

Authentic brand activism or woke-washing? Consumers' perceptions of brands engaging in socio-political activism.

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AUTHENTIC BRAND ACTIVISM OR WOKE-WASHING? CONSUMERS' PERCEPTIONS OF
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ABSTRACT

Brands decide to increasingly take a stance on sociopolitical topics, also called brand activism. Important factors are a brand's prior sociopolitical engagement and the activist marketing message. A (mis)fit of both was conceptualized as message-sociopolitical cause (in)congruence, consequently affecting consumers' perceived (in)authenticity of brand activism. While perceived authenticity has positive effects on brand attitude, inauthentic brand activism efforts can have negative effects, like woke-washing accusations or boycotts. Consumers' political ideologies were considered as moderating factors, as consumers are inclined to agree with brand activism efforts of their own political stance. By focusing on ad authenticity in the context of brand activism, this thesis aims to provide insights into effective brand activism. A 2x2 factorial experimental design between congruence, ad authenticity, brand attitude, and political ideology was employed. Respondents (N=138) were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions, representing a combination of message-sociopolitical cause (in)congruence: inauthentic, absent, silent, and authentic brand activism. Respondents saw one ad for shampoo of an activist (Lush) or a non-activist brand (Axe), featuring an activist or a non-activist slogan. Results were analyzed through Hayes PROCESS. Limitations included respondents partially failing to identify the level of activist message and brand, suggesting that advertisement cues were not as clear as intended. Thus, the sample size of respondents correctly identifying the manipulation checks was small (N = 63), limiting the generalizability of findings. The results of the research failed to support previous research. Results showed no effect of message-sociopolitical cause congruence on ad authenticity, and political ideology did not moderate the effect. Ad authenticity had no effect on brand attitude. For the subgroup (N = 63), congruence had a significant positive effect on ad authenticity, which was moderated by political ideology, as liberals perceived the congruent ad more authentic compared to conservatives. For the subgroup, ad authenticity had no effect on brand attitude. The findings underscore the need to further examine brand activism advertisements to fully understand the effects on authenticity and brand attitude.

KEYWORDS: *brand activism, marketing, ad authenticity, brand attitude, political ideology, woke-washing*

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1. Introduction

In their book *Brand Activism: From Purpose to Action*, known marketing researchers Sarkar and Kotler state, “In a highly polarized world, it’s no longer good enough to be neutral. [...] Brands are expected to solve, not aggravate, the world’s biggest problems.” (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020, p. 3). In line with this statement, brand activism can be described as businesses that actively engage in social, political, economic, or environmental issues to contribute to societal change beyond traditional marketing practices.

Recent activist movements like Black Lives Matter, or #MeToo sparked global conversations, compelling brands like Nike to take public stances (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 444). While underlying topics like racism and inclusivity are not new, scholars highlight a growing emphasis on purposeful advertising with social impact, suggesting research on the sociocultural effects of advertisements (LaVoi & Haley, 2021, p. 373). Moreover, studies showed that consumers find it important for brands to address sociopolitical topics (Sprout Social, 2017, para. 10). In line with these recent industry developments, brand activism emerged as a strategic marketing practice (Pimentel et al., 2023, p. 16).

One of the reasons why brands engage in brand activism is as a differentiation strategy from competitors aiming for improved brand image (Moorman, 2020, p. 390). Moreover, companies see brand activism as a political mission and a holistic business strategy to drive social change (Moorman, 2020, p. 390). Brands engaging in sociopolitical issues must choose activist topics, either reinforcing or challenging views (Moorman, 2020, p. 389). Many brands adopt a liberal stance in their activism, while some take conservative positions, reflecting their brand values and resonating with their target audience (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 451; Atanga et al., 2022, as cited in Pimentel et al., 2023, p. 1).

Many brand activism examples involve a liberal stance (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 451) such as the #spycops campaign by cosmetic brand Lush, criticizing the unethical practices of undercover police officers. In this campaign, Lush brand stores were decorated in police bands with the slogan “Police have crossed the line” (Sibai et al., 2021, 1661; Belam, 2018, para. 2).

Though less common, brand activism is also possible on the opposite side of the political spectrum, such as Chick-fil-A’s president, who publicly took a stand against same-sex marriage (Atanga et al., 2022, as cited in Pimentel et al., 2023, p. 1). Notably, both examples were congruent in brand values and activist messages, consequently, not inciting consumer outrage who shared similar beliefs.

However, businesses are generally concerned as brand activism is likely to provoke stakeholders disagreeing with the company’s conduct, illustrated by the brand Tabaco, using gender-inclusive language to promote their shampoo (“Für echte Männer*innen) (Vorbringer, 2023, para. 5). While the brand is known to have a male target audience, the slogan sparked outrage, going as far as consumers boycotting the brand. Some recipients found the use of gender-inclusive language

inauthentic, while simultaneously, others perceived it as the brand mocking inclusivity, against their personal beliefs (Vorbringer, 2023, para. 4).

These examples highlight the relevance of the fit of the brand's underlying values and brand activism communication, also defined as message-sociopolitical cause congruence. Within the growing body of brand activism research, the concept of authenticity is prevalent, fueled by risks associated with message-sociopolitical cause incongruence. Studies addressed the influence of brand activism on the perception of brand authenticity (Campagna et al., 2023, pp. 136-138; Lou et al., 2024, p. 3; Morhart et al., 2015, p. 201). However, little is known about consumers' perceptions of brand activism advertisements (Miller, 2015, p. 178). It is crucial to close this gap in academic research as it helps gain insights into brands' operations concerning authentic brand activism efforts.

Additionally, researchers Mirzaei et al. (2022, p. 8) argue that in light of potential consumer backlash, political dimensions should be considered when examining authentic brand activism efforts. Scholars Flight and Coker (2022, p. 741) found that political ideologies influence consumer behavior, such as brand attitudes, implicating differences regarding perceptions of marketing messages between different political groups. As research on political ideology as a moderating factor of brand activism yet needs to be expanded, this thesis will contribute to current research by investigating consumers' political ideologies in the context of brand activism advertisements.

In addition to theoretical contributions, the results of this thesis have societal relevance, as brand activism communication has the potential to impact public discourse, draw attention to sociopolitical and environmental issues, and possibly provoke social change (Chatterji & Toffel, 2019, pp. 178, 179). Authentic brand activism, speaking a clear value- and purpose-driven communication, can reduce consumers' perceived risk and information costs, which will lead to consumers favoring brands who practice authentic brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 451). Studies found that these positive associations with brands will positively influence purchase decisions, going as far as positive sales growth over the next year (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 17). Moreover, authentic brand activism enhances consumers' brand equity (e.g. positive brand knowledge) for current and future brand activism efforts (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 451).

Concludingly, authentic brand activism enhances consumers' trust and positive associations with the brand, resulting in favorable choices like increased purchase intention as well as amplifying the brands' impact on society. Over time, increased market share of brands engaging in authentic brand activism can therefore lead to an advantage compared to competitors. Competitors may feel encouraged to adopt authentic brand activism efforts, which can lead to more prosocial practices and a shift in market dynamics.

However, today's consumers require firms to navigate carefully when it comes to establishing authentic brand activism, as it is a fine line to woke-washing, which can have negative consequences for brands such as boycotts. By exploring the underlying mechanisms of authentic brand activism in

marketing, this investigation aids brands in applying effective brand activism measures (Miller, 2015, p. 190), especially by taking consumers' political ideologies into account.

Therefore, this research aims to answer the research question: *To what extent does the congruence of brands' activist marketing messaging and sociopolitical cause influence perceived advertisement authenticity and attitudes towards the brand?*

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Brand Activism

Over the last few years, social movements have been more and more discussed publicly, impacting public opinions and mobilizing brands to take a stance on sociopolitical topics (Rosenthal et al., 2022, p. 1034). Examples include the collaboration of Nike and Colin Kaepernick, who was excluded from the NFL for protesting against police brutality and racism before his games (Creswell et al., 2018, para. 6). Nike, a brand known for its meaningful advertising, launched their "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything" campaign, featuring Kaepernick (Creswell et al., 2018, para. 14). While the risk of offending primarily white and older NFL fans was present, the campaign was hugely successful with Nike's young target audience, even leading to the rise of the brand's stocks (Creswell et al., 2018, para. 12). The example of Nike taking a stance for racial equality underscores how marketers respond to social movements by engaging with them and taking a political stance. These efforts are also called brand activism.

Sarkar & Kotler (2018) define brand activism as "business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society" (p. 468). As the first scholars to define brand activism, the conceptualization strikes as ambitious while simultaneously highlighting the potential impact of brand activism to contribute to social change. Brand activism can be divided into six categories: social activism, workplace activism, political activism, environmental activism, economic activism, and legal activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020, p. 28).

In the 1970s, companies started to be inspired by activist movements of the time, leading them to take action (Prakash Sethi, 1982, as cited in Cammarota et al., 2023, p. 1680). These initiatives, called Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), gained popularity in the late 1980s and the definition of "do well by doing good" emerged (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988, as cited in Cammarota et al., 2023, p. 1670). At the same time, brands engaging in CSR efforts noticed positive effects on consumers' perceptions of the brands, therefore leading to CSR becoming more common (Cammarota et al., 2023, p. 1670).

While CSR mainly offers financial support to "the good cause", brand activism supports activist movements and societal change through communicative measures (Nalick et al., 2016, p. 385). Moreover, the focus of CSR measures lies on non-controversial topics, whereas brand activism efforts support sociopolitical issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 446). Concludingly, brand activism is a development from traditional CSR efforts towards a more publicly vocal activist stance on sociopolitical issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 446; Cammarota et al., 2023, p. 1671).

With the development from CSR to brand activism, research increased in recent years, depicting the diverse nature of brand activism. Studies focused on various angles of the topic, such as antecedents, intervening factors, and consequences of brand activism (Cammarota et al., 2022, p. 1682).

Koch (2020, pp. 593, 594) examined political activism from the brand Oatly as a form of internal antecedent brand activism as opposed to the more popular brand activism point of view from the consumers' side. Through consistent cultural branding, Oatly included sustainability as the political brand ideology within the firm's brand proposition (Koch, 2020, p. 603). Instead of only seeing sustainability as one activist aspect, this study highlights how brand activism can be leveraged as a central point for corporate cultural branding.

Another form of firms' internal brand activism is CEO activism, where Chief executive officers (CEOs) take a public stance on political topics, unrelated to their firm's core business (Bedendo & Siming, 2021, p. 1062). Hambrick and Wowak (2021, pp. 33, 39) further conceptualize CEO activism as the CEO's ideologies, influencing their decision-making, while considering stakeholders' ideologies. Bedendo & Siming (2021, p. 1063) found that strong CEO activism can significantly impact shareholder value negatively, as they examined that corporations may face criticism from stakeholders as a result of their controversial perspective, while also limiting the chances of future activism engagement (p. 1079). Similarly, Hambrick and Wowak found that stakeholders opposing the CEO's opinion will have a lower association with the company (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021, p. 50). On the other hand, stakeholders sympathizing with the CEO's decision-making will have a stronger association with the company's values and the CEO (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021, p. 50). Together, both studies allow us to understand that CEO activism can bring benefits for brands but also risks that need to be considered.

