appropriate method for this thesis. In order to find out a managerial perspective on brand activism, brand managers and marketing experts were interviewed. The dataset of this thesis consists of a corpus of 10 interview transcripts.

According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), a qualitative method is an appropriate way of approaching a study when the researcher aims to gain a deep understanding, to elicit meaning and to develop empirical knowledge. In addition to this, qualitative in-depth interviews allow researchers to find out the personal opinions, feelings and experiences of participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2004). Considering that this thesis aimed to gain a deep understanding of why brands and brand managers choose to take a stance on socio-political issues, approaching the research with a qualitative method offered the most meaningful results. In addition to this, conducting qualitative in-depth interviews with experts in the fields of branding and marketing allowed the researcher to discover the personal experiences and beliefs of the experts regarding brand activism (Rubin & Rubin, 2004).

#### *Grounded Theory*

Considering the lack of research on brand activism from a managerial perspective, Grounded Theory was deemed an appropriate method for this study. Grounded Theory is an inductive method of research, where new theory is discovered through systematically obtained social research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). With this data-driven approach, categories were established through three levels of coding and constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Grounded Theory was developed in order to build theory from data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Distinctly different from other qualitative methods such as thematic analysis, Grounded Theory is a systematic, inductive and comparative approach in which the researcher aims to construct new theories and ideas directly from the data, instead of developing a prepared coding scheme with which to analyze the data (Corbin & Strauss,

2008). In other words, the theory emerges from the data, instead of being applied to the data (Hood, 2007).

Furthermore, constant comparison is a crucial element of conducting Grounded Theory (Kelle, 2007). Constant comparison consists of systematically comparing all data; not merely waiting for all the data to be collected, but to analyze and compare codes and categories right after the data has been collected (Kelle, 2007). The aim of constantly comparing the data is to find similarities and differences within the different pieces of data, ultimately aiding in the discovery of categories and themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Additionally, with the use of memos, the researcher keeps track of what they think about the data (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019). In the context of this thesis, memos were used to keep track of the similarities and differences found in the data, in addition to general thoughts and insights that occurred during and after the analysis of the transcripts. An excerpt of the memos of the current study can be found in Appendix C.

The analysis process of Grounded Theory consisted of three main coding phases: initial coding, axial coding and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). By coding all the data in three phases while also using the constant comparison method, the researcher was able to analyze the data from different points of view while avoiding missing important insights. In addition to this, the coding and comparison process pushed the researcher to showcase “sensitivity”: to pick up on subtle nuances in the data that might indicate a deeper meaning (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

### *Constructivist Grounded Theory*

More specifically, this study used Constructivist Grounded Theory, developed by Charmaz (2006). Constructivist Grounded Theory is based on Glasserian and Straussian Grounded Theory, but differentiates itself by emphasizing the belief that knowledge is constructed instead of discovered (Charmaz, 2006). While still using crucial factors of Grounded Theory such as theoretical sampling, systematic coding and constant comparison, Constructivist Grounded Theory acknowledges the researcher’s relationship to the study (Charmaz, 2017). In other words, the researcher’s active role in the study and personal bias is acknowledged. Constructivist Grounded Theory relies on maintaining “methodological self-consciousness” (Charmaz, 2017, p. 36), meaning researchers should examine themselves in the research process. Thus, the researcher’s worldviews, beliefs, values and role within the research might affect how the results of the study are interpreted (Charmaz, 2017). “A constructivist approach places priority on the phenomenon of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 130). Constructivist Grounded Theory allows the researcher to bring their experience with the topic to the study, making the researcher part of the constructed theory (Charmaz, 2006).

Thus, Constructivist Grounded Theory was deemed appropriate for this thesis since it allowed the researcher to construct knowledge through interaction with the participants and the data, in addition to acknowledging the subjective interpretation of the researcher during the analysis

(Charmaz, 2006). This thesis is aligned with the constructivist approach by Charmaz (2006), since it aimed to construct meaning out of the conversations with the participants, in addition to practicing reflexivity during the entire research process. In a similar vein as methodological consciousness, reflexivity refers to the acknowledging of the researcher's personal bias affecting the interpretation of the data (Charmaz, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

### **3.2 Sampling and data collection**

In order to answer the research questions, 10 participants were interviewed in-depth. Considering the managerial perspective of the study, the units of analysis for this research were brand managers, communication experts and marketing experts. Thus, the in-depth interviews in this thesis were 'elite' interviews, meaning experts were consulted as opposed to consumers (Drumwright et al., 2004). More specifically, this thesis aimed to conduct in-depth interviews with managers from Unilever brands. Unilever is one of the leading corporations when it comes to brand activism, with brands such as Dove fighting for normalizing diverse bodies in advertising and Ben & Jerry's fighting for immigrants and refugees' rights in their portfolio.

Thus, gaining insight from these experts resulted in the appropriate data to answer the research questions. To validate the insights from managers working at Unilever brands, 3 managers who worked at brands outside of Unilever were interviewed. In total, 80 experts were approached for participation in the study. In order to gain a broad understanding of the managerial perspective, brand managers, communication experts and marketing experts varying in gender, industry experience (entry-level to experienced) and age (mid-twenties to mid-fifties) were selected. After conducting 10 in-depth interviews, theoretical saturation was achieved. The characteristics of the participants can be found in Appendix A.

Furthermore, multiple forms of sampling were used. According to Morse (2007), it is important for a qualitative study to have a purposefully selected sample. In other words, the participants must be experts in the field of investigation, must be willing to participate, must be reflective and able to speak about the experience articulately (Morse, 2007). In the context of this research, the purposive sample must consist of brand managers or communication and marketing experts, preferably from Unilever brands. Ultimately, 7 out of 10 interviews were conducted with participants that worked at Unilever, with the remainder of participants working at other brands.

The researcher used networking platform LinkedIn to find possible participants, after which these possible interviewees were contacted through LinkedIn or email. Once a preliminary sample was selected, this research moved to snowball sampling. In the context of this research, snowball sampling required the researcher to ask participants within the sample to invite their colleagues to participate in the study (Morse, 2007). By conducting snowball sampling, the risk of ignoring variation within the sample was avoided (Morse, 2007). In addition to this, snowball sampling allowed the researcher to locate brand managers that might not have been willing to participate if approached directly.

Lastly, theoretical sampling was used. In accordance with Constructivist Grounded Theory, theoretical sampling is used during the data collection and analysis process (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019). As Constructivist Grounded Theory requires the researcher to start the coding process rapidly after conducting the interview, codes and themes occur. Based on these emerging concepts, the researcher attempts to sample participants that might develop these concepts and codes further (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019). In the context of this research, the researcher contacted specific experts based on data that emerged from previous interviews. After the initial coding phase of the transcripts, in some cases a follow-up email was sent to a participant with the aim to get a referral to a colleague that might know more on the topic of interest.

To illustrate, after a participant mentioned that activist brands within Unilever were the most rapidly growing brands, the researcher asked to be referred to a brand manager or marketing expert employed at Ben & Jerry's. After conducting an interview with Leonore from the activism department at Ben & Jerry's, theoretical sampling led to an interview with Fleur from the marketing department at Ben & Jerry's, in order to get a broader understanding of Ben & Jerry's business perspective in relation to activism.

