Over the rainbow: Exploring consumers' attitudes toward brands taking a stance

A quantitative study of consumers' attitudes toward brands addressing social brand activism in the form of LGBTQIA+ issues in their advertising

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ABSTRACT

More and more brands are taking a stand on sociopolitical issues such as the rights of individuals within the LGBTQIA+ spectrum in their advertising campaigns. Thereby, brands engage in brand activism, an emerging marketing strategy that seeks to meet consumer expectations, foster competitive differentiation, and drive sociopolitical change. However, the impact of this strategy on consumers' attitudes remains uncertain. As brands increasingly tackle LGBTQIA+ issues in their advertising, accusations of opportunism and rainbow-washing have surfaced, suggesting that brands may exploit these communities without genuinely supporting them. Therefore, this study aimed to explore how exposure to different types of social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues in advertising affects consumers' attitudes, while considering the moderating roles of consumer-brand stance-agreement and ad skepticism.

For this research, a between-subject experimental survey was conducted online. Participants (N = 174) were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions representing different types of brand activism: absent, authentic, and inauthentic. In each condition, participants were exposed to an advertisement of a fictitious toothpaste brand that either contained no brand activism or authentic and inauthentic LGBTQIA+ brand activism. The brand's activism authenticity was manipulated through fictional newspaper articles, one praising its genuine commitment and the other accusing it of rainbow-washing. Responses on consumers' attitudes toward the ad and brand were analyzed using one-way ANCOVAs and moderation analysis using PROCESS.

Results revealed that participants exposed to authentic social brand activism rated the ad and brand more positively than those exposed to no activism or inauthentic activism. Consumer-brand stance-agreement was found to play a moderating role in the association between (in)authentic social brand activism and attitude toward the brand, but not toward the ad. No significant moderating effect was found for advertising skepticism.

This study provides new theoretical insights into the use of social brand activism in advertising. The practical implications that emerge from these findings encourage brands to take positions on sociopolitical issues in their advertising when done based on sincere motives. Given the existing research gap regarding the effects of brand activism, this study adds to the literature on consumers' attitudes toward (in)authentic brand activism, covering positioning on LGBTQIA+ issues in advertising.

KEYWORDS: *advertising, brand activism, authenticity, brand attitude, ad attitude, LGBTQIA+ advertising, rainbow-washing*

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Abstract and keywords

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the role of companies within society has changed as customers increasingly expect companies to take responsibility and make a difference (Burnett, 2019). According to the Edelman Trust Barometer (2019), 53% of customers want brands to engage in at least one sociopolitical issue which has no direct impact on their business. Therefore, more and more brands are now publicly taking a stand on sociopolitical topics such as racial inequity, climate change, or the rights of individuals identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, or plus, standing for other gender identities that are not included in the letters (LGBTQIA+). By addressing those topics in their advertising campaigns, brands engage in a marketing strategy called brand activism (Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Especially LGBTQIA+ individuals have a relatively short history of advocacy compared to other minority groups (e.g., based on gender, race, national origin, and religion), and most LGBTQIA+ people around the world are still not protected from discrimination (Zhou, 2021). However, the global social acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people has increased since 1980, indicating a societal shift (Flores, 2021). Besides, according to a recent survey by Ipsos (2021), 47% of adults aged 16-74 in 27 countries support brand activism promoting LGBTQIA+ equality. Consequently, social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues has been on the rise in recent years, as brands have a growing financial interest in representing LGBTQIA+ themes and people (Coffee 2022; Lim et al., 2022). For instance, to show their support for the LGBTQIA+ community, brands often release Pride collections, such as limited-edition products, feature LGBTQIA+-oriented content on their social media or promote participation and sponsorship of Pride events (Lim et al., 2022). Noticeably, marketing campaigns focused on LGBTQIA+ are often timed to align with Pride celebrations rather than taking place throughout the year (Coffee 2022; Lim et al., 2022). A Nielsen survey (2021) found that outside of Pride month, only 1% of TV ads feature LGBTQIA+ characters or themes. Therefore, critics allege that brands are trying to capitalize on a movement that began as resistance (Lim et al., 2022). Moreover, when brands use LGBTQIA+ symbols in their ads without taking concrete action to support these communities, they risk being accused of rainbow-washing (Lim et al., 2022).

Hence, while brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues is desired by consumers, this endeavor also comes with potential pitfalls. On the one hand, the prevalent controversy surrounding this topic makes it risky for companies to consciously choose a side, as they may

offend customers who disagree with the company's stance (Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). On the other hand, the brand activism campaign may also trigger a consumer backlash if the brand's activism is not perceived as authentic (Vredenburg et al., 2020). For example, Burger King recently launched an ad campaign featuring a burger with two bun tops and another with two bottoms, which served as an analogy to sex within the LGBTQIA+ community. The campaign received criticism from conservatives, but also from LGBTQIA+ individuals who found it inauthentic and insensitive (Biron, 2022; Coffee 2022). Therefore, the question arises of how brands can manage the balancing act between meeting consumer expectations and avoiding negative reactions.

Whereas brand activism is gaining increasing momentum in marketing, academic research in that field to date is still rare (Schmidt et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Existing studies have mainly focused on factors contributing to authenticity in relation to brand activism (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020), or have examined specific brand activism campaigns (Lee & Yoon, 2020; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). However, due to the ambiguous nature of brand activism, Koch (2020) urges that further theoretical explanations for the phenomenon are needed. Furthermore, there has been limited research on the effects of brand activism (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020), and the role of consumers' perceived authenticity regarding brand activism remains understudied (Chu et al., 2022; Mirzaei et al., 2022). Notably, studies exploring consumer reactions to brand activism have yielded contradictory conclusions: Whereas Schmidt et al. (2021) show that brands taking an authentic sociopolitical stand are perceived more positively by consumers than brands that do not, both Jungblut and Johnen (2021) and Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) found minimal benefits for brands in taking the "right" stand, while taking the "wrong" stand can severely damage a brand. Therefore, this master thesis intends to complement existing research by investigating the effects of different types of social brand activism on consumers' attitudes, ultimately seeking to reconcile academic contradictions.

Moreover, the results of this study are also socially relevant, since consumer buying behavior has changed dramatically in recent years, fueled by consumers becoming more politically and socially aware (Alemany, 2020). Hence, consumers are increasingly buying more consciously, primarily supporting brands that share their values and avoiding those that do not. This trend is particularly noticeable among younger people, including Gen Z and Millennials (Amed et al., 2019). Consequently, brand positioning on a sociopolitical topic is increasingly expected (Edelman, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). While brands seek to meet

the evolving needs of their customers, they still perceive brand activism as a risky endeavor (Moorman, 2020). Therefore, it is crucial for brands to gain a thorough understanding of how consumers perceive and interpret brand activism communication, allowing for the effective execution of brand activism campaigns while maintaining authenticity and resonating with consumers (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Thus, by conducting consumer surveys, the impact of brand activism on consumers' attitudes can be empirically examined (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Through insights from these surveys, brands can make informed decisions and adapt their strategies to effectively engage with their audiences, navigating the challenges and opportunities of brand activism.

 Therefore, the research question is formulated as follows: *To what extent does exposure to different types of social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues in advertising affect the consumers' attitudes?*

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Brand activism

2.1.1. Brand activism: Definition and origin

Brand activism can be defined as a marketing strategy in which brands publicly take a stance on sociopolitical issues, aiming to increase their competitive differentiation, but also to promote sociopolitical change (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017; Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). While there are multiple ways for brands to communicate their stance on a sociopolitical issue, one way is through advertising campaigns (Cristobal et al., 2022; Feng et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Within this context, scholarly literature refers to the notion of *woke advertising* (Cristobal et al., 2022; Feng et al., 2021). The term *woke* stands for an awareness of social issues (Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Vredenburg et al., 2020). While the form of woke advertisements may differ, they share the common objective of communicating a non-neutral stance on a sociopolitical topic with the aim of influencing consumers by raising awareness of a particular issue, altering their behavior, and lastly, seeking economic and reputational benefits due the consumers' appreciation of the involvement with the cause (Jungblut & Johnen, 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Examples of brand activism ad campaigns include Nike's 2018 "Dream Crazy" campaign addressing racial inequality featuring Black Lives Matter (BLM) protestor and former NFL football player Colin Kaepernick, and Gillette's 2019 "We Believe" campaign addressing toxic masculinity (Vredenburg et al., 2020)

According to Vredenburg et al. (2020), brand activism can be classified by four key characteristics: First, the brand is purpose- and values-driven, meaning it pursues a social mission based on its values that transcends pure financial interests. Second, it addresses a controversial, divisive, or polarizing sociopolitical topic, which means that the brand deliberately takes a stance on an issue that provokes a wide gulf between opinions. In this way, the company intentionally accepts that its stance may not reflect the opinion of all its stakeholders, including customers, employees, and partners, and that it may potentially cause some level of disagreement. Although the definition of a contentious issue can vary depending on cultural and historical context, there are several issues currently highlighted in the media, such as climate change, racial injustice, sexual harassment, gender equality, LGBTQIA+ rights, immigration, gun control, reproductive rights, and public health (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020). The issues addressed through brand activism can be categorized into six areas: (1) Social, such as LGBTQIA+

rights or gender inequality, (2) legal such as tax and employment laws, (3) business such as business ethics or CEO salaries, (4) economic such as wages inequality or distribution of wealth, (5) political such as voting rights and policies, and (6) environmental activism such as pollution and climate change (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). Yet, this study will focus on social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues, since this is still an emerging topic in communication research despite its growing popularity in mainstream culture (Zhou, 2021).

The third characteristic of brand activism is its representation of either a progressive or a conservative stand on sociopolitical issues (Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Interestingly, Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) claims, that companies engaging in brand activism mainly take a progressive stance on controversial issues, whereas they are less likely to advocate traditional values. Lastly, the fourth characteristic of brand activism according to Vredenburg et al. (2020) is the brand's demonstration of its commitment toward one or more sociopolitical issues through both its messaging and practice. In essence, this implies that the brand not only shows its commitment on an intangible level by addressing its position on the sociopolitical problem, but also on a tangible level by actively engaging with it in practice, such as through changes in corporate practices and organizational policies, charitable donations, or social initiatives intended to promote social change. Nevertheless, the impact of prosocial corporate practices depends on how deeply they are integrated into the business. For instance, providing a single donation to the LGBTQIA+ community would have a lesser impact compared to implementing an organizational policy enabling parental leave for same-sex couples. Thus, a lasting and deep-rooted commitment is more likely to have a greater social impact (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Brand activism can be considered an evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Cause-Related Marketing (CRM) (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022). CSR was defined by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (1999) as the ongoing dedication of businesses to ethical behavior, and economic growth while enhancing the well-being of employees, their families, local communities, and society in general. CRM, on the other hand, is a way of integrating CSR into marketing practices and is characterized by the company's willingness to contribute to a designated sociopolitical cause in return for customers' profitable engagement, meeting organizational and individual goals (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022; Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). However, brand activism can be clearly distinguished from CSR and CRM due to two reasons: First, the focus of CSR-related activities is placed more on actions and their consequences for the company, such as

improving reputation and sales figures than at intrinsic corporate values (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). Second, an important difference is that CSR and CRM tackle non-controversial issues with a consensus in society that engagement in this area is beneficial to society, whereby brand activism refers to contentious issues, which can elicit both positive and negative reactions (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

2.1.2. *Authenticity in brand activism or the lack of it*

While brand activism is desired by consumers, brands must endure close scrutiny of the underlying motives behind their activism, as consumers often approach these with skepticism (Holt, 2002; Vredenburg et al., 2020). This is confirmed by Edelman's (2019) survey, in which 56% of consumers felt that too many brands use brand activism as a marketing ploy to boost sales. In the context of LGBTQIA+, this is particularly intriguing, as companies are often accused of trying to capitalize on the LGBTQIA+ movement (Lim et al., 2022). Thus, when customers perceive a lack of clear or sincere motives regarding the sociopolitical cause, it can negatively impact the brand's authenticity, equity and potentially lead to a backlash (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

In this case, scholars such as Sobande (2019) and Vredenburg et al. (2018) coin the term *woke washing*, which is used to describe when a company presents itself as socially aware or *woke* for marketing purposes but is not actively working to solve sociopolitical problems. In the context of LGBTQIA+, this notion is referred to as *rainbow washing*, meaning that brands use LGBTQIA+ symbols in their brand communication without taking concrete action to support these communities (Lim et al., 2022). Given this risk of being accused of *woke washing* or *rainbow washing*, brands are reluctant to engage in brand activism due to concerns that it may negatively impact their company's ability to attract and retain customers or partners (Moorman, 2020).

Therefore, several studies have emphasized the importance of authenticity in brand activism to elicit positive reactions from consumers (Ciszek & Lim, 2021; Mirzaei et al., 2022; Schmidt et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). According to the definition of Alhouti et al. (2016) and Molleda (2010), the term authenticity refers to the concepts of being truthful, real, honest, genuine, and trustworthy. Hence, a brand can be considered authentic if these attributes are perceived as given, whereas a lack of these attributes can be considered inauthentic (Shen & Kim, 2012). Regarding LGBTQIA+ communication practices, consumers' perceived authenticity reflects a subjective evaluation of how well a brand's

authenticity claims match the LGBTQIA+ context and needs of specific stakeholders (Molleda, 2010; Lim et al., 2022). Notably, the concept of perceived authenticity should not be considered as a binary state, but rather a question of level, meaning that a brand engaging in social brand activism cannot only be viewed as either authentic or inauthentic but can be placed on a spectrum of (in)authenticity (Shen & Kim, 2012). Despite the complexity surrounding this concept, for the sake of simplicity, this master's thesis will work with the two terms authenticity and inauthenticity in relation to social brand activism, considering that they have also been employed in several scholarly articles (e.g., Alhouti et al., 2016; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of how consumers perceive a brand's activism as authentic or inauthentic, it is crucial to shed light on the factors that contribute to (in)authenticity. Given the multifaceted nature of authenticity, it is not surprising that previous research has examined the concept from different perspectives, thereby developing various conceptualizations (e.g., Alhouti et al., 2016; Mirzaei et al., 2022; Morhart et al., 2015, Lim et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020). For example, Vredenburg et al. (2020) state that a brand that speaks out on a sociopolitical issue is more likely to be perceived as authentic when four factors, namely purpose, values, messaging, and practice of a company coincide. These four factors are interrelated and function as a whole system to create authenticity. This implies that if, for example, messaging is not aligned with corporate practice, purpose and values, the authenticity of brand activism is undermined. Similarly, if the brand's practices are not consistent with its purpose, values, and messaging, this results in inauthentic brand activism or woke washing (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Moreover, Alhouti et al. (2016) suggest that impact and motive are additional important drivers for (in)authenticity. First, impact contributes to authenticity when the company can make a significant difference regarding the sociopolitical issue. Second, public-serving motives are perceived as authentic, whereas self-serving motives are perceived as inauthentic. This means that consumers perceive brand activism as authentic if they believe that the brand is genuinely committed to helping others and is not only motivated by financial incentives. In addition, both Morhart et al. (2015) and Lim et al. (2022) found continuity and credibility to be crucial aspects of authenticity. Whereas continuity refers to a brand's history and consistency over time, credibility is defined as a brand's ability and willingness to deliver on its commitments. While more factors are discussed in the literature, this study will rely on the aforementioned factors to further define (in)authentic social brand activism.