While internal antecedents of brand activism have a proactive nature and come from within a company, there are also external factors that influence brands engaging in brand activism, such as consumers' political ideologies. Neureiter and Bhattacharya (2021, pp.615-617) found that corporations that take a stance on sociopolitical issues within a polarized political environment can face the risk of "boycotts" (Nielson, 2010, as cited in Neureiter & Bhattacharya, 2021, p. 611). This reaction can be triggered when the brand activism efforts conflict with a company's main customer base and result in a decrease in sales. Interestingly, when conflicting with a smaller fraction of customers, boycotts are less effective, as they cause solidarity amongst agreeing customers, therefore balancing the backlash (Neureiter & Bhattacharya, 2021, p. 617).

Similarly, Zhou and Dong (2022, p. 177) examined consumers' direct negative responses to firms' inauthentic brand activism efforts. They found that consumers' sociopolitical activism predicts their intentions to react negatively toward brand activism, as consumers with a high degree of sociopolitical activism have higher expectations for firms communicating brand activism. Therefore, even if a brand's stance and actions align, if consumers who are socio-politically engaged perceive the brand activism efforts as not sufficient, brands could still provoke negative reactions (Zhou & Dong, 2022, p. 178).

Lastly, current research was conducted examining the consequences of brand activism, highlighting the potential impact on societal change. Spry et al. (2021, p. 541) found that brand

activism can challenge the dominant social paradigm of for-profit by implementing new conduct. This can happen when brands actively prioritize prosocial activities. The outdoor brand Patagonia is one example of a brand that successfully influenced the business landscape toward a more integrated approach to environmentalism as the brand's mission (Spry et al., 2021, pp. 537, 540). Patagonia's CEO publicly declared the brand's mission to act responsibly, underscored by investing in its own sustainable cotton supply chain, as a reaction towards unsustainable market practices (Sonsev, 2019, para. 15). Moreover, Patagonia communicated its brand values in iconic campaigns such as "Don't Buy This Jacket", urging consumers to repair instead of purchase (Allchin, 2013, para. 2). Overall, Patagonia demonstrates how brands can act as pioneers within their sectors by changing the dominant social paradigm through brand activism measures.

Supporting these findings, Hoppner and Vadakkepatt (2019, p. 419) examined how brands, as moral authorities, can shape social norms through brand activism. By taking a strong stance on sociopolitical issues resonating with societal values such as sustainability, racial equality, or LGBTQ+, acceptance of these topics gets promoted. In addition, brand activism can reinforce consumer culture by encouraging sustainable consumption (Spry et al., 2021, p. 539).

After discussing a variety of brand activism research, it is important to examine how to mitigate the risks and maximize successful brand activism communication. An important factor when exploring brand activism is the role of authentically aligning brand values and brand activism efforts, which will be discussed in the next paragraph.

2.2 Authenticity in Brand Activism

56% of consumers perceive activist messages in marketing as primarily for-profit (Edelman, 2019, p. 14), underscoring the urgent need for brands to consider how to effectively communicate brand activism. Vredenburg et al. (2020, pp. 449, 450) note that, when brands align their activist messaging, purpose, and values with socially responsible corporate actions, they participate in authentic brand activism. This helps to foster significant potential for societal impact and substantial increases in brand equity.

Conversely, brands neglecting one of the four pillars of authentic brand activism (activist messaging, purpose, values, and practices) engage in inauthentic brand activism, often referred to as "woke washing". This incongruence can harm both brand equity and the likelihood of contributing to meaningful social change (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 449; Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019, p. 424; Zhou & Dong, 2022, p. 177; Neureiter & Bhattacharya, 2021, p. 615).

Vredenburg et al. (2020, p. 450) propose a brand activism typology, differentiating authentic, inauthentic, silent, and the absence of brand activism depending on the congruence between the brand's activist marketing messaging and prosocial corporate practice (Figure 2.1). The typology offers a framework for locating brand activism efforts, helping to derive strategic decisions to maintain or adjust future measures.

The brand activism typology is divided into four quadrants (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 450). In the first quadrant, “absence of brand activism”, brands are located with neither prosocial practices nor communicate activist marketing messages. Oftentimes, these brands are B2B businesses that don’t rely on direct consumer expectations for their brand credibility and, thus do not feel the need to engage in sociopolitical issues. However, engaging in brand activism could benefit those brands in terms of market growth (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 450).

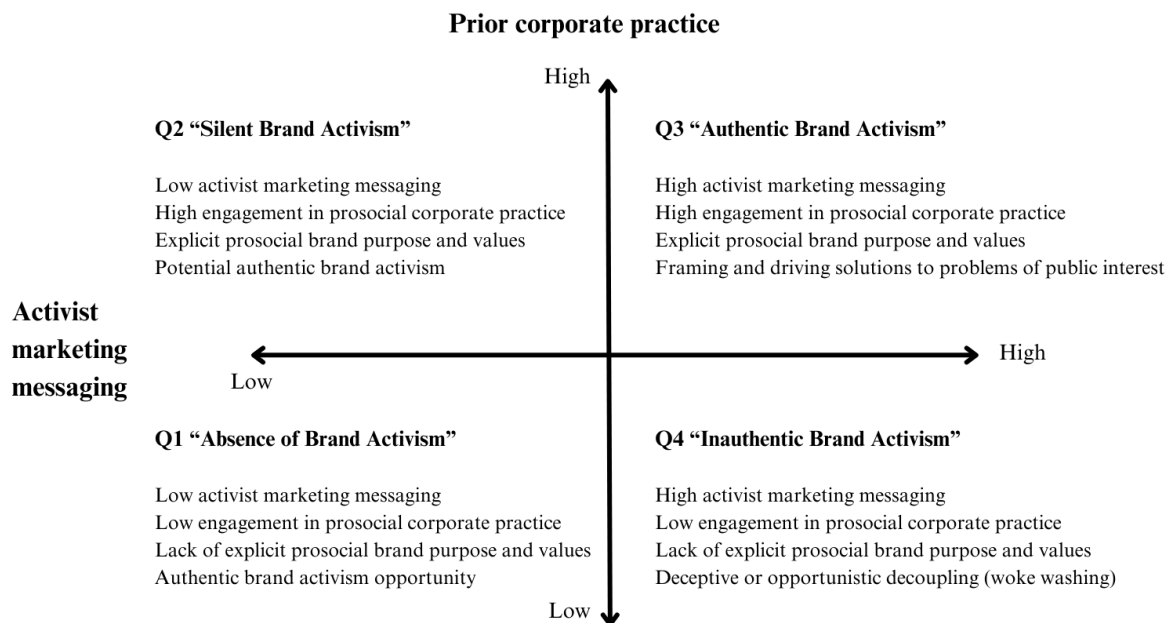
According to Vredenburg et al. (2020, p. 450), the second quadrant, “silent brand activism”, includes brands with inherently sustainable products or prosocial practices. However, these brands do not include these practices in their marketing strategy. Since their corporate practices, beliefs, and prosocial brand purpose are already connected with sociopolitical topics, brands in the silent quadrant stand to gain significantly from entering the activist marketing messaging field. This is because aligned messaging is an essential requirement for authentic brand activism. Concludingly, aligned brands should not only focus on their practices but should communicate these to gain positive effects on their brand equity (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 450).

Brands that have aligned their activist marketing messaging with prior prosocial practice fall in the third quadrant, “authentic brand activism” (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 450). Brands engaging in authentic brand activism have the most positive brand equity outcomes, as consumers will associate fewer risks and more positive values with the brand. These positive associations not only benefit current marketing campaigns but can have long-lasting benefits for brand equity, such as purchase decisions (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 451). Bhagwat et al. (2020, p. 17) found that purchase decisions based on positive associations can increase a firm’s sales for as long as the following quarter up to the next year after positive brand equity.

Lastly, brands that communicate activism, but do not match their prior prosocial practice, are within the fourth quadrant: “inauthentic brand activism” (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 451). This incongruence, also called woke washing, risks negative reactions from consumers and is additionally considered unethical.

Figure 2.1

Typology of Brand Activism



Note. From. “Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing?” by Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A., & Kemper, J. A., 2020, *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 39(4), 444–460.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0743915620947359>

The brand activism typology underscores the need for brands who employ brand activism as a marketing practice to carefully consider the alignment of their prior prosocial practice with the messages they send. Without a fit of both, brands risk being perceived as inauthentic, which can lead to a negative, long-lasting impact. Building upon Chu et al.’s (2023, pp. 1042-1043) study, this fit will be defined as message-sociopolitical cause congruence, since it is argued that a perceived congruence benefits consumers’ perception of the advertisement’s authenticity (Vredenburg et al., 2020, pp. 450, 451). Simultaneously, a perceived incongruence of brand-sociopolitical cause fit can lead to perceived brand activism inauthenticity (Chu et al., 2023, p. 1041).

In order for consumers to assess ad authenticity, the meaning of brand cues must be carefully negotiated (Beverland & Farrell, 2010, p. 839). Since message-cause congruence is conveyed through advertisements, ad authenticity is the best concept to measure the perception of message-sociopolitical cause congruence. Authentic advertisements have been defined as conveying the appearance of the reality of everyday life in the context of consumption (Stern, 1994, p. 388). Following the definition of authentic advertisements, the concept of perceived ad authenticity is defined as the degree to which consumers consider an advertisement depicting the message and brand true to reality (Miller, 2015, p. 179). Scholars, on the one hand, note that perceived ad authenticity is understudied (Miller, 2015, p. 178). On the other hand, it can be challenging for marketers to conceptualize authentic brand activism ads. To successfully convey authenticity, brands must ensure the congruence of the activist messaging

and underlying brand values (Holt, 2002, p. 83; Miller, 2015, p. 180). Concludingly, this research poses the following Hypothesis:

H1: *Congruence of the brand's message-sociopolitical cause is positively related to perceived advertising authenticity.*

2.3 Consumers' political beliefs

This thesis aims to investigate consumers' political ideologies in addition to the predicted influence of message-sociopolitical cause congruence on ad authenticity. Typically, consumers' political beliefs are examined on a spectrum from conservative to liberal (Haupt et al., 2023, p. 1252; Flight & Coker, 2022, p. 733). Conservatism can be defined as an ideology that promotes personal rights and freedoms with minimal governmental intervention, whereas liberalism is typically understood as a political approach based on shared central governance that strives to offer people equal prosperity (Flight & Coker, 2022, p. 733).

Although liberalism and conservatism are two frequently researched political ideologies, Flight and Coker (2022, p. 733) and Ray (1982, p. 37) note that consumers' political beliefs are more complex. Thus, the political dimensions of libertarianism and authoritarianism will be explored additionally. The libertarian ideology emphasizes support for cultural diversity and promotes personal development and expression, as well as complete liberty of thought and conduct. Authoritarians, on the other hand, view the social structure as a shared moral or cultural norm that allows the adoption of strict authority on individual expression in the interest of maintaining a cohesive community (Flight & Coker, 2022, p. 733).