#### *Data Collection*

Qualitative in-depth interviews were chosen as the appropriate method of data collection for this research, since the researcher aimed for deep and meaningful knowledge and information that is difficult to acquire through methods such as quantitative surveys (Johnson, 2011). For this purpose, 10 in-depth interviews lasting approximately 45-60 minutes each were conducted with brand managers and communication and marketing experts. After conducting 10 interviews, theoretical saturation was achieved. Theoretical saturation occurs when there is no new data emerging from the interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). An interview guide was constructed containing a list of possible interview questions, to steer the participants in case they would go off-topic too much. The guiding questions mainly revolved around the participants' experience with brand activism, the risks associated with brand activism, the results of brand activism and the future of brand activism. The interview detailed protocol of this thesis can be found in Appendix B.

The interviews began with ice-breakers to ensure that the participants felt comfortable (Brennen, 2012). More specifically, the researcher asked the participants how they were doing and how they were experiencing remote-working during the pandemic. In addition to this, the researcher asked the participants whether they could tell something about their job and what it was they generally did, before asking specific questions about brand activism.

Furthermore, the researcher used techniques such as probing to incentivize the participant to elaborate on certain statements (Johnson, 2020). For example, participants were asked to elaborate on something they said that was of interest to the researcher. In addition to this, examples of brand activist campaigns from various brands were used as probing tools, in order to find out the opinion of the participants on these campaigns. Even though qualitative in-depth interviews are preferably

conducted face-to-face in order to establish intimacy (Johnson, 2020), the restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic required the interviews to be conducted through video-chat.

Before the start of each interview, participants were asked to either fill out the consent form, or consent orally to being recorded. The interviews were conducted using the video-chat platform 'Zoom', where the interviews were automatically recorded. Considering the interviews were conducted and recorded online, the researcher ensured a secondary recording system was used, in order to prevent technical issues from disrupting the research. After each interview, the researcher transcribed the recordings verbatim and stored the transcriptions in a secure place on iCloud, that could only be accessed by the researcher with a password.

In order to comply with the ethics of qualitative interviews, the researcher ensured that the participants were aware of the scope and intention of the research and that the data from the interviews were used for academic purposes only (Brennen, 2012). Informed consent forms were used to ensure that the participants had all the necessary information about the aim of the research and their rights as interviewees. In order to ensure the confidentiality of the participants, only a pseudonym and the sex of the informants was used in the results section of this thesis.

### **3.3. Operationalization**

The main objective of this study was to find out why brands choose to take a stance on socio-political issues in spite of the high risks associated with it. Although the method used for this thesis consisted of Constructivist Grounded Theory, part of the analysis was connected to a cultural practice and consumer behavior perspective. Therefore, this section will explain how the core concept 'marketing as a form of government' informed the data analysis.

Marketing as a form of government refers to marketing techniques designed to influence and modify the behavior of consumers and other stakeholders (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Moreover, marketing as a form of government includes calculated practices that shape and work through the desires and lifestyles of consumers (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). In the context of this thesis, marketing as a form of government was used as one of the core categories. During the analysis, segments of the data that suggested that participants felt the power to influence or shape consumers' opinions and behavior were coded as 'marketing as a form of government'. Thus, this research followed a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach and the outcomes of the analysis were derived directly from the data in an inductive manner, while simultaneously considering the notions of marketing as a form of government.

### **3.4. Data analysis**

This section will describe how the data from the in-depth interviews was analyzed. In order to conduct Constructivist Grounded Theory, three phases of coding were applied on the textual data. First, all of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, resulting in 10 separate textual files, each containing the transcript of 1 participant. The transcripts were then coded manually using Microsoft



Word, where phrases and sections were highlighted and ascribed codes or comments. Additionally, sections of particular interest to the researcher were put in bold, so that the quotes could easily be found later on in the analysis process. The next sections of this chapter will describe the three levels of systematic coding that were used.

#### *Open coding phase*

In the initial coding phase, also called ‘open coding’, the data was broken apart by labelling discrete segments and phrases of the transcript with a code (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the context of this thesis, all transcripts went through the phase of open coding separately. Using Microsoft Word, line-by-line coding was used by highlighting and attaching comments to the phrase, each containing specific information about the interpretation of that line. According to Bryant and Charmaz (2019), when doing Constructivist Grounded Theory, it is not necessary to code segments of the data that are not relevant to what the researcher is attempting to find out. Therefore, sections of the transcript containing general chit-chat were not coded. During the open coding process, memos were used in order to write down important interpretations or correlations between the data. In addition to this, constant comparison was used by comparing each set of data and the codes that emerged during the analysis of those transcripts. Before starting the axial coding phase, patterns and overlaps within the data were written down in a separate file.

#### *Axial coding phase*

In the axial coding phase, the researcher critically reads over the previously constructed codes, aiming to group together - or axe together - convergent codes and concepts into categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the context of this thesis, the transcripts were read again several times, combining and comparing codes both within the same transcript and in other transcripts. Some of the overlapping codes that emerged were ‘in-vivo codes’, meaning that the codes were borrowed from how a participant conceptualized something (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For example, the code ‘engaging with consumers’ emerged in several transcripts as an important reason for brand activism. This resulted in the axial code ‘Stakeholder Engagement’. Other codes such as ‘improving relationship with consumers’, ‘connecting with people’ and ‘attracting employees’ were grouped together in the axial code Stakeholder Engagement. Thus, axial coding allowed relationships between the data to be revealed and coded.

#### *Selective coding phase*

Selective coding is the third and last coding phase within Constructivist Grounded Theory, and was applied to all the codes and categories that emerged from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Through selective coding, the core categories and codes were selected from the data. These core categories formed the basis for the answers to the research questions, which will be described in the fourth chapter of this thesis. Similar to the first two coding phases, the constant comparison method

was used to ensure sufficient overlap between the different units of data. Furthermore, the emerging codes from the axial coding phase and the selective coding phase were compared to the theory from chapter two, in order to identify overlap between the existing theory and the theory that emerged from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Charmaz, 2006). As a result, the theory from Moisander & Valtonen (2006) was utilized to construct one of the core categories. Considering that the theory assumes that marketers have the power to shape consumers' lifestyles (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006), open codes such as 'raising awareness', 'educating consumers' and 'the power to change' resulted in the category 'Marketing as Government'.

The goal of the analysis process was to explore how brand managers and marketing experts perceived brand activism in order to find out why brands choose to take a stance on socio-political issues in spite of the risks involved. By systematically coding each section of the data and continuously comparing the codes and transcripts, similarities and differences between the data were identified. Based on similarities within the data, theoretical sampling was used in order to confirm categories and achieve theoretical saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2006).

### **3.5. Credibility**

This section presents a detailed explanation of how the credibility and trustworthiness of this thesis was ensured. Several decisions were made regarding the interpretation and analysis of the data as well as the selected methods and data collection. However, given the qualitative nature of the study, the results of the data analysis cannot be generalized (Brennen, 2012). According to Charmaz and Thornberg (2020), there are four main criteria to ensure the quality of Constructivist Grounded Theory studies: credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness.

First, the credibility of Constructivist Grounded Theory relies on the strong reflexivity of the researcher (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). In the current study, reflexivity was ensured by writing memos during the analysis process and actively analyzing the researcher's role in the research. Furthermore, having sufficient data and using constant comparison further contributes to the credibility and validity of Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). This thesis ensured sufficient data through aiming for theoretical saturation and used constant comparison throughout the entire analysis process. Second, the originality of Constructivist Grounded Theory relies on offering new insights to the phenomenon under study (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). This thesis ensured the originality of the study since brand activism from a managerial perspective remained relatively under researched.