2.1.3. *Different types of social brand activism*

Considering the important role of authenticity in relation to brand activism, different types of brand activism can be distinguished. In this regard, this master thesis is guided by the classification of Vredenburg et al. (2020), who suggest four types of brand activism based on the level of prosocial corporate practices and the level of activist marketing messaging: absence of activism, silent brand activism, authentic brand activism, and inauthentic brand activism.

The first type, absence of brand activism, describes brands that do not yet take a stance on a sociopolitical issue, meaning they have low activist marketing messaging, low engagement in prosocial corporate practices, and a lack of brand purpose and value. Second, silent brand activism refers to brands that exhibit high engagement in prosocial corporate practices, combined with prosocial purpose and values but do not strongly communicate these to the public. In contrast, the third type, authentic brand activism, embodies brands with strong activist marketing messaging, high engagement, and matching brand purpose and values. Finally, the fourth type, inauthentic brand activism pertains to brands that have high activist marketing messaging, but little engagement and a lack of clear purpose and values (Vredenburg et al., 2020). However, this study focuses on only three types, namely absent, authentic, and inauthentic brand activism. These specific types are examined in relation to social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues in advertising.

In combining the factors contributing to (in)authenticity and following the classification of brand activism, the three types can be defined as follows: First, the absence of brand social activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues is referred to a brand that (1) does not publicly speak out on LGBTQIA+ issues in their advertising campaigns, (2) nor engages in practices to support the LGBTQIA+ community and has lack of brand purpose and values in relation to LGBTQIA+. Second, authentic brand social activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues is therefore understood as a brand that (1) publicly speaks out on LGBTQIA+ issues in their advertising campaigns, (2) takes concrete actions to support the LGBTQIA+ community, (3) stands behind values important to the LGBTQIA+ community, (4) has a public-serving motive by pursuing a social mission grounded in supporting LGBTQIA+ individuals beyond financial interests, (5) is willing and able to deliver on its commitment and (6) can make a significant impact. Third, inauthentic social brand activism LGBTQIA+ will be understood as a brand that (1) publicly speaks out on LGBTQIA+ issues in their advertising campaigns, but (2) does not really make an effort to support the LGBTQIA+ community in practice, (3)

espouses values that are contrary to the LGBTQIA+ community, (4) has a self-serving motive as the brand uses the LGBTQIA+ topic as a marketing ploy, (5) is not willing to deliver on its commitment and (6) is not able to make a significant impact. Table 2.1 provides an overview of the characteristics of each type.

Table 2.1

The three types of social brand activism

Types of social brand activism	Characteristics
Absence of brand social activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues	1. No public stance on LGBTQIA+ issues in ad campaign. 2. No practices regarding the support the LGBTQIA+ community. 3. No brand purpose or values in relation to LGBTQIA+.
Authentic brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues	1. Public stance on LGBTQIA+ issues in ad campaign. 2. Concrete practices to support the LGBTQIA+ community. 3. Brand stands behind LGBTQIA+ values. 4. Public-serving motive. 5. Willingness and ability to deliver on commitments. 6. Ability to make a significant impact.
Inauthentic brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues	1. Public stance on LGBTQIA+ issues in ad campaign. 2. No effort to support the LGBTQIA+ community in practice. 3. Brand does not stand behind LGBTQIA+ values. 4. Self-serving motive. 5. No willingness and ability to deliver on commitments. 6. Inability to make a significant impact.

Note. The characteristics of the different types of social brand activism are derived from existing literature (e.g., Alhouti et al., 2016; Lim et al., 2022; Morhart et al., 2015; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

2.2. Effects of brand activism in advertising on consumers' attitudes

2.2.1. *Advertising effects on consumers' attitudes*

Advertising plays an important role in shaping people's beliefs, attitudes, and behavior like purchase intention (Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999). However, for this research, the effects of social brand activism in advertising on consumers' attitudes are the most relevant. Consumers' attitudes captured the spotlight in marketing research for many years already, as they make it possible to predict consumers' behavior toward a product or service (Ajzen,

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1991; Mitchell & Olson, 1981). Considering the important role of advertising in establishing the value of a brand, it is not surprising that prior research has focused primarily on examining how exposure to a certain advertisement influences two specific consumer attitudes outcomes, namely attitude toward the advertisement and attitude toward the brand (Gardner, 1985; Mitchell & Olson, 1981; Shimp, 1981). To define attitude toward the ad (Aad), researchers often resort to MacKenzie and Lutz's (1989) definition according to which Aad can be described as an individual's tendency to react positively or negatively toward an advertisement during a certain exposure time. Notably, the definition of attitude toward the ad refers to a specific exposure to a particular advertisement and not to consumers' attitudes toward advertising in general. Attitude toward the brand (Ab), on the other hand, is defined as the way a consumer internally evaluates a brand (Mitchell & Olson, 1981). Hence, it indicates how consumers think, feel, and respond toward the brand (Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999). Looking at these two attitude outcomes, prior research has already demonstrated a relationship between Aad and Ab, namely the mediating role of Aad in the effect of advertising on Ab and purchase intention (Gardner, 1985; Mitchell & Olson, 1981; Shimp, 1981). In other words, exposure to advertisements affects Aad, which in turn affects Ab, which then impacts buying behavior (Mitchell & Olson, 1981). However, given the extensive empirical research that has already examined and confirmed the relationship between Aad and Ab, the contribution of this study is not to re-examine this relationship but to investigate how exposure to an advertisement involving social brand activism affects these two constructs separately, which is why both Aad and Ab are considered as dependent variables for this study.

In seeking to explain the change or formation of attitudes following exposure to advertising, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is an established theory in advertising research (Petty & Cacioppo 1986; Rodgers & Thorson, 2019; Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999). The ELM was proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986) and outlines two ways in which attitudes are formed in response to persuasive messages, such as advertising, namely the central and the peripheral route. According to the model, which route is taken depends on the level of elaboration, which describes "the extent to which a person carefully thinks about issue-relevant information" (Petty & Cacioppo 1986, p. 7). The central route involves a high level of elaboration, where consumers carefully evaluate the content of the advertisement and the arguments presented in it. In contrast, the peripheral route involves a low level of elaboration, whereby consumers are more likely to be influenced by superficial cues of the

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advertisement, such as the colors, symbols, or source credibility (Petty et al., 1983; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). While the ELM distinguishes between the two routes discussed, it is also highlighted that both routes can be used simultaneously in attitude formation (Lord et al., 1995; Petty et al., 1987). For instance, MacKenzie and Lutz (1989) build on the ELM to explain that both the Aad and Ab may be formed through both central and peripheral processing mechanisms. A simplified portrayal of the ELM can be found in Figure 1.1.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the ELM also received some criticism over the years, especially due to its descriptive nature, the continuum of the level of elaboration likelihood, and the duality of information processing (Kitchen et al., 2014). Besides, the ELM model was originally formulated in the era of mass media marketing communications in the 1980s, making it plausible that the media environment and the way consumers process ad impressions may have changed significantly (Kitchen et al., 2014). However, the ELM remains one of the most widely used theories by marketing researchers to study consumers' attitude change after being exposed to advertisements (Kitchen et al., 2014), which is why for this study, the ELM is drawn upon as a theoretical framework for explaining changes in consumers' attitudes after being exposed to different types of social brand activism.

In the logic of the ELM, woke advertisements containing messages regarding LGBTQIA+ rights can form attitudes via both the central and the peripheral route. For example, consumers might process the information presented in the social brand activism campaign through the central route by actively thinking about the brand's stance on LGBTQIA+ rights and scrutinizing it for its authenticity and consequently forming their attitudes toward the ad and the brand. On the other hand, peripheral processing may occur when consumers lack the motivation or cognitive resources to think more thoroughly about the brands' stance. In this case, they may be influenced by peripheral cues, like symbols and colors standing for LGBTQIA+, or the mere presence of a newspaper article praising or criticizing the brand's commitment, which also shapes their attitudes toward the ad and the brand.

Figure 2.1

Own simplified portrayal of the ELM based on Petty and Cacioppo (1986)
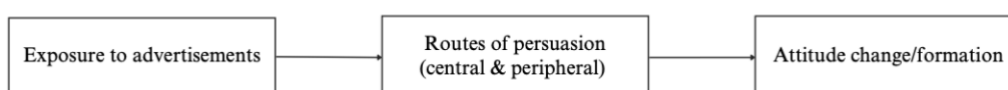
2.2.2. *Brand activism effects on consumers' attitudes*

Due to the inherently ambiguous nature of the phenomena in eliciting both positive and negative reactions, prior research has already investigated consumer responses to brand activism. Schmidt et al. (2021) show that a brand engaging in authentic brand activism is viewed more positively by consumers than a brand that avoids taking a stance on sociopolitical topics. Their study revealed that respondents exposed to a press release of a sociopolitically active brand reported a higher Ab, brand personality, and product usage compared to those exposed to a press release of a non-sociopolitically active brand. This aligns with Shetty et al.'s (2019) findings that Millennials prefer to buy brands that authentically support a cause or purpose compared to non-activist brands. Similarly, Cristobal et al. (2022) discovered that after being exposed to woke advertisements, Filipino consumers showed a more positive effect on their attitudes toward the brand and their brand perceptions.

Moreover, as discussed earlier, the literature suggests that authenticity is key for positive consumer responses toward brand activism (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020). In contrast, inauthentic brand activism is expected to lead to unfavorable brand associations and thus a more negative impact compared to authentic brand activism (Holt, 2002; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Although few studies have investigated the effect of authentic or inauthentic brand activism on consumers' attitudes, prior research in the CSR literature guides this study considering that brand activism is an evolution of CSR (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). For instance, Alhouti et al. (2016) found that authentic CSR initiatives have a positive impact on consumer purchase intention and brand loyalty while diminishing boycott behavior.

This is confirmed by Afzali and Kim (2021), showing that authentic CSR initiatives are effective in eliciting positive responses from customers. Similarly, Yoon et al. (2006) found that engaging in CSR initiatives can enhance a company's reputation if consumers perceive the motives to be genuine. Conversely, if the motives are perceived as insincere, it can damage the company's image. This conclusion is also reached by Polansky and Wood (2001), stating that inauthentic CSR efforts create an unfavorable impression of the company among consumers. In the field of brand activism, Chu et al. (2022) show that authentic brand activism is positively associated with electronic word of mouth (eWOM), leading to an improvement in brand reputation, purchase inclination, and customer loyalty.

Within this context, the balance theory and the persuasion knowledge theory explain the effects of brand activism on consumers' attitudes. First, the balance theory, introduced by

Heider (1946), states that people seek consistency or balance among their attitudes, behaviors, and social relationships. The theory centers on a triadic relationship between the person, another person, and an object and posits that balance occurs when the three elements have similar attitudes toward each other, either positively or negatively. In cases of imbalance, individuals are motivated to restore balance by changing their attitudes (Heider, 1946; Woodside & Chebat, 2001). Prior research has used the balance theory to explain changes in consumers' attitudes (Basil & Herr, 2006; Jungblut & Johnen, 2021; Woodside & Chebat, 2001). Applying the balance theory to the field of brand activism provides a framework that explains the relationship between an individual, a sociopolitical issue, and a brand. Specifically, it suggests that if a brand endorses a sociopolitical issue that is also endorsed by a person, balance occurs, leading to stronger attitudes toward the brand (Jungblut & Johnen, 2021).

Second, Friestad and Wright's (1994) persuasion knowledge model explains how consumers develop an understanding of persuasive communication and respond to it. It assumes that consumers have knowledge and beliefs about persuasive attempts such as marketing and advertising, which leads them to actively monitor these attempts. In the context of (in)authentic brand activism, the persuasive knowledge model suggests that consumers use the knowledge they have about the brands' purpose, values, and effort required to address the sociopolitical issue to determine whether a brand's activism is genuinely making a significant impact. Therefore, Alhouti et al. (2016) rely on the persuasion knowledge theory to argue that consumers' perception of authentic CSR initiatives results in positive attitudes toward the ad and the brand. Hence, the theory can also be used to explain that if brand activism is perceived as inauthentic or insincere, consumers may be skeptical and view it as a manipulative marketing tactic, resulting in negative attitudes toward the ad and the brand.

All in all, considering the findings from the discussed literature and drawing from the ELM, the balance theory, and the persuasion knowledge theory, the following hypotheses are formulated:

> **H1:** Exposure to an advertisement with authentic social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues will result in a more positive attitude toward the ad compared to exposure to an advertisement without social brand activism or with inauthentic social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues.

H2: Exposure to an advertisement with authentic social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues will result in a more positive attitude toward the brand compared to exposure to an advertisement without social brand activism or with inauthentic social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues.

2.2.3. *The moderating role of consumer-brand stance-agreement*

The balance theory also highlights the importance of the consumer's agreement with the brand's stance on the sociopolitical issue addressed in its brand activism to create positive responses. Accordingly, Jungblut and Johnen (2021) build on the balance theory to explain the relationship between an individual, a sociopolitical issue, and a brand in two ways: First, if a brand endorses a sociopolitical issue that is also endorsed by a person, balance occurs which leads to stronger attitudes toward the brand. However, if the brand endorses a sociopolitical issue that the individual opposes, this creates an imbalance and could lead to less favorable brand attitudes.