According to research, these consumers' political beliefs and social norms influence how receptive they are to brand activism efforts (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 455). One explanation for the underlying mechanism of the influence of consumers' political ideologies on brand activism effects, is the Social Identity Theory, which states that people create a sense of self based on their affiliation with a group while setting themselves apart from outgroup members (Neuman, 2011, p. 285). Therefore, for brands engaging in politically activist topics such as LGBTQ+, gun control, or sustainability, consumers' agreement can vary, depending on whether brand activism threatens or reinforces their normative belief structure (McGraw and Warren, 2010, p. 1144). Compared to conservative consumers, liberal consumers are more perceptive to sociopolitical activist messaging from firms (Haupt et al., 2023, p. 1252). Additionally, prior research found that liberals are more open to new information and more vulnerable to the persuasive power of activist messaging, whereas conservatives typically have more consistent opinions about companies (Haupt et al., 2023, p. 1252). As brand activism oftentimes takes a liberal stance, it could be a factor in conservative consumers' less noticeable reactions to activist marketing messaging. Concludingly, brands are perceived as more authentic when their activism efforts fit into the normative belief structure of the customer (McGraw

and Warren, 2010, p. 1144). Nevertheless, the perceived authenticity of the brand may suffer if the brand activism seems opportunistic or dishonest.

Additionally, research by Hydock et al. (2020, p. 1148) suggests that brand activism is more likely to reject existing customers disagreeing with a brand's stance on sociopolitical issues than attracting new customers, also called negativity bias. Brand activism initiatives can potentially disadvantage larger corporations, as they seem to lose more current customers than gain new ones. Smaller businesses, on the other hand, benefit more from expressing their sociopolitical views as they have a larger amount of new potential customers (Hydock et al., 2020, p. 1148).

To summarize, examining the relationship between consumers' political beliefs and brand activism is essential for understanding how consumers with varying political ideologies respond to brand activism. Flight and Coker (2022, p. 738) and Hydock et al. (2020, p. 1137) argue that brands could include consumers' political ideologies in their decision-making processes when discussing the firms' value propositions, as this strengthens consumers' identification with the brand.

Furthermore, research by Haupt et al. (2023, p. 1259) emphasizes the lack of brand activism research considering consumers' political ideology as a moderating variable. Since current research highlights political ideologies of liberalism and conservatism, this thesis will focus on this spectrum while considering authoritarianism and libertarianism as additional dimensions of political ideology. Therefore, as this thesis explores political ideology as a moderating factor in brand activism communication on consumers' perception of ad authenticity, the following hypothesis will be posed:

H2: The positive effect of message-sociopolitical cause congruence on perceived advertisement authenticity is expected to be stronger for consumers with a liberal ideology.

2.4 Brand Attitude

Studies found that brand activism can enhance competitive advantage, adding to strong brand-building and increasing brand equity (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 17). The Information-Based Model of Advertising supports these findings, stating that consumers use brand-related characteristics to build their perception of brand attitude (Miller, 2015, pp. 178-179).

Brand Attitude, an important aspect of consumer behavior studies, is defined as consumers' lasting positive and negative perceptions and emotions towards a brand (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975, as cited in Nguyen et al., 2023, p. 1499; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020, p. 24). Concludingly, to examine how brand equity can be influenced positively, it is crucial to understand how brand activism can shape consumers' perceptions of brand attitude. Positive brand attitudes among consumers have a beneficial impact on consumer value and their intention for brand loyalty (Kim, 2013, as cited in Nguyen et al., 2023, p. 1499).

To understand how consumers assess advertisements and form perceptions such as brand attitude, this thesis uses the "general theory of attitude change", also called Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) by researchers Petty and Cacioppo (1986, p.3). In the context of brand activism

advertisement, consumers process the activist advertisement cues of message and brand to form attitudes towards the brand. Since advertisements are a form of persuasive communication, the ELM is especially useful to understand the process of brand activism advertisements, as this thesis explores the concepts of perceived message-sociopolitical cause congruence and ad authenticity and their effects on brand attitude. Persuasive communication, in this case, brand activism advertisements, are processed through two routes, the central route and the peripheral route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, p.3).

Information that is processed through the *central route* includes active and more thoughtful information processing by consumers. On the other hand, persuasive information that is processed more passively and without close examination by consumers works through the *peripheral route*.

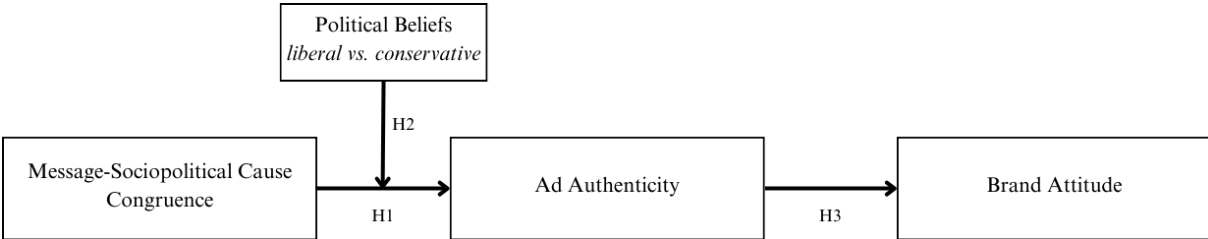
The ELM framework was utilized by different scholars as an underlying mechanism to explain consumers' attitudes towards congruent brand activism both through the central and peripheral routes. Nguyen et al. (2023, p. 1496) argue that factors such as source credibility act as simple persuasive agents via the peripheral route. Meanwhile, persuasive information that is more thoughtfully processed through the central route, is preferred by brands since consumers' attitudes toward brands can be seen as longer-lasting and consistent. Furthermore, Zhou & Dong (2022, p. 178) found that consumers' social issue activism can act as a strong motivational factor when processing incongruent brand activism measures, as more intense discomfort is triggered by incongruent communication. Therefore, arguing for the processing of brand activism information through the central route of persuasion. Concludingly, this study employs the ELM model as the explanation of the underlying mechanism of why consumers form their brand attitudes after being exposed to brand activism as a form of persuasive communication.

The relationship between the perception of ad authenticity and brand attitude will be examined to further understand brand perception for brand activism advertisements. When assessing the consumer's perception of a brand, Miller (2015, pp. 178, 180, 190) emphasizes the importance of considering perceived advertising authenticity, as positive reactions to advertisements have a positive impact on brand attitude. Therefore, in line with previous studies, the following hypothesis will be examined:

H3: Perceived advertising authenticity is positively related to perceived brand attitude.

Figure 2.2

Theoretical Framework



3. Method

This chapter provides a detailed justification and presentation of the experimental design, procedure, and variable operationalization selected to test the hypotheses.

3.1 Research Design

The research employed a 2x2 factorial experimental design to investigate the causal relationship between the independent variable (IV) message-sociopolitical cause congruence, the mediator (MED) ad authenticity, the dependent variable (DV) brand attitude, and the moderator (MOD) political ideology. In this experiment, the manipulations were designed to assess the impact of the IV on participants' perception by controlling the degree of activist marketing message (high, low activism) and prior prosocial practice (high, low) (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017, p. 15). See Table 3.1 for an overview of the experimental conditions.

A quantitative study was chosen as experiments allow for a systematic examination of causal relationships (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017, p. 83), especially concerning micro-level examinations such as individual perceptions of ad authenticity and brand attitude, compared to more macro-level observations, that focus on broader societal concepts (Neuman, 2011, p. 282, 283; Vargas et al., 2017, p. 102).

Additionally, experiments are suited to build knowledge by testing individual variables through the manipulation of the stimulus material (Neumann, 2011, p. 283). Two brands were chosen that each reflect a high and low level of prior prosocial practice: Lush and Axe. Well-known brands were chosen consciously, as prior studies recommend further exploration, due to prior focus on unknown brands in experimental research on brand attitude (Miller, 2015, p. 178). Additionally, since this research aims to compare how consumers perceive different levels of prosocial practice in the context of authentic brand activism, it was a necessity to choose brands that trigger consumers' associations in order to be perceived as (in)authentic (Dahlén & Lange, 2005, p. 473).

The stimulus material was created as standardized as feasible, eliminating any confusion or complexity in the language employed, in line with academic recommendations (Bornemann & Hattula, 2022, p.10). The stimulus material was an advertisement for shower gel and a slogan. Advertisement research stimulus material should look professional, while simultaneously not overwhelm survey participants (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017, p. 85). Therefore, a simple background was chosen, allowing the slogans to stand out and be easily manipulated by the researcher on the one hand, and easily recognizable by participants on the other hand. Lastly, the product pictures were chosen to be as similar as possible, to ensure comparable experimental conditions (Figure 3.1).

The experimental groups received the treatment, representing the message-sociopolitical cause congruence, while the control group did not receive the treatment, in this study, the group assigned to the brand Axe (low prior prosocial practice) with the slogan "Dein neues Shampoo" (low activist

marketing message) (Neuman, 2011, p. 310). Randomization was employed to assign participants to the experimental and control groups, ensuring an unbiased and comparable distribution (Babbie, 2017, 236; Neumann, 2011, p.288, p. 310).

This research was designed according to the developed theoretical framework and intends to explore empirical evidence, therefore being a so-called theory-directed experiment (Neumann, 2011, p. 287). Moreover, experimental research provides quantitative data that can be statistically analyzed and follows the epistemologically positivist principles of social science (Neumann, 2011, p. 310). Online experiments have become a commonly used tool in today’s market research, as this method offers cost and distribution advances, and was applied for this research as well (Bornemann & Hattula, 2022, pp. 20, 21). The measurement tools included Qualtrics for survey administration and IBM SPSS for data analysis.

A pretest with 5 respondents was conducted, to ensure a clear understanding of the survey questions, which were translated from English to German. All respondents were able to understand the questions without any problems. Hence, the survey was published and distributed.

Table 3.1

Experimental Design

		Activist Marketing Message	
		low	high
Prior Prosocial Practice	high	Lush “Dein neues Shampoo”	Lush “Für echte Männer*innen”
	low	Axe “Dein neues Shampoo”	Axe “Für echte Männer*innen”

Figure 3.1

Experimental Stimuli Mock-Ups



3.2 Sampling

As the sampling method, a mix of purposive sampling and virtual snowball sampling, both non-probability sampling methods, were used to select participants based on their relevance to the research focus (Sarstedt et al., 2018, p. 654). The link to the survey was distributed through social media. Additionally, respondents were encouraged to share the survey with others. Moreover, the platform Prolific was used to distribute the survey to gain a broader spectrum of participants and improve representativeness. Crowdsourcing platforms such as Prolific have the benefit of a fast response rate, a large variety of respondents, and the possibility to specifically target respondents (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017, p. 87). For this study, German natives within the sample

characteristics for age were selected, as the activist marketing message was operationalized in the form of a German slogan, utilizing gender-inclusive language.