Third, the resonance of Constructivist Grounded Theory demonstrates that the researcher has constructed categories that represent the experiences of the participants, in addition to being insightful to others (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). The current study ensured resonance by asking questions during the interviews that illuminated the experiences of the participants, in addition to constantly comparing the emerging codes and concepts. Lastly, usefulness in Constructivist Grounded Theory includes the practical, societal and scientific relevance of the constructed theory

(Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). The practical, societal and scientific relevance of this thesis were explained in detail in the first chapter of this study.

Furthermore, the research process of this study was made transparent through describing the used methods, data collection process and analysis process in order to provide an understanding of the interpretation. Although Classic Grounded Theory studies typically refrain from using a theoretical framework (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), Constructivist Grounded Theory acknowledges that the researcher is never without any personal or academic bias (Charmaz, 2006). Considering the scope and time constraints of this study, a theoretical framework allowed the researcher to interpret the data and results within a specific discipline, while still remaining true to the methodological guidelines of Constructivist Grounded Theory.

### **3.6. Research design in brief**

The methodology selected for this thesis focuses on three levels of systematic coding, constant comparison and theoretical sampling. In addition to this, memos were used to keep track of the researcher's interpretation of the data and emerging codes. By systematically coding and continuously comparing the emerging codes to existing codes and the theory, similarities and differences between the data were identified. The analysis consisted of an interpretation of the data with respect to the theoretical framework of ACP. The next chapter will present the results and analysis of this thesis.

## 4. Analysis and results

### *Chapter overview*

This chapter presents the results of the analysis of the interviews with 10 brand managers and marketing experts. The main findings of the analysis will be presented in three sections: building a brand through activism, reenvisioning the world through marketing and walking the talk. The first section will explore the strategic implications of brand activism, subsequently answering the first sub-question of this thesis. The second section will explore the beliefs of the participants regarding brand activism while aiming to answer the second sub-question of this study. The final section of this chapter will present the findings on the importance of credibility and brand activism, according to the participants.

### **4.1. Building a brand through activism**

This section presents the main findings regarding brand activism from a strategic perspective. In other words, why do managers believe that taking a stance on socio-political issues creates value for their brand?

The analysis suggests that stakeholder engagement is a significant motivator for brand activism. Codes such as ‘enhancing consumer-relationships’ and ‘connecting with consumers’ were derived from the majority (9 out of 10) of the transcripts, as reasons for taking a stance on socio-political issues. To illustrate, Justin (Game Changer Unlimited) stated: “If you stand up, you gain more and consumers will remain loyal to you.” In addition to this, participants highlighted the importance of humanizing their brand in order for consumers to be able to identify with the brand more. For this purpose, brand activism could be used. For example, Lara (Hellman’s) described: “And this of course, creates brand favorability ... you're talking about selling mayonnaise and your competitors are selling mayonnaise, but now you're talking about selling mayonnaise and solving food waste in your house. It's a new compelling story that has a lot of truth to it.” Additionally, Maria (Unilever Professional) explained:

“We're all human. And when you think of a brand, you can help them to personify a brand, right... But if you think of Ben & Jerry's as a person, it's someone who really stands up for what they believe in. And I think that's always really appealing to us to have that personified. Whereas if you maybe have another brand that doesn't really stand for anything, you are maybe less likely to feel a connection with that brand and less likely to purchase. I think that appealing to emotion is a really, really big part of marketing. And having genuine and authentic connection is something that you can't really do without activation and brand activism, because otherwise, you're just not really creating genuine connection.”

Thus, in accordance with the literature by Bhagwat et al. (2020), brand activism can enable consumers to identify with the brand more, resulting in increased engagement of consumers. However, the group of consumers that does not identify with the brand’s stance might feel alienated,

or choose to boycott the brand (Bhagwat et al., 2020). When asked about the risks associated with brand activism, Maria (Unilever Professional) stated: “Essentially, I think that at the end of the day, if there are really people that are against Black Lives Matter, I'm not sure if they will take that stand by not eating Jerry's ice cream if they like it. But it really appeals to the people that do.” Building on that, Peter (Barry-Callebaut) highlighted: “Of course brands will have done their homework. Now they know who are the key audiences and I guess a boycott could only sort of add to the party by showing ‘we’re doing the right thing’, depending on whatever their goal is.” Similarly, Justin (Game Changer Unlimited) stated: “A strong brand cannot be the friend of all.”

Moreover, the engagement of employees was found to be a significant motivator for brand activism. In addition to enhancing relationships with consumers, brand activism was named by several participants as a tool to attract and engage employees. Codes such as ‘employee engagement’ and ‘attracting future employees’ emerged from the data. For instance, Lara (Hellman’s) stated: “It's a huge internal motivator for people, you know, so Unilever is a more valued and more desirable place for work because of that as well. It's good for business.” In addition to this, Maria (Unilever Professional) explained:

“At the end of the day ... behind every brand, it's people who are working for that brand. And, typically, I mean, I've spoken to a lot of people about why they joined Unilever in the past. And I know why I joined Unilever. And literally one of the most common reasons for joining is because of sustainability. And because of purpose, it really draws people in and it creates a lot of teams who are just really passionate about driving the brand's purpose.”

Additionally, younger generations such as Gen Z are considered an important factor for brand activism, both as consumers and as possible future employees. Madison (Unilever Sustainability) said: “I think I think that, you know, kind of the next generation of workforce, will be thinking more about these political and social issues as a result of us being so exposed to global issues and news, much more than we were a while ago due to social media and things like this.”

Furthermore, the analysis suggested that brand activism can help in growing a brand in terms of sales and visibility. For example, Guido (Campari) stated: “Brands are still driven by profit and a demand from consumers.” In other words, profit and sales remain of significant importance for brands that are conducting activism. Moreover, Ariana (The Vegetarian Butcher) highlighted the value of brand activism: “I think the Vegetarian Butcher is the fastest growing brand within Unilever.” Similarly, Maria (Unilever Professional) explained:

“I mean, so even within Unilever, we see it with our own brands. We have a few brands that are really at the forefront of brand activism. So Ben & Jerry's, for example, which has been a really big voice in the Black Lives Matter movement. But before that, also in climate action, they have led protests, they've led manifestations, they've led real action for change. And they've also been at the forefront of things like LGBTQ rights. And we see that brands such as Ben & Jerry's, but also, for example, Dove,

who's really vocal on all the beauty standards, these brands grow 69% faster than the rest of our brands who might not have a strong purpose.”

Thus, the first sub-question: *Why do managers believe that taking a stance on socio-political issues creates value for their brand?* could be answered. Two main strategic motivators for brand activism were observed. First, stakeholder engagement was found to be a significant factor. Two important groups of stakeholders, namely consumers and employees, could be engaged and attracted with the use of brand activism. The experts that were interviewed did not seem to believe that alienating consumers and employees was a significant problem caused by brand activism, since they mainly highlighted the positive aspects and results. Furthermore, brand growth was observed as a second strategic motivator for brand activism. Participants explained that data could prove the positive effects of activism for their brand in terms of growth and sales. In summary, taking a stance on socio-political issues creates value for brands by enhancing stakeholder engagement and accelerating brand growth.

#### **4.2. Reenvisioning the world through marketing**

This section presents the main findings on why managers believe that a brand taking a stance on socio-political issues is appropriate. The first section will present the findings on how brands have the power to change the world. The second section presents the findings on how brand managers and marketers believe in what they are doing. Ultimately, this section will answer the second sub-question of this thesis.