In accordance with this, Bhagwat et al. (2020) show that both investors and customers reward brand activism when it closely aligns with their values, but they also react negatively when it does not. Moreover, they found that the effect of brand activism on purchase intention is moderated by the deviation between the brand's stance and customer values. Similarly, Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) show that the effect of brand activism on consumer attitudes, intentions, and behavior is asymmetric, meaning that it is negative in case consumers disagree with the brand's stance and is without effect in case consumers agree. Jungblut and Johnen (2021) draw a similar conclusion by investigating the effect of brand activism on purchase intention, observing a positive effect on purchase intention among consumers who approve of the brand's stance on the sociopolitical issue while observing a negative effect on purchase intention among disapproving consumers, which was even higher than the positive effect. Therefore, since this study focuses on social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues, more precisely on advertisements that contain messages supporting the LGBTQIA+ community, it would be relevant to find out if consumers' level of agreement with the brand's stance on LGBTQIA+ is moderating the effect of brand activism on attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the brand. Therefore, in line with the balance theory and literature discussed, it is hypothesized:

H3: Consumers' level of agreement with the brand's stance on LGBTQIA+ will moderate the association between (in)authentic social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues with attitude toward the ad in a way that a positive association is stronger for approving participants than for disapproving participants.

H4: Consumers' level of agreement with the brand's stance on LGBTQIA+ will moderate the association between (in)authentic social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues with attitude toward the brand in a way that a positive association is stronger for approving participants than for disapproving participants.

2.2.4. *The moderating role of advertising skepticism*

Referring again to Friestad and Wright's (1994) persuasion knowledge theory, the way consumers perceive and react to persuasive messages is influenced by their knowledge of advertisers' motives and tactics. Regarding this persuasion knowledge, advertising skepticism is one component, which refers to consumers' negative attitudes and their tendency to distrust the claims and motives of advertisers (Mangleburg & Bristol, 1998; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998). When consumers are skeptical, they are more likely to recognize the underlying selling intent of advertisements and view persuasive messages as being less truthful, credible, authentic, and more biased. This results in less favorable responses to certain messages (Hardesty et al., 2002; Obermiller et al., 2005). Researchers have found that advertising skepticism plays a moderating role in understanding how consumers respond to different types of messages in advertising (Hardesty et al., 2002; Manuel et al., 2014; Obermiller et al., 2005). For instance, Obermiller et al. (2005) confirmed the moderating role by showing that highly skeptical individuals of advertising showed more negative responses to Aad and Ab compared with less skeptical consumers after being exposed to several TV commercials. Similarly, Manuel et al. (2014) investigated the moderating role of ad skepticism in the relationship between CRM ads and consumer responses and found participants with low skepticism showed a more positive response in Aad and Ab for a matching CRM message. However, the mismatching CRM message led to similar results for participants with low and high skepticism.

Therefore, in conjunction with brand activism in advertising, it can be assumed that consumers with high skepticism toward advertising are more likely to recognize the marketing tactics behind brand activism and identify a self-serving motive, which might lead

to a more negative attitude toward the ad and the brand. On the other side, consumers with low skepticism are more likely to believe the brand's genuine commitment to LGBTQIA+, which may result in a more positive attitude toward the ad and the brand. Therefore, in line with the persuasion knowledge theory and previous research, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5: Advertising skepticism will moderate the association between different types of social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues (absent, authentic, inauthentic) with attitude toward the ad in a way that a positive association is stronger for less skeptical participants than for more skeptical participants.

H6: Advertising skepticism will moderate the association between different types of social brand activism (absent, authentic, inauthentic) addressing LGBTQIA+ issues with attitude toward the brand in a way that a positive association is stronger for less skeptical participants than for more skeptical participants.

Figure 1.2

Conceptual model
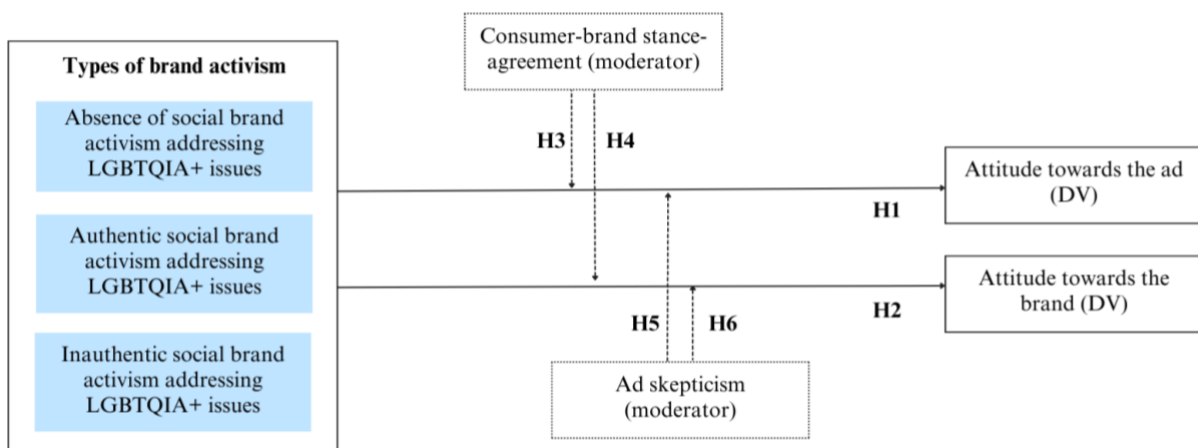
3. Method

3.1. Research approach

To answer the research question, a quantitative approach was chosen, as this method involves the collection and analysis of structured data that can generate numerical representations (Goertzen, 2017). Moreover, quantitative research is suitable for quantifying attitudes of the group under study with the goal of achieving generalizability by providing estimates of the population at large (Babbie, 2016). Since this paper seeks to explore consumers' attitudes toward brands taking a stance on LGBTQIA+ issues in their advertising, a quantitative approach seems more appropriate than using qualitative measures, as qualitative approaches can be influenced by social desirability bias, i.e., participants' tendency to report to the interviewer what they consider to be the most desirable attitudes (Bergen & Labonté, 2019). The impersonal nature of responses and the anonymous submission make quantitative research less vulnerable to bias, thereby facilitating the capture of participants' real attitudes regarding LGBTQIA+ activism (Larson, 2018).

Additionally, quantitative research is concerned with testing hypotheses to understand relationships between variables and allows for statistical comparison between groups (Wilson, 2019). Thus, a quantitative method is suitable for this research, as it enables to examine the relationship between different types of social brand activism and consumers' attitudes toward the ad and the brand and can provide conclusions about the differences among the three groups exposed to different brand activism types. This study takes a deductive approach, since it moves from developing specific expectations of hypotheses based on general assumptions to testing those hypotheses on a particular case to prove whether they are true or false (Babbie, 2016). The epistemology underlying this research is post-positivism, as it aims to scientifically investigate the phenomena under study but moves away from the purely objective view of positivism and recognizes that studies are unable to reveal absolute truth (Clark, 1998; Henderson, 2011).

3.2. Research design

3.2.1. Experimental survey design

An online experiment within a survey design was adopted to answer the research question. According to Babbie (2016), surveys are particularly suitable for investigating attitudes and orientations in larger populations. Additionally, surveys have proven to be a valuable tool in marketing research for investigating consumers attitudes toward a brand (Pauwels & Van

Ewijk, 2020). In turn, an experimental design can be useful for testing and proving causal relationships by manipulating and controlling the independent variable (Neumann, 2014). Experimental designs have therefore become increasingly popular for surveys exploring attitudes (Sniderman & Grob, 1996; Vargas et al., 2017).

Moreover, this study adopted a single-factor between-subject experimental design by randomly assigning all participants to one of three experimental conditions (type of social brand activism: absent vs. authentic vs. inauthentic), using random assignment in Qualtrics, as described by Charness et al. (2012) and Vargas et al. (2017). The first group, which served as control group viewed a neutral advertisement. The second group saw an LGBTQIA+-supportive ad with positive news coverage, while the third group encountered the same ad but with negative news accusing the brand of rainbow-washing. Table 3.1 visualizes the experimental design including three experimental conditions.

Table 3.1

Overview of experimental conditions

|	Condition	Stimulus material
1	Absence of social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues	Advertisement without brand activism
2	Authentic social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues	Advertisement with social brand activism + newspaper article praising the brand for its authentic LGBTQIA+ commitment
3	Inauthentic social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues	Advertisement with social brand activism + newspaper article accusing the brand of rainbow-washing

3.2.2. Stimulus material

Following the approach of several experimental researchers (e.g., Fayez et al., 2022; Jungblut & Johnen, 2021; Manuel et al., 2014), a fictitious brand was created for this study, as the use of real brands may lead to confounding effects due to previous associations with the brand, which in turn might affect the independent and dependent variables (Vargas et al., 2017). Therefore, two fictitious advertisements were designed to manipulate the independent variable, the different types of social brand activism (absence vs. authentic vs. inauthentic, see Figure 3.1). Inspired by MacKenzie et al. (1986), toothpaste was chosen as a product since it is an everyday product used by everyone regardless of gender, age, or nationality. The

fictitious toothpaste brand was called "Dentaden". Each ad was designed to contain the same image of the toothpaste, the same arrangement of text, and the same use of colors to eliminate differences in visual appeal between the two ads. The ad without brand activism did not contain any stance on a sociopolitical issue. Thus, the slogan "Smile with joy!" and the claim "For a long-lasting, radiant smile" with the hashtag #smilestrong were used. For the ad representing social brand activism, to create a link to LGBTQIA+, a rainbow was chosen as it is a symbol of LGBTQIA+ pride (Nelson, 2022), and other experimental scholars that investigated LGBTQIA+ activism (e.g., Champlin & Li, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2021) also included the rainbow in their visual stimuli. To create the LGBTQIA+ reference also in the form of words, the lettering was also adapted, namely as "Smile with pride!". Additionally, to show the brand's stance on the topic, the ad contained the statement "We stand with the LGBTQIA+ community and demand equal rights for all" and uses the hashtag #loveislove to underline the welcoming of sexual diversity.

Figure 2.1

Ad without social brand activism (left) and ad with social brand activism (right)
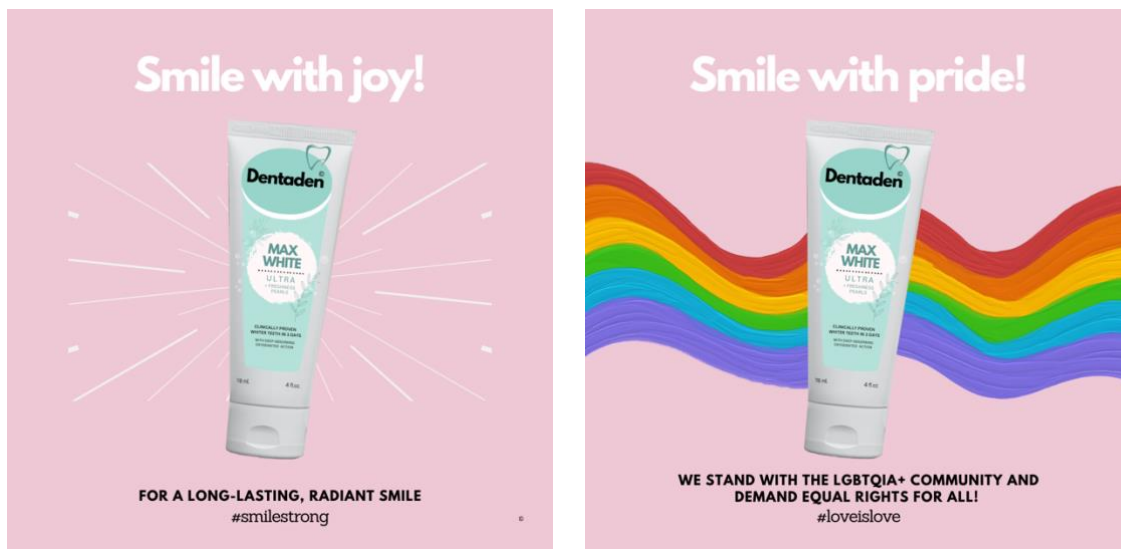
To manipulate authenticity, two fictional newspaper articles from "The daily news" were designed (see Figure 3.2), since it was assumed that an assessment of authenticity from an external source would appear more credible than from the brand itself. The news articles of Barker (2022) and Hardcastle (2021) served as inspiration for the creation of the texts. Both articles began with an introduction that many brands celebrate Pride each June by promoting

equality and visibility for LGBTQIA+ individuals but that brands must be authentic. The text for the inauthentic brand activism condition also mentioned and defined the issue of rainbow-washing.

The second part of the article was created in conjunction with the findings from previous literature on factors contributing to (in)authenticity (Alhouti et al., 2016; Lim et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Therefore, for the authentic brand activism condition, an alignment of the brand's purpose, values, messaging, and practice was created, following Vredenburg et al. (2020). For example, purpose was established by highlighting that the brand has already long been active in ending discrimination against LGBTQIA+ individuals. The brand's values were stated (e.g., solidarity, respect, and diversity) which aligned with the brand's purpose. Moreover, two examples for practice were given: First, it was stated that the brand donates 1% of its revenue to LGBTQIA+ organizations around the world, and second, that the brand has advanced LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the workplace. Moreover, as proposed by Alhouti et al. (2016), impact was highlighted by showing that the brand has already donated more than 500,000 euros and has received the "2022 Diversity & Inclusion Award". Besides, a public-serving motive of the brand was implied. Moreover, Lim et al.'s (2022) aspects of authenticity were considered: Continuity by emphasizing commitment since 2015, and credibility by the promise to donate 1% of the revenue and claiming that more than 500,000 euros have already been raised.

For the text in the inauthentic brand activism condition, the same factors were considered. For example, a mismatch between the brand's purpose, values, messaging, and practice was created by highlighting the brand's traditional values that contradict those of the LGBTQIA+ community and indicating a lack of purpose. Additionally, a mismatch between the brand's messaging and practice was created by stating that the brand also supports politicians who are against gay marriage (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Moreover, it was shown that the brand's activism has no impact by stating that only little money is reaching the initiative the brand promised to donate for. Besides, the text implied a self-serving motive by accusing the brand of rainbow-washing (Alhouti et al., 2016). Lastly, the brand's credibility was questioned by stating that the brand also supports politicians who are clearly against gay marriage and that despite the brand's promise to support a queer suicide prevention initiative, only little money is reaching the initiative (Lim et al., 2022).

Figure 3.2

Newspaper article highlighting the brand's authenticity (above) and inauthenticity (below)

THE DAILY NEWS

BY CLARA BARKER   Jun 09, 2022

Dentaden praised for LGBTQIA+ commitment

Many brands celebrate Pride each June by promoting equality and visibility for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, or plus (LGBTQIA+). However, it is important that brands are authentic and true to their campaigns and the support they offer.