Next, the unit of analysis had to be specified, as it is what the study is focused on (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017, p. 21). In social science research, the unit of analysis is oftentimes the individual or group level (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017, p. 21). Given the progressive nature of brand activism and its resonance with millennials and Generation Z (Smiley, 2019, para 5), individuals born between 1978–1996 (age 28-46) and 1997-2012 (age 12-27), were specifically targeted (Dimock, 2019, as cited in Campagna et al., 2023, p. 142). Additionally, the increase in spending power of these generations has made them focal points in brand authenticity research. However, due to ethical considerations, respondents under the age of 18 were excluded from the survey. Lastly, the sample aimed at getting a variation on the political identity of respondents, to accurately test the moderating role.

3.3 Procedure

Before respondents were exposed to the stimulus material, they were informed about the broad topic and goal of the research within a short introduction (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017, p. 88). Additionally, the confidentiality of the data throughout the research was ensured. The researchers' contact information in the form of an e-mail address was provided, in case respondents had questions or comments regarding the survey experiment. Moreover, they were asked for consent to anonymously and voluntarily participate in the research. It was stated that in case the respondents did not want to continue with the survey, they could drop out without any problems. If participants agreed to the question of consent, they were provided with the next questions. If not, respondents were directed to the end of the survey.

First, demographic questions about age, gender, and level of education were asked to ease the respondents into the survey, as the following questions were relatively complex. Following the political ideology questions, respondents were exposed to one stimulus material out of the four conditions, which were evenly distributed and randomized.

After seeing the stimulus material, all participants were asked to indicate their perception of the message-sociopolitical cause congruence, which simultaneously served as the third manipulation check to assess whether the manipulation was perceived as intended. Next, all respondents were asked the same questions to measure their perception of ad authenticity and brand attitude. Following, all four groups were asked whether they perceived the brand and message as activist, which were two additional manipulation checks.

After completing the survey, respondents saw a short outro, thanking them for their time and effort. Lastly, the researchers' contact information was added once again in case of any questions regarding the survey experiment.

3.4 Measurements

To measure the variables of this research, established scales developed from previous research and verified by earlier studies were employed, also increasing the validity of this research (Pallant, 2016, p. 23).

For the variable *age*, respondents were asked to indicate their age in years. For the variable *gender*, respondents were asked to select either male, female, non-binary/third gender, or prefer not to say. The last demographic variable, *education*, was asked by selecting either “less than a high school degree”, “high school degree”, “bachelor’s degree”, “master’s degree”, “PhD or equivalent”, or “other”.

Political ideology was measured through three scales by researcher Mehrabian (1996) as cited in Flight & Coker (2022, p. 734). The variable political ideology was therefore split into liberal and conservative, authoritarian and libertarian. The ideology *liberal-conservative* was measured using a five-item, seven-point Likert scale with 1 (Strongly disagree) and 7 (Strongly agree), including items such as “I am politically more liberal than conservative”, and “I cannot see myself ever voting to elect conservative candidates” (Flight & Coker, 2022, p. 735). The item “Socialism has been proven to be a failed political ideology” was reverse coded since it was negatively worded in comparison to the other items of the scale.

The dimension of *authoritarian* political ideology was measured using a four-item, seven-point Likert scale with 1 (Strongly disagree) and 7 (Strongly agree), asking questions such as “I am willing to exchange my personal freedoms for greater security provided by government programs”, or “Our society can improve only with more government controls over individuals and businesses” (Flight & Coker, 2022, p. 735).

The dimension of *libertarian* political ideology was measured by employing a five-item, seven-point Likert scale with 1 (Strongly disagree) and 7 (Strongly agree), including questions like “Excessive taxation is a prime example of the way in which governments take away individual freedom”, and “Government programs discourage individual responsibility and achievement while fostering dependency and failure” (Flight & Coker, 2022, p. 735).

The *perceived message-sociopolitical cause congruence* was measured, and the scale by Becker-Olson, Cudmore, and Hill (2006), as adopted in Chu et al. (2023, pp. 1048-1049) was applied. The scale consists of 4 items and is a 7-point differential scale asking respondents how they think the brand’s advertising message fits the brand. The following items were used: “low fit/strong fit”, “dissimilar/similar”, “inconsistent/consistent”, and “not complementary/complementary” (Chu et al., 2023, pp. 1048-1049).

To measure *perceived advertisement authenticity*, the 7-item scale developed by Miller (2015, p. 194) was used. The respondents were asked to indicate on a scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree) how they perceived the advertisement. Questions include “This advertisement reflects originality”, “This advertisement accurately reflects the brand’s personality”, “The brand’s character

can be clearly seen in this advertisement”, or “I would expect to see this brand in this advertisement” (Miller, 2015, p. 194).

To measure *brand attitude*, the scale by Mitchell and Olson (1981) as cited in Miller (2015) was applied. Four items were used: “bad/good”, “poor quality/high quality”, “dislike/like” and “unpleasant/pleasant” (Miller, 2015, p. 188).

As the manipulation checks, respondents were asked to rate whether the marketing *message* was perceived as activist (“yes/no”) and whether they associated the *brand* with prior prosocial practice (“yes/no”).

4. Results

4.1 Data cleaning

The data was cleaned before the analysis to guarantee the reliability and integrity of the dataset (Pallant, 2016, p. 61). After conducting the survey through the platforms Qualtrics and Prolific, the data was exported into IBM's statistics Software SPSS. Overall, the total number of participants consisted of 165 respondents, out of which 22 did not complete the survey. Moreover, 5 respondents completed the survey in under 2 minutes, while the pretest showed a completion time of 4 to 7 minutes. Concludingly, the data cleaning resulted in 138 valid respondents for the final analysis. Moreover, some political ideology questions were found to have missing values. For those missing variables, there were no questions with more than 5% missing values. Therefore, as the other values for those participants were insightful for the research, those missing values were replaced with the series mean. In addition to data cleaning, dummy variables representing the manipulations of message activism (0 = no 1 = yes), the manipulation of brand activism (0 = no 1 = yes), as well as the manipulation of message-prior sociopolitical cause congruence (0 = incongruence, 1 = congruence) within the stimulus material were created to prepare the data for analysis.

4.2 Sample characteristics

Within the valid sample of 138 respondents, 70 (50.7%) participants were male, 65 (47.1%) were female, 2 (1.4%) identified as non-binary or male/female transgender, and one respondent (0.7%) preferred not to disclose their gender. Respondents were between the ages of 19 and 46, with an approximate average of 29 years ($M = 29.40$, $SD = 6.36$). The sample's level of education is as follows: 3.6 % of participants obtained less than a high school degree, 31.2% reported having a high school degree, 38.4% of respondents obtained a bachelor's degree, 23.2% a master's degree, 2.2% a PhD or equivalent, and 1.4% of respondents reported to obtain another degree. The summarized sample characteristics of respondents can be found in Table 4.1.

Moreover, the distribution of the four experimental conditions was as follows. Condition one, depicting an activist brand and activist slogan, was shown to 36 respondents. Condition two included an activist brand and a non-activist slogan, which 31 respondents saw. 36 participants saw the third condition, depicting a non-activist brand and an activist slogan. The fourth condition, showing a non-activist brand and a non-activist slogan was shown to 35 respondents.

Table 4.1*Descriptive statistics of participants (n = 138)*

Characteristic	Frequency in sample	Percentage of sample
Age		
19-25	33	25%
26-28	32	25%
29-34	28	25%
35-46	28	25%
Missing values	17	
Gender		
Male	70	50.7%
Female	65	47.1%
Non-binary/third gender	2	1.4%
Prefer not to say	1	0.7%
Education		
Less than Highschool degree	5	3.6%
High school degree	43	31.2%
Bachelor's degree	53	38.4%
Master's degree	32	23.2%
PhD or equivalent	3	2.2%
Other	2	1.4%

4.3 Factor Analysis and Test of Normality

All scales contained more than one item, therefore the sum was calculated and averaged to achieve the overall score in IBM SPSS (Pallant, 2016, p. 101). To test and validate the internal consistency of all scales, Cronbach's alpha was determined (Pallant, 2016, p. 116). An overview of all measures including reliabilities can be found in Table 4.2.

For the political ideology *liberal-conservative*, the scale had a mean of 3.32 ($SD = 1.26$), and a skewness of .42 ($SD = .21$), suggesting a clustering of scores on the left side of the graph, within lower values (Pallant, 2016, p. 73). Moreover, the scale had a negative kurtosis of -.27 ($SD = .41$), implying a comparatively flat value distribution (Pallant, 2016, p. 73). Additionally, Principal Components Analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation was conducted on the five items used to measure the construct of liberal-conservative ideology (Pallant, 2016, p.202). The analysis was based on eigenvalues greater than 1.00. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis, and Bartlett's test of sphericity indicated that correlations between items were sufficiently large for PCA, $KMO = .74$, $\chi^2(138, 10) = 413.45$, $p < .001$. The PCA revealed one component that explained

72.2% of the variance. The five items had factor loadings ranging from .68 to .89, with a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .87$, and since being higher than .80, considered very reliable (DeVellis, 2017, p. 136).

The scale for the political dimension *authoritarian* had a mean of 3.30 ($SD = 1.14$), a skewness of .19 ($SD = .21$), and a negative kurtosis of -.41 ($SD = .41$). This suggests clustering of scores on the left side of the graph, as well as a fairly flat distribution of values (Pallant, 2016, p. 73). The four items measuring authoritarianism were included in the factor analysis using PCA with Varimax rotation based on eigenvalues (>1.00), $KMO = .70$, $\chi^2(138, 6) = 201.51$, $p < .001$. The PCA revealed one component that explained 70.0% of the variance. The four items had factor loadings ranging from .74 to .82, with a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .81$, indicating high reliability.

The *libertarian* scale had a mean of 4.66 ($SD = 1.32$) and a skewness of -.39 ($SD = .21$), therefore indicating a cluster of values on the right side of the graph, on the higher end of scores (Pallant, 2016, p. 73). Moreover, a negative kurtosis of -.41 ($SD = .41$) was found, suggesting a flat distribution of values (Pallant, 2016, p. 73). The five items measuring libertarianism were entered into PCA with Varimax rotation based on eigenvalues (>1.00), $KMO = .85$, $\chi^2(138, 15) = 414.05$, $p < .001$. The PCA revealed one component that explained 73.4% of the variance. The six items had factor loadings ranging from .66 to .88. The scale achieved a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .87$, therefore also considered reliable.

The perceived *message-sociopolitical cause congruence* scale's mean was 3.91 ($SD = 1.65$), with skewness of -.29 ($SD = .21$), and a negative kurtosis of -.98 ($SD = .41$). These values indicate a clustering of scores at the right side of the graph, as well as a rather flat distribution of values (Pallant, 2016, p. 73). The four items measuring perceived message-sociopolitical cause congruence were entered into PCA with Varimax rotation based on eigenvalues (>1.00), $KMO = .85$, $\chi^2(138, 6) = 589.50$, $p < .001$. The PCA revealed one component that explained 93.0% of the variance, and factor loadings ranged from .92 to .95. Furthermore, the scale reached a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .95$, thus considered very reliable.