##### *The power to change the world*

Through the analysis, the word ‘power’ occurred in several interviews, where participants described that brands have the power to change the world, change consumer habits and opinions or change government policies. Furthermore, participants described how brands can enable consumers to push for systematic change. Thus, the codes ‘brands as leaders of change’ and ‘cultural mediation’ were constructed. For instance, Fleur (Ben & Jerry’s) noted: “At Ben Jerry’s, it starts from the values. And it starts from the values of what the brand and the business believes in. And that comes first, actually, regardless of what fans or consumers think.” Furthermore, Leonore (Ben & Jerry’s) explained:

“But you have power to change the world through your operations, because chances are, you're having a negative impact right now. And then you also have a huge amount of power to shape narratives, to educate people, to bring people into existing movements, to change the debate, and that, that takes a lack of ego that a lot of brands don't have, because a lot of brands exist to exist ... to keep building and keep growing. And in order to really take their power seriously, there has to be an element where they're willing to do something that's not for the good of their brand, or not specifically to try and build their brand.”

Thus, this excerpt from the interview illustrates how managers believe brands and managers have the power to shape narratives, educate consumers and to change the debate. Hence, the theory by Moisander & Valtonen (2006) on cultural mediation and marketing as a form of government with the power to influence consumers was confirmed. In a similar vein, Guido (Campari) noted: “I think I said it before, definitely companies can participate in the educational path of consumers.” Building on that, Madison (Unilever Sustainability) stated: “Brands have a huge amount of presence in people's lives . They have a huge amount of reach and impact on what people do, how they function and how they see the world.” Moreover, Fleur (Ben & Jerry’s) acknowledged marketing’s role in changing consumer opinions when she explained:

“Marketing is such a powerful tool to change people's opinion. So I, you know, I find it amazing that we get to do that on a brand that is genuinely interested in changing people's opinion, not because it wants you to buy more cookie dough, but because ... over here, I'm interested in changing your opinion about refugees in the UK, and that marketing is fascinating. That's an amazing privilege to get to work on something like that.”

Interestingly, the last phrase of Fleur’s citation on changing people’s opinion led to another significant observation, namely the impression that the participants cared deeply for what they and their brand were doing, and that they believed it to be ‘the right thing’ to do. Therefore, the next section will present the findings on how the analysis suggested that participants believed that brand activism is the right thing to do.

#### *Doing the right thing for society*

A second main observation from the analysis in relation to the second sub-question consists of the impression that the participants firmly believed in their brand’s activist actions as the right thing to do. Moreover, the analysis suggested that participants working at Unilever brands (7 out of 10) had more positive opinions towards their brand speaking out on socio-political issues than participants not working at Unilever brands. Fleur (Ben & Jerry’s) noted: “We're not doing it so that someone buys the ice cream. We're doing it, because it is part of our values. It's part of what we as a company believe.” Additionally, Lara (Hellman’s) stated: “So all brands exist for a purpose. And they exist, not only to provide the best quality products to consumers, but also good for the planet and society ... I think it’s the right thing to do as a company and as human beings working for the company”. In contrast, when asked about Ben & Jerry’s calling for the impeachment of former US president Donald Trump, Peter (Barry-Callebaut) explained:

“If I look at it from a generic corporate communications perspective, you know, by definition as a company, you tried to not be partisan. You know, you always try to be politically neutral. That doesn't mean that you do not have certain opinions on political issues. But I would say calling the

impeachment of a democratically elected president, because let's not forget that he was democratically elected. You know, he was a legitimate president. This would for me ... clearly cross the line. Because here, you're meddling in issues which should be decided by a judge. And it's not it that was not a political discussion. It's a legal discussion, and I don't think that you should enter into those discussions.”

This excerpt from the transcript highlights the difference between how participants working for Unilever brands and participants working for other brands perceived taking a stance on controversial topics. Arguably, Unilever pushing for purpose-led brands with strong socio-political messaging attracts and enables employees that believe firmly in said purpose. To illustrate, Charlotte (Lipton) noted: “But I do think, from my experience this comes from real need and a real want to make a positive change.” Building on that, Maria (Unilever Professional) stated: “I think there are a lot of teams and brand teams out there that really truly believe in, you know, the purpose that they're trying to achieve with their brand.” In addition to this, Madison (Unilever Sustainability) offered an interesting perspective when she commented: “As we evolve as humans to realise our personal impact on the world, more and more humans will utilize that impact through their job at work. And then more and more people will be choosing their role and their company based on their personal purpose and personal beliefs.”

Thus, the second sub-question: *Why do managers believe that a brand taking a stance on socio-political issues is appropriate?* could be answered. Two main motivations were observed. First, the majority of participants (9 out of 10) referred to brands having the power to raise awareness, educate and change opinions. Moreover, the participants working at Ben & Jerry's and The Vegetarian Butcher suggested that brands have the power to push for systematic change on issues such as same sex marriage, refugees, racial equality and the meat industry. Second, the majority of participants (8 out of 10) felt that taking a stance on socio-political issues was the right thing to do for the world. Participants explained that standing up for what they themselves and their brand believed in was a significant factor in choosing their job. Additionally, they believed that their stance on the socio-political issue was the right stance for society. In summary, managers believe that it is appropriate for a brand to take a stance on socio-political issues because brands have the power to change the world through their operations, in addition to it being the right thing to do for society.

### **4.3. Walking the talk**

This section presents the findings of how the participants perceived brand activism in relation to credibility and trustworthiness. Thus, this section will answer the third sub-question: “How do managers believe that brand activism can be a successful strategy for their brand?” As discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, brand activism involves various risks for brands, such as the alienation of stakeholders and consumer boycotts (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Consequently, these risks are highest when stakeholders perceive the brand's activist actions as insincere or inconsistent



(Vredenburg et al., 2020). During the analysis, several codes such as ‘the importance of credibility’, ‘the alignment of brand and purpose’ and ‘being knowledgeable’ made up the category ‘walking the talk’. More specifically, this category refers to how brands should combine words with deeds to be seen as credible by consumers, instead of merely speaking out about an issue but failing to act in support of the cause. When asked about how to conduct brand activism successfully, the participants mentioned the importance of being credible and trustworthy, in addition to aligning the activist strategies to the purpose or mission of the brand. For example, Maria (Unilever Professional) explained:

“So even looking from a purely business perspective, and not even looking at the moral side of it, it's become crucial to not just be a brand that talks the talk but also walks the walk. You need to really make changes in order to appeal to consumers today, because consumers can see through the greenwashing. So there's no point of just let's say, having a nice and clean CSR policy on your website anymore. You really need to make actionable changes and really take part in brand activism if you want to just grow your brand. There needs to be something that you stand for.”

Building on that, Maria (Unilever Professional) noted: “I think where you might have a disconnect, or where you enter the space of wokewashing or greenwashing, is when you have a brand purpose that doesn't really align with your brand.” In addition to this, Ariane (The Vegetarian Butcher) mentioned: “I think you should first know what you're talking about and you should genuinely believe that this is the best thing to do.” Later in the interview, Ariane explained:

“Yeah, I think honestly, for some brands, it's also a matter of, oh, it works for them. So let's try to kind of copy it, because it's a marketing model. I honestly do. I do think that there are definitely brands that are just having a conversation with a marketing agency, and they say, oh, well, did you ever think about this? So definitely, I think that's also happening. But it's also because I think a lot of brands in the world just feel like we all have a role to play”.

Furthermore, Peter (Barry-Callebaut) elaborated on the risk of being perceived as insincere:

“You know, you need to make sure that what you're saying is legitimate and has value because the worst thing that can happen is that you speak out on a topic and people call you out for ... trying to woke-wash. And that has happened also in Black Lives Matter where a number of companies have tried to jump on the bandwagon and they got slap on slap on the hand and then to be honest, the damage is a lot bigger than not speaking out.”