Dentaden, for instance, has long been vocal and active in ending discrimination against LGBTQIA+ individuals. Standing behind values such as solidarity, respect, and diversity, they are committed to caring for the well-being of their LGBTQIA+ customers and employees. Since 2015, they have promised to donate 1% of their revenue to LGBTQIA+ organizations around the world, already raising more than 500,000 €. In addition, Dentaden was awarded the 2022 Diversity & Inclusion Award for advancing LGBTQIA+ inclusion by creating a workplace where all employees feel safe and are met with openness.

THE DAILY NEWS

BY CLARA BARKER   Jun 09, 2022

Dentaden accused of rainbow-washing

Many brands celebrate Pride each June by promoting equality and visibility for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, or plus (LGBTQIA+). However, some brands engage in rainbow washing, meaning that they use the rainbow colors to suggest to consumers that they support the LGBTQIA+ community without actually making an effort to do so.

Dentaden has recently come under criticism for their campaign, in which they clearly position themselves as supporters of LGBTQIA+. However, Dentaden is known for embodying more traditional values, such as tradition and stability. In fact, the brand also donates money to politicians who are clearly against gay marriage. What's more, despite the brand's promise to support a queer suicide prevention initiative, LGBTQIA+ representatives said that in reality, little money is reaching communities.

3.2.3. Pre-test

A pre-test was carried out to select the stimulus material and conduct a manipulation check. Manipulation checks are typically included in experiments to verify that participants correctly perceive, understand, and respond to the specific aspect of the independent variable (IV) of interest (Hoewe, 2017). Researchers such as Hauser et al. (2018) and Hoewe (2017) suggest conducting a separate pre-test to assess the efficacy of the manipulation, as this allows the researcher to modify the IV manipulation if the pre-test reveals any issues. Following the suggestions of Hoewe (2017), this study included a pre-study with different participants from the ones in the main experiment to test the manipulation of the IV "different types of social brand activism". A short online survey with a within-subject-design was created using Qualtrics, meaning that all participants were exposed to the same visual stimuli (Vargas et al., 2017). Participants were recruited using convenience sampling. In total, 23 participants (M_{age} = 24, SD_{age} = 2.73, 64.5% female) participated in the pre-test.

First, it was tested whether participants can perceive the difference between the absence and presence of social brand activism. Therefore, participants were initially exposed to the ad without brand activism. They were then asked to rate the level of sociopolitical engagement of the brand by indicating to what extent they agree or disagree that the brand takes a stand on LGBTQIA+ in the shown advertisement, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). Subsequently, participants were exposed to the ad with social brand activism. Again, they were asked to rate the sociopolitical engagement of the brand regarding LGBTQIA+ issues, using the same question as before.

To determine the potential differences in participants' ratings of the brand's sociopolitical engagement following the exposure to both advertisements, a paired-samples t-test was conducted. Given that for the pre-test a within-subjects design with a single group of participants was used, a paired-samples t-test was appropriate for analyzing the data (Pallant, 2020). Results show that there was a statistically significant increase in participants' ratings of the brand's sociopolitical engagement from after seeing the ad without brand activism (M_{absent} = 1.79; SD_{absent} = .86) to after seeing the ad with brand activism ($M_{present}$ = 4.79, $SD_{present}$ = 0.71), $t(18)$ = 13.87, $p < .001$ (two-tailed). The mean increase was 3.00, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 2.55 to 3.45. The eta squared statistic (η^2 = .91) indicated a large effect size (Pallant, 2020). Therefore, it can be concluded that the manipulation was successful.

Second, to verify if the participants had different perceptions of authenticity after reading the newspaper articles, they were shown three newspaper articles: One titled "Dentaden praised for LGBTQIA+ commitment", highlighting the brand's authentic commitment to the LGBTQIA+ community, one titled "Proud of Pride or only profit-driven?" and one titled "Dentaden accused of rainbow-washing" both pointing to the brand's lack of authenticity regarding LGBTQIA+ issues. Participants were asked to evaluate the perceived authenticity of the brand after each newspaper article using a 19-items scale containing five factors as proposed by Lim et al. (2022) on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly agree)* to 7 (*Strongly disagree*). Responses on each perceived authenticity item were summed and averaged for each of the three conditions. Thus, for the first newspaper, the scale obtained a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .97$ ($M = 2.59$; $SD = 1.01$), for the second newspaper article, the scale obtained a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .99$ ($M = 5.13$; $SD = 1.50$), and for the third newspaper article, the scale again obtained a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .96$ ($M = 5.86$; $SD = .79$). Hence, the scale for perceived authenticity can be considered as reliable (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

To assess the potential differences in participants' ratings of (in)authenticity after reading the three different newspapers (authentic vs. inauthentic01 vs. inauthentic 02), a one-way repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed. One-way repeated measures ANOVA was chosen, since the pre-test contained a single group of participants, who were measured three times on the same variable under three different conditions (i.e., three different newspaper articles; Pallant, 2020). There was a significant effect for newspaper article, Wilks' Lamba = .11, $F (2, 12) = 47,66$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .89$. The partial η^2 value shows that 89% of the variance in perceived authenticity is explained by the different newspaper articles. The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 3.2. Pairwise comparison using Bonferroni revealed that the score of perceived authenticity for newspaper article 1 (authentic) differs significantly from those of newspaper article 2 (inauthentic 01, $p < .001$) and of newspaper article 3 (inauthentic 02, $p < .001$). There was no significant difference between newspaper articles 2 and 3 ($p = .165$). These results indicate that participants rated the brand as more authentic after reading newspaper article 1 compared to after reading newspaper articles 2 and 3. Hence, it can be concluded that authenticity was successfully manipulated.

Table 3.2

Descriptive statistics for perceived authenticity with statistics test scores for the three different newspaper articles

Newspaper article	*N*	*M*	*SD*
1 (authentic)	14	2.35	.90
2 (inauthentic 01)	14	5.02	1.50
3 (inauthentic 02)	14	5.86	.79

Moreover, respondents were asked which of the two inauthentic newspaper articles helped them to answer the questions more clearly, providing two answer options: Article 2 ("Proud of Pride or only profit-driven?") or article 3 ("Dentaden accused of rainbow-washing"). Results showed that 66.67 % of the respondents stated that the newspaper article 3 was more helpful for them in answering the questions. Therefore, newspaper article 3 was chosen for the final study and article 2 was omitted (see Appendix A).

Lastly, respondents also were given the option to provide feedback or recommendations. Based on the feedback of the respondents, a minor spelling error in the text on the toothpaste was eliminated. Moreover, the scale to measure perceived authenticity was changed for the final study, as participants noted that it took them a long time to assess the 19 statements containing five factors and not all 19 items could be perfectly reflected in the text. Therefore, seven of the 23 participants were personally asked whether they considered the scale proposed by Alhouti et al. (2016), which contains six items, as more suitable. Five out of seven (71.43 %) participants affirmed this.

3.3. Data collection and sampling

As for the sampling strategy, given the limited time frame of the study, a non-probability sample was chosen. More precisely, the researcher opted for a mixture of convenience sampling and virtual snowball sampling. Convenience sampling is particularly useful, as it comes with low cost and quick implementation, which is why it has gained popularity in social science (Coppock & McClellan, 2019). Besides, virtual snowball sampling is also becoming increasingly popular to recruit participants, as it is used especially for master theses due to limited financial resources and time frames (Dusek et al., 2015). Virtual snowball sampling is particularly beneficial when social media is used as a tool to disseminate the

survey (Baltar & Brunet, 2012; Dusek et al., 2015). The link to the anonymous survey was shared via social media (i.e., Instagram) and instant messaging (i.e., Whatsapp and Telegram). Additionally, people who received the link were encouraged to distribute the survey to others in their personal network. The survey was accessible via all electronic devices, including smartphones, tablets, and laptops. The data collection started on the 18th of April and ended 5th of May 2023.

3.4. Sample

In total, the sample consisted of 215 respondents. However, not everyone finished the survey ($n = 41$). Hence, only 174 respondents remained in the final sample that was used for further analysis. Of the valid sample, 103 (59.2%) participants were female, 67 (38.5%) were male, 3 (1.7%) were non-binary or male/female transgender and one person (0.6%) preferred not to indicate their gender. The participants were between 18 and 61 years old and on average approximately 28 years old age ($M = 27.80$, $SD = 7.99$). Due to the researcher's German background and current residence in the Netherlands and given that convenience and virtual snowball sampling were employed to recruit the participants, it is not surprising that 55.7% of the participants were German, and 16.1% were Dutch. However, responses were collected from participants across Europe, Asia, South and North America, given that brand activism is a global phenomenon (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Accordingly, this study sought to achieve geographic diversity and gain cross-cultural insights by including participants from all over the world. Regarding the level of education, 1.1% of the participants reported having obtained less than a high school diploma, 17.8% obtained a high school degree or equivalent, 50.6% reported having a bachelor's degree, 26.4% obtained a master's degree or MBA and 2.3% reported having a PhD or equivalent. In terms of sexual orientation, 82.2% were heterosexual, 9.2% bisexual, 4.0% gay, 2.9% asexual, 2.9% pansexual, and 1.1% queer. Hence, the sample consisted of 31 (17.8%) LGBTQIA+ participants and 142 (81.6%) non-LGBTQIA+ participants. An overview of the sample characteristics of all participants can be found below in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3

Descriptive statistics of participants (N = 174)

Variable	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Age	Range: 18 – 61	$M = 27.80$	$SD = 7.99$
Gender	Male	67	38.5 %
	Female	103	59.2%
	Non-binary or male/female transgender	3	1.7%
	Prefer not to say	1	0.6%
Nationality	Germany	97	55.7%
	Netherlands	28	16.1%
	Italy	6	3.4%
	Chile	4	2.3%
	China	4	2.3%
	Greece	4	2.3%
	Others	31	17.9%
Education	Less than a high school degree	2	1.1%
	High school degree or equivalent	31	17.8%
	Bachelor's degree	88	50.6%
	Master's degree or MBA	46	26.4%
	PhD or equivalent	4	2.3%
	Other	1	0.6%
Sexual	Asexual	5	2.9%
Orientation	Bisexual	16	9.2%
	Gay	7	4.0%
	Heterosexual or straight	143	82.2%
	Lesbian	2	1.1%
	Pansexual	5	2.9%
	Queer	1	0.6%
	None of the above	1	0.6%
	Prefer not to say	1	0.6%

Note. One person who indicated "None of the above" for sexual orientation specified the following: "Will figure it out once I've started hormone replacement therapy and am more comfortable in my body."

  Since the respondents were randomly assigned to one of three conditions, condition 1 (absent) obtained 53 (30.5%) participants, condition 2 (authentic) 57 (32.8%) participants, and condition 3 (inauthentic) 64 (36.8%) participants. An overview of the sample characteristics of the participants in each group is provided in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4

Descriptive statistics of participants in each group (N = 174)

Variable	Value	Condition 1: absent (*N* = 53)	Condition 2: authentic (*N* = 57)	Condition 3: inauthentic (*N* = 64)
		Percentage		
Age		*M* = 28.68 *SD* = 8.30	*M* = 26.35 *SD* = 5.64	*M* = 28.36 *SD* = 9.34
Gender	Male	39.6%	36.8%	39.1%
	Female	58.5%	61.4%	57.8%
Sexual Orientation	LGBTQIA +	15.1%	10.5%	26.6%
	non-LGBTQIA+	83.0%	89.5%	73.4%
Nationality	German	54.7%	59.6%	53.1%
	Dutch	15.1%	14.0%	18.8%
Education	High school or equivalent	11.3%	21.1%	20.6%
	Bachelor's degree	52.8%	56.1%	43.8%
	Master's degree	30.2%	19.3%	29.7%

3.5. Procedure

An online survey was created using the online tool Qualtrics (see Appendix B). The survey began with an informed consent section introducing the topic, providing information about the purpose of the study, giving a definition of LGBTQIA+ to make sure all participants understand the topic, and presenting the researcher and the institution in which the research is being conducted. Moreover, in line with the ethical guidelines of the Netherlands code of conduct (KNAW et al., 2018), participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their data would be kept confidential and anonymous. Besides, they were ensured that the data would be stored securely and deleted after the completion of the research. Additionally, they were informed that if they did not wish to participate in the survey, or wished to discontinue the survey, it would not affect them. Finally, the researcher's contact information was provided in case participants had any questions. Only participants who confirmed their consent to participate in the survey were forwarded to the start of the questionnaire, which all participants did.

After giving consent, respondents reached the first section of the survey, which included demographic questions including age, gender, education, nationality, and sexual orientation. Demographic questions were placed at the beginning of the survey, as according to Teclaw et

al. (2012), this placement leads to a rise in the response rate for demographic questions while leaving the response rate for non-demographic questions unaffected. Furthermore, the purpose of placing the demographic questions at the beginning was to filter respondents who indicated they were 17 years old or younger due to ethical reasons (KNAW et al., 2018).

Participants were then randomly assigned to one of the three conditions and presented with the stimulus material. Therefore, using Qualtrics, a randomizer was built into the survey flow ensuring that all participants were evenly distributed among one of the three experimental conditions. Thus, 53 participants were randomly assigned to condition 1 (absent) (30.5%), 57 participants were assigned to condition 2 (authentic) (32.8%), and 64 participants were assigned to condition 3 (inauthentic) (36.8%) (see Table 3.4). As stated earlier, participants in condition 1 were exposed only to a neutral advertisement without brand activism, participants in conditions 2 and 3 were shown the same advertisement with social brand activism and a newspaper article either highlighting the brand's authenticity or inauthenticity (see Table 3.1). Only participants in conditions 2 and 3 were asked to indicate their agreement with the brand's stance on LGBTQIA+ in the advertisement. Moreover, participants in all groups were asked to rate the perceived authenticity of the brand, which served as a manipulation check.

After the stimulus material was presented, all participants were asked the same questions regarding their attitude toward the advertisement and their attitude toward the brand. Besides, participants' advertising skepticism was measured. Lastly, a manipulation check was put at the end to prevent the manipulation check itself from affecting the dependent variable (Hoewe, 2017). Thus, it was assessed whether the participants recognized the brand's stance on a sociopolitical issue in the advertisement. Using Qualtrics, statement randomization was applied for each measurement to avoid order effects (Strack, 1992).