The scale for *perceived advertisement authenticity* had a mean of 3.58 ($SD = 1.36$), and a skewness of .01 ($SD = .21$), reflecting an almost normal symmetry of value distribution (Pallant, 2016, p. 72). Moreover, the scale had a negative kurtosis of -.57 ($SD = .41$), indicating a comparatively flat distribution of values (Pallant, 2016, p. 73). The seven items measuring perceived advertisement authenticity were entered into PCA with Varimax rotation based on eigenvalues (>1.00), $KMO = .83$, $\chi^2(138, 21) = 682.36$, $p < .001$. The PCA revealed one component that explained 87.0% of the variance. The seven items had factor loadings ranging from .68 to .92, with a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .91$, indicating high reliability.

The *brand attitude scale* had a mean of 1.62 ($SD = .43$). Moreover, the scale scored a skewness of -.51 ($SD = .21$), suggesting clustering of values on the higher end of scores, on the right-hand side of the graph, and a negative kurtosis of -1.50 ($SD = .41$), indicating a flat distribution (Pallant, 2016, p. 63). The four items measuring brand attitude were entered into PCA with Varimax

rotation based on eigenvalues (>1.00), $KMO = .79$, $\chi^2(138, 6) = 368.42$, $p < .001$. The PCA revealed one component that explained 89.0% of the variance. The four items had factor loadings ranging from .86 to .91, with a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .91$, indicating high reliability.

Since all scales scored a very high Cronbach's alpha above .80, a high reliability can be assumed (Pallant, 2016, p. 22).

Table 4.2

Measurements and Reliability Overview

Measure	<i>N</i>	<i>n</i> items	Cronbach's Alpha	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min.	Max.
Libertarian	138	6	.87	3.32	1.26	1.00	7.00
Authoritarian	138	4	.81	3.30	1.14	1.00	7.00
Liberal- Conservative	138	5	.87	4.66	1.32	1.40	7.00
Message-Cause Congruence	138	4	.95	3.91	1.65	1.00	7.00
Ad Authenticity	138	7	.91	3.58	1.36	1.00	7.00
Brand Attitude	138	4	.91	1.62	.43	1.00	2.00

4.4 Descriptive Statistics

A correlation analysis was conducted in SPSS to obtain preliminary insights into the direction and strength of the correlations between the variables employed in this study (Table 4.3), (Pallant, 2020, p. 150). Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. The interpretation of the direction and strength of the relationships between variables was conducted according to Cohen (1988, pp. 79-81).

Firstly, the relationship between perceived activist message and manipulated activist message was investigated. There was a moderate, positive correlation between the two variables, $r = .49$, $n = 138$, $p = .01$, with higher levels of perceived activist message associated with higher levels of manipulated activist message.

Moreover, the relationship between Ad Authenticity and perceived message-sociopolitical cause congruence had a strong, positive correlation, $r = .66$, $n = 138$, $p = .01$. This means that a high level of perceived ad authenticity indicates a high level of message-sociopolitical cause congruence.

Additionally, a strong positive correlation was found between the political ideology authoritarianism and libertarianism, $r = .58$, $n = 138$, $p = .01$, suggesting a high level of authoritarianism indicating a high level of libertarianism.

Furthermore, a strong positive correlation was found between the two variables liberal-conservative and libertarianism, $r = .51$, $n = 138$, $p = .01$, also suggesting respondents scoring high on conservatism indicating a high level of libertarianism.

Table 4.3*Pearson's correlations between measures (N = 138)*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Mean	SD
1. Activist Message (0=no 1=yes)	-											0.52	0.50
2. Activist Brand (0=no 1=yes)	.03	-										0.49	0.50
3. Message-Cause Congruence (0=incongruence 1=congruence)	-.03	.04	-									0.51	0.50
4. Perceived Activist Message	.49**	.10	.03	-								0.31	0.46
5. Perceived Activist Brand	.23**	.27**	.00	.39**	-							0.24	0.43
6. Message-Cause Congruence	-.38**	-.10	.01	-.19**	-.06	-						3.91	1.65
7. Ad Authenticity	-.25**	-.18*	.06	-.07	.02	.66**	-					3.58	1.36
8. Brand Attitude	-.21*	.12	-.04	-.07	-.05	.24**	.08	-				1.62	0.43
9. Libertarian	.01	.02	.02	.11	.07	-.13	-.00	-.04	-			3.32	1.26
10. Authoritarian	-.01	.04	-.03	.03	.00	-.13	.07	.15	-.58**	-		3.30	1.14
11. Liberal-Conservative	-.07	.01	.03	-.12	-.01	.09	-.01	.09	-.51**	.37**	-	4.66	1.32
12. Age	.10	.17	-.04	.05	.06	-.04	.07	-.09	.10	-.04	-.20*	29.40	6.36

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

4.5 Manipulation Check

Three manipulation checks were conducted to ensure the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation (Hauser et al., 2018, p. 2). Firstly, respondents were asked whether they perceived the *message* in the stimulus material as activist (0 = no 1 = yes). A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine respondents' association between manipulated activist message and perceived activist message. The chi-square test indicated a significant association between manipulation and perception of the message, $\chi^2(1, N = 138) = 30.73, p < .001$. This manipulation check implies that respondents significantly correctly identified the manipulated message within the stimulus material as activist or not activist. Despite the significant chi-square test result, a substantial number of participants (24.6%) who were exposed to the activist message falsely identified the message as non-activist. Comparably, for respondents exposed to the non-activist message, a smaller percentage of respondents (3.6%) falsely identified the message as activist (Table 4.4). Therefore, the manipulation check for message activism can be considered partially effective, but not entirely clear to all respondents.

Secondly, respondents were asked whether they perceived the brand and its prior prosocial practice as activist (0 = no 1 = yes). A chi-square test of independence was performed to once again examine respondents' association between manipulated activist brand and perceived activist brand. Results revealed a significant association between respondents' perception of the brand and manipulation, $\chi^2(1, N = 138) = 8.92, p < .003$, indicating a good fit between manipulation and perception of the brands. Once again, the significant chi-square test results can be considered as only moderately successful. A large number of respondents who were exposed to an activist brand did not perceive the brand as activist (31.2%). Respondents who were exposed to a non-activist brand falsely identified the brand's prosocial practice comparability less (6.5%) (Table 5).

Overall, 75 respondents (54.3%) did not correctly associate the combination of perceived message and brand activism within the stimulus material. 63 respondents (45.7%) correctly associate the combination of perceived message activism and brand activism within the stimulus material.

The last manipulation check assessed whether respondents perceived the advertisement's message-sociopolitical cause as congruent or incongruent. A t-test showed that there was no significant difference in perception between the two groups of congruent advertisements ($M = 3.93, SD = 1.71$) and incongruent advertisements ($M = 3.89, SD = 1.60, t(136) = .147, p = .475$).

Table 4.4

Distribution of manipulation check questions – Do you perceive the brand as activist? Do you perceive the message as activist?

		Perceived Activism	
		No	Yes
Activist Brand	No	44.9% (62)	6,5% (9)
	Yes	31.2% (43)	17.4% (24)
Activist Message	No	44.2% (61)	3.6% (5)
	Yes	24.6% (34)	27.5% (38)

4.6 Hypothesis testing

The add-on package Hayes PROCESS macro (version 2.16) was installed on SPSS to conduct the Hypothesis testing (Hayes, 2022, p. 414). To evaluate the direct and indirect impacts of message-cause congruence on brand attitude through ad authenticity as moderated by political ideology, a moderated mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro Model 7 in IBM SPSS, accounting for all three Hypothesis (Hayes, 2022, p. 414). The significance of the direct and indirect effects was evaluated by means of 5000 bootstrap samples to create bias-corrected confidence intervals of 95%. Message-sociopolitical cause congruence was included as the causal antecedent variable (X), causally influencing perceived ad authenticity (M), as well as the consequent variable brand attitude (Y). Moreover, the political ideology of liberal-conservative was entered as the moderator (W) (Hayes, 2022, p. 413).

First, the valid sample of 138 respondents was included. The data showed no significant influence from message-sociopolitical cause congruence on ad authenticity, $b = 1.13$, $p = .19$, therefore rejecting Hypothesis 1. The direct effect from message-cause congruence to ad authenticity was not moderated by the political ideology liberal-conservative, $b = -0.21$, $p = .24$, $\Delta R^2 = .01$. Concludingly, Hypothesis 2 was rejected. The effect of ad authenticity on brand attitude was insignificant, $b = 0.02$, $p = .365$, thus rejecting Hypothesis 3. The index of moderated mediation was not significant, $b = -.005$, 95% percentile CI [-0.22, 0.01], providing no evidence for a moderated mediation. For the full regression results see Table 4.6. A summary of the accepted or rejected hypotheses can be found in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5*Overview of Hypotheses*

	<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>Conclusion</i>
H1.	Congruence of the brand's message-sociopolitical cause is positively related to perceived advertisement authenticity.	Rejected
H2.	The positive effect of message-sociopolitical cause congruence on perceived advertisement authenticity is expected to be stronger for consumers with a liberal political ideology.	Rejected
H3.	Perceived advertisement authenticity is positively related to perceived brand attitude	Rejected

Additionally, the moderated mediation was tested for a *subgroup* of participants ($n = 63$). Namely, those who completed both manipulation checks for perceived activism of the brand and message successfully. The overall model was statistically significant, with 25% of the variance in ad authenticity being explained by message-sociopolitical cause congruence as the predictor $F(3, 59) = 6.67, p = .000, R^2 = .25$. The data showed a significant positive effect from message- sociopolitical cause congruence on ad authenticity, $b = 1.16, p = .001$. This result indicates that subgroup participants who saw congruent stimulus materials perceived the advertisements as significantly more authentic than participants receiving incongruent stimulus materials.

The direct effect from message-sociopolitical cause congruence to ad authenticity was moderated by liberal-conservative, $b = -0.70, p = .007, \Delta R^2 = .10$. The (negative) conditional effect from message-sociopolitical cause congruence on ad authenticity was the strongest for low values (- 1 SD) of liberalism-conservatism (liberal), $b = 2.09, p < .001$, it was weaker but still significant for medium values (M) of liberalism-conservatism, $b = 1.16, p < .001$, and not significant for high values (+1 SD) of liberalism-conservatism (conservative), $b = .23, p = .63$. This significant interaction means that a high level of message-sociopolitical cause congruence (vs. incongruence) within advertisements has a stronger effect on perceived ad authenticity for respondents with a more liberal (vs. conservative) political ideology. This finding was expected as it was hypothesized that the moderating effect would be stronger for respondents with liberal political ideology. Moreover, the finding is in line with the Social Identity Theory, stating that respondents with a liberal political ideology can identify themselves with liberal brand activism, leading to a higher perception of ad authenticity. Concludingly, Hypothesis 2 was accepted for the subgroup. However, it should be noted that within the subsample of participants who correctly identified the level of the activist message and brand, more participants received the manipulation without any activism. Therefore, the interpretation should be interpreted with caution due to possible sample bias.