Interestingly, a contrast was observed between the answer given by the participant working for Barry-Callebaut and a participant working for Ben & Jerry's. When discussing the risks involved when speaking out on socio-political issues, Leonore (Ben & Jerry's) stated: “So for us, the risk is in

damaging the movement. For many other businesses, the risk is in having any kind of negative press at all. So it becomes, which risk are you willing to take as a business?” Arguably, brands that might be bolder in their stances on socio-political issues, or brands that have a longer history of being purpose-led, might feel more comfortable taking risks with regards to brand activism than brands who are less familiar with brand activism. Furthermore, several participants mentioned the importance of working with third-parties such as activist groups or NGOs in order to diminish the risks associated with brand activism. Peter (Barry-Callebaut) noted: “You need to build credibility, one way to do it is by involving third parties, so by teaming up with an NGO, or by teaming up with an expert, or, you know, that's how you in the end, make it more and more credible.” In addition to this, Leonore (Ben & Jerry's) explained:

“For us, the risk is in not standing up, to speak out on our values, because that's who we are. And you know, we're led by the movement, we're led by our partners. And we are only concerned really, when we say stuff, are we furthering the movement? Are we aiding our partners? Are we accidentally saying something that could detract from them? And because we have activists and managers in place that you know, in all the markets where we do this work, we can be pretty certain that through their knowledge and expertise and through the relationships they have with the partners, that's not going to be the case.”

Ultimately, the third sub-question: *How do managers believe that brand activism can be a successful strategy for their brand?* could be answered. The main observation consisted of credibility and trustworthiness and as being perceived as ‘authentic’ by consumers. In order to do this, participants noted the importance of aligning the brand purpose with the activism. In other words, the product, messaging and actions all have to align with the taken stance on the socio-political issue, in order to avoid some of the risks associated with brand activism. In addition to this, partnering up with existing activist groups and NGOs was mentioned by some of the participants as important, since strategy could help brands in avoiding faulty messaging or damaging the movement itself. In summary, managers believe that brand activism can be a successful strategy for their brand if consumers perceive them as credible, the brand activism is aligned with the brand purpose and experts on the socio-political issue are approached for assistance.

#### **4.4. Results chapter in brief**

This chapter presented the main findings of this study and answered the three sub-questions of this thesis. Four main motivations for brand activism were observed. First, the analysis suggested that stakeholder engagement was an important motivation for brands to take a stance on socio-political issues. The relationship with two important groups of stakeholders, namely employees and consumers could be enhanced and maintained through brand activism. In addition to this, brand growth was observed as a second strategic motivation for brand activism, where the analysis suggested that through activism, a brand could achieve positive business outcomes and brand growth.

Furthermore, it was observed through the analysis that the participants believed fiercely in their brand's activist actions. They believed that brands have the power to achieve systematic change on a societal level, raise awareness amongst consumers and spark debate on various topics. Consequently, the analysis suggested that the participants believed that taking a stance on socio-political issues was the right thing to do for the world. Lastly, it was observed that credibility played an important role in brand activism being a successful strategy for brands. More specifically, aligning the brand purpose with the taken stance on socio-political issues, communicating effectively and transparently and collaborating with existing activist groups and NGOs was deemed crucial for successful brand activism. The next chapter of this thesis will present the discussion and conclusion, consisting of a discussion of the findings in relation to the theory, the limitations of this study and suggestions for future research. In addition to this, the next chapter aims to answer the main research question of this thesis.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

### *Chapter overview*

This chapter discusses the main findings of the analysis while drawing from the literature presented in the second chapter of this thesis. In addition to this, this chapter aims to answer the central research question of why brands take a stance on socio-political issues in spite of the high risks associated with it. Furthermore, this chapter presents the theoretical implications of this thesis by discussing how the current study contributes to existing academic literature. Lastly, the limitations of this thesis are presented and suggestions for future research are proposed.

Considering the lack of academic research on brand activism from a managerial perspective, this study contributed to existing research on brand activism by providing new insights on why brands choose to engage in activism. This study has primarily argued that brands take a stance on socio-political issues because it is of tangible value to their brand, in addition to a genuine desire to support social movements and raise awareness.

First, this study confirmed the theory that marketers believe they have the ability to change, shape and influence consumer behavior (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006; Moorman, 2020). During the interviews, participants highlighted that brands have the ‘power’ to send a strong message to consumers, more so than NGOs, since they often do not have the financial means of for-profit organizations. In addition to this, participants explained how their brand had a strong presence in the lives of consumers; being directly in consumers’ households in the form of products that are used daily. Participants believed this presence further strengthened the brand’s activist messaging.

Thus, the results of this study confirmed that marketers are cultural mediators that have the power to influence consumer-lifestyles, in addition to proposing that brand activism - similar to marketing itself - can be seen as a form of government (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). The implications of marketing as a form of government will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Second, this study delivered an understanding of how managers perceive the development of activism in marketing. Prior studies mainly focused on conceptualizing brand activism and providing insights on possible risks and consumer perceptions. Therefore, this study filled a gap in the existing literature by exploring the beliefs and motivations of managers in regards to brand activism and offering new insights on brand activism from a managerial perspective.

Finally, this study revealed that managers have strong beliefs on socio-political issues and utilize their jobs to raise awareness and push for societal change. The results of this study suggested that the personal values and opinions of managers play a significant role in how brands engage in activism, since managers and employees seemed to utilize their personal opinions in their jobs. In addition to this, this study observed that brand activism can attract possible employees with specific values that align with the brand’s values and purpose, confirming the theory by Bhagwat et al. (2020) and Moorman (2020) that brand activism can engage and attract employees.

## 5.1. Brand's motivation for activism

This section will discuss the main findings in relation to the literature from the second chapter of this thesis. The first section will discuss brand growth and stakeholder engagement in relation to the findings of the current study. The second section will discuss marketing as government and the lenses of brand activism in relation to the findings of this thesis.

### *Growing a brand and engaging stakeholders*

With the rise of social media and the increase of political polarization in the West, brands have been taking a stance more frequently on controversial issues including same sex marriage, refugees and race equality. This thesis aimed to find out why brands take a stance on these issues, since the risks include negative feedback from stakeholders and the alienation of large groups of consumers (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

According to the findings, there are two main motivations for brand activism. First, the findings suggested that brand activism can help grow a brand, if utilized correctly. Through building credibility and 'walking the talk', brand activism can enhance relationships with consumers and build a stronger brand story. In the literature, Bhagwat et al. (2020) noted that brand activism has an asymmetric effect on brands, since brand-self similarity and consumer-brand identification could be damaged. However, according to the findings, Unilever brands with a strong socio-political purpose grow approximately 69% faster than brands that do not have a strong socio-political purpose. Additionally, it was confirmed by 4 out of 10 participants that activist brands show the most brand growth within Unilever. Arguably, consumers of brands such as Ben & Jerry's, The Vegetarian Butcher and Dove already show higher levels of consumer-brand identification. However, the analysis suggested that the majority of consumers that do not necessarily identify with the brand's activism will not take a stance by boycotting the product if they enjoy the taste or feel of it.