3.6. Measurements

To measure the variables of interest for this study, pre-validated scales from previous research were employed, which will be discussed in the following section. For scales containing more than one item, the sum of the item scores was calculated and averaged using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27. This procedure allows the scale to be used for subsequent statistical analyses, as recommended by Pallant (2020). Besides, Cronbach's alpha was computed for each scale containing more than one item, to ensure that the scale has good reliability (Pallant, 2020). Table 3.2 gives an overview of the reliability of all measures used

in this study. In addition, the skewness and kurtosis of all continuous variables used in this study were calculated using SPSS, as this information is relevant for performing parametric tests described in the following chapter (Pallant, 2020). According to Pallant (2020), skewness provides information about the symmetry of the distribution, while kurtosis gives information about the shape of the distribution. A value of 0 for skewness and kurtosis stands for a perfectly normally distributed distribution, which, however, rarely occurs in the social sciences. Despite not using measures with subscales, a principal component analysis was conducted in SPSS for each scale containing multiple items to confirm that all items were appropriately assigned to one component only, as recommended by Pallant (2020). As this verification was successful for all scales, no additional adjustments were necessary.

3.6.1. *Independent variable*

This study included one manipulated independent variable, which consisted of three different types of social brand activism. An overview of the three conditions and the manipulations is provided in Table 3.1. Since the independent variable is categorical, it was recoded into two dummy variables, as this is necessary to perform bivariate correlation analyses (Field, 2017). The variable was recoded using indicator coding as proposed by Hayes and Montoya (2017), whereby condition 1 served as the reference group. For the first dummy variable condition, participants in condition 2 were coded with a 1, and participants not belonging to this condition (conditions 1 and 3) were assigned a 0. Similarly, for the second dummy variable condition, participants in condition 3 were coded with a 1, and participants not belonging to this condition (conditions 1 and 2) were assigned a 0.

3.6.2. *Dependent variables*

Attitude toward the ad. An adjusted version of the five-item scale proposed by Wells (1964) was used to measure attitude toward the ad. The five items include "This ad is very appealing to me", "I dislike this ad" (reverse coded), "I would probably skip this ad if I saw it again on TV" (reverse coded), "This ad makes me feel good", and "This ad has little interest for me" (reverse coded). However, for this study, the researcher decided to change the item "I would probably skip this ad if I saw it again on TV" to "I would probably skip this ad if I saw it again on Social Media", as the way advertising messages are delivered today has shifted more to mobile devices and channels such as social media rather than traditional channels such as television (Lee & Cho, 2020). Therefore, social media seemed more appropriate. Using a 7-point Likert scale with 1 (*Strongly disagree*) and 7 (*Strongly agree*), participants

were asked to choose how much they agree or disagree with each of the five statements. The three reversed items were first recoded and then all items were summed and averaged using SPSS, as these two steps are important before conducting statistical analysis (Pallant, 2020). The scale scored a Cronbach's alpha of α = .82. This value exceeds the threshold of .70 as suggested by Tavakol and Dennick (2011), which means that the scale can be considered reliable. Moreover, the scale had a mean of 3.72 (*SD* = 1.31). The skewness of attitude toward the ad was -.20 (*SD* = .19), which implies that the scores are clustered at the right-hand side of the graph (Pallant, 2020). Besides, the variable had a negative kurtosis of -.86 (*SD* = 0.37), indicating that the distribution has lighter tails and a flatter peak compared to a normal distribution (Field, 2017; Pallant, 2020).

Attitude toward the brand. To measure attitude toward the brand, the well-established scale for brand attitude from Spears and Singh (2004) was employed. The scale consists of five items, namely bad/good, appealing/unappealing, unpleasant/pleasant, unfavorable/favorable, and unlikeable/likable. Respondents were asked to indicate their opinion about the brand using a bipolar 7-point Likert scale. Similarly, responses to each item were summed and averaged. The scale demonstrated good reliability, as indicated by a Cronbach's alpha of α = .94 (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Moreover, the scale achieved a mean of 4.16 (*SD* = 1.52). The skewness was found to be -.32 (*SD* = .19), suggesting a clustering of scores at the right-hand side of the graph (Pallant, 2020). Additionally, the variable has a negative kurtosis of -.58 (*SD* = 0.37), indicating that the distribution has lighter tails and a flatter peak compared to a normal distribution (Field, 2017; Pallant, 2020).

3.6.3. *Moderating variables*

Consumer-brand stance-agreement. The proposed moderator consumer-brand stance-agreement was measured on a single-item scale, which was adapted from previous work (Atanga et al., 2022; Jungblut & Johnen, 2021). Respondents that were exposed to the ad with brand activism (Condition 2 and 3) were asked to rate "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement in the advertisement - supporting the LGBTQIA+ community and demanding equal rights for all?" using a 7-point Likert scale with 1 (*Strongly disagree*) and 7 (*Strongly agree*). Since no scores for condition 1 were measured, responses to this question were reported as missing values. Besides, the scale had a mean of 5.69 (*SD* = 1.75). The skewness of the variable was -1.61 (*SD* = 0.22). Additionally, the kurtosis was 1.67 (*SD* =

0.44), indicating that the distribution has heavier tails and a rather peaked distribution compared to a normal distribution (Field, 2017; Pallant, 2020).

Ad skepticism. The second proposed moderator ad skepticism was assessed using Obermiller and Spangenberg's (1998) scale consisting of nine items. Examples of the items are "Advertising's aim is to inform the consumer", "Advertising is generally truthful" or "We can depend on getting the truth in most advertising". Using a 7-point Likert scale with 1 (*Strongly disagree*) and 7 (*Strongly agree*), participants were asked to choose how much they agree or disagree with each of the nine statements. Responses on each ad skepticism item were summed and averaged. The scale obtained a Cronbach's alpha of α = .87 and can thus be considered as reliable (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Furthermore, the scale had a mean of 2.99 (*SD* = 1.04). The skewness of the ad skepticism was found to be .52 (*SD* = .18), suggesting that the scores are clustered at the left-hand side of the graph (Pallant, 2020). Additionally, the variable has a positive kurtosis of .30 (*SD* = 0.37), indicating that the distribution has heavier tails and a rather peaked distribution compared to a normal distribution (Field, 2017; Pallant, 2020).

3.6.4. *Demographics and control variables*

As stated earlier, several demographic variables were included, such as respondents' age, gender, sexual orientation, education, and nationality.

Age. For the variable age, respondents were asked to indicate their precise age in years by selecting the appropriate option from a dropdown format in Qualtrics. This continuous variable was included as control variable, since age might play a crucial role in the effect of brand activism, given that especially young people, namely Gen Z and Millennials, expect brands to position themselves on political issues (Cammarota et al., 2021; Cristobal et al., 2022). Moreover, insights from marketing suggest that Gen Z and Millennials, in particular, support brands that share their values (Amed et al., 2019) and are more likely to support same-sex marriage compared to older age cohorts (Parker et al., 2022).

Gender. The variable gender also served as control variable, as Schmidt et al. (2021) pointed out that women reacted more positively to brand activism than men in their study. For this categorical variable, a dummy variable was created in SPSS. Gender was coded with 0 = male (38.5%) and 1 = female (59.2%), other categories were recoded as missing values due to their low frequencies.

Sexual orientation. This measure was included as control variable to account for potential differences in the effect of social brand activism among sexual orientations. As found in previous research, non-LGBTQIA+ participants, demonstrated more positive attitudes after being exposed to pride advertisements, along with perceiving greater authenticity and expressing less skepticism compared to LGBTQIA+ participants (Champlin & Li, 2020; Lim et al., 2022). Sexual orientation was coded into a dummy variable with 0 = LGBTQIA+ participants for individuals identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, or asexual (17.8%) and 1 = non-LGBTQIA+ participants where all individuals who identified as heterosexual or straight were included (81.6%). One person who indicated both asexual and heterosexual was counted to the LGBTQIA+ participant group. Participants who preferred not to share their sexual orientation were counted as missing values.

3.6.5. *Manipulation check*

To verify that the manipulation worked as intended by the researcher, two measures were included that acted as manipulation checks (Hoewe, 2017).

Perceived authenticity. First, to measure the perceived authenticity of the brand after reading one of the two possible newspaper articles (authentic vs. inauthentic), the scale developed by Alhouti et al. (2016) was used as a foundation, since it has proven to be a well-established scale and was already employed by several researchers (e.g., Afzali & Kim, 2021; Chu et al., 2022; Nguyen et al.; 2023). While the original scale was developed for a company's CSR actions, the term was replaced with "Dentaden's LGBTQIA+ activism" to reflect the focus of this study. Moreover, for this study, two items from the original scale were excluded because they presupposed a pre-existing association with the brand. Given that this study chose a fictitious brand, these items were considered irrelevant and therefore omitted. Eventually, the scale consisted of six items, such as "Dentaden's LGBTQIA+ activism is genuine" or "Dentaden is standing up for what it believes in". Participants were asked to rate how much they agree or disagree with these statements on a 7-point Likert scale with 1 (*Strongly disagree*) and 7 (*Strongly agree*). Again, responses to each item were summed and averaged. The scale demonstrated good reliability, as shown by a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .96$ (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The mean of the scale was 3.78 ($SD = 1.69$). Additionally, a positive skewness of .21 was found ($SD = .19$), implying a clustering of scores at the left-hand side of the graph (Pallant, 2020). Besides, the variable had a negative

kurtosis of -1.10 ($SD = 0.37$), indicating that the distribution has lighter tails and a flatter peak compared to a normal distribution (Field, 2017; Pallant, 2020).

Sociopolitical engagement. To evaluate if the participants were able to recognize the level of sociopolitical engagement of the brand in the advertisement (absent vs. present), a single-item scale inspired by Schmidt et al. (2021) was used. The respondents were asked to evaluate how much they agree or disagree with the following statement: "Dentaden takes a stand on LGBTQIA+ in this advertisement (e.g., by supporting the LGBTQIA+ community)" using a 7-point Likert scale with 1 (*Strongly disagree*) and 7 (*Strongly agree*). The scale obtained a mean of 4.27 ($SD = 2.00$). Moreover, a negative skewness of -.22 ($SD = .19$) and a negative kurtosis of -1.40 ($SD = 0.37$) were found for the variable.

Table 1.2

Overview of measurements and reliability

Measure	N	n items	Cronbach's Alpha	M	SD	Min.	Max.
Consumer-brand stance-agreement	121	1	/	5.69	1.75	1.00	7.00
Ad skepticism	174	9	.87	2.99	1.04	1.00	6.11
Attitude toward the ad	173	5	.82	3.72	1.31	1.00	6.40
Attitude toward the brand	171	5	.94	4.16	1.52	1.00	7.00
Perceived authenticity	173	6	.96	3.78	1.69	1.00	7.00
Sociopolitical engagement	173	1	/	4.27	2.00	1.00	7.00

<center>**4. Results**</center>

4.1. Manipulation check

Similar to the pre-test, it was first assessed if the manipulations of the three different types of social brand activism were detected correctly by the participants in the final survey. As stated above, two measures were included as manipulation checks: perceived authenticity and sociopolitical engagement. Since the independent variable in this study contained three groups and each of the manipulation check variables is continuous, a one-way ANOVA seems appropriate to determine differences regarding the mean for perceived authenticity and sociopolitical engagement between the three groups (Pallant, 2020). Hence, two one-way ANOVAs were performed.

First, the variable "Group" including the three different types of brand activism was set as fixed factor and "perceived authenticity" as dependent variable. The assumption of equality of variance was not violated, Levene's $F (2,170) = 1.13$, $p = .326$. The first one-way ANOVA revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in mean perceived authenticity between the three groups ($F (2, 170) = 177.03$, $p < .001$). The effect size, partial η^2, was .68, meaning that 68% of the variance in perceived authenticity is explained by the different types of brand activism. Post hoc testing using the Tukey's HSD Test for multiple comparisons revealed significant differences between different types of brand activism with authentic brand activism being perceived as more authentic ($M_{authentic} = 5.56$, $SD_{authentic} = 1.14$, $p < .001$) than the absent brand activism group ($M_{absent} = 3.72$, $SD_{absent} = .91$, $p < .001$) and the inauthentic brand activism ($M_{inauthentic} = 2.24$, $SD_{inauthentic} = .85$, $p < .001$). These findings indicate that the authentic brand activism condition was perceived as more authentic, compared to the control group (absent). Similarly, the inauthentic brand activism was perceived as less authentic compared to the other two conditions. Thus, the manipulation of authenticity was successful.

For the second ANOVA, again the variable "Group" was set as fixed factor and "sociopolitical engagement" as dependent variable. The assumption of equal variance was violated (Levene's $F (2,170) = 14.24$, $p < .001$). Therefore, to account for the unequal variances, the Welch F-ratio is reported (Pallant, 2020). There was a statistically significant difference in mean sociopolitical engagement between the three groups ($F_{Welch} (2, 112) = 66.21$, $p < .001$). The effect size, partial η^2, was .38, indicating that 38% of the variance in sociopolitical engagement is explained by the different types of brand activism. For post hoc testing, the Games Howell-test was used because it is commonly used when the assumption

of equal variance is violated (Field, 2017). Hence, post hoc testing using Games-Howell-test for multiple comparisons revealed significant differences between the different types of brand activism with absent brand activism being perceived as less sociopolitical active (M_{absent}= 2.71, SD_{absent} = 1.47, p <.001) than the authentic brand activism group ($M_{authentic}$ = 5.81, $SD_{authentic}$ = 1.33, p <.001) and the inauthentic brand activism group ($M_{inauthentic}$ = 4.17, $SD_{inauthentic}$ = 1.84, p <.001). These findings show that participants in condition 1, exposed to the ad without brand activism, tended to disagree that the brand takes a stand on LGBTQIA+ in this advertisement, whereas participants in condition 2 and 3, exposed to the ad with brand activism, tended to agree that the brand takes a stand on LGBTQIA+. Therefore, the manipulation can be considered successful. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the results of the manipulation check.

Table 4.1

One-way ANOVA comparing perceived authenticity and sociopolitical engagement across three types of social brand activism

Measure	C1: Absent			C2: Authentic			C3: Inauthentic			F	η^2
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD	n	M	SD		
Perceived authenticity	52	3.72	.91	57	5.56	1.14	64	2.24	.85	177.03***	.68
Sociopolitical engagement	52	2.71	1.47	57	5.81	1.33	64	4.17	1.84	66.21***	.38

Note. *** $p < .001$.