The direct effect from ad Authenticity to brand attitude was not significant, $b = 0.05$, $p = .26$, thus rejecting Hypothesis 3 for the subgroup. The index of moderated mediation was not significant, $b = -0.03$, 95% percentile CI [-0.10, .03], providing no evidence for a moderated mediation. For the full regression results see Table 4.7.

4.7 Additional Analysis

Within the survey, two additional measures for assessing people's political ideology were added. In this section, analysis was repeated using the two other political ideology measures. First, to evaluate the direct and indirect impacts of message-sociopolitical cause congruence on brand attitude through ad authenticity as moderated by the dimension *authoritarian*, a moderated mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro Model 7 in IBM SPSS (Hayes, 2022, p. 414). The significance of the direct and indirect effects was evaluated by means of 5000 bootstrap samples to create bias-corrected confidence intervals of 95%. Message-sociopolitical cause congruence was included as the causal antecedent variable (X), causally influencing perceived ad authenticity (M), as well as the consequent variable brand attitude (Y). Moreover, the dimension of libertarianism was entered as the moderator (W) (Hayes, 2022, p. 413). First, the valid sample of 138 respondents was included.

The data showed no significant direct effect from message-sociopolitical cause congruence to ad authenticity, $b = -1.27$, $p = .08$. The effect from message-sociopolitical cause congruence to ad authenticity was moderated by authoritarianism, $b = 0.44$, $p = .04$, $\Delta R^2 = .03$. The conditional effect from message-sociopolitical cause congruence on ad authenticity was the strongest for high values (+ 1 SD) of authoritarianism, $b = .69$, $p = .04$, not significant for medium values (M) of authoritarianism, $b = .15$, $p = .52$, and also not significant for low values (- 1 SD) of authoritarianism, $b = -.40$, $p = .26$. Since the overall Model was insignificant $F(3, 134) = 1.90$, $p = .13$, $R^2 = .04$, the moderating effect is still insignificant. The direct effect from ad authenticity to brand attitude was not significant, $b = 0.02$, $p = .36$. The index of moderated mediation was not significant, $b = .01$, 95% percentile CI [-0.01, 0.05], providing no evidence for a moderated mediation. For the full regression results see Table 4.6.

The PROCESS macro Model 7 was additionally repeated for the subgroup of 63 participants. The subdimension authoritarianism reached significance for the overall model: $F(3, 59) = 4.59$, $p = .006$, $R^2 = .19$. Thus, 19% of the variance in ad authenticity was explained by message-sociopolitical cause congruence as the predictor. The data showed a significant effect from message-sociopolitical cause congruence to ad authenticity, $b = 1.15$, $p = .002$. The direct effect from message-sociopolitical cause congruence to ad authenticity was not moderated by authoritarianism, $b = 0.24$, $p = .49$, $\Delta R^2 = .01$. The effect from ad authenticity on brand attitude was not significant, $b = 0.05$, $p = 0.26$. The index of moderated mediation was not significant, $b = .01$, 95% percentile CI [-0.03, 0.10], providing no evidence for a moderated mediation. For the full regression results see Table 4.7.

Next, the subdimension *libertarian* was entered as the moderator (W) employing the PROCESS macro Model 7 (Hayes, 2022, p. 414). Once again, the analysis was first conducted for the whole valid sample of 138 respondents. The data showed an insignificant effect from message-sociopolitical cause congruence on ad authenticity, $b = 0.53, p = .43$. The direct effect from message-sociopolitical cause congruence to ad authenticity was not moderated by libertarianism, $b = -0.11, p = .56, \Delta R^2 = .002$. The effect from ad authenticity on brand attitude was not significant, $b = 0.02, p = .36$. The index of moderated mediation was not significant, $b = -0.002, 95\%$ percentile CI [-0.03, 0.01], providing no evidence for a moderated mediation. For the full regression results see Table 4.6.

The PROCESS macro Model 7 was additionally repeated for the subgroup of 63 participants. The overall model was statistically significant, with 17% of the variance in ad authenticity being explained by message-sociopolitical cause congruence as the predictor $F(3, 59) = 3.91, p = .013, R^2 = .17$. The data showed a significant effect from message-sociopolitical cause congruence on ad authenticity, $b = 1.23, p = .001$. The direct effect from message-sociopolitical cause congruence on ad authenticity was not moderated by libertarianism, $b = 0.25, p = .40, \Delta R^2 = .01$. The direct effect from ad authenticity on brand attitude was insignificant, $b = 0.05, p = .26$. The index of moderated mediation was not significant, $b = 0.01, 95\%$ percentile CI [-0.05, 0.06], providing no evidence for a moderated mediation. For the full regression results see Table 4.7.

Table 4.6*N = 138 Regression results for message-sociopolitical cause congruence to ad authenticity and for ad authenticity to brand attitude*

Variable	Ad Authenticity			Ad Authenticity			Ad Authenticity			Brand Attitude		
	MOD: Liberal-Conservative			MOD: Authoritarian			MOD: Libertarian					
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p-value</i>
Congruence	1.13	0.85	0.19	-1.27	0.71	0.08	0.53	0.66	0.43	-0.04	0.07	0.59
MOD	0.09	0.12	0.462	-.10	.13	0.46	0.05	0.13	0.71			
Congruence x MOD	-0.21	0.18	0.24	.44	.21	0.04	-0.11	0.19	0.56			
Ad Authenticity										0.02	0.03	0.36
Note. Overall Models	$R^2 = .01, F(3, 134) = .63, p = .60$			$R^2 = .04, F(3, 134) = 1.90, p = .13$			$R^2 = .01, F(3, 134) = .28, p = .84$			$R^2 = .01, F(2, 135) = .53, p = .59$		

Table 4.7*N = 63 Regression results for message-sociopolitical cause congruence to ad authenticity and for ad authenticity to brand attitude*

Variable	Ad Authenticity			Ad Authenticity			Ad Authenticity			Brand Attitude		
	MOD: Liberal-Conservative			MOD: Authoritarian			MOD: Libertarian					
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p-value</i>
Congruence	1.16	0.34	.001	1.15	0.36	0.002	1.23	0.36	0.001	-0.19	0.13	0.14
MOD	0.43	.21	.041	0.07	0.29	0.82	-0.25	0.25	0.32			
Congruence x MOD	-0.70	.25	.007	0.24	0.34	0.49	0.25	0.29	0.40			
Ad Authenticity										.05	.04	0.26
Note. Overall Models	$R^2 = .25, F(3, 59) = 6.67, p < .001$			$R^2 = .19, F(3, 59) = 4.59, p = .006$			$R^2 = .17, F(3, 59) = 3.91, p = .013$			$R^2 = .04, F(2, 60) = 1.30, p = .28$		

4.8 ANOVA

A between-subjects two-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the IV's message activism and brand activism on the DV ad authenticity. Likewise, the analysis also intends to test the interaction effect between message activism and brand activism on ad authenticity. For full results of the two-way ANOVA see Table 4.8.

Results revealed that the main effect for message activism indicated a significant difference in perceived ad authenticity between respondents who saw an activist message and respondents who saw no activist message, with message activism explaining 6.2% of the variance in ad authenticity, $F(1, 137) = 8.78, p = .004$. Analysis showed that respondents with no message activism scored higher on ad authenticity ($M = 3.94$) than respondents with message activism ($M = 3.26$). This finding suggests that the advertising messages may have elements perceived as less authentic. One explanation could be the chosen activist slogan in the stimulus material, which included gender-inclusive language. The personal interpretation of the slogan of respondents could differ from the intended one, where some may find it activist, but inauthentic, or not activist at all. This interpretation would be in line with the manipulation check, which showed a false association of many respondents exposed to the activist message.

As for the main effect of the activist brand, the result also indicated a significant difference in perceived ad authenticity between respondents who saw brand activism and respondents who saw no brand activism, with brand activism explaining 3.1% of the variance in ad authenticity $F(1, 137) = 4.27, p = .041$. Analysis revealed that respondents with no brand activism scored higher on ad authenticity ($M = 3.81$) than respondents with brand activism ($M = 3.34$). This finding could be the result of consumers' insufficient knowledge of the brand's prior prosocial practice, or consumer skepticism towards brands practicing activism in general.

Moreover, the interaction effect of message activism and brand activism on ad authenticity was not significant $F(1, 137) = 0.54, p = .462$. The insignificant interaction effect of the activist message and activist brand indicates that while both manipulations have a significant effect on consumers' perception of ad authenticity, their effects are neither amplified nor mitigated by one another.

Table 4.8*Means, Standard Deviations, and Two-Way ANOVA statistics for ad authenticity*

Variable	Activist Message		Activist Brand		ANOVA			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Effect	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	η^2
Ad Authenticity					MA	8.78*	1	0.062
Yes	3.26	1.45	3.34	1.18	BA	4.27**	1	0.031
No	3.94	1.16	3.81	1.48	MA x BA	0.54	1	0.004

Note. *N* = 138. ANOVA = analysis of variance; MA = Message Activism; BA = Brand Activism.

p* < .01 *p* < .05.

5. Discussion

This thesis aimed to answer the research question: *To what extent does the congruence of brands' activist marketing messaging and sociopolitical cause influence perceived advertisement authenticity and attitudes towards the brand?* Based on previous research on authentic brand activism, consumer perception, and political ideologies, three hypotheses were developed and tested employing an experimental survey design. The results from the survey experiment failed to support the proposed relationships, in contrast to theoretical expectations.

Results showed that for the valid sample (n=138), message-sociopolitical cause congruence did not significantly influence perceived ad authenticity. Moreover, the analysis could not find a significant moderating effect of political ideology on the relationship between message-sociopolitical cause congruence and ad authenticity. Lastly, ad authenticity had no significant effect on perceived brand authenticity. Concludingly, all three Hypotheses were rejected. To answer the research question, the congruence of brands' activist marketing messaging and sociopolitical cause did neither influence perceived advertisement authenticity nor attitude towards the brand.

The analysis was repeated for respondents who successfully identified the manipulation checks the level of activist message and activist brand (n = 63). For the subgroup, message-sociopolitical cause congruence had a significant positive effect on ad authenticity. Moreover, the effect of message-sociopolitical cause congruence on ad authenticity was moderated by consumers' political ideology. Additionally, the effect of ad authenticity on brand attitude was also insignificant for the subgroup respondents.

Next, additional analyses were performed to examine the effects of the political ideology dimensions of authoritarianism and libertarianism for message-sociopolitical cause congruence on ad authenticity. For the valid sample (n=138) and both dimensions of authoritarianism and libertarianism, the direct effect of message-sociopolitical cause congruence on ad authenticity was not significant. The moderation of authoritarianism was significant; however, the overall model was also insignificant. The moderation of libertarianism was not significant. No significant direct effect of ad authenticity on brand attitude was found for both authoritarianism and libertarianism.

For the subgroup (n=63), the same analysis was conducted for the dimensions of authoritarianism and libertarianism. Both authoritarianism and libertarianism showed a significant direct effect of message-sociopolitical cause congruence on ad authenticity. However, for both political ideologies, the moderation for the effect of message-sociopolitical cause congruence on ad authenticity as well as the direct effect of ad authenticity on brand attitude were insignificant.