Therefore, the findings challenge the literature by arguing that consumers who care about the issue that the brand has taken a stance on will be able to identify more with the product, thus enhancing consumer engagement, whereas consumers that somewhat disagree with the brand will not care enough to boycott the brand if they like the product. In addition to this, the findings suggest that brands generally do not care about alienating consumers that strongly disagree with their taken stance, if the brand believes that they are doing the right thing. For example, Peter (Barry-Callebaut) argued that Ben & Jerry's probably does not care about alienating consumers that identify with far-right movements who believe climate change is a hoax or that same sex marriage should be illegal. On the other hand, Ben & Jerry's would care more if they are alienating consumers that align with their brand mission or consumers with a more neutral stance on issues, since they are more valuable stakeholders to the brand.

As for employees and other internal stakeholders, Gupta et al. (2017) stated that employees interpret a brand's actions through their own personal values. In other words, employees and managers' opinions on brand activism are perceived through their own values and opinions.

Furthermore, Bhagwat et al. (2020) theorized that brand activism can engage employees and increase satisfaction towards the company, especially when those employees are in favor of the brand's socio-political stances. The findings of this study indicated employee engagement is a significant motivator for brand activism, since participants mentioned that they and some of their colleagues chose to work for Unilever because of their socio-political missions. Thus, it can be argued that by taking a stance on socio-political issues, brands attract and retain employees that have similar values and convictions to the brand.

On the other hand, possible employees that disagree with the socio-political stance of an organization might choose to not work for that company, consequently reinforcing the attraction and retention of a group of employees that have similar values and opinions to the organization. In a similar vein, Nalick et al. (2016) argued that brand managers and CEOs might pursue their personal ideology and values through the company they work for. In the context of this research, participants acknowledged that as people evolve to realize their impact on the world, more people will choose to utilize that impact through their jobs.

To summarize, the findings and interpretation of the analysis indicated that brand activism can have positive outcomes for brands, such as stakeholder engagement and brand growth. In addition to this, the current study proposes that the risks of brand activism are mainly applicable to consumers that strongly disagree with the brand's taken stance and those consumers are not in the brand's target audience, meaning the risk of alienation is not significant to the brand. However, the findings suggested that taking a stance on socio-political issues as a marketing tactic to grow a brand might not be the right motivation for brand activism. More specifically, it is of importance for the people behind the brand to genuinely care about the issue and to want to achieve actual change.

#### *Marketing as government and the lenses of brand activism*

The second main observation of this study was that the brand managers and marketers interviewed thought brands had the power to achieve societal change, in addition to believing fiercely in what they were doing as brands was the right thing. In the second chapter of this thesis, Moorman's (2020) lenses of brand activism were presented. In the context of this research, four lenses were observed to be relevant, namely the Brand Authenticity View, the Brands as Educators View, the Cultural Authority View and the Political Mission View.

The findings indicated that the non-Unilever brands mainly adhered to the Brand Authenticity View, meaning the brand would only take a stance on issues directly related to their brand or mission (Moorman, 2020). For example, Barry-Callebaut speaks out about slavery in the cocoa supply-chain, which is directly related to their organization as a cocoa producer. In addition, Peter (Barry-Callebaut) was more hesitant than some of the other participants regarding speaking out about political issues and noted the importance of credibility and authenticity more so than others, confirming the Brand Authenticity View. The other Unilever brands, though displaying signs of the Brand Authenticity View, also suggested the presence of the Brands as Educators view. Herein,

brands aim to move consumers into a direction that the brand sees as better for society (Moorman, 2020). For example, Madison (Unilever Sustainability) noted that due to the significant presence of brands in people's lives, brands have the ability to educate consumers on various topics. Interestingly, the Brands as Educators View could be linked to the theory of marketing as a form of government (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006), since it indicates that marketers have the power to shape the opinions and lifestyles of consumers.

Moreover, the participants working at Ben & Jerry's and The Vegetarian Butcher stood out from the other participants in terms of the Political Mission View and the Cultural Authority View. Since The Vegetarian Butcher was founded in order to make plant-based alternatives to meat more accessible and flavorful, the Political Mission View especially applies to their brand. Furthermore, the Cultural Authority View indicates that brands are powerful cultural actors that can shape stakeholders and society as a whole (Moorman, 2020). Both participants working at Ben & Jerry's elaborated on the power that brands have to change consumer opinions, and on their responsibility as brands to achieve systematic change. Thus, the findings suggest that managers are cultural mediators and that they are actively aware of this power. Consequently, this thesis confirmed that marketing is a form of government that enables managers to shape, direct and influence the lifestyles and opinions of consumers (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006).

To summarize, the findings and analysis of this thesis suggested that brands and managers are powerful cultural actors with the ability to educate, shape and influence consumer-lifestyles and opinions (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). In addition to this, it was observed that the beliefs and perspectives of participants working at Unilever brands related more to the Political Mission View and the Cultural Authority View by Moorman (2020), though still noting the importance of remaining credible and 'authentic' to their brand. Moreover, Ben & Jerry's and The Vegetarian Butcher stood out in terms of boldness and belief in being able to re envision the world through brand activism. However, the findings of this study also indicated that managers cared deeply about the issues their brand spoke out on and truly believed in their cause. Therefore, this study suggests that brand activism is a new form of marketing that requires managers to utilize their personal values, in order to activate consumers to participate in the socio-political debate and to achieve societal change.

## **5.2. The implications of brand activism**

The findings of this study suggested that there is more to brand activism than mere marketing purposes. More specifically, during the interviews, it was observed that the participants were passionate about pushing for societal change through their jobs, and fiercely believed that they were doing the right thing for the world. When connecting this perspective to organizational identity orientation (Brickson, 2005; Brickson, 2007), this study argues that brands that engage in actual activism have a strong collectivist orientation. In other words, brands such as Ben & Jerry's, The Vegetarian Butcher and Dove perceive themselves as part of a larger society and thus engage in

activities that benefit welfare and change (Brickson, 2005; Brickson, 2007). Furthermore, brands that speak out about issues but do so in a more calculative manner, such as other Unilever brands, have a significant relational orientation, meaning they engage in activities that benefit both the organization and others (Brickson, 2005; Brickson, 2007). Although brand activism can be interpreted as inauthentic by consumers (Vredenburg et al., 2020), the data analysis indicated that the participants had no ulterior motives or malicious intentions by speaking out on socio-political issues.

Moreover, Ariane (The Vegetarian Butcher) believed that activating consumers to be aware about societal issues was a ‘good’ thing, and Leonore (Ben & Jerry’s) mentioned how proud she was to be working for a brand that aimed to achieve systematic change and support minorities. Therefore, the findings raise the question: is brand activism the right thing to do? It is common knowledge that people generally vary in values, opinions and beliefs. For this reason, judging the motivations of brand activists in terms of morality would not be objective nor productive. In addition to this, brands such as The Vegetarian Butcher or Ben & Jerry’s are not dictating what is inherently *wrong*, but instead aim to raise awareness on topics that they believe deserving of attention. Thus, it is important to address brand activism in terms of cultural mediation and marketing as a form of government, since managers have the ability to influence and shape consumers’ opinions and lifestyles (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). However, this study argues that it is not necessary to determine whether this is right or wrong, since the motivations of managers are highly personal and can therefore not be judged on a moral level.

In conclusion, through the analysis and answering of the three sub-questions, this study was able to answer the main research question: *Why do brands take a stance on controversial socio-political issues in spite of the high risks associated with it?* By answering the first sub-question, this thesis revealed that brand activism has the ability to bring value to brands in terms of stakeholder engagement and brand growth. By humanizing and attributing values to the brand, stakeholders such as employees and consumers are able to identify more with the brand, ultimately resulting in brand growth. Moreover, brand activism creates visibility and can increase sales, in addition to attracting a target audience with similar values to the brand. By answering the second sub-question, this thesis observed that through cultural mediation, managers believed that they could achieve societal change and raise awareness on socio-political issues. Consequently, managers believed that they were doing the right thing for the world, and felt validated by speaking out on issues that were important to them.