4.2. Exploratory analyses

To gain first insights into the strength and direction of the relationships between the variables used in this study, a correlation analysis was conducted in SPSS (see Table 4.1; Pallant, 2020). To ensure that the assumptions of normality and linearity were not violated, initial analyses, such as histograms, were performed, following the recommendations of Field (2017). Besides, since only continuous or dichotomous variables can be used for the analysis (Pallant, 2020), dummy variables for the different types of brand activism, gender, and sexual orientation were used. To interpret the strength of the correlation, the guidelines of Cohen (1988) were followed.

The results showed that there was a significant, moderate positive correlation between participants assigned to condition 2 and Aad *(r = .36, p < .001)*, as well as Ab *(r = .51, p < .001)*. This suggests that participants in condition 2 have a more positive attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the brand than participants in conditions 1 and 3. Similarly, the results show a significant, weak negative correlation between respondents assigned to condition 3 and ad skepticism *(r = -.18, p < .05)*, a moderate negative correlation between Aad *(r = -.33, p < .001)*, and a strong negative correlation between condition 3 and Ab *(r = -.68, p < .001)*. These results suggest that for participants in condition 3, the score of ad skepticism decreases, meaning they were slightly more skeptical toward advertising compared to participants in conditions 1 and 2. Moreover, participants in condition 3 had a more negative attitude toward the ad and the brand compared to participants in conditions 1 and 2.

Besides, for the moderator consumer-brand stance-agreement, significant, weak positive correlations were found with Aad *(r = .28, p < .01)*, Ab *(r = .22, p < .05)*, and gender *(r = .18, p < .05)*. Therefore, it can be assumed that the more participants agreed with the brand's stance in the advertisement, the more positive Aad and Ab. Moreover, it indicates that women in the sample are slightly more likely to agree with the brand's stance on LGBTQIA+ rights than men within the sample. Furthermore, for the moderator ad skepticism, significant, weak positive correlations were found with Aad *(r = .22, p < .01)* and Ab *(r = .30 p < .001)*. Thus, it can be concluded that as the score for ad skepticism increases, which means that the participants are less skeptical of advertising, the more positive Aad and Ab.

For the control variable age, a significant, weak negative correlation was found with Ab *(r = -.17, p < .05)*. This implies that the younger the participants within the sample, the more positive Ab. For the control variable gender, results showed a significant, weak positive correlation with Aad *(r = .25 p < .05)*, suggesting that women may have a slightly more positive Aad than men. Besides, results showed that there is a significant, weak positive correlation between the control variable sexual orientation and Aad *(r = .20, p < .01)*. Therefore, it can be assumed that participants who identify as non-LGBTQIA+ have a slightly more positive Aad.

Table 4.1

Pearson's correlations between measures (N = 174)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Consumer-brand stance-agreement (N = 121)	1										
2. Ad skepticism	-.04	1									
3. Attitude toward the ad	.28**	.22**	1								
4. Attitude toward the brand	.22*	.30***	.69***	1							
5. Perceived authenticity	.19*	.23**	.54***	.80***	1						
6. Sociopolitical engagement	.10	.03	.26***	.30***	.46***	1					
7. Age	-.13	.05	-.02	-.17*	-.11	.05	1				
8. Gender [a]	.18*	-.03	.25**	.14	.04	-.10	-.18*	1			
9. Sexual Orientation [b]	.01	-.06	-.01	.20**	.20**	.13	-.16*	-.04	1		
10. Condition 2 [c]	.04	.02	.36***	.51***	.74***	.54***	-.13	.03	.14	1	
11. Condition 3 [d]	-.04	-.18*	-.33***	-.68***	-.70***	-.04	.06	-.01	-.17*	-.53***	1

Note. * Correlation is significant at the $p < .05$ level (2-tailed). ** Correlation is significant at the $p < .01$ level (2-tailed). *** Correlation is significant at the $p < .001$ level (2-tailed). [a] 0 = men and 1 = women. [b] 0 = LGBTQIA+ participants and 1 = non-LGBTQIA+ participants. [c] 0 = participants in condition 1 and 3 and 1 = participants in condition 2. [d] 0 = participants in condition 1 and 2 and 1 = participants in condition 3

4.3. Hypothesis testing

4.3.1. Effects of different types of brand activism on Aad

First, H1 was tested, which posits that exposure to an advertisement with authentic social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues will result in a more positive attitude toward the ad compared to exposure to an advertisement without social brand activism or with inauthentic social brand activism. To examine this hypothesis, it is suitable to perform a one-way between-subjects analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), as this technique is often used to evaluate the impact of experimental manipulations while controlling for other variables (Pallant, 2020). Moreover, since the independent variable in this study is categorical with three conditions and the dependent is continuous, an ANCOVA test is particularly suitable for analyzing such a relationship (Pallant, 2020). In addition, ANCOVA has been used by other researchers in experimental studies (e.g., Atanga et al., 2022; Champlin & Li, 2020).

Prior to conducting the analysis, several assumptions were tested, as recommended by Field (2017) and Pallant (2020). First, it was assessed that the three control variables age, gender, and sexual orientation are not strongly correlated with each other, which is not the case (see Table 4.1). Second, it was checked whether the covariates are correlated with the DV, but not strongly correlated. As can be seen from Table 4.1, a significant, weak positive correlation was found between Aad and gender ($r = .25$), hence this requirement is met. However, there was no significant correlation between Aad and the control variables age and sexual orientation. Since, according to Streiner (2016), the inclusion of covariates unrelated to the DV only leads to a reduction in degrees of freedom (dfs) without compensating for the reduction in error, the control variables age and sexual orientation were excluded from the analysis. Moreover, it was assessed whether there is a linear relationship between the DV and gender for each level of the IV by creating scatterplots. Lastly, the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes was not violated for Aad and gender.

Hence, a one-way ANCOVA was conducted to determine whether there is a difference between the three different types of social brand activism (absent vs. authentic vs. inauthentic) on the dependent variable Aad while controlling for gender (Table 4.2). Thus, the continuous variable Aad was entered as dependent variable, the categorical variable "group" for the three types of brand activism as fixed factor, and the control variable gender as covariate. The assumption of equality of variance was not violated, Levene's $F_{(2,166)} = 1.84$, $p = .161$. The ANCOVA results suggest a significant difference in Aad scores among the three groups $F_{(2, 165)} = 15.71$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .16$. The partial η^2 value shows that 16% of the variance in the Aad is explained by the different types of brand activism when

controlling for gender. Post hoc comparison using the Bonferroni criterium indicated that the adjusted mean score for Aad for the authentic brand activism condition was significantly higher ($M_{authentic} = 4.37$, $SE_{authentic} = .16$) compared to the absent brand activism condition ($M_{absent} = 3.68$, $SE_{absent} = .16$, $p = .007$) and the inauthentic brand activism condition ($M_{inauthentic} = 3.16$, $SE_{inauthentic} = .15$, $p < .001$). There was no significant difference between the absent and inauthentic conditions ($p = .062$). Therefore, it can be assumed that exposure to an advertisement with authentic social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues results in a more positive attitude toward the ad compared to the absence of activism or inauthentic social brand activism. Thus, H1 can be accepted.

4.3.2. Effects of different types of brand activism on Ab

The same analysis was conducted to test H2, which posits that exposure to an advertisement with authentic social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues will result in a more positive attitude toward the brand compared to exposure to an advertisement without social brand activism or with inauthentic social brand activism. Again, preliminary checks were conducted to ensure that there was no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homogeneity of regression slopes. While there was a weak significant correlation between the DV attitude toward the brand (Ab) and the control variables age and sexual orientation, there was no significant correlation with gender (see Table 4.1). Hence, the variables age and sexual orientation were included as covariates for the analysis, while gender was omitted (Streiner, 2016).

Therefore, to perform the ANCOVA, the continuous variable Ab was entered as dependent variable, the categorical variable "group" for the three types of brand activism as fixed factor, and the control variables age and sexual orientation as covariates (see Table 4.2). The assumption of equal variance was not violated, Levene's $F(2,164) = .08$, $p = .923$. The ANCOVA indicates a significant difference in Ab scores among the three groups $F(2, 162) = 78.41$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .49$. The partial η^2 value shows that 49% of the variance in the Ab is explained by the different type of brand activism when controlling for age and sexual orientation. Post hoc comparison using the Bonferroni criterium indicated that the adjusted mean score for attitude toward the brand for the authentic brand activism condition was significantly higher ($M_{authentic} = 5.21$, $SE_{authentic} = .15$) than for the absent brand activism condition ($M_{absent} = 4.62$, $SE_{absent} = .15$, $p = .017$) and the inauthentic brand activism condition ($M_{inauthentic} = 2.79$, $SE_{inauthentic} = .14$, $p < .001$). There was also a significant difference between

the absent and inauthentic condition ($p < .001$). Therefore, it can be assumed that exposure to an advertisement with authentic social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues results in a more positive attitude toward the brand compared to the absence of activism or inauthentic social brand activism. Thus, H2 can be accepted. Table 4.2 and Figure 4.1 provide an overview of the adjusted means for each condition.

Table 4.2

Differences between three different types of social brand activism in Aad and Ab

Measure	C1: Absent			C2: Authentic			C3: Inauthentic			F	η^2
	n	M	SE	n	M	SE	n	M	SE		
Attitude toward the ad [a]	52	3.66	.16	56	4.37	.16	61	3.16	.15	15.71[***]	.16
Attitude toward the brand [b]	51	4.62	.15	56	5.21	.15	60	2.79	.14	78.41[***]	.49

Note. [***] $p < .001$. The table presents the adjusted mean scores for Aad and Ab per condition. [a] The model was controlled for participants' gender. [b] The model was controlled for participants' age and sexual orientation.

Figure 4.1

Estimated marginal Mean comparison Aad and Ab by different types of social brand activism
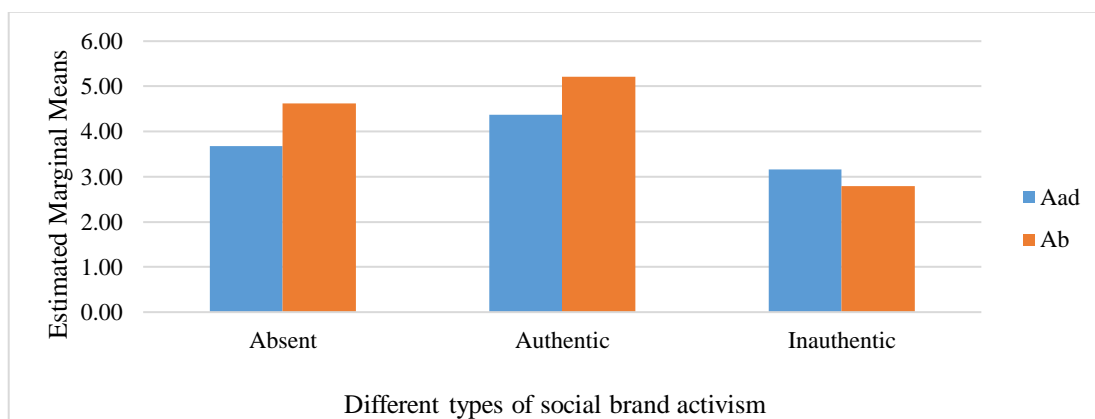
Note. The figure presents the adjusted mean scores for Aad and Ab per condition on a scale ranging from 0 to 6, where 0 represents a negative attitude toward Aad and Ab, and 6 represents a positive attitude.

4.3.3. Moderation effect of consumer-brand stance-agreement

To test H3, which posits that consumer-brand stance-agreement will moderate the association between (in)authentic social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues with attitude toward the ad in a way that a positive association is stronger for approving participants than for disapproving participants, a moderation analysis using PROCESS Version 4.2 (Hayes, 2017; Model 1) was conducted. Since consumer-brand stance-agreement was only measured for conditions 2 and 3, a dummy variable called "Cond2" was entered as independent variable (X) with 1 = for participants being assigned to condition 2 and 0 = for participants being assigned to condition 3. The continuous variable consumer-brand stance agreement was entered as the moderator variable (W), Aad as the outcome variable (Y), and gender as covariate. Gender is included as the only covariate, as it showed a significant correlation with Aad, unlike sexual orientation and age (Streiner, 2016). The results show that the overall model was statistically significant, $R^2 = .33$, $F (4, 112) = 15.39$, $p < .001$, indicating that 33% of the variance in the DV can be explained by the predictors. Table 4.3 provides an overview of the results. There was no significant interaction effect found for condition 2 × consumer-brand stance-agreement ($b = .24$, $SE = .14$, $t (1.67)$, $p = .098$, 95% CI [-.05, .52]). Therefore, H3 must be rejected.

For testing H4, the same analysis was conducted with the dummy variable for Condition 2 as independent variable (X), consumer-brand stance-agreement as moderator variable (W), attitude toward the brand (Ab) as outcome variable (Y), and age and sexual orientation as covariates. Those two covariates were included due to their significant correlation with Ab, while gender was omitted (Streiner, 2016). The results show that the overall model was statistically significant, $R^2 = .67$, $F (5, 113) = 49.44$, $p < .001$, indicating that 67% of the variance in the DV can be explained by the predictors. Table 4.3 provides an overview of the results. Moreover, a significant interaction effect was found for a condition 2 × consumer-brand stance- agreement interaction on attitude toward the brand ($b = 0.34$, $SE = .16$, $t (2.11)$, p = .037, 95% CI [.02, .66]). This indicates that the relationship between authentic and inauthentic brand activism and attitude toward the brand is moderated by consumer-brand stance-agreement. To gain more insights, the Johnson-Neyman point was interpreted, which indicates the exact value at which the interaction effect between the independent variable and the moderator variable becomes statistically significant (Hayes & Montoya, 2017). Hence, the impact of (in)authentic brand activism was significant for values of consumer-brand stance-agreement above the Johnson-Neyman point of -3.19. The variable was mean-centered

($M = 5.69$), implying that when agreeing with at least 2.50 on a scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*) with the brand's stance, (in)authentic brand activism and Ab are significantly related ($b = 1.23$, $SE = .62$, t (1.98), $p = .050$, 95% CI [.00, 2.47]). Moreover, the results suggest that as the score for agreement increases, the relationship between (in)authentic brand activism and Ab becomes more positive with the highest agreement of 1.31 above the mean ($b = 2.77$, $SE = .22$, t (12.39), $p < .001$, 95% CI [2.33, 3.21]). Therefore, it can be concluded that for approving participants, a positive association between authentic or inauthentic social brand activism is stronger than for disapproving participants. Hence, H4 can be accepted.