Lastly, a two-way ANOVA was performed to compare the effects of message activism and brand activism, as well as the interaction effect of message activism and brand activism on ad authenticity. Results showed a significant main effect for both message activism and brand activism on ad authenticity. For both main effects, respondents exposed to an activist message and an activist brand reported lower ad authenticity compared to respondents exposed to no activist message and no

activist brand. The interaction effect between message activism and brand activism was not significant.

5.1 Theoretical implications

This thesis explored the effect of message-sociopolitical cause congruence on ad authenticity. Interestingly, the findings differed for the whole sample size and the subgroup of respondents who correctly identified the manipulation checks for both message activism and brand activism. While there was no significant relationship for the whole sample, the subgroup analysis found a positive significant effect of message-sociopolitical cause congruence on ad authenticity for all political ideology variables, supporting previous research (Vredenburg et al., 2020, pp. 450, 451). Thus, respondents who correctly associated the level of activist message and activist brand had a positive perception of the authenticity of the advertisement for congruent brand activism. Simultaneously, the ad was perceived as less authentic for incongruent brand activism by the subgroup. One interpretation of the difference in findings for the two respondent groups could be the importance of consumer brand awareness and a clear understanding of the brand activism messages.

Furthermore, the two-way ANOVA indicated a lower perceived authenticity score for both message activism and brand activism for the whole sample. This suggests that respondents did not perceive the chosen activism as authentic, underscoring the need to closer examine how brand activism advertisement cues are perceived by consumers. A question that brands and research should ask themselves includes how to transfer their brand's sociopolitical practices and activist message into an activist advertisement. A construct that could be considered in the context of congruent brand activism research is brand awareness. Brand awareness is the consumer's ability to recognize a brand in sufficient detail to allow them to make a purchase (Rossiter, 2014, p. 534). Brand awareness in the context of brand activism was absent for the brands that were chosen in this research, as proven by the high score of failed manipulation checks.

Next, this thesis aimed to close the research gap of ad authenticity in the context of brand activism research. No effect of ad authenticity on brand attitude was found across all analyses, contradictory to previous research (Miller, 2015, p. 190). Possibly, there are other factors contributing to consumers' attitude formation. Miller (2015, p. 178) suggests the inclusion of attitude towards the ad as a mediator on brand attitude, in addition to ad authenticity. Attitude towards the ad was found to have several antecedents in previous research, such as ad perception, ad credibility, and attitude toward the advertiser, which could all account for the perception of ad authenticity and its influence on brand attitude (Kim et al., 2012, pp. 87-88). Lastly, another construct that could account for the insignificant findings could be the construct of brand interest, instead of brand attitude, as brand attitudes were found to be stable perceptions from consumers, which are unlikely to be impacted by one single ad (Machleit et al., 1993, p. 79).

Lastly, political ideology was found to moderate the effect of message-sociopolitical cause congruence on ad authenticity for the subgroup, confirming previous research on the social identity theory. Research showed that liberal in-group members feel more connected to brand activism that is close to their beliefs, as opposed to out-group members (Neuman, 2011, p. 285). The findings support this theory, as liberals in the subsample did perceive the liberal brand activism ad as more authentic compared to conservative respondents. Furthermore, studies suggest that when consumers feel connected to a brand, they are also more inclined to favorable perceptions, such as perceived authenticity (Hauptman, 2023, pp. 1250, 1252), which could explain the findings. Moreover, liberal brand activism is more prevalent than conservative brand activism, emphasizing social change as compared to traditional values or rejection of inequality versus acceptance of it. This could potentially explain why conservatives may not respond as strongly toward the measures (Hauptman, 2023, p. 1252).

As the political ideologies authoritarianism and libertarianism had no significant moderating effect on the effect of message-sociopolitical cause congruence on brand attitude, it can be assumed that they do not play a big role as additional political ideology variables. This supports prior research that mainly employed the scale from liberal to conservative to assess consumers' political ideologies in the context of brand activism (Haupt et al., 2023, p. 1252; Flight & Coker, 2022, p. 733).

5.2 Practical implications

In a landscape of polarizing sociopolitical topics, marketers must decide whether and how to engage in brand activism efforts. On the one hand, brand activism can offer great potential as a differentiation strategy and for brands to remain relevant to their target audience (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018, p. 468). On the other hand, brand activism must be carefully considered due to risks such as perceived inauthenticity, possible boycotts, and other negative responses from consumers (Neureiter & Bhattacharya, 2021, pp. 615-617; Zhou & Dong, 2022, p. 178). As a result, this study provides managerial implications on how to participate in brand activism effectively.

First, when communicating brand activism, brands must pay attention to their message-sociopolitical cause congruence to foster positive perceptions and avoid “woke washing” allegations (Vredenburg et al., 2020, pp. 449, 450; Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019, p. 424). As this research showed in the partially failed manipulation check for brand activism (Do you perceive the brand as activistic?), a high level of brand awareness is one important factor for consumers to potentially understand the activist intentions of the brand. To do so, the brand's core values and beliefs should be examined as they are the foundation of brand activism. Moreover, as underscored by the partially failed manipulation check of message activism (Do you perceive the message as activistic?), a clear understanding of the activist message is important to avoid confusion.

Additionally, one useful guideline for brands that consider participation in brand activism is the typology of brand activism that was presented in the theoretical framework. Especially brands

within the sector of silent brand activism should consider communicating their already existing efforts, to fully capitalize on the potential (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 455). Managerial implications for those brands could be a focus on transparent communication of their already existing prosocial practices, in the form of sustainability reports or the implementation of their practices in marketing campaigns. The goal should be to make the silent efforts visible to their audience and to foster a stronger connection with consumers who value prosocial practices.

Next, marketing managers should consider segmentation of their target audience according to political ideologies to leverage in-group associations (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 455; Flight & Coker, 2022, p. 738). For example, for brands where the core values fit a liberal political ideology, liberal consumers will be more likely to respond positively to brand activism efforts. Therefore, brands can foster strong connections with target audiences sharing similar values and beliefs. However, brands need to recognize that brand activism efforts can potentially offend out-group members (Hydock et al., 2020, p. 1148; Neureiter & Bhattacharya, 2021, p. 617). Concludingly, marketing managers must weigh the advantages against the risks of brand activism and communicate sensitively.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

There are certain limitations to this research, some of which may hold opportunities for future research. Firstly, the two manipulation checks for perceived activist message and activist brand failed partially: 53.4% of overall respondents had incorrect associations, thus failing to recognize the stimuli connected to the manipulations. It is interesting to note that respondents who received the activist message and activist brand failed the manipulation checks significantly more often than respondents who saw no activist material. To ensure successful interpretations of stimulus materials, it is crucial for future research to include brand awareness or brand familiarity as relevant factors for manipulation checks. Moreover, results of the two-way ANOVA showed that the advertisement cues for activist brand and activist message were both perceived as less authentic than non-activist ad cues. This leads to the conclusion that brand activism ad cues were not sufficiently clear for some respondents. In the future, stimulus materials should be pretested to encourage consumers' clear recognition of activist stances in the advertisements. This could be achieved by utilizing more extreme brand activism examples to test the effects of higher levels of brand activism on perceived ad authenticity and brand attitude. Additionally, it would be beneficial to place brand activism in a broader context such as LGBTQ+, sustainability, or racial equality topics. Prior research indicated that in different experimental conditions, respondents could have different reactions toward brand activism advertisements (McGraw and Warren, 2010, p. 1144).

Secondly, this study could not show a significant effect of ad authenticity on brand attitude throughout all analyses, urging future research to investigate more. It might be necessary to shift the focus of future research to contributing factors to the constructs of ad authenticity and brand attitude. Based on prior research, factors could include ad perception, ad credibility, attitude toward the

advertiser, and brand interest. A lack of research on ad authenticity in the context of brand activism prevails, while current studies focus on consumers' perceptions of brand authenticity. Thus, this thesis urges future studies to further explore ad authenticity in brand activism and examine questions such as: Will brands that are perceived as authentic automatically score high on ad authenticity? Thirdly, a certain sampling bias was present, limiting the generalizability of findings, as a relatively small subgroup of participants correctly associated the manipulation checks.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Factor analysis

Table A.1

Measures, factor loadings, and Cronbach alphas

Construct	Items	Factor Loadings
Libertarian	($\alpha=.87$) (1= strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree)	
	1. Excessive taxation is a prime example of the way in which governments take away individual freedom.	0.88
	2. Government programs discourage individual responsibility and achievement while fostering dependency and failure.	0.79
	3. Individuals create wealth and governments take it away to promote the interests of those in control.	0.83
	4. I am entitled only to the fruits of my own labor; not to that of others passed on to me through government handouts.	0.71
	5. As a government get bigger and more powerful, its citizens become poorer and less free.	0.66
Authoritarian	($\alpha=.81$) (1= strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree)	
	1. I am willing to exchange my personal freedoms for greater security provided by government programs.	0.82
	2. Our government is not active enough; we need more laws and government programs to regulate and improve our lives and dealings with each other.	0.74
	3. For me, government-imposed social order and security are more important than individual freedom.	0.82
Liberal-Conservative	($\alpha=.87$) (1= strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree)	
	1. I am politically more liberal than conservative.	0.68
	2. I cannot see myself ever voting to elect conservative candidates.	0.84
	3. Socialism has many advantages over capitalism.	0.84
	4. On balance, I lean politically more to the left than to the right.	0.89

	5. Socialism has been proven to be a failed political ideology *	0.79
Message-Sociopolitic Cause Congruence	($\alpha=.95$) (1-7)	
	1. low fit/strong fit	0.95
	2. dissimilar/similar	0.92
	3. inconsistent/consistent	0.94
	4. not complementary/complementary	0.95
Ad Authenticity	($\alpha=.91$) (1= strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree)	
	1. This advertisement reflects originality.**	-
	2. This advertisement accurately reflects the brand's personality.	0.80
	3. The brand's character can be clearly seen in this advertisement.	0.68
	4. This is classic advertising of the brand.	0.88
	5. This advertisement reminds me of other advertisements of the brand.	0.82
	6. I would expect to see this brand in this advertisement.	0.88
	7. This is a typical advertisement of the brand.	0.92
Brand Attitude	($\alpha=.91$) (1-2)	
	1. bad/good	0.91
	2. poor quality/high quality	0.86
	3. dislike/like	0.87
	4. unpleasant/pleasant	0.89
*item has been reverse coded		
**item has been dropped		

Appendix B: German Survey

B.1 Introduction and informed consent

Liebe TeilnehmerInnen,

vielen Dank, dass Sie an dieser Umfrage teilnehmen! Dieser Fragebogen wird nicht mehr als 10 Minuten in Anspruch nehmen und befasst sich mit Werbung, die gesellschaftspolitische Themen wie Umwelt, Politik oder Soziales anspricht. Unternehmen stehen heute vor der Frage, ob sie in ihrer Werbung Stellung zu einem gesellschaftspolitischen Thema beziehen oder lieber neutral bleiben sollen. Mit Ihrer Teilnahme an dieser Umfrage leisten Sie einen wichtigen Beitrag, um Erkenntnisse über die Reaktionen der Verbraucher zu gewinnen, die zur Gestaltung künftiger Werbekampagnen beitragen können.