Lastly, by answering the third sub-question, this thesis observed that the managers perceived credibility as an important factor for brand activism. Messaging had to be consistent and honest, in addition to aligning to the brand’s purpose where possible. By doing this, the high risks associated with brand activism could be avoided. In summary, brands choose to take a stance on controversial socio-political issues in spite of the high risks associated with it because it fosters brand growth, enhances stakeholder engagement, enables societal change and because it is the right thing to do for the world.



### **5.3. Limitations**

This study has discovered that brand managers and marketers care deeply about achieving actual societal change through brand activism, in addition to brand activism being a successful marketing tactic for organizations. However, there are several limitations to the current study that warrant clarification. First, it is of importance to note that this study is significantly Western-centric. The participants of this thesis all worked at American or European brands, and though these brands operate on various continents, this implies that the results of this study might not be replicable in a broader cultural context. For this reason, the researcher paid attention to reflexivity, in order to avoid interpretations of the data that could affect the validity of this thesis. During the analysis process, memos were written in which the researcher reflected on the interview of that day and of their own role within the interview.

Furthermore, most participants worked for large brands such as Barry-Callebaut, Campari, Lipton, and Ben & Jerry's. Thus, the same results might not be achieved when conducting a similar research consisting of a sample of experts working at smaller or more niche brands. Another key aspect to clarify is the time constraints of this study. More specifically, achieving a sample of 10 professionals required persistence and flexibility from the researcher, since some of the participants had less time for the interview than discussed or had to reschedule several times due to urgent business meetings.

Lastly, the limited previous research on brand's motivation to engage with brand activism and the scope of this thesis makes this study a preliminary explanation that requires further and more extensive research to confirm and consolidate the results of this thesis.

### **5.4. Future research**

The strength of this thesis lies in its contribution to existing research on brand activism, while providing new insights in regards to brand's motivation to engage in brand activism. Considering the small amount of academic research on this topic, future research on this topic is desirable. For this reason, this study proposes several directions for future research.

First, this study mainly focused on managers from relatively large brands as the data sample. Therefore, future research should include smaller, more niche brands, in order to get a broader understanding of why brands engage in brand activism. Additionally, the literature suggested that recently more brands have been founded based on a political mission, increasing the level of brand activism present in those companies (Moorman, 2020). Thus, collecting data from smaller brands might aid in comprehending managers' reasons for speaking out on socio-political issues.

Second, the findings of this study suggested that the participants believed that their stance on socio-political issues was the 'right' stance. For this reason, future research should aim to gain a more in-depth understanding of the ethical convictions of managers, and how brand activism is an ethical strategy. Building on this, future research should include a sample of consumers in order to

understand how consumers perceive brand activism from an ethical perspective. For this purpose, focus groups could be used.

Third, considering brands are increasingly speaking out on controversial issues such as same sex marriage, refugees, abortion and gun rights (Vredenburg et al., 2020), future research should investigate the role of brand activism in political polarization. In other words, how is brand activism either contributing to a greater divide between people, or how does brand activism bring people together?

Lastly, this study focused on Western-centric brands. Therefore, the current study proposes that a similar study be conducted in nations with vastly different cultures. For instance, future research should explore how brand activism exists and operates in countries such as China or India. This could further aid in building more theory and understanding in regards to brand activism.

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## Appendix A

### *Interviewee characteristics*

Table 1 presents the relevant characteristics of the participants of this thesis. The names presented in the table are pseudonyms. Furthermore, the biological sex, general position within the company and the name and brand of the company are presented.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Organization</b>
Peter	Male, senior position	Barry-Callebaut
Charlotte	Female, junior position	Unilever (Lipton)
Maria	Female, medior position	Unilever (Unilever Professional)
Guido	Male, junior position	Campari
Justin	Male, senior position	Game Changer Unlimited
Lara	Female, medior position	Unilever (Hellmans)
Madison	Female, senior position	Unilever (Sustainability)
Ariana	Female	Unilever (The Vegetarian Butcher)
Leonore	Female, senior position	Ben & Jerry's
Fleur	Female, senior position	Ben & Jerry's

***Table 1.***

## **Appendix B**

### *Interview guide*

Appendix B presents the interview guide used for this study. As the method consisted of semi-structured in-depth interviews, the questions presented below were used as a general guide for the interviews, giving as much freedom to the participants as necessary in order to acquire relevant data to answer the research questions.

### QUESTIONS

- Could you tell me about your experience with brand activism?
- Why do you think it is appropriate for a brand to take a stance on politically-charged issues?
- Why do you think that brands have the power to make the world a better place?
- What do you say to critics who may feel that “purpose” is simply another marketing gimmick?
- How do you feel about the gap in attitude and behavior of consumers when it comes to purchasing based on moral or ethical convictions?
- What do you see for the future of Brand Activism?
- How do you manage the balance between economic performance and social purpose?
- Why is the distinction between a company defining its own movement or playing into an existing movement important?
- How do you think it is possible to yield meaningful and measurable results?
- How do you think the events of 2020 and early 2021 are pushing more companies to move beyond corporate social responsibility to corporate activism?
- How do you think brands can navigate cultural differences when adopting brand activist strategies?
- How do you deal with the risks associated with brand activism?

## **Appendix C**

### *Excerpt of memos*

Appendix C presents an excerpt of the memos written during the interview and analysis process. The purpose of the excerpt is to show how the researcher was immersed in the data during the analysis process, and how certain ideas emerged.

**(15-04-2021)**

Apart from more strategic reasons such as brand growth or preparing for future generations of consumers, it became clear relatively quickly that most participants held strong beliefs and truly felt that they were making a change with their jobs. I found it difficult to get a sense of what they thought about the ‘alienated’ group of consumers; it was almost as if they did not matter or exist to the participants. Even though there are probably a good few strategic reasons to be an activist brand, I must say that the general feeling I get when talking to the participants is that they believe fiercely in causes and that they truly think their actions make the world a better place. That being said, does this mean that activist brands attract employees that are activist in their hearts, or that employees that get the freedom at those brands to pursue their social causes make the brand more activist?