Table 2.3

Moderation analysis: Authentic and inauthentic brand activism and consumer-brand stance-agreement

	Attitude toward the ad ($N = 117$)				Attitude toward the brand ($N = 119$)			
	b	$SE\ B$	t	p	b	$SE\ B$	t	p
Constant	2.85 [2.42, 3.28]	.22	13.12	.000	3.39 [2.40, 4.38]	.50	6.78	.000
Cond2 [a]	1.19 [.76, 1.61]	.21	5.57	.000	2.32 [1.93, 2.71]	.20	11.80	.000
Agree (centered)	.08 [-.12, 27]	.10	.768	.444	.02 [-.13, .17]	.08	.26	.794
Cond2 x Agree	.24 [-.05, 52]	.14	1.67	.098	.34 [.02, .66]	.16	2.11	.037
Gender [b]	.53 [.07, .99]	.23	2.28	.025				
Sex. orient. [c]					-.03 [-.06, -.00]	.01	-2.20	.030
Age					.34 [-.20, .89]	.26	1.24	.218
R^2	.33				.67			

Note. 95% Confidence intervals are shown in the square brackets. [a] 0 = participants in condition 3 and 1 = participants in condition 2. [b] 0 = men and 1 = women. [c] 0 = LGBTQIA+ participants and 1 = non-LGBTQIA+ participants.

4.3.4. Moderation effect of ad skepticism

Regarding H5, again a moderation analysis using PROCESS (Hayes, 2017; Model 1) was conducted to test if ad skepticism moderates the association between different types of social

brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues (absent, authentic, inauthentic) and Aad. Since this variable was measured for all three conditions, the categorical variable "group" was entered as the IV (X) and specified as multicategorical using indicator coding. Ad skepticism was entered as moderator variable (W), Aad as outcome variable (Y), and gender as covariate. The results show that the overall model was statistically significant, $R^2 = .25$, $F (6, 162) = 8.94$, $p = .000$, indicating that 25% of the variance in the DV can be explained by the predictors. Table 4.4 provides an overview of the results. There was no significant interaction effect by an X1 × ad skepticism interaction on Aad ($b = -.01$, $SE = .22$ $t (-.07)$, $p =. 948$, 95% CI [-.45, .42]). Similarly, no significant interaction effect was found by an X2 × ad skepticism interaction on Aad ($b = -.01$, $SE = .22$ $t (-.04)$, $p =.972$, 95% CI [-.44, .43]). Therefore, H5 needs to be rejected.

Table 3.4

Moderation analysis: Types of brand activism and ad skepticism

	Attitude toward the ad (N = 169)				Attitude toward the brand (N = 170)			
	b	SE B	t	p	b	SE B	t	p
Constant	3.22 [2.85, 3.58]	.18	17.30	.000	4.83 [4.05, 5.62]	.39	12.23	.000
X1 [a]	.76 [.31, 1.20]	.22	3.37	.001	.75 [.31, 1.20]	.23	3.32	.001
X2 [b]	-.39 [-.85, .07]	.23	-1.67	.096	-1.57 [-2.00, -1.14]	.22	-7.16	.000
SKEP (centered)	.25 [-.06, .57]	.16	1.60	.111	.55 [.23, .87]	.16	3.41	.001
X1 x SKEP	-.01 [-.45, .42]	.22	-.07	.948	-.31 [.02, .66]	.25	-1.22	.224
X2 x SKEP	-.01 [-.44, .43]	.22	-.04	.972	-.46 [-.88, -.04]	.21	-2.18	.031
Gender [c]	.65 [.30, 1.01]	.18	3.60	.000				
Sex. orient. [d]					.38 [-.01, .76]	.20	1.93	.056
Age					-.03 [-.05, -.01]	.01	-2.61	.010
R^2	.25				.57			

Note. 95% Confidence intervals are shown in the square brackets. [a] 0 = participants in condition 1 and 3 and 1 = participants in condition 2. [b] 0 = participants in condition 1 and 2 and 1 = participants in condition 3. [c] 0 = men and 1 = women. [d] 0 = LGBTQIA+ participants and 1 = non-LGBTQIA+ participants.

For testing H6, the same analysis was used to test if ad skepticism will moderate the association between different types of social and Ab. Again, the variable "group" was entered as (X) and specified as multicategorical, ad skepticism as moderator variable (W), Ab as outcome variable (Y), and age and sexual orientation as covariates. The results show that the overall model was statistically significant, $R^2 = .57$, $F (7, 162) = 32.82$, $p = .000$, indicating that 57% of the variance in the DV can be explained by the predictors. All results can be seen in Table 4.4. No significant interaction effect was found by an X1 × ad skepticism interaction on attitude toward the brand ($b = -.31$, $SE = .25$, $t (-1.22)$, $p = .224$, 95% CI [.02, .66]). However, a significant interaction effect was found by an X2 × ad skepticism interaction on attitude toward the brand ($b = -.46$, $SE = .21$, $t (-2.18)$, $p = .031$, 95% CI [-.88, -.04]). This implies that the relationship between inauthentic brand activism and attitude toward the brand is moderated by advertising skepticism, however, this is not the case for the absent brand activism group, nor the authentic brand activism group. Therefore, H6 must be rejected. An overview of the accepted and rejected hypotheses is provided in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5

Overview of accepted and rejected hypotheses

	Hypothesis	Accepted?
H1	Exposure to an advertisement with authentic social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues will result in a more positive attitude toward the ad compared to exposure to an advertisement without social brand activism or with inauthentic social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues.	Yes
H2	Exposure to an advertisement with authentic social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues will result in a more positive attitude toward the brand compared to exposure to an advertisement without social brand activism or with inauthentic social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues.	Yes
H3	Consumers' level of agreement with the brand's stance on LGBTQIA+ will moderate the association between (in)authentic social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues with attitude toward the ad in a way that a positive association is stronger for approving participants than for disapproving participants.	No
H4	Consumers' level of agreement with the brand's stance on LGBTQIA+ will moderate the association between (in)authentic social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues with attitude toward the brand in a way that a positive association is stronger for approving participants than for disapproving participants.	Yes
H5	Advertising skepticism will moderate the association between different types of social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues (absent, authentic, inauthentic) with attitude toward the ad in a way that a positive association is stronger for less skeptical participants than for more skeptical participants.	No
H6	Advertising skepticism will moderate the association between different types of social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues (absent, authentic, inauthentic) with attitude toward the brand in a way that a positive association is stronger for less skeptical participants than for more skeptical participants.	No

5. Discussion

5.1. Summary of findings

This study set out to answer the research question, *to what extent does exposure to different types of social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues in advertising affect the consumers' attitudes?* In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in brands speaking out on sociopolitical issues like LGBTQIA+ issues in their ad campaigns. In doing so, however, brands have been walking a fine line. While they aim to cater to the expectations of consumers, especially young consumers, who highly value sociopolitical engagement, they also run the risk of alienating customers who disagree with the brand's stance or face accusations of rainbow-washing, if their engagement is perceived as inauthentic (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2022). Therefore, the results of this study are particularly relevant for brands seeking an effective strategy to express themselves on LGBTQIA+ issues in advertising while minimizing the aforementioned risks. In this regard, this study analyzed whether three different types of social brand activism (absent vs. authentic vs. inauthentic) influence the consumers' attitudes toward the ad and the brand. Additionally, the moderating roles of consumer-brand stance-agreement and ad skepticism were explored.

Hence, in light of previous findings on brand activism, authenticity, and advertising-related theories, six hypotheses were formulated and tested using an experimental survey design. Data analysis with IBM SPSS revealed that the scores for attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the brand differed significantly between the three groups. As expected, participants who were exposed to authentic social brand activism rated both the ad and the brand more positive compared to participants who saw an advertisement without brand activism and those who were exposed to inauthentic social brand activism. While adjusted means were lowest for inauthentic social brand activism, interestingly, the difference between absent and inauthentic brand activism was significant only for attitude toward the brand, but not for attitude toward the ad. Besides, by comparing the adjusted mean scores for the two outcome variables Aad and Ab, a distinct pattern emerged. In the absent and authentic groups, the brand was rated more positively than the advertisement. Contrarily, in the inauthentic group, the brand received less favorable ratings than the advertisement.

Furthermore, consumer-brand stance-agreement was found to have no significant moderating effect on the association between (in)authentic social brand activism and attitude toward the ad. However, this moderating effect was significant for the outcome variable

attitude toward the brand. Results showed that the positive association between (in)authentic social brand activism and attitude toward the brand was stronger among participants who agreed with the brand's stance than among those who disagreed.

Lastly, advertising skepticism had no significant moderating effect on the association between the different types of social brand activism and attitude toward the ad, as well as for attitude toward the brand. Interestingly, the results showed that the interaction effect was only significant on the association between inauthentic brand activism and Ab, but not for the other two groups.

5.2. Theoretical implications

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the effects of brand activism on consumers' attitudes. To begin with, the results validate previous research highlighting the crucial role of authenticity in brand activism for generating positive consumer responses (Ciszek & Lim, 2021; Mirzaei et al., 2022; Schmidt et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Moreover, the study demonstrates that a brand that engages in authentic social brand activism is viewed more positively in terms of attitude toward the ad and the brand compared to a brand that does not position itself on an issue, supporting the findings of Schmidt et al. (2021). Besides, the findings also confirm the assumption that inauthentic brand activism leads to unfavorable brand associations and consequently a more negative impact compared to authentic brand activism (Holt, 2002; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Moreover, the results revealed that the impact on Ab, whether positive or negative was stronger compared to Aad. One reason for this outcome might be consumers' tendency to humanize brands and form emotional bonds (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017). Incorporating human values in advertising (e.g., LGBTQIA+ support) can result in brand personification by associating the brand with human-like characteristics (Cohen, 2013; Chen 2017). Consequently, it elucidates why the brand is more strongly rewarded for authentic brand activism and more strongly punished for inauthentic brand activism, compared to the ad.

Likewise, this phenomenon can explain why consumer-brand stance-agreement was only found to have a significant moderating effect on Ab, but not on Aad. This suggests that consumers' agreement with a brand's position on LGBTQIA+ plays a more important role in shaping their overall attitude toward the brand than their response to a particular advertisement. Besides, the findings indicate that the more participants agreed with the brand's stance, the stronger the positive association between (in)authentic brand activism and

Ab. While this result is in line with the balance theory and the findings of Bhagwat and colleagues (2020) regarding the positive impact in case of agreement, it also contradicts recent research that suggests minimal effects when consumers agree with the brand's stance and negative effects when they disagree (Jungblut & Johnen, 2021; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). One possible explanation for this contradiction is the nuanced nature of consumer responses to brand activism. While this study focused specifically on LGBTQIA+ issues, the previous studies have primarily examined sociopolitical issues regarding immigration, refugee ban, border control, gun control, or abortion. Therefore, the effects of consumer-brand stance-agreement may differ depending on the specific issue or the broader sociocultural context. Indeed, the findings indicate that support for LGBTQIA+ issues is less controversial than assumed, as only 14 participants (11.6%) disagreed with the brand's stance, 6 participants (5%) neither agreed nor disagreed and 101 participants (83.5%) agreed. The decreasing controversy surrounding LGBTQIA+ issues and the prevailing approval observed in this study are consistent with the broader societal shifts toward greater inclusivity and acceptance of LGBTQIA+, including the widespread legalization of same-sex marriage, increased acceptance of LGBTQIA+ culture in mass media, and the growing representation of diverse sexual orientations in advertising (Champling & Li, 2020).

Interestingly, the study found that advertising skepticism only played a moderating role in the association between inauthentic brand activism and Ab, contradicting the theoretical framework and previous studies outlined in this research (Hardesty et al., 2002; Manuel et al., 2014; Obermiller et al., 2005). However, placing the measurement at the end of the study introduces the potential for posttreatment bias, as the prior exposure to the stimuli might have influenced participants' scores and mitigated the moderating effect of ad skepticism (Montgomery et al., 2018). This bias may be reflected in the slightly higher ad skepticism among participants exposed to inauthentic activism, as indicated by the weak negative correlation. Indeed, inauthenticity was found to foster consumer skepticism (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). Besides, participants' pre-existing attitudes regarding LGBTQIA+ issues may have equally influenced their response, as LGBTQIA+ advocates might have maintained a positive attitude toward the brand regardless of their ad skepticism.

5.3. Limitations and future research

Like any other research, this study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sampling strategy employed in this study raises concerns about the

generalizability of the findings. The study utilized a global distribution, which may limit the applicability of the results to specific regions or cultures. Given that the controversy surrounding a sociopolitical issue can vary among cultural and historical contexts (Bhagwat et al., 2020), it would be advisable to limit subsequent studies to specific regions (e.g., Western Europe, Latin America, etc.). Additionally, the study was conducted solely in English and relied on online distribution, potentially excluding individuals who are not proficient in English or do not have access to electronic devices. Furthermore, the sample distribution exhibited some imbalances, with more women (59.2%) than men (38.5 %) and relatively young participants ($M_{age} = 27.80$). Since for gender, weak positive correlations were found between gender and Aad and consumer-brand stance-agreement, it cannot be ruled out that the results may be different with a higher proportion of men. Besides, only 11 participants belonged to Gen X and Babyboomers, making it difficult to draw conclusions about different age groups. As research indicates that especially Gen Z and Millennials expect brands to take a stance and support brands that share their values (Amed et al., 2019; Cristobal et al., 2022), further research should try to reach a more diverse sample regarding age to find out differences in the effect of brand activism between the generations.

Moreover, the research design presents certain limitations. Firstly, the artificiality and standardized nature of questionnaires in experimental survey research may not fully capture the experiences of individual respondents (Babbie, 2016). One specific aspect of artificiality is the use of a fictional brand, which was intended to enhance the internal validity of the experimental design. However, it poses risks to external validity, as results may differ for real brands. To address this limitation, future experimental studies could incorporate existing brands and control for participants' familiarity or identification with the brand. Moreover, the choice of toothpaste as the product under investigation may not necessarily reflect the attitudes related to brand activism for other types of products. Hence, future studies should strive for broader generalizability by considering other product categories. Additionally, support for the LGBTQIA+ community and their rights were solely expressed through the symbol of the rainbow and a statement. However, it would also be interesting to examine the impact of depictions of LGBTQIA+ individuals on consumers' attitudes. Besides, the design of the stimuli used in the study should also be considered, since factors such as colors or fonts in the ad can potentially influence participants' perceptions. Moreover, this study examined only one sociopolitical issue, LGBTQIA+ issues. However, as brand activism also applies to other sociopolitical issues from other areas (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017), it would be a fruitful

direction for future research to include additional current controversial issues such as abortion, refugee employment, or climate change mitigation.

Furthermore, the study's manipulation of authenticity was limited to a binary distinction (authentic vs. inauthentic). While efforts were made to incorporate various factors contributing to (in)authenticity into the stimuli to facilitate this distinction, it is important to note that authenticity is better understood as a spectrum (Shen & Kim, 2012). Therefore, exploring different levels of authenticity or inauthenticity by selectively including certain factors could provide further insights into the effects of brand activism.

Another limitation is the lack of a second control group that would have assessed the effects of social brand activism alone, without specific authenticity manipulation. This additional control group would have allowed for a more nuanced comparison between the groups (Solomon, 1949). Additionally, the measurement of consumer-brand-stance-agreement was limited to conditions 2 and 3, lacking a control group for comparison.

Furthermore, additional limitations can be acknowledged regarding the survey structure. The manipulation check, intended to measure the brand's sociopolitical engagement, was placed at the end of the survey to avoid affecting the dependent variables (Hoewe, 2017). However, the results of the manipulation check indicated that participants in Condition 3 were slightly less likely to agree that the brand takes a stance on LGBTQIA+ issues compared to participants in condition 2. One possible explanation is that participants in condition 3, after reading the newspaper accusing the brand of rainbow-washing, evaluated the sociopolitical engagement more negatively. Therefore, it would be interesting for further research to examine how the results might change if the manipulation check was integrated immediately after the advertisement but before the authenticity stimulus.

Likewise, the measurement of ad skepticism was positioned after the stimulus, leaving room for the possibility that the preceding stimuli influenced participants' skepticism scores. To avoid this, it would be advantageous to measure ad skepticism before the stimulus (Montgomery et al., 2018). Additionally, considering the context of brand activism, it could be valuable to incorporate a new measurement specifically targeting skepticism toward brand activism campaigns, allowing for a more comprehensive exploration of consumers' attitudes.

The study could have also benefited from incorporating measures of participants' involvement in LGBTQIA+ issues, as proposed by the ELM framework. This would have provided a more nuanced understanding of how individuals' levels of engagement with the issue might have influenced their responses to brand activism. Besides, additional outcome

variables, such as purchase intention, boycotting behavior, or eWOM intention offer valuable direction for future research.

5.4. Practical implications

This study provides empirical evidence that social brand activism pays off positively for brands that engage in it authentically, with a more favorable attitude toward the ad and the brand compared to a brand that does not engage in social brand activism. However, the study also highlights that once social brand activism is perceived as inauthentic, it has a detrimental impact on both outcomes. Therefore, brands that engage or wish to engage in sociopolitical issues and convey their stance through advertising should scrutinize their motives and prioritize the authenticity of their activism initiatives. Only if the brand's activism is perceived as authentic, it can lead to a boost in Aad and Ab, making brand activism an effective marketing strategy. Specifically, this study encourages brands to engage in social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues if their purpose, values, messaging, and practices align with LGBTQIA+ issues, they have a public-serving motive, can make a significant impact, and are able and willing to fulfill their commitment. Consequently, brands are advised against positioning themselves on a sociopolitical issue merely to jump on the woke bandwagon, pursue self-serving and insincere motives, or are unable to deliver on their commitments, as this elicits negative reactions from consumers.

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Appendix A: Omitted newspaper article used in pre-test

THE DAILY NEWS

BY CLARA BARKER   Jun 09, 2022

Proud of Pride or only profit-driven?

Many brands celebrate Pride each June by promoting equality and visibility for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, or plus (LGBTQIA+). However, pride and profit are mixed - and so are the consequences: Some brands are accused of profiteering from LGBTQIA+ products, highlighting more than ever that brands must be authentic and true to their campaigns and support they offer.

Dentaden, for instance, recently launched a campaign, in which they clearly position themselves as supporters of LGBTQIA+. While they announced to sponsor a queer suicide prevention initiative, they also donate money to politicians who are clearly against gay marriage. What's more, LGBTQIA+ representatives said that despite the promises, in reality little money reaches the communities.

In addition, Dentaden is known for embodying more traditional values, such as family, tradition, and stability. This is also reflected in their usual advertising campaigns, depicting mainly heterosexual models, which doesn't necessarily speak for the diversity they claim to stand for.

Survey Flow

> **Block: Introduction (2 Questions)**
> **Standard: Demographics (5 Questions)**
>
> **BlockRandomizer: 1 - Evenly Present Elements**
>
> > **Group: Group 1**
> >
> > > **EmbeddedData**
> > > **Absence of brand activism = 1**
> > >
> > > **Standard: Condition 1: Advertising without brand activism (2 Questions)**
> >
> > **Group: Group 2**
> >
> > > **EmbeddedData**
> > > **Authentic brand activism = 2**
> > >
> > > **Standard: Condition 2: authentic brand activism (4 Questions)**
> >
> > **Group: Group 3**
> >
> > > **EmbeddedData**
> > > **Inauthentic brand activism = 3**
> > >
> > > **Standard: Condition 3: Inauthentic brand activism (4 Questions)**
>
> **Standard: Attitude towards the ad (DV) (1 Question)**
> **Standard: Attitude towards the brand (DV) (1 Question)**
> **Standard: SKEP (1 Question)**
> **Standard: Manipulation check (1 Question)**

Introduction

Dear Participant,

Thank you for participating in this survey! This questionnaire will not take more than 10 minutes of your time and is about advertising addressing LGBTQIA+ issues. LGBTQIA+ stands for individuals identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual or plus.

Today, companies are struggling with whether to take a stand on a sociopolitical issue in their advertising campaigns or whether they should rather remain neutral. By participating in this

survey, you are making an important contribution to gaining insights into consumer responses, which can help shape future advertising campaigns.

The survey is being created as part of a master thesis at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Please answer each question carefully and honestly. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers as it is your personal opinion. Please be assured that your responses will be kept completely confidential and anonymous. I will not be able to identify you. The collected data will be used for research purposes only. The data will be saved securely and deleted after the research.

If you now decide not to participate in this research, this will not affect you. If you decide to cease your cooperation while filling in the questionnaire, this will in no way affect you either. You can cease your cooperation without giving reasons.

If you have any questions about this survey, please feel free to contact the researcher: Anne Kaifer, 619157ak@student.eur.nl

Thank you again for your participation!

With kind regards,
Anne Kaifer

Consent

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and anonymous. My answers will be used for research purposes only.

⚪ I agree to participate

⚪ I do not agree to participate

Skip To: End of Survey If I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and anonymous. My answers will be u... = I do not agree to participate

Age

Age ✳

▾ 🔄 Skip to

End of Survey if 17 years or younger Is Selected

How old are you? (in years)

17 years or younger ⬍

Nationality

Nationality | List of Countries ✳ ✕→

What is your nationality?

Afghanistan ⬍

Gender

Gender ✳

What gender do you identify with?

○ Male

○ Female

○ Non-binary or male/female transgender

○ Other (please specify):

○ Prefer not to say

Sexual orientation

Sexual orientation   ✶

What is your sexual orientation? **(select all that apply)**

- ☐ Asexual
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Gay
- ☐ Heterosexual or straight
- ☐ Lesbian
- ☐ Pansexual
- ☐ Queer
- ☐ None of the above, please specify:
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Education

Education   ✶

What is the highest educational level that you have **completed**?

- ○ Less than a high school degree
- ○ High school degree or equivalent
- ○ Bachelor's degree
- ○ Master's degree or MBA
- ○ PhD or other equivalent
- ○ Other, namely

Condition 1

Imagine that you come across this online advertisement for toothpaste.

Please take a minute to view and read it carefully. Questions will follow concerning this online advertisement. The advertisement will not be viewed again during the survey.
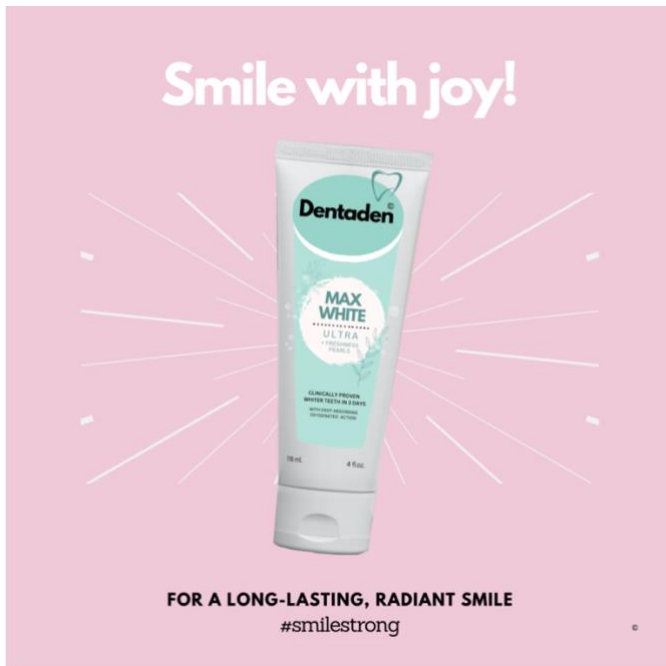
Authenticity_control

Please rate the level to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Dentaden is a socially responsible company.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Dentaden is standing up for what it believes in.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Dentaden is concerned about improving the well-being of society.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Dentaden is being true to itself with its LGBTQIA+ activism.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Dentaden's LGBTQIA+ activism is in accordance with the company's values and beliefs.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Dentaden's LGBTQIA+ activism is genuine.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Condition 2

Imagine that you come across this online advertisement for toothpaste.

Please take a minute to view and read it carefully. Questions will follow concerning this online advertisement. The advertisement will not be viewed again during the survey.

Agreement_01

To what extent do you agree or disagree to the statement in the advertisement - supporting the LGBTQIA+ community and demanding equal rights for all?

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Authentic brand

Now imagine you come across this newspaper article about the brand.

Please take a minute to read it carefully.

THE DAILY NEWS

BY CLARA BARKER   Jun 09, 2022

Dentaden praised for LGBTQIA+ commitment

Many brands celebrate Pride each June by promoting equality and visibility for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, or plus (LGBTQIA+). However, it is important that brands are authentic and true to their campaigns and the support they offer.

Dentaden, for instance, has long been vocal and active in ending discrimination against LGBTQIA+ individuals. Standing behind values such as solidarity, respect, and diversity, they are committed to caring for the well-being of their LGBTQIA+ customers and employees. Since 2015, they have promised to donate 1% of their revenue to LGBTQIA+ organizations around the world, already raising more than 500,000 €. In addition, Dentaden was awarded the 2022 Diversity & Inclusion Award for advancing LGBTQIA+ inclusion by creating a workplace where all employees feel safe and are met with openness.

Authenticity_01

Please rate the level to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Dentaden is a socially responsible company.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Dentaden is standing up for what it believes in.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Dentaden is concerned about improving the well-being of society.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Dentaden is being true to itself with its LGBTQIA+ activism.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Dentaden's LGBTQIA+ activism is in accordance with the company's values and beliefs.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Dentaden's LGBTQIA+ activism is genuine.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Condition 3

Imagine that you come across this online advertisement for toothpaste.

Please take a minute to view and read it carefully. Questions will follow concerning this online advertisement. The advertisement will not be viewed again during the survey.

Agreement_02

To what extent do you agree or disagree to the statement in the advertisement - supporting the LGBTQIA+ community and demanding equal rights for all?

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Inauthentic article

Now imagine you come across this newspaper article about the brand.

Please take a minute to read it carefully.

THE DAILY NEWS

BY CLARA BARKER   Jun 09, 2022

Dentaden accused of rainbow-washing

Many brands celebrate Pride each June by promoting equality and visibility for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, or plus (LGBTQIA+). However, some brands engage in rainbow washing, meaning that they use the rainbow colors to suggest to consumers that they support the LGBTQIA+ community without actually making an effort to do so.

Dentaden has recently come under criticism for their campaign, in which they clearly position themselves as supporters of LGBTQIA+. However, Dentaden is known for embodying more traditional values, such as tradition and stability. In fact, the brand also donates money to politicians who are clearly against gay marriage. What's more, despite the brand's promise to support a queer suicide prevention initiative, LGBTQIA+ representatives said that in reality, little money is reaching the initiative.

Authenticity_02

Please rate the level to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Dentaden is a socially responsible company.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Dentaden is standing up for what it believes in.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Dentaden is concerned about improving the well-being of society.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Dentaden is being true to itself with its LGBTQIA+ activism.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Dentaden's LGBTQIA+ activism is in accordance with the company's values and beliefs.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Dentaden's LGBTQIA+ activism is genuine.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Attitude toward the ad

Now that you have seen the advertisement of the brand Dentaden, how much do the following statements apply to you?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
This ad is very appealing to me.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I dislike this ad.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I would probably skip this ad if I saw it again on Social Media.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This ad makes me feel good.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This ad has little interest for me.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Attitude toward the brand

How accurately do the following expressions describe how you feel about the brand Dentaden?

In my opinion, the brand is...

Unappealing	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Appealing
Bad	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Good
Unpleasant	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Pleasant
Unfavourable	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Favourable
Unlikeable	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Likeable

Ad skepticism

Please rate the level to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I feel I've been accurately informed after viewing most advertisements.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Advertising is truth well told.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Advertising is a reliable source of information about the quality and performance of products.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
We can depend on getting the truth in most advertising.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Advertising is generally truthful.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
In general, advertising presents a true picture of the product being advertised.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I believe advertising is informative.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Most advertising provides consumers with essential information.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Advertising's aim is to inform consumer.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Manipulation check

Think back to the advertisement. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Dentaden takes a stand on LGBTQIA+ in this advertisement (e.g. by supporting the LGBTQIA+ community)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

End of survey

Thank you very much for your participation! You are helping me to learn more about the use of sociopolitical issues in advertising. In my research, I want to measure how different types of social brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues affect consumers' attitudes.

Therefore, you were randomly assigned to one of three groups that showed either an ad with no brand activism or an ad with brand activism addressing LGBTQIA+ issues. If you were in the group with brand activism, you were also shown either a newspaper article praising the brand for its authentic LGBTQIA+ commitment to or a newspaper article accusing the brand of rainbow-washing.

You have now reached the end of the questionnaire. If you have any further questions about the content, purpose or research ethics of this survey, please contact me at 619157ak@student.eur.nl.

Thank you again very much for your time and effort!