Die Umfrage wird im Rahmen einer Masterarbeit an der Erasmus-Universität Rotterdam erstellt:

- Bitte beantworten Sie jede Frage sorgfältig und ehrlich.
- Es gibt keine richtigen oder falschen Antworten, da es sich um Ihre persönliche Meinung handelt!
- Ihre Antworten werden absolut vertraulich und anonym behandelt.
- Die gesammelten Daten werden nur zu Forschungszwecken verwendet, sicher gespeichert und nach Abschluss der Studie gelöscht.
- Wenn Sie sich jetzt entscheiden, nicht an dieser Studie teilzunehmen, hat dies keine Auswirkungen auf Sie. Wenn Sie sich während des Ausfüllens des Fragebogens entscheiden, Ihre Teilnahme abzubrechen, hat dies ebenfalls keine Auswirkungen auf Sie. Sie können Ihre Teilnahme ohne Angabe von Gründen beenden.

Wenn Sie Fragen zu dieser Umfrage haben, können Sie sich gerne an die Forscherin wenden: Kaija Hosie, 659517kh@student.eur.nl

Nochmals vielen Dank für Ihre Teilnahme!

Mit freundlichen Grüßen,

Kaija Hosie

Q1: Ich verstehe, dass meine Teilnahme an dieser Studie freiwillig und anonym ist. Meine Antworten werden nur zu Forschungszwecken verwendet.

- a) Ich stimme der Teilnahme zu
- b) Ich stimme der Teilnahme nicht zu

B.2 Demographic Questions

Q2: Wie alt sind Sie?

Q3: Mit welchem Geschlecht identifizieren Sie sich?

- a) Männlich
- b) Weiblich
- c) Nicht-binär / drittes Geschlecht
- d) Andere
- e) Ich möchte lieber nichts sagen

Q4: Welches ist der höchste Bildungsabschluss, den Sie absolviert haben?

- a) Weniger als ein Abiturabschluss
- b) Abitur oder gleichwertiger Schulabschluss
- c) Bachelor
- d) Master oder MBA
- e) Dokortitel oder gleichwertig
- f) Andere, nämlich

B.3 Political Ideology Questions

B.3.1 Libertarian

Q5: Bitte bewerten Sie, inwieweit Sie jeder der folgenden Aussagen zu Ihrer **politischen Einstellung** zustimmen oder nicht zustimmen (von „Stimme gar nicht zu“ bis „Stimme voll und ganz zu“)

- a) Übermäßige Besteuerung ist ein Paradebeispiel für die Art und Weise, wie Regierungen dem Einzelnen die Freiheit nehmen.
- b) Staatliche Programme entmutigen Eigenverantwortung und Leistung, während sie Abhängigkeit und Versagen begünstigen.
- c) Der Einzelne schafft Wohlstand, und die Regierungen entziehen ihn, um die Eigeninteressen der Regierenden zu fördern.
- d) Ich habe nur Anspruch auf die Früchte meiner eigenen Arbeit; nicht auf die der anderen, die mir durch staatliche Zuwendungen zugute kommen.
- e) Je größer und mächtiger eine Regierung wird, desto ärmer und weniger frei werden ihre Bürger.
- f) Meine ideale Regierung wäre sehr klein und würde nur einige wesentliche Aufgaben erfüllen.

B.3.2 Authoritarian

Q6: Bitte bewerten Sie, inwieweit Sie jeder der folgenden Aussagen zu Ihrer **politischen Einstellung** zustimmen oder nicht zustimmen (von „Stimme gar nicht zu“ bis „Stimme voll und ganz zu“)

- a) Ich bin bereit, meine persönlichen Freiheiten für mehr Sicherheit durch staatliche Programme einzutauschen.
- b) Unsere Regierung ist nicht aktiv genug; wir brauchen mehr Gesetze und Regierungsprogramme, um unser Leben und unseren Umgang miteinander zu regeln und zu verbessern.
- c) Für mich sind staatlich verordnete soziale Ordnung und Sicherheit wichtiger als individuelle Freiheit.
- d) Unsere Gesellschaft kann sich nur verbessern, wenn der Staat mehr Kontrolle über Einzelpersonen und Unternehmen ausübt.

B.3.3 Liberal-Conservative

Q7: Bitte bewerten Sie, inwieweit Sie jeder der folgenden Aussagen zu Ihrer **politischen Einstellung** zustimmen oder nicht zustimmen (von „Stimme gar nicht zu“ bis „Stimme voll und ganz zu“)

- a) Politisch bin ich eher liberal als konservativ.
- b) Ich kann mir nicht vorstellen, jemals konservative Kandidaten zu wählen.
- c) Der Sozialismus hat viele Vorteile gegenüber dem Kapitalismus.
- d) Im Großen und Ganzen neige ich politisch eher zur Linken als zur Rechten.
- e) Es ist erwiesen, dass der Sozialismus eine gescheiterte politische Ideologie ist.

B.4 Stimulus material for the four experimental conditions

Stellen Sie sich vor, Sie stoßen auf diese Online-Werbung für ein Shampoo der Marke Lush/Axe.

Nehmen Sie sich bitte eine Minute Zeit und lesen Sie die Anzeige aufmerksam durch. Es folgen Fragen zu dieser Online-Anzeige.

Die Anzeige wird während der Umfrage nicht noch einmal angezeigt.



B.5 Questions measuring message-sociopolitical cause congruence, ad authenticity, and brand attitude

Note. Based on the experimental group, each participant only saw the question text corresponding to the group's message and brand.

Q8: Wie gut passt die Werbebotschaft "Dein Neues Shampoo"/„Für echte Männer*Innen“ zu der Marke Lush/Axe? (von 1-7)

- a) niedrige Übereinstimmung - hohe Übereinstimmung
- b) unähnlich – ähnlich
- c) unstimmig – stimmig
- d) nicht kompatibel - kompatibel

Q9: Wie haben Sie die Werbung der Marke Lush/Axe wahrgenommen? (von „Stimme gar nicht zu“ – „Stimme voll und ganz zu“)

- a) Diese Anzeige spiegelt Originalität wider.
- b) Diese Anzeige spiegelt die Persönlichkeit der Marke treffend wider.
- c) Der Charakter der Marke ist in dieser Anzeige deutlich zu erkennen.
- d) Dies ist eine klassische Werbung für die Marke.
- e) Diese Anzeige erinnert mich an andere Anzeigen der Marke.
- f) Ich hätte erwartet, diese Marke in dieser Werbung zu sehen.
- g) Dies ist eine typische Werbung für die Marke.

Q10: Wie würden Sie Ihre Einstellung zur Marke Lush beschreiben?

- a) schlecht - gut
- b) niedrige Qualität - hohe Qualität
- c) Gefällt mir nicht - Gefällt mir
- d) unangenehm - angenehm

B.6 Manipulation Check questions

Q11: Empfinden Sie die Botschaft „Dein neues Shampoo“/“Für echt Männer*Innen“ als aktivistisch?

- a) Ja
- b) Nein

Q12: Nehmen Sie die Marke Lush/Axe als gesellschaftspolitisch engagiert wahr?

- a) Ja
- b) Nein

B.7 Debriefing

Herzlichen Dank für Ihre Teilnahme!

Sie helfen mir, mehr über die Berücksichtigung gesellschaftspolitischer Themen in der Werbung zu erfahren. In meiner Forschung möchte ich messen, wie Markenaktivismus, der gendergerechte Sprache verwendet, die Einstellungen der Verbraucher beeinflusst. Deshalb wurden Sie nach dem Zufallsprinzip einer von vier Gruppen zugeteilt, die entweder einen Werbespot ohne Markenaktivismus oder einen Werbespot mit Markenaktivismus, der gendergerechte Sprache anspricht, von den Marken Lush oder Axe zeigten.

Sie haben nun das Ende des Fragebogens erreicht. Wenn Sie weitere Fragen zum Inhalt, zum Zweck oder zur Forschungsethik dieser Umfrage haben, wenden Sie sich bitte an mich unter 659517kh@student.eur.nl.

Nochmals herzlichen Dank für Ihre Zeit und Mühe!

Appendix C: English Survey

C.1 Introduction & Consent

Dear Participant,

Thank you for participating in this survey! This questionnaire will not take more than 10 minutes and is about advertisements addressing sociopolitical topics such as environmental, political or social topics. Today, companies are struggling with whether to take a stand on a sociopolitical issue in their advertising or 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's thesis at Erasmus University Rotterdam; therefore:

- Please answer each question carefully and honestly.
- There are no right or wrong answers, as it is your personal opinion!
- Your responses will be kept completely confidential and anonymous.
- The collected data will be used for research purposes only and 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: Kaija Hosie, 659517kh@student.eur.nl

Thank you again for your participation!

With kind regards,

Kaija Hosie

Q1: I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and anonymous. My answers will be used for research purposes only.

- a) I agree to participate
- b) I do not agree to participate

C.2 Demographic Questions

Q2: How old are you?

Q3: What gender do you identify with?

- a) Male
- b) Female
- c) Non-binary / third gender
- d) Other
- e) Prefer not to say

Q4: What is the highest educational level that you have completed?

- a) Less than a high school degree
- b) High school degree or equivalent
- c) Bachelor's degree
- d) Master's degree or MBA
- e) PhD or equivalent
- f) Other, namely

C.3 Political Ideology Questions

Q5-Q7: Please rate the level to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements regarding your political view

For English political ideology questions, see Appendix A

C.4 Stimulus material for the four experimental conditions

Imagine that you come across this online advertisement for shampoo by the brand Lush.

Please take a minute to take a look at it and read the advertisement carefully. Questions will follow concerning this online advertisement.

The advertisement will not be viewed again during the survey.



C.5 Questions measuring message-sociopolitical cause congruence, ad authenticity, and brand attitude

Q8-Q10: For English questions, see Appendix A

C.6 Manipulation Check questions

Note. Based on the experimental group, each participant only saw the question text corresponding to the group's message and brand.

Q11: Do you perceive the message “Dein neues Shampoo”/ “Für echt Männer*innen” as activistic?

- a) Yes
- b) No

Q12: Do you perceive the brand Lush as committed to sociopolitical activism?

- a) Yes
- b) No

C.7 Debriefing

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 brand activism addressing gender-inclusive language affects consumers' attitudes. Therefore, you were randomly assigned to one of four groups that showed either an ad with no brand activism or an ad with brand activism addressing gender-inclusive language, by the brands Lush or Axe.

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 get in touch with me at 659517kh@student.eur.nl.

Thank you again very much for your time and effort!

Appendix D: Declaration Use of Generative AI Tools

Student Information

Name: Kaija Hosie

Student ID: 659517

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: Dr. Serge Rijdsdijk

Date: 26.06.2024

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- ~~Writing improvements, including~~ grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature:



Date of Signature: 26.06.2024