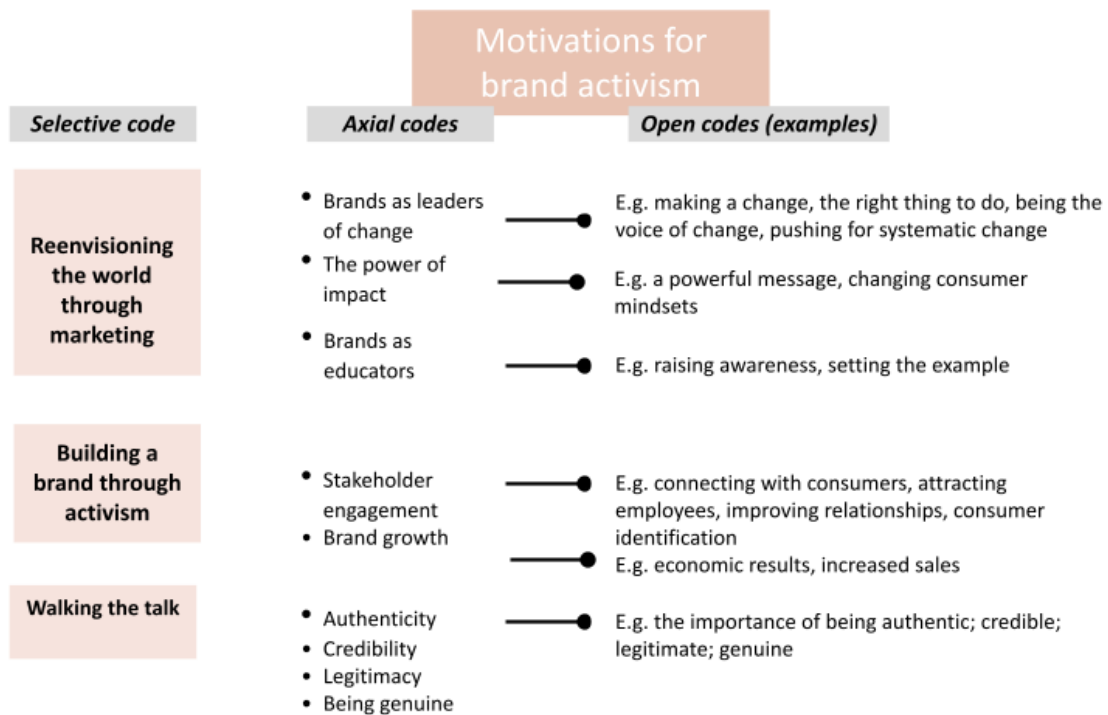
**(21-04-2021)**

Leonore clearly has a huge background in activism, which I could feel from the way she talked about her job at Ben & Jerry’s. In the first few paragraphs of the transcript, I felt the need to write a memo about her use of the words ‘power’ and ‘impact’. Power in the sense that brands have more budget and more communication-power to truly convey a message, in comparison to governments and NGOs. Impact in the sense that whoever or whatever you are (person or brand), you make an impact on the world. Mostly negative. I found the term ‘power of impact’ perhaps fitting as the umbrella, as the core category of this study. Specifically, brand activism causes impact on society through supporting movements, but also makes an impact on brands through brand growth and stakeholder engagement.

## Appendix D

### *Excerpt of coding process*

Appendix D presents an excerpt of the coding process, where open coding was used in the first phase, and axial coding in the second phase. Lastly, selective coding was used to establish the two main categories of this thesis.



## Initial coding

we know exactly how much impacts we have in terms of our carbon, we know exactly how much impact we have in terms of our plastic in terms of the transport, in terms of the workers on the farms, in terms of the workers in supply chains, like, you know, fair trade producers who produce vanilla and cocoa and bananas. Do you have to have that holistic impact of your authority, a holistic view and analysis of your overall impact. And there's also huge amounts of power there. So you have these kind of, you can think about it in slightly different ways. But you have power to change the world through your operations, because chances are, you're having a negative impact right now. And then you also have a huge amount of power to, to shape narratives, to educate people, to bring people into existing movements, to change the debate, and that, that takes a lot takes a lack of ego than a lot of brands don't have, because a lot of brands exist to exist Sure, to me, like, their whole purpose is to keep building and keep growing. And in order to sort of really take their power seriously, there has to be an element where they're willing to do something that's not for the good of their brand, or not specifically to try and build building their brand. Yes, sorry, that was a lot. No.	Babette Kleine...	Referring to sustainable impact
	Babette Kleine...	Referring to labor impact
	Babette Kleine...	B/J's positive impact
	Babette Kleine...	Holistic impact
	Babette Kleine...	The power of impact
	Babette Kleine...	Brands as leaders of change
	Babette Kleine...	Negative impact
	Babette Kleine...	Brands as leaders of change
	Babette Kleine...	The ego of brands
	Babette Kleine...	Brand purpose
	Babette Kleine...	Taking power seriously
	Babette Kleine...	Do something not good for the brand
	Babette Kleine...	Everyone is led by values
	Babette Kleine...	Value-led brands
	Babette Kleine...	Value-led brands
	Babette Kleine...	Value-led brands
	Babette Kleine...	Everything is political
	Babette Kleine...	Everything is political
	Babette Kleine...	Prioritizing the social good
	Babette Kleine...	Prioritizing the social good
	Babette Kleine...	Prioritizing the social good
	Babette Kleine...	Traditional business practices
	Babette Kleine...	Consumer locating
	Babette Kleine...	Consumer locating
	Babette Kleine...	Prioritizing social good
	Babette Kleine...	Brand activism works
	Babette Kleine...	Brand activism works
	Babette Kleine...	Brand activism works

Leonore 19-18

So there's a few things to say there. One is that we are led by our values. And that is something that we are looking in that our co-founders had values or may instill those values into the company. So in some ways, it sort of comes ready made that will speak out on issues of injustice, inequality, because that's what we've always done. And so, we, we start with our values, and we say, you know, we talk a lot about being political, but nonpartisan, everything's political. You can't not be political. And it's a complete fallacy that businesses think that they can be values led and not political, but that's a whole other topic for another day. And one of the things that we say is that we actually, we don't care. I'm trying to think how to phrase this without sounding terrible, we don't really care if we alienate some consumers, because we're standing up for what is the right thing to do. And so unlike some other business, or maybe even more traditional brand practices, and you'll have to forgive me, because I'm not a business person, so I get some of this wrong some of the time, but we deal with where our where our consumers are, and then pay really close attention to that and track that and sort of go with our consumers. We start with our values, and then we speak up. And that's, that's the right thing to do. And that's kind of the end of it for us. And that said, we are still alive 43 years after our founding. And some of that is because a lot of that is because the ice cream is great. And some of that is because enough people like us for being outspoken and values LED, that they will continue to buy us and that kind of loyal to us. And I had, I was doing a piece of filming with the co-founders a couple of years ago. And Ben said that at the beginning, when they started doing a lot more of this activism work. Slightly more cynical people or some of the business folk would come to them and say, you know, you're only really doing this because it's like benefiting your company. Right? You know, it's just, you're only doing it because it's making you money. And then when I was like, No, no, we're doing this because it's the right thing to do with values led, this is who we are. And if you want to meet Ben, I'll get to him speak like he is one of the most principled people I've ever come across. He's He's so he has so much integrity. And as just Jerry, they both they both are great. But anyway, he said that he used to say, No, no, no, like, we were doing this because of our values. And then he realised that actually, maybe he

## Axial coding

*Strategic thinking*

Long-term thinking

Brand activism as future investment

Brand positioning

Building a brand story

Good for reputation

Brand Growth

Economic results

Brand activism as profit

Marketing value

Sales increase

Increases market share

*Brands as the leaders of change*

Brands doing good for society

Making a change

The voice of change  
Brands as educators  
Brands as leaders of change  
Changing consumer mindset  
Raising awareness  
Drivers of social change  
The right thing to do  
Setting the example  
The people behind the brand  
Political turmoil  
The power of impact (impact in general)  
Prioritizing social good

#### *Stakeholder Engagement*

Connecting with people  
Consumer engagement  
Improving relationship with consumers  
Storytelling to attract consumers  
Being bold to attract consumers  
Employee engagement  
Consumer identification  
Consumers desire more depth from brands  
consumer power  
Increased consumer awareness  
Adapting to changing times  
Brands more political; going with the flow  
End of generic marketing → more on people's convictions  
Personifying the brand  
Emotional marketing

#### *Walk the Talk*

Credibility → risk of getting canceled  
Know what you talk about  
Walk the talk  
Being genuine (desire to want to change the world)  
Brand authenticity  
Work together with NGOs  
Legitimacy importance

## **Selective coding**

- Reenvisioning the world through marketing
- Building a brand through activism
- Walking the talk