B lab
Reports

Special Issue
Innovative Brand Management III

Special Issue

Innovative Brand Management III

Carsten Baumgarth (Ed.)

Preface

Brand management is, and remains, an exciting research and management topic. Technological, social and legal changes lead to new challenges and research topics. Even if these sometimes disruptive and continuous changes are difficult for brand management to master, it is exciting for researchers because there are always new and exciting research questions.

This special issue "Innovative Band Management III" contains four papers covering a broad spectrum of "new" topics.

However, what makes the contributions particularly interesting is that the authors are all master students of the HWR Berlin who wrote the articles in the summer semester of 2022. As part of the course "Advanced Brand Management", twelve groups chose research questions and worked on scientific papers. This was done under my supervision. At the beginning of the course, students were taught the basics of scientific publishing (e.g. journal rankings, databases, double-blind review process, structured abstract, IMRaD: Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussions structure, etc.). Afterwards, guest researchers (Prof. Dr. Cleopatra Veloutsou/University of Glasgow, Prof. Dr. Oriol Iglesias/ESADE, Barcelona, Prof. Dr. Philip Rauschnabel/Bundeswehruniversität München) and our team (Cosima Kaibel, Alexandra Kirkby, Prof. Dr. Carsten Baumgarth) presented current brand research projects. Based on this input and a call for papers, the students developed an own research topic in small groups, conducted a literature search and derived hypotheses and/or models. Here is a list of all papers and contributors:

- Valentina Maurer & Sarah Plastrotmann: Why so shy? Brand conspicuousness of slow fashion*
- Nicole Feger, Anouk Lauber & Mark Verderosa: Don't BALE on me if you don't mean it – Brand Activist Limited Editions' Impact on Brand Attitude
- Federica Colombini, Emilia Torres Rios & Lisa Winkler: The effect of Gender-Inclusive Communication on Brand Trust
- Antonia Krüger, Jana Rittmeier & Deborah Shaheen: Brand-Influencer Fit for Sustainable Products – Effects of brand fit and expertise on brand attirudes
- Matilde Dalprà, Anna Potthoff & Thuy Duong Hoang: Brand Personality & Brand Trust in the Sharing Economy
- Alisa Class, Sandra Kieckhöfel & Monique Krüger: The opposite sex: A guarantee for brand coolness?*

- Anna-Lena Nix, Deborah Lausch & Lisa-Mari Vollmer: The Effect of Art Infusion on a company's crisis management
- Katharina Kröger, Laura Marie Isabell Münchrath & Ben Wenner: Generation Z also known as Generation Skepticism? Investigating intergenerational differences in their attitude towards (green) marketing measures
- Irene Reichert, Mara Marie Drzimalla & Anne Böthig: Is brand activism boosting employer brand attractiveness?*
- Michelle Marie Basak & Anne-Pauline Piper: Get woke, go broke?! Co-created vs. company centered brand activism on Instagram within the fashion industry*
- Paula Ludwig & Pauline Meyer: An analysis of Influencer Slow Fashion Brand
- Milan Bak, Laura Giuliana Schlüter & Dennis Volmer: Consumer's attitude towards companies' brand activism on Ukrainian war

* selected paper for this Special Issue.

All topics are very interesting and shows that for young researchers brand topics with a link to the society and/or environment are more relevant than "classical" brand topics (11 of 12 papers).

After a further input phase on empirical master techniques, the students developed a design and conducted an empirical study. The implemented approaches ranged from case studies, social listening and standardized consumer surveys to experiments. The papers were then reviewed by a peer review with the help of a review form. Based on this feedback, the groups improved their contributions and submitted the final versions. The seminar ended with a poster session of all twelve papers. Based on the quality of the contributions, four papers were selected for this special issue "Innovative Brand Management III". What is remarkable about these is, that despite time (only 3 months!), financial, and methodological limitations, students succeeded in developing, carrying out, evaluating and documenting good studies within about four months.

I am convinced that this very labor-intensive teaching format for lecturers and students has brought great learning progress and represents a perfect preparation for the master's thesis. I'm very proud of the whole master group and I wish you, the reader, an inspiring read. If you have any questions or feedback, please do not hesitate to contact me as the editor or the students.

Berlin, November 2022   Prof. Dr. Carsten Baumgarth

Content

List of Contributors

Carsten Baumgarth

Carsten Baumgarth is Professor of Brand Management at the Berlin School of Economics and Law. He has published around 450 publications with focuses on brand management, B-to-B Marketing, arts & brands and empirical research. His research has repeatedly received national and international Best Paper Awards.

Michelle Basak

Michelle Basak is currently pursuing her double degree in International Management at HWR Berlin and ESCE Paris. After obtaining her bachelor's degree at HWR, where she specialized in Marketing, she is now studying Digital Marketing Management at the partner university in Paris and expects to graduate in autumn 2023. She gained her first professional experience in the fashion and IT industry, focusing on Sustainability Management.

Anne Böthig

Having studied Business Communication Management, Anne Böthig earned her bachelor's degree at the University of Applied Sciences in Berlin. She is currently pursuing a degree in Marketing Management and is in the third semester of her master's program at the School of Economics and Law in Berlin. She is expected to graduate in Summer 2023.

Alisa Class

Alisa Class graduated in Business Administration and Media Management and will soon complete her master's degree in Marketing Management at the Berlin School of Economics and Law. She recently moved to Italy for a semester abroad to study Psychology at the University of Padova.

Mara Drzimalla

Mara Drzimalla earned her bachelor's degree in Business Communication Management at the University of Applied Sciences in Berlin. She is currently studying Marketing Management and is in her third semester of the master's degree at the School of Economics and Law in Berlin. She is expected to graduate in Summer 2023.

Sandra Kieckhöfel

Sandra Kieckhöfel completed her Bachelor of Arts in Public and Nonprofit Management with a focus on Marketing at the Berlin School of Economics and Law in 2019. She is currently completing the last semester of her master's degree in Marketing Management at the Berlin School of Economics and Law.

Monique Krüger

Monique Krüger earned her bachelor's degree in Business Administration at the Berlin School of Economics and Law as part of the dual study programme. She is currently studying Marketing Management and is completing the third semester of her master's degree. Before she starts writing her thesis in the last semester, she opted for an exchange semester at the International Business School in Budapest until 2023. She is therefore expected to graduate in the summer of 2023.

Valentina Maurer

Valentina Maurer earned her bachelor's degree in Business Communication at the Berlin School of Applied Sciences for Engineering and Economics in Berlin in 2021. Currently, she is studying Marketing Management in her third semester of the master's degree at the School of Economics and Law (HWR) in Berlin. At the moment she's gaining experiences during a semester abroad in Georgia. She is expected to graduate in spring 2023.

Anne-Pauline Piper

Anne-Pauline Piper is currently studying International Management as part of the double degree program at HWR Berlin and ESCE Paris and is now specializing in her Masters in Luxury Marketing and a focus on fashion where she already gained professional experiences during her two internships. She is expecting to graduate from ESCE in Paris Summer of 2023.

Sarah Plastrotmann

Sarah Plastrotmann earned her bachelor's degree in Business Communication at the University of Applied Sciences for Engineering and Economics in Berlin. As part of her master's degree in Marketing Management at the School of Economics and Law in Berlin, she is currently doing an exchange semester at the Peruvian University of Applied Sciences in Lima. She is expected to graduate in March 2024.

Irene Reichert

Irene Reichert earned her bachelor's degree in Marketing at the IU International University of Applied Sciences in Berlin. She is currently studying Marketing Management and is in her third semester of the master's degree at the School of Economics and Law in Berlin. She is expected to graduate in Summer 2023.

Why so shy?
Brand conspicuousness of slow fashion

Valentina Maurer, Sarah Plastrotmann

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the effect of brand conspicuousness of slow fashion products on the attitude towards the slow fashion brand, assuming that the sustainable consumer awareness has a moderating effect.

Design/Methodology/Approach – An online experimental design with two groups consisting of 84 German students was chosen to measure the effect of brand conspicuousness on the attitude towards the brand with the variable of brand conspicuousness being manipulated.

Findings – The results don't show significant mean differences between the two groups so that the hypotheses are rejected. Brand conspicuousness has no effect on consumers' attitude towards slow fashion brands. Concurrently sustainable consumer awareness has no moderating effect. This implicit that the attitude towards slow fashion brands is not influenced by conspicuous branding what consequently does not lead to a less positive brand attitude.

Research limitations/implications – Usage of a fictions brand; small sample size of sustainable consumers; biased self-assessment of sustainable behavior.

Originality/Value – So far, brand conspicuousness is mainly examined in connection with luxury brands. This paper is the first empirical study that tests the relation between brand conspicuousness and slow fashion brands.

1   Introduction

Sustainability within the fashion industry has become more important over the last years (Grazzini et al., 2021) since the impact that this industry has on the environment has been exposed to the public (Moretto et al., 2018). Especially young people tend to care more about the social responsibility and environmental sustainability of companies which leads to a change in consumer behavior (Sicoli et al., 2019). This change can also be seen in the willingness of consumers to boycott companies that don't act responsible towards the environment (Mohr et al., 2001). Further it can be seen in the impact that Cooperate Social Responsibility (CSR) actions, so the transparent and ethical behaviors concerning the impact of company's decisions and activities on society and the environment (Schneider, 2015), have on consumers' attitude towards the brand (Janssen et al., 2016). That is why companies with-in the fashion industry must rethink and improve their value chain (Sicoli et al., 2019). This change in awareness of environmental impact of fashion offers opportunities for new business models like the slow fashion movement, that concentrates on different aspects to slow down the fashion industry and to make it more sustainable (Jung and Jin, 2014).

At the same time, the sustainability trend causes social pressure for consumers regarding the sustainability of product choices (Aagerup and Nilsson, 2016). In addition, it offers an opportunity for consumers to signal their status (Bennett and Chakravarti, 2009; Castagna et al., 2022; Griskevicius et al., 2010), which can be seen as an indirect way to provide others with information about oneself without having to directly state that information (Bennett and Chakravarti, 2009).

Even though the fulfilment of status signaling can be seen in purchasing sustainable products, slow fashion brands typically brand their products rather inconspicuously, as demonstrated in figure 1 through the comparison of three German slow fashion brands.

Sweatshirt Givn	Hoodie ArmedAngels	Hoodie Lanius
Source: Sweatshirt HEDI aus Bio-Baumwolle - Butter o. D.	*Source: Sweathoodie ANJANAA in undyed von o. D.*	*Source: Feminines Kapuzensweatshirt	Bio-Baumwolle o. D.*

Figure 1. Comparison of three similar products of German slow fashion brands

Although most companies have reasons why they choose an inconspicuous over a conspicuous branding (Han et al., 2010), conspicuous branding of slow fashion might address con-sumers' need of status signaling. Therefore, slow fashion brands could improve the consumers' attitude towards the brand by making its' products more appealing to consumers because conspicuous branded products would give them a chance to overtly present their sustainable clothing choice. Based on the mentioned findings, this paper aims to examine the effect of brand conspicuousness of slow fashion on the consumers' attitude towards the brand.

2   Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

2.1   Slow Fashion

The current fashion industry is still dominated by fast fashion companies, but also these companies are trying to become more sustainable, for example through creating more sustainable collections or increasing their transparency concerning production methods and materials (Goldstone, 2022). Fast fashion is known for just-in-time production to make overconsumption of fashion trends possible which leads to environmental and social problems such as pollution and exploitation (Pookulangara and Shephard, 2013). Facing these challenges, in the last years slow fashion brands emerged as part of the so-called "slow culture movement" (Fletcher, 2010). Slow fashion has the aim to implement sustainability in the fashion industry based on different values and goals, clearly rejecting the business- and production-as-usual of fast fashion. It is characterized by inter alia small-scale production, traditional craft techniques, local materials and markets as well as long-lasting fashion (ibid.). Jung and Jin (2014) define five dimensions of slow fashion: Localism, equity, authenticity, exclusivity and

functionality. Localism means that products are produced in a local area with local resources. Equity is understood as a fair behavior towards producers and employees throughout the value chain. Authenticity assures a high quality of the products enabled through skilled production. Exclusivity is related to a relatively small production size which makes the products more unique. Functionality is supposed to be achieved by prolonging the product life cycle through timeless designs and the already mentioned high quality of products (ibid.). But not only the fashion industry itself is rethinking its' business models, also consumers are reflecting and changing their behavior (Sicoli et al., 2019). Being sustainable and wearing slow fashion is even connected with (self) esteem and status: Castagna et al. (2022) found out that people who are shopping second hand or slow fashion clothes feel as if they are doing something environmentally friendly, are willing to express positive word of mouth and that owners of slow fashion pieces use those to signal their status while owners of fast fashion pieced don't use them for that kind of purpose. However, there's still a contradiction between the attitude towards slow fashion and the actual buying intention which is still low (ibid).

2.2   Effect of Brand Conspicuousness on Brand Attitude

Brand conspicuousness, also called brand prominence, can be understood as" attention-getting behavior regarding the brand, such as flaunting or name-dropping" (Ferraro et al., 2013). Brands try to get attention for example by using visible and explicit logos (Berger and Ward, 2010) to differentiate them from other brands (Esch and Möll, 2019). This kind of attention-getting behavior describes to what extent a product has a visible marking that helps recognizing the brand (Han et al., 2010). Conspicuous branding has especially been examined in connection with luxury brands where it is used by consumers to signal their status (Truong et al., 2008; Greenberg et al., 2019). Concurrently, CSR actions of luxury brands with a conspicuous branding lead to a depreciation of the consumers' attitude towards the brand over the CSR actions of luxury brands that use inconspicuous branding (Janssen et al., 2016). In this context, the attitude towards a brand can be defined as "the buyer's evaluation of the brand with respect to its' expected capacity to deliver on a currently relevant buying motive" (Percy and Rossiter, 1992). The attitude towards a brand can last for a long time but can also change due to gained experiences (Solomon, 2019). Moreover, Solomon (2019) argues that brand attitude consists of three components: Affect, behavior and cognition. Affect describes the feelings and emotions towards a brand, behavior includes the actions taken and cognition means the thoughts towards a brand. These three are related to each other as that cognition guides behavior and affect stimulates behavior (Percy and Rossiter, 1992). For sustainable brands, research shows a similar but contrary effect than the one that Janssen et al. (2016) found for luxury brands. Therefore, consumers prefer those CSR-related products more that offer them a higher chance to signal their status over those CSR-related products that don't offer a potential for status signaling (Bennett and Chakravarti, 2009). This effect even occurs when the potential to signal is very little. Furthermore, the difference between those low and high CSR-related products is stronger when people are given

self-signals (ibid.). In addition, people are more willing to buy sustainable products when it influences their reputation because they are seen by others (Griskevicius et al., 2010) and people decide more often for the sustainable version of a product when they feel as if they are being watched by others (Aagerup and Nilsson, 2016). As shown in figure 1, slow fashion products are mostly branded inconspicuously or are not branded at all, even though sustainable products offer consumers a chance to signal their status (Griskevicius et al., 2010; Aagerup and Nilsson, 2016; Bennett and Chakravarti, 2009). Therefore we assume that consumers might have a more positive attitude towards a brand that is conspicuously branded over one that is inconspicuously branded, leading to our first hypotheses.

H1 Brand conspicuousness of slow fashion brands influences consumers' attitude towards the brand. Conspicuous branding leads to more positive consumer attitudes' than inconspicuous branding.

2.3   Sustainable Consumer Awareness as a Moderator

Regarding the growing importance of sustainability in the fashion industry (Grazzini et al., 2021), consumers seem to change their behavior towards a more sustainable consumption (Sicoli et al., 2019). In this context, sustainable consumption describes the change in purchase-related and habitual behaviors in everyday life which generally requires a shift in lifestyles with more pro-environmental and pro-social values (Gilg et al., 2005). For instance, people who are aware of the social comparison that is happening during the buying process of either sustainable or non-sustainable products choose the sustainable product more often over people that aren't aware of this comparison taking place (Aagerup and Nilsson, 2016). Furthermore, the more people feel like they act environmentally friendly and nonconformity, the more they are spreading positive word of mouth about it (Castagna et al., 2022). As research shows, consumers that act sustainable already seem to have a desire to show their behavior. This leads to our assumption that the sustainable consumer awareness can increase the effect of brand conspicuousness on the attitude towards the slow fashion brand.

H2 Consumers' awareness of sustainability moderates the effect of brand conspicuousness on consumers' attitude toward the slow fashion brand.

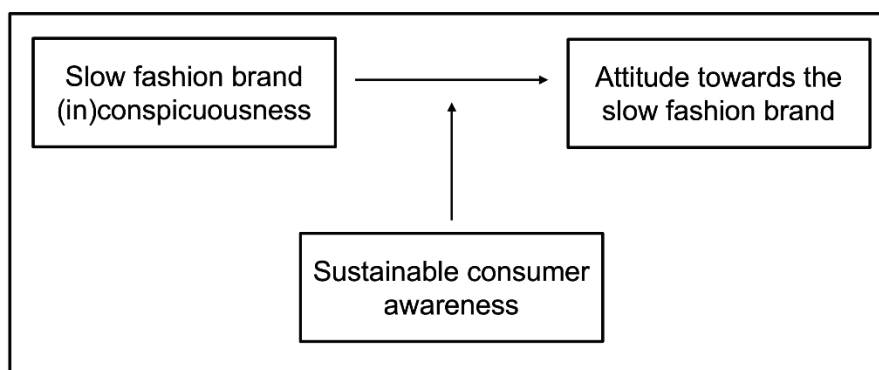The overall research model of this study can be seen in figure 2.

Figure 2. Research Model

3   Methodology

3.1   Design, Stimulus and Procedure

An online experimental design with two groups was chosen to test the hypotheses on the effect of brand conspicuousness on consumers' attitude towards the brand with the sustainable consumer awareness as a moderator. The study manipulated the brand conspicuousness to measure the attitude towards the brand. At the beginning, both groups were asked to read an identical text about the fictitious brand NU AGE that described its values and actions towards sustainability, based on the definition of slow fashion from Jung and Jin (2014). Referring to Janssen et al., this study used a fictitious brand to make sure that there was no bias because of the participants' prior knowledge and experience with that brand (2016). Next, the participants were asked a question to make sure that they understood that NU AGE aims to be a sustainable brand. Further, each group was shown either the conspicuous or inconspicuous branded hoodie (see figures 3 and 4) and afterwards the participants were presented with four items that measured their attitude towards the brand as well as twelve items to measure the sustainable consumer awareness.

To be sure that the manipulation worked, the participants were also asked some questions about the perceived brand prominence. The questionnaire ended with a question about the interest in hoodies in general and with some demographical questions.

Figure 3. Manipulation: Conspicuous branded hoodie by "NU AGE"

Figure 4. Manipulation: Inconspicuous branded hoodie by "NU AGE"

3.2   Pretest

A pretest was conducted to test the manipulation and was completed by a total of 21 students that were each assigned to one of the questionnaires dependent on their day of birth (1-15 = group 1 (12 participants); 16-31 = group 2 (9 participants)). The first group was shown the conspicuous hoodie and the second one the inconspicuous hoodie. Afterwards, both groups were asked to assess the conspicuousness of the brand based on three items that were adapted by Janssen et al. (2016) and Jung and Jin (2014). The reliability analysis was used to measure the internal consistency of the construct which found a high consistency of the three items (Cronbach's α = 0.83). The condition of normal distribution to conduct a t-test is not given for the group of conspicuous branding ($p < .05$), but based on the findings from Stone (2010, p. 1563) the t-test is robust enough to work with data that isn't normally distributed. The condition of homogeneity of variances is fulfilled ($F(1,19)$ = .95, $p > .05$) The participants of the first group perceived the brand prominence as significantly higher (M = 6.36) than the one in the second group (M = 4.15; $t(21) = 4.82$, $p < .001$).

3.3   Measures

In the main study, three constructs were measured: the attitude towards the brand, the sustainable consumer awareness and the perceived brand conspicuousness. In the following, the measures are described briefly. All items for each measured construct are listed in Table 1 in the order of appearance within the study. For

measuring the attitude towards brand, this study used a scale developed by Putrevu and Lord (1994). It consists of five items which are formulated as statements about the brand, e.g. "Buying (brand) is a good decision.". Based on the study from Janssen et al. (2016) the item "The decision to buy (brand) is foolish." (Putrevu and Lord, 1994) wasn't implemented in this research. The attitude towards the brand was measured on a seven-point Likert scale and the reliability analysis found a high consistency of those items (Cronbach's α = 0.86). The consciousness for sustainable consumption scale (CSC-scale) by Balderjahn et al. (2013) provides an approved measurement tool which applies the three-dimensional triple-bottom-line concept of sustainability by Elkington (1997) to consumption. The multidimensional scale measures all three dimensions of sustainability: Ecological, social and economic (Balderjahn et al., 2013). The CSC-scale considers "the awareness of consuming in such a way that an improvement in the ecological, social and economic quality of life is achieved" (Ziesemer et al., 2016). It measures the expectations and importance of consumers towards specific product features and requirements, but it leaves out the actual buying behavior. The CSC-scale in total consists of 46 items. To reduce the complexity, this study used the tested simplified CSC-scale with twelve items on a seven-point Likert scale. The internal consistency of those items was high (Cronbach's α = 0.8). Brand conspicuousness was measured similarly as in the pretest, with three items adapted by Janssen et al. (2016) and Jung and Jin (2014) on a seven-point Likert scale.

3.4   Sample

The participants of the experiment were German university students at an average age of 25 years. The homogeneity of a student sample is more acceptable and more common in experimental settings because experiments primarily aim for internal validity, not representational power (Calder et al., 1981). That is why the sample does not restrict the study. In total, 128 people participated in the online experiment. After cleaning the data for missing values and outliers, an effective sample size of 83 people was left. The first group (conspicuous branding) consists of 38 participants and second group (inconspicuous branding) of 45 participants. Both groups are homogenous regarding the distribution of gender and age.

4   Main Results

This study doesn't find a significant impact of brand conspicuousness of slow fashion on consumers' attitude towards the brand. Based on Stone (2010, p. 1573), we can ignore that the condition of normal distribution for both groups in the manipulation check of perceived brand conspicuousness is not given (p < .05). With considering the violation of homogeneity of variances (F(1,81) = 27.57, p < .001), the study finds a significant mean difference between the groups of conspicuous (M = 6.68) and inconspicuous branding (M = 3.93; t(58.61)

= 13.61 -, p < .001), meaning that the manipulation worked out. Both conditions to measure the main effect, homogeneity of variances are given (F(1,81) = .79, p = .38; p > .05).

Constructs measured	Items
Brand message	What does the brand NU AGE stand for?
Brand attitude	It is a good decision to buy the brand NU AGE. I think NU AGE is a satisfactory brand. I think NU AGE has many positive features. I have a positive opinion about the brand NU AGE.
Sustainable Consumer Awareness	I prefer to buy a product when I am convinced that it ... - … consists of recyclable materials. - … is packaged in an environmentally friendly way. - … was produced in a climate-friendly way. - I would prefer to buy a product if I was convinced that in its production ... - … the human rights of the workers have been respected. - … employees were not discriminated against. - … employees were paid fairly and equitably. Even if I could afford a product financially, I only buy it if ... - … I really need the product. - … it is a useful product for me. - … the expenses for this do not place an excessive financial burden on me. - … I do not have to restrict myself in the future as a result. Even with products that I can financially afford, I always consider whether I… - … can borrow the product from friends or acquaintances instead of buying it. - … can share the product with others instead of owning it.
Brand conspiucousness	How prominently does this hoodie display its brand? To what extent is this hoodie recognizable as a product of the brand NU AGE? To what extent does the brand NU AGE attempt to draw attention to its brand name on the hoodie?
Hoodie consumption habit	Do you wear hoodies in general?

Table 1. Measures (in order of appearance in study)

The t-test does not find a significant mean difference between the groups of conspicuous (M = 5.68) and inconspicuous branding (M = 5.94; t(83) = -1.32, p = .19), even showing that the attitude towards the brand is slightly better for the inconspicuous branding condition (see figure 5). Therefore, the results don't support H1. Since there is no significant main effect there is no need to test for a moderator effect of sustainable consumer awareness, which is why the results also reject H2. Nevertheless, the sustainable consumer awareness could still have an impact on the effect of brand conspicuousness on the attitude towards the brand. To test if the sustainable

consumer awareness is a condition for this effect, the researchers only tested the effect for the participants that have a sustainable consumer awareness ≥ 6 (n(conspicuous) = 7; n(inconspicuous) = 8). For the manipulation check we can ignore once more, that the condition of normal distribution for the group of conspicuous branding is not given (p < .05) (Stone, 2010, p. 1573). With considering the violation of homogeneity of variances $(F(1,13) = 6.26$, p = .03), the study also does not find a significant mean difference between the groups of conspicuous (M = 5.86) and inconspicuous (M = 5.72; t(13) = .21 p = .84)) branding (see figure 6). Yet the sustainable participants prefer the conspicuous branded hoodie a little more. All results can be found in table 2.
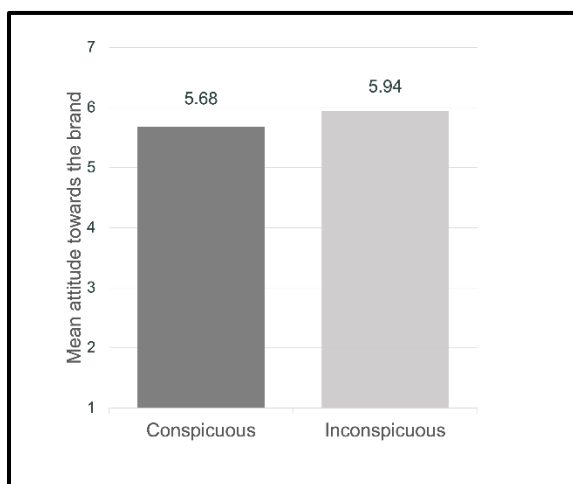

Figure 5. Mean comparison of conspicuous (N = 38) & inconspicuous group (N = 45)
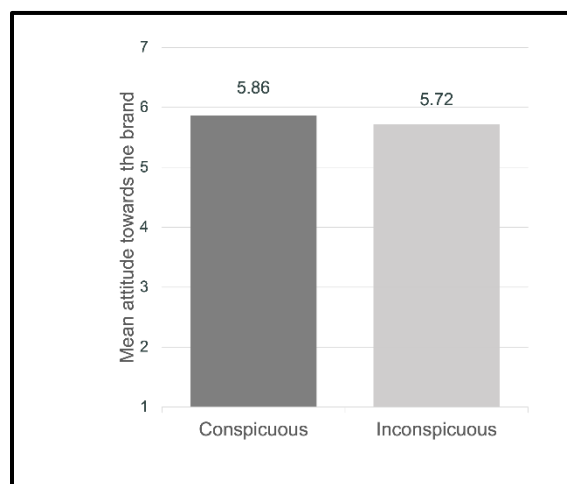
Figure 6. Mean comparison of conspicuous (N = 7) & inconspicuous group (N = 8) with sustainable consumer awareness ≥ 6

5   Discussion

The results of the study suggest that brand conspicuousness has no effect on consumers' attitude towards slow fashion brands. However, sustainable consumers have a slightly better brand attitude when the hoodie is conspicuously branded, considering that the effect is not significant, and the sample size is small with a total of 15 people. These findings assume that conspicuous branding of slow fashion products does not lead to a less positive attitude towards a slow fashion brand which proves different effects than the ones that Janssen et al. (2016) found out for luxury brands. Consequently, it may not matter for slow fashion brands if their products are conspicuously or inconspicuously branded regarding the consumers' attitude towards the brand. Nevertheless, the perception of conspicuous and inconspicuous brands can be different.

			Descriptive statistic			Levene-Statistic		Kolomog orov-Smirnov	T-Test		
			n	M	SD	F	Sig.	Sig.	T	df	Sig.
Pretest	**Conspicuousness** (Cronbach's α = 0.83)	Conspicuous	12	6.36	.82			.01			
		Inconspicuous	9	4.15	1.28			.20			
		Total	21	5.26	2.10	.95	.34		4.82	19	<.001
H1 All participants	**Attitude towards the brand**	Conspicuous	38	5.68	.93			.20			
		Inconspicuous	45	5.94	.86			.07			
		Total	83	5.81	.89	.79	.38		-1.32	81	.19
	Conspicuousness	Conspicuous	38	6.68	.48			<.001			
		Inconspicuous	45	3.93	1.25			.02			
		Total	83	5.30	.87	27.57	<.001		13.61	58.61	<.001
H1 Sustainable participants	**Attitude towards the brand**	Conspicuous	7	5.86	1.08			.20			
		Inconspicuous	8	5.72	1.40			.20			
		Total	15	5.80	1.01	.21	.46		.21	13	.84
	Conspicuousness	Conspicuous	7	6.81	.38			<.001			
		Inconspicuous	8	4.33	.94			.20			
		Total	15	5.57	.66	6.26	.03		6.45	7.88	<.001

Table 2. Results

In 2010, Berger and Ward found out that people who want to differentiate themselves from mainstream consumers prefer inconspicuous branding whereas mainstream consumers prefer conspicuous branding to signal their status. The reason for this is because insider, meaning people among a specific social group, recognize brands which are valuable for them even though they are not using loud signals (Berger and Ward, 2010). Transferring these findings to the results of our study, people who already consume slow fashion or sustainable products may not have the desire to use conspicuous branded fashion to signal their status. Important brands are already known in the slow culture scene and therefore the products don't have to be branded very conspicuously. At the same time, mainstream consumers could use conspicuous branded slow fashion to signal their status. As there's no significant mean differences between the groups, it could be that the participants of the study include both mainstream consumers and insiders. Furthermore, research shows that already a small signaling potential

when buying sustainable products seems to have an effect (Bennett and Chakravarti, 2009). Therefore, the inconspicuous branding could have already given enough potential to fulfil the participants' need of status signaling. In conclusion, the study results implicit that slow fashion brands can use conspicuous branding if they want to gain more attention, without being afraid of being perceived less positive.

5.1   Managerial Implications

Although the study does not provide significant results concerning the effect of brand conspicuousness on consumers' attitude towards slow fashion brands, there are some implications for brand managers in the slow fashion industry. As the results show, brand conspicuousness of slow fashion brands has no influence on the brand attitude. Managers do not initially have to fear that conspicuous branding will lead to poorer brand attitudes. Thus, the decision over a suitable branding strategy can be made based on other indicators. At the same time, possible advantages of conspicuous branding could be used in favor of slow fashion brands. For example, conspicuous branding could lead to greater brand attention, which in turn could ensure awareness of a slow fashion brand. Furthermore, the target group of a slow fashion brand could be widened by addressing mainstream as well as insider consumers through the usage of different branding conspicuousness for different products. It is recommended to test different degrees of the conspicuousness of a brand among the corresponding target group because the effects could differ from brand to brand. Ultimately, we recommend that the conspicuousness of a brand must be aligned with the overall brand strategy so that the whole brand is perceived as authentic.

5.2   Limitations and Further Research

Besides the findings of this study, there are some limitations that offer potential input for further research. At first, there is to name that a fictious brand was used to execute the experiment with the goal to prevent the results from any bias through already existing knowledge or experiences towards the brand (Janssen et al., 2016). There is to mention that a brand is usually built up upon images and experiences within the minds of the stakeholders, that take on an identification and differentiation function and shape consumer's behavior. These images develop over time (Esch and Möll, 2019). That is the reason why measuring the attitude towards the brand of an imaginary brand is difficult. Secondly, the measured sustainable consumer awareness among all participants of the study was quite high with an average of 5.2 which probably doesn't seem to reflect the reality, assessing that the sustainable behavior can be influenced by the pressure of social norms (Griskevicius et al., 2010; Aagerup and Nilsson, 2016). If people think that others will conform and that others expect them to conform to specific norms, they will more likely adopt pro-environmental behavior (Culiberg and Elgaaied-Gambier, 2015). Moreover, consumers beliefs about sustainability are often inconsistent with their behavior (Mohr et al.,

2001). That is why another scale, that measures actual behavior rather than only beliefs and willingness to act towards sustainability, could lead to a more realistic picture of the degree of sustainability of the participants. In addition, the sample size of sustainable consumers is quite small which lowers the meaningfulness of the results. That is why the result of sustainable participants preferring conspicuous branding is even more questionable, considering that the effect wasn't significant either. Moreover, the implementation of brand conspicuousness within the study was only referred to the prominence of the brand logo. However, focusing only on logo size when dealing with brand conspicuousness is far too limited (Greenberg et al., 2019). More attention-getting behavior could be described and included in the brand text of the imaginary brand NU AGE which could influence the perception of the brand of either conspicuous or inconspicuous in a more implicit way. Furthermore, it could be interesting to check if there would be an effect for non-branded products, because other research shows that only an implicit branding might already fulfil the need for status signaling (Bennett and Chakravarti, 2009). Lastly, the dependent variable, the attitude towards the brand, might have been the wrong construct to measure the actual effect of brand conspicuousness of slow fashion. The hypotheses are mainly based on papers dealing with status signaling in terms of sustainable consumption (i.a. Truong et al., 2008; Greenberg et al., 2019). Therefore, even though this study does not find an effect of brand conspicuousness on consumers' attitude towards the brand, there could be an effect regarding the product likability or the need for status signaling. In this field it would be interesting to examine different target groups (insiders and mainstreamers) to find out if the product likeability and the need for status signaling differs between those groups and if different branding strategies should be applied to address both target groups.

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Appendix

Background information about NU AGE

The sustainable brand NU AGE is a slow fashion brand. It manufactures its products in Germany and has a carbon-neutral footprint. The fabrics are made from regionally produced hemp. Hemp wool uses very little water in the production process and makes NU AGE clothes completely recyclable. The timeless designs of the rare, high-quality collections are designed to reduce unnecessary consumption. NU AGE also ensures that fair working conditions prevail for everyone involved in production. NU AGE promotes sustainable projects to raise awareness in the fashion industry.

A different sex, guarantee for brand coolness?

Alisa Class, Sandra Kieckhöfel, Monique Krüger

Abstract

Purpose - This study aims to investigate whether the use of testimonials from a different gender in advertising has an impact on attitudes towards, identification with, choice or coolness of a brand.

Design/Methodology/Approach- In a 2x2 experiment 117 subjects were shown non manipulated and manipulated advertisements with testimonials of another sex. A pretest was conducted to find suitable testimonials and brands in a functional and non-gender-specific product category. In the main study the attitude scale by Spears and Singh (2004), the identification scale by Algesheimer et al. (2005) and Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) and the coolness scale by Warren et al. (2019) were used.

Findings - The study did not find any impact of the gender of the testimonial towards brand attitude, identification, choice and coolness among males and the brand attitude, choice, and coolness among females. However, it was found that women identify more strongly with a brand if the testimonial is male.

Research limitations and implications - Further research is needed to examine whether the use of testimonials from another gender has no impact on brand attitude, identification, choice, and coolness, as this study could not find a significant difference. Furthermore, it is necessary to investigate the effects in hedonistic product categories.

Practical Implications - According to our results, the use of testimonials from another sex is not an adequate solution to improve customers' attitude towards, identification with, choice or coolness of a brand.

Originality and value - Currently, there is a considerable lack of research on influencer marketing in the context of sustainable products with low involvement of customers. Therefore, this study focuses on this particular field of research.

1   Introduction

There are many brands on the market that have a gender identity *(Allison et al., 1979; Alreck et al., 1982; McCracken, 1993).* They can be stereotyped as either masculine or feminine. Some examples include Chanel, Hugo Boss, Marlboro, Virginia Slims, Victoria Secret, Dove and Harley Davidson. One characteristic of these gendered brands is that they have a personality and use their masculine or feminine associations to attract male or female consumers respectively *(Jung and Lee, 2006).*

However, social trends such as the diversity movement and the unisex orientation as well as the dissolution of classic gender roles are leading brands to abandon clear gender positioning and make transfers to the respective other target group, for example through gender bending *(Azar et al., 2018; Frieden, 2013).* Back in the 1950s, Marlboro was considered a woman's cigarette. Ads were created showing men working on cars or flying planes, and later the image that caught on: the Marlboro Man representing a classic example of this strategy *(Bloomberg, 2011).* Particularly in U.S. studies, the effect of gender bending is judged differently by women and men *(Sandhu and Singh, 2016).* When the extensions are made from a masculine brand to appeal to female customers, the acceptance of a cross-gender extension is higher than the other way round. Hence, women are found to be more receptive toward cross-gender extension than men in general *(Jung and Lee, 2006).* Additionally, more and more beauty brands announce male brand ambassadors, who can be strategically used as an effective marketing tool that has aroused both marketers' and society's interest *(Frankel, 2020).* A current example shows the cosmetics brand Mac, which recently makes Bill Kaulitz, a German singer and model, the face of its campaign promoting a new mascara *(MAC, 2022).* The cosmetics brand NYX also recently promoted an eyebrow set with the faces of four German YouTube stars known as the "Elevator Boys" *(Werner, 2022).* Both products tend to be stereotypically assigned to a female target group and have also been promoted for them in the past.

To the best of our knowledge no previous research has specifically addressed gender positioning through testimonials or brand ambassadors with the opposite gender. The use of testimonials in advertising is in general a common way to increase the credibility of the advertising message. This can either be a well-known personality or a person who reflects the typical consumer. Usually, the testimonial is of the same gender as the target group of the product or brand to increase overall identification and trustworthiness *(Baetzgen et al., 2013).* The aim of this paper is to investigate whether the use of testimonials from a different sex in advertising has an impact on attitude towards, identification with, choice or coolness of a brand, which are often used to indicate the performance of a brand. Based on this, we conducted an experimental study on the effects of testimonials of the opposite sex on brands. Ultimately, further research is needed to derive precise recommendations for actions in terms of brand management.

2   Theoretical Background

As stated, many brands have a strong gender identity. Over the years, there has been an increasing trend toward cross-gender extensions in brands, in part due to the unisex trend in consumer products *(Jung and Lee, 2006)*. However, men and women have varying reactions to the gender dilution of their brands *(Sandhu, 2017)*. This study examines evaluations of cross-gender extensions like gender bending and attempts to identify if the use of testimonials from another gender in advertisements has an impact on the attitude towards, the identification with, the choice or coolness of a brand.

2.1   Gender Bending

On the one hand, a brand gender helps brands to better meet the individual needs of men and women and on the other hand to differentiate themselves from neutrally positioned brands *(Sandhu, 2017)*. Hence, gendered brands appeal to the gender of the consumer *(Sandhu and Singh, 2016)*. Nevertheless, additional to other aspects of the human personality, femininity and masculinity play an increasing role in the context of self-image in times of gender role change *(Avery, 2012)*.

Furthermore, many marketers have challenged the strict gender discipline traditionally associated with gendered brands and are reworking their gender work by blurring the distinction between male and female brands. New consumer ideologies are emerging that go beyond the gendered meanings of brands and encourage men and women to embrace brands traditionally associated with another sex *(Sandhu, 2017)*. Therefore, marketers continually expand the gender spectrum of previously gendered brands by bringing women into the male-dominated customer base of male-dominated products and vice versa. The historical divide between male and female products is blurring and "unisex" is becoming a consumer ideology *(Patterson and Elliot, 2002)*. This phenomenon can be attributed to social and cultural practices that influence the social gender order and, by extension, consumer responses to the gendered orientation of products. They also call for an examination of complementarity between the two sexes *(Fischer and Gainer, 1994)*.

However, men and women respond differently to the dilution of the gendered meanings of their brands. Gender bending of brands is not advisable if the previous users of the brand are people with high masculinity (femininity) and they use the brand to convey their masculinity (femininity). This may result in the brand being discarded by existing users, thwarting the marketers' intention to expand the brand market to both genders *(Sandhu, 2017)*.

2.2   Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

As already stated before, previous studies suggest that men and women react in a different way to gender bending. The acceptance of a cross-gender extension is higher when the extension is made from a masculine brand to appeal to female customers than the other way round.

Furthermore, women are found to be more receptive toward cross-gender extension than men in general *(Jung and Lee., 2016)*. Based on this we expect that lower acceptance of gender extension leads to a negative effect that impacts brand performance, when using testimonials from the opposite sex.

In addition, a brand signature can influence the attitude towards a brand. Hence, the brand signature is an important aspect of identification in branding *(Foroudi, 2018)* and can be designed to evoke certain reactions depending on the type of communication and the desired marketing objectives *(Pappu et al., 2005)*. The perception customers have of a brand should be common, positive, and consistent *(Van Riel et al., 2001)*. However, attitudes towards a brand vary from consumer to consumer and can be influenced by aroused associations and beliefs that establish a brand's attitude *(Foroudi, 2018)*.

In this case, the consumer's attitude towards a brand may be based on existing attitudes towards the brand name and logo and may change over time. Advertising may help companies strategically position themselves to stand out from the competition and generate goodwill among consumers and stakeholders *(Foroudi, 2018)*. A successful brand should attract positive attention so that companies need to differentiate themselves since the branding is an opportunity for a company to showcase its reputation *(Melewar et al., 2001)*. Therefore, a certain reputation must be created because customers choose the brand with the image that best fits their self-image. Additionally, companies make a promise with the brand to their customers, from which expectations arise *(Foroudi, 2018)*.

Research of gender bending and the effect on the attitude towards a brand also finds that brand attitude toward female-to-male brand extension is more positive within the target group than male-to-female extension *(Azar et al., 2018; Frieden, 2013)*. Moreover, when it comes to brand choice and identification a negative effect can be observed within male target groups. Generally, men are more likely to experience a brand connection to a brand with a male representation. Studies also found that even for neutral products if the brand representation is female, men will intend to buy it less than if the brand has a male representation *(Spielmann et al., 2021)*. Furthermore, studies on brand performance are mostly based on the marketing productivity stages of Rust et al. (2004), completed and updated by Katsikeas et al. (2016), who included cause and effect relationships between

the marketing actions concerning the firm's brand and its results *(Fischera and Himme, 2017; Hanssens and Pauwels, 2016).*

Beyond that, brand performance but also the equity of a brand in general are based on how customers perceive a company's product *(Aaker, 1992).* Among other things, this is dependent on brand loyalty, awareness, perceived quality and ultimately the buying behaviour. These factors can positively or negatively affect the brand equity *(Aaker and Biel, 2009).* As customers use the products, they develop a preference for the brand and rather buy the name of the brand over its generic equivalent *(Akthar et al., 2016).* When a brand is known and trusted to the extent that consumers identify with it and feel a profound psychological connection to it, its brand performance is valuable and undeniable *(Mittal et al., 2021).*

Additionally, brand image and advertising play an important role in improving the performance of any brand, because these represent implicit tools that can positively change the buying behaviour *(Gupta, 2021).* Advertising is a driving force of any business because it is an effective source to convey the brands message and stay in the hearts of customers as they identify more highly with the brand *(Malik et al., 2013).* In this case, several factors shape the customers' perception towards the performance of a brand based on past research by Aaker (1991), Wang and Finn (2013), Wang et al. (2008) and Keller (1998).

Lastly, when it comes to gender positioning and gender bending, there are different approaches to implementing it. In addition to gender stereotypical colors and products, for instance, the use of testimonials with the same gender as that of the target group is also a crucial component for positioning a product or brand in terms of gender. To the best of our knowledge, no other research has specifically addressed gender positioning through testimonials with a different sex than the target group.

Based on that, the purpose of this research is to find out whether the use of testimonials from another sex has a different impact within the respective target group. To measure this, we investigate the impact this has on parts of brand performance. The following attributes are, proceeding from the research, considered to be particularly relevant and examined: choice, attitude towards the brand and identification with the brand.

Drawing on this, we hypothesize that within the male target group there will be a negative effect in terms of attitude, identification, and choice, while the effect within the female target group will be positive concerning attitude. For identification and choice, we expect no effect within the female target group, but a negative effect within the male target group. Formally:

H1a: Using male testimonials for brands with a stereotypically female target group has a positive impact on the attitude towards the brand within that target group.

H1b: Using female testimonials for brands with a stereotypically male target group has a negative impact on the attitude towards the brand within that target group.

H2a: Using male testimonials for brands with a stereotypically female target group does not lead to a loss of identification with the brand within that target group.

H2b: Using female testimonials for brands with a stereotypically male target group leads to a loss of identification with the brand within that target group.

H3a: Using male testimonials for brands with a stereotypically female target group has no impact on the choice of that target group.

H3b: Using female testimonials for brands with a stereotypically male target group has a negative impact on the choice of that target group.

In 2019 Warren et al. developed a scale to measure brand coolness. In this study different characteristics of brand coolness were discovered. However, this study is limited when it comes to pointing out specific marketing actions that could increase brand coolness. Therefore, we want to test if the use of testimonials from another sex could help to increase brand coolness. Using testimonials of another gender could be seen as rebellious and original, which are, according to Warren et al., two characteristics of brand coolness. Differences between men and women have not been questioned before. According to these the last two hypotheses are:

H4a: Using male testimonials for brands with a stereotypically female target group has a positive impact on the perceived coolness within that target group.

H4b: Using female testimonials for brands with a stereotypically male target group has a positive impact on the perceived coolness within that target group.

All hypotheses are summarized in figure 1.

3   Methods

3.1   Pretest

The main aim of the pretest was to find suitable testimonials and brands, which can be used in the main study. The requirement for the male testimonials was that they were classified as male while the female testimonials should be classified as female within their target group. Moreover, the pretest should state if the brand for the

male test group in the following main study is classified as male while the brand for the female test group should be classified as female.
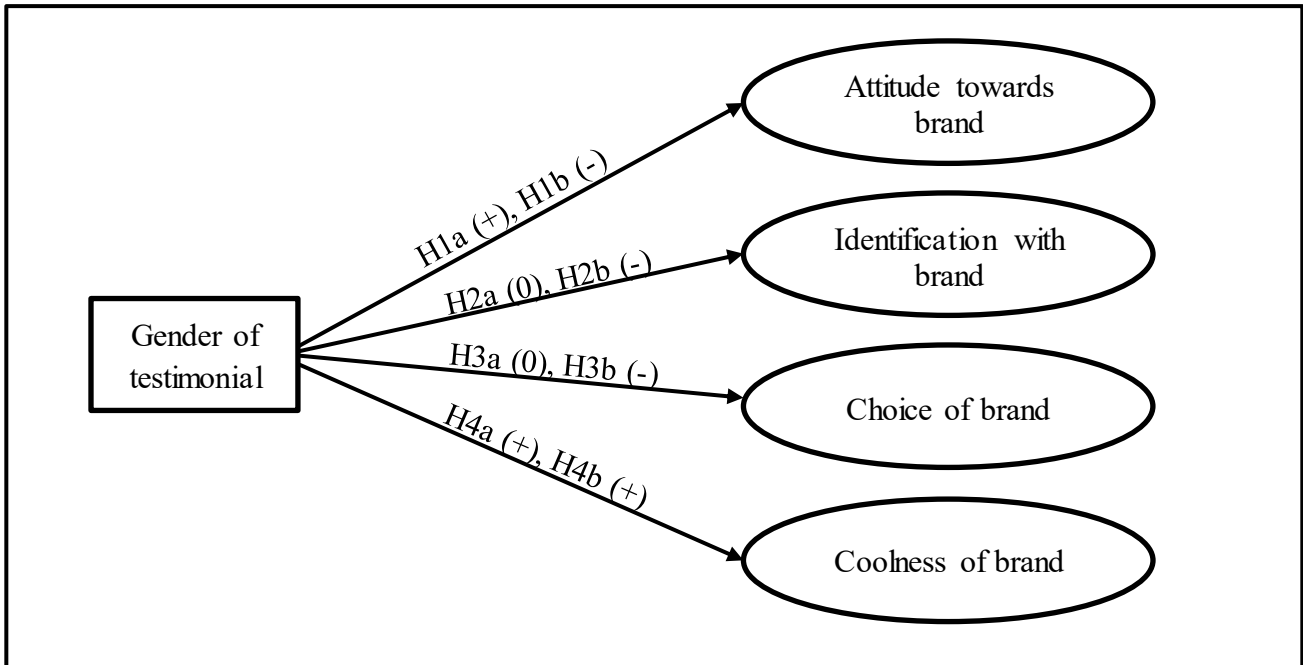

Figure 1. Model with hypotheses

3.1.1 Sample, Design and Measurement

The pretest was conducted with an online survey. As there are different groups in the following main study, participants were grouped by their gender in the pretest as well. In the different groups, participants first saw the testimonials that would later be used in their gender groups. They were asked if they would classify the person on the picture as male or female. After that the different brands were shown and the participants were asked if they would classify the brands as masculine or feminine. The sample was collected under German students as the main study will also be conducted with German students as participants.

3.1.2 Results of the Pretest

During the pretest, 21 students (11 men, 10 women) were shown separate images of the testimonials and the shampoo package. All of them were not part of the main study. The men's group saw shampoo of the brand Axe and the corresponding testimonials, while the women saw Pantene Pro-V product and the corresponding

testimonials. The results show that all four testimonials were assigned to the expected gender by all participants. The male testimonials were recognized as male and the female testimonials as female. For Pantene Pro-V 80% of the women agree that it is a feminine brand, while 90.9% of the men agree that Axe is a masculine brand. All in all, the pretest confirmed that the stimulus material is appropriate for the main study.

3.2   Main study: Design and Measurement

The main study took place from the end of June until the beginning of July in 2022, was designed as a 2x2 experiment and conducted by an online survey. As the study was designed as a 2x2 experiment there were 4 different groups. Figure 2 summarizes and represents the conception of the experiment. As seen in the figure group 1a and 1b only contained female participants while group 2a and 2b only contained male participants. In the female test groups 1a and 1b the female shampoo brand Pantene Pro-V was shown, in the male test groups 2a and 2b the male shampoo brand Axe was shown. The a-groups saw the unmanipulated advertisement, while the b-groups saw a manipulated version with a testimonial of the opposite gender. To measure the effects, a 7-point Likert scale was used with 1 representing no agreement and 7 representing agreement.
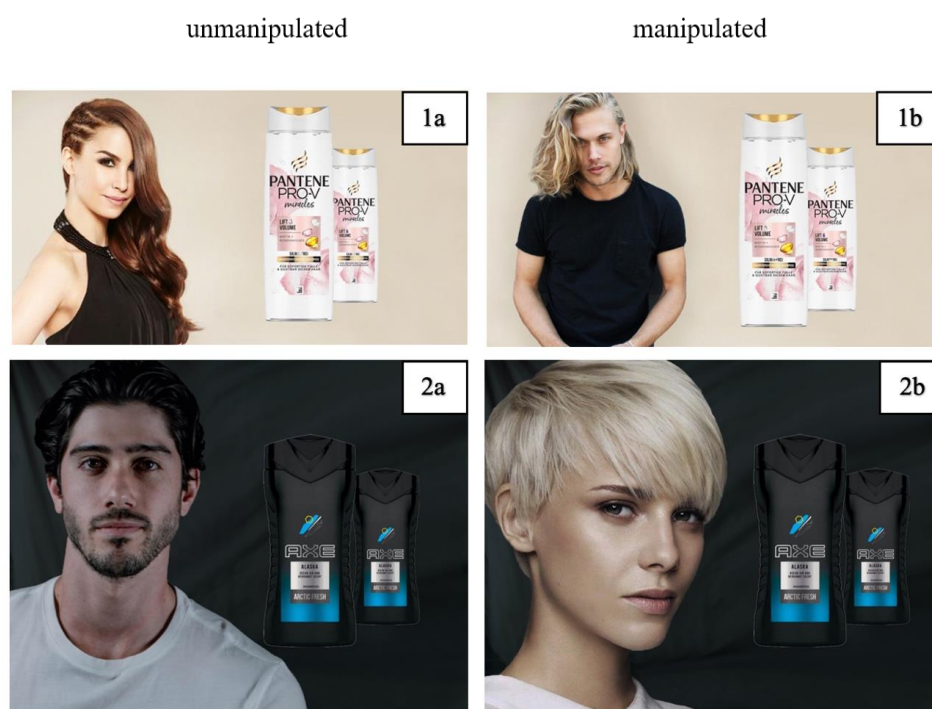

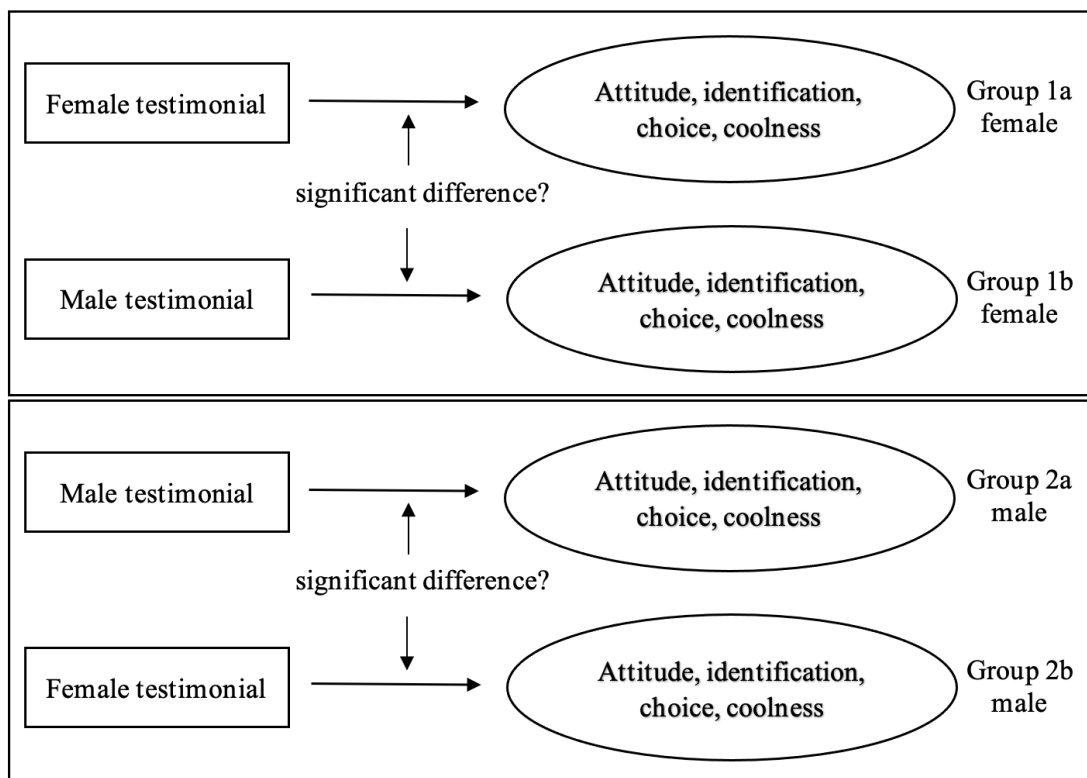
Figure 1. Stimuli for experiment

Figure 3. Design of experiment

4   Results of the Main Study

The sample consists of a total of 117 students, of whom 67 (57.3%) were female and 50 (42.7%) were male. The experiment was conducted using an online questionnaire that assigned participants to the four test groups based on two selection criteria. The first criterion was the gender to which the participants felt they belonged. Accordingly, they were placed in group 1 (only female participants) or group 2 (only male participants). The second criterion was the month in which the participants were born. Based on this criterion, the sample was randomly divided. In the end, we found 31 participants in group 1a, 36 participants in group 1b, 25 participants in group 2a and 25 participants in group 2b. Group homogeneity was ensured by filter questions. All participants were German students. Within the measured constructs, all questions were randomized to reduce bias due to order and to increase the quality of the data.

Although proven scales were used in the questionnaire, the reliability of the measurement instrument was first tested. To check the reliability of the scales, Cronbach's alpha values were evaluated *(Cronbach, 1951)*. Due to the grouping of the participants by gender, the values in both groups were evaluated separately. The results,

which are presented in the table, show an internal consistency that is above the value of 0.7 recommended by Nunally and Bernstein *(Nunally and Bernstein, 1994)* for all constructs. Since the variable choice was measured with one question, the test for internal consistency was redundant.

Construct	Test group	Cronbach's alpha value
Attitude	1a, 1b (female)	0.972
	2a, 2b (male)	0.973
Identification	1a, 1b (female)	0.968
	2a, 2b (male)	0.959
Coolness	1a, 1b (female)	0.884
	2a, 2b (male)	0.903

Table 1. Internal consistency

To test whether there are significant differences between the groups, a series of t-tests for independent samples was carried out. A difference can be called significant if the P-value is less than 0.05 *(Fisher, 1935),* as in this case the null hypothesis can be rejected. Table 2 shows the results of the t-tests.

As can be seen from the table, the mean values vary in the different gender-specific test groups. While the mean values for the female group that saw the manipulation are always higher than those of the female group that saw the original advertisement. The mean values for the male group that saw the manipulation are always lower than those of the male group that saw the original advertisement. As a seven-point Likert scale was used, the larger numbers indicate higher attitude toward, higher identification with, higher possibility of choice and higher perceived coolness of a brand.

However, except for identification in the female group, the differences are not significant. In summary, the study could not proof that there is an impact on brand performance and perceived brand coolness in the male test group when female testimonials are used. In the female target group on the other hand, the use of male testimonials has a positive effect on identification with the brand. Women identify more strongly with a brand when men instead of women act as testimonials. No effects were proven in the other areas measuring brand performance (attitude and choice) or in relation to perceived brand coolness. An overview of the hypotheses' evaluation can be seen in the following table.

		Female participants	Male participants
Brand attitude	Index (mean)	3.9	4.1
Brand attitude with testimonial of the opposite gender	Index (mean)	4.4	3.8
t-test (attitude)	P-value	0.195	0.532
	t	-1.311	0.632
Brand identification	Index (mean)	1.7	2.1
Brand identification with testimonial of the opposite gender	Index (mean)	2.2	2.0
t-test (identification)	P-value	**0.030***	0.859
	t	-1.420	0.179
Brand choice	Index (mean)	3.9	4.5
Brand choice with testimonial of the opposite gender	Index (mean)	4.6	3.7
t-test (choice)	P-value	0.184	0.171
	t	-1.343	1.388
Brand coolness	Index (mean)	3.2	4.0
Brand coolness with testimonial of the opposite gender	Index (mean)	3.8	3.5
t-test (choice)	P-value	0.068	0.260
	t	-1.855	1.139

$*P<0.05$

Table 2. T-test results

5   Discussion and Managerial Implications

The aim of this paper is to investigate whether the use of testimonials from another sex in advertising has an impact on attitudes towards, identification with, choice or coolness of a brand. After the previous section pointed out that almost all the hypotheses were rejected, this section aims to provide possible reasons for it and states some managerial implications.

Hypothesis	Short description	Evaluation
H1a	Positive impact on attitude within female target group by using testimonial of the opposite gender	Rejected
H1b	Negative impact on attitude within male target group by using testimonial of the opposite gender	Rejected
H2a	No loss in identification within the female target group by using testimonial of the opposite gender	Approved
H2b	Loss in identification within the male target group by using testimonial of the opposite gender	Rejected
H3a	No impact on the choice within the female target group by using testimonial of the opposite gender	Approved
H3b	Negative impact on the choice within the male target group by using testimonial of the opposite gender	Rejected
H4a	Positive impact on the perceived coolness within the female target group by using testimonial of the opposite gender	Rejected
H4b	Positive impact on the perceived coolness within the male target group by using testimonial of the opposite gender	Rejected

Table 3. Hypotheses

First, it must be said, that even if the results were not significant, slight tendencies were seen when comparing the different means. Those tendencies confirm that men and women react slightly different to testimonials from another gender. Since only German students were surveyed in the study, the results cannot be generalized to the public. But based on our study, there is no risk of gender bending through testimonials among the target group of male German students, as we could not find any significant effects.

On the one hand, this is good because negative effects on the attitude towards, identification with, choice and coolness of a brand do not occur and therefore no risk for brands exist. This is important for the choice of products, as this could harm the overall success of a company. On the other hand, no improvement is apparent either. When looking at the target group of female German students we can state the same in terms of attitude towards, choice and coolness of a brand. The only impact this study found was concerning the higher identification within the female target group when a male testimonial was used. This means that, from a practical point of view, it would be better to use male testimonials with female target groups. However according to our

results, marketers should not see the use of testimonials from another sex as an adequate solution to improve customers' attitude towards, identification with, choice or coolness of a brand.

6   Limitations and Further Research

This study and its managerial implications, as stated above, have limitations, which will be explained in the following section. First, research on brand preferences and the difference between women and men finds that when pursuing functional consumption goods, consumers are in general more likely to choose masculine versus feminine positioned products. The functional product used in the female test group was positioned female. The use of a male testimonial may have contributed to the fact that this effect was also observed in this case. Due to the limited time and possibilities the whole study was conducted on German students and the sample size in each test group was between 25-35. The results in other target groups, as for example in other age groups and/or groups with other educational background may be different. To draw a holistic picture of the influence of the use of testimonials from another sex, further research on a bigger sample size is necessary before making important marketing decisions. To be more concrete, the study could not state a significant difference in the chosen target group whether the use of testimonials from another gender have an impact on the attitude, identification, choice, and coolness of the brand in contrast to the mean values, which differ in the respective gender-specific test groups. The fact that the study was only conducted on Axe and Pantene Pro-V, which represent two well-known brands, may have influenced the answers of the test groups and outcome of the study, so that more research on less known products or brands is needed. The low measures of brand coolness, choice, identification, and attitude, for example, could also be due to the subject's belief that the male or female testimonial does not fit the brand's image.

Moreover, the study focused only on a functional product category. There is the need to investigate the impact on hedonistic product categories as well. Additionally, it would be interesting to investigate whether the use of opposite gender testimonials can not only apply for hedonistic but also for service products, and if there are no effects on brand attitude, choice or in relation to perceived brand coolness for those categories, too. Further studies could check and explore the effect of testimonials from another sex not only by integrating them in advertising, but also to the product packaging or the product design or even services.

Lastly, the used scale of brand coolness by Warren et al. developed in 2019 is in general relatively new and therefore might not be holistic. In addition, only a shortened version with selected items were applied in this study. Due to the novelty, only little research in the use of the brand coolness scale from Warren et al. (2019) exists and further investigation is needed to specify concrete recommendations for action in practice and which marketing tools should be used.

In our study, only subjects who identified as either male or female were considered. Subjects who identify as non-binary were not included. The manipulated advertisements also only showed people who were clearly identified as either male or female. This was ensured by our pretest. In further research the presentation of testimonials could be investigated to find out if there is an effect of male testimonials that are rather presented with stereotypical female characteristics and vice-versa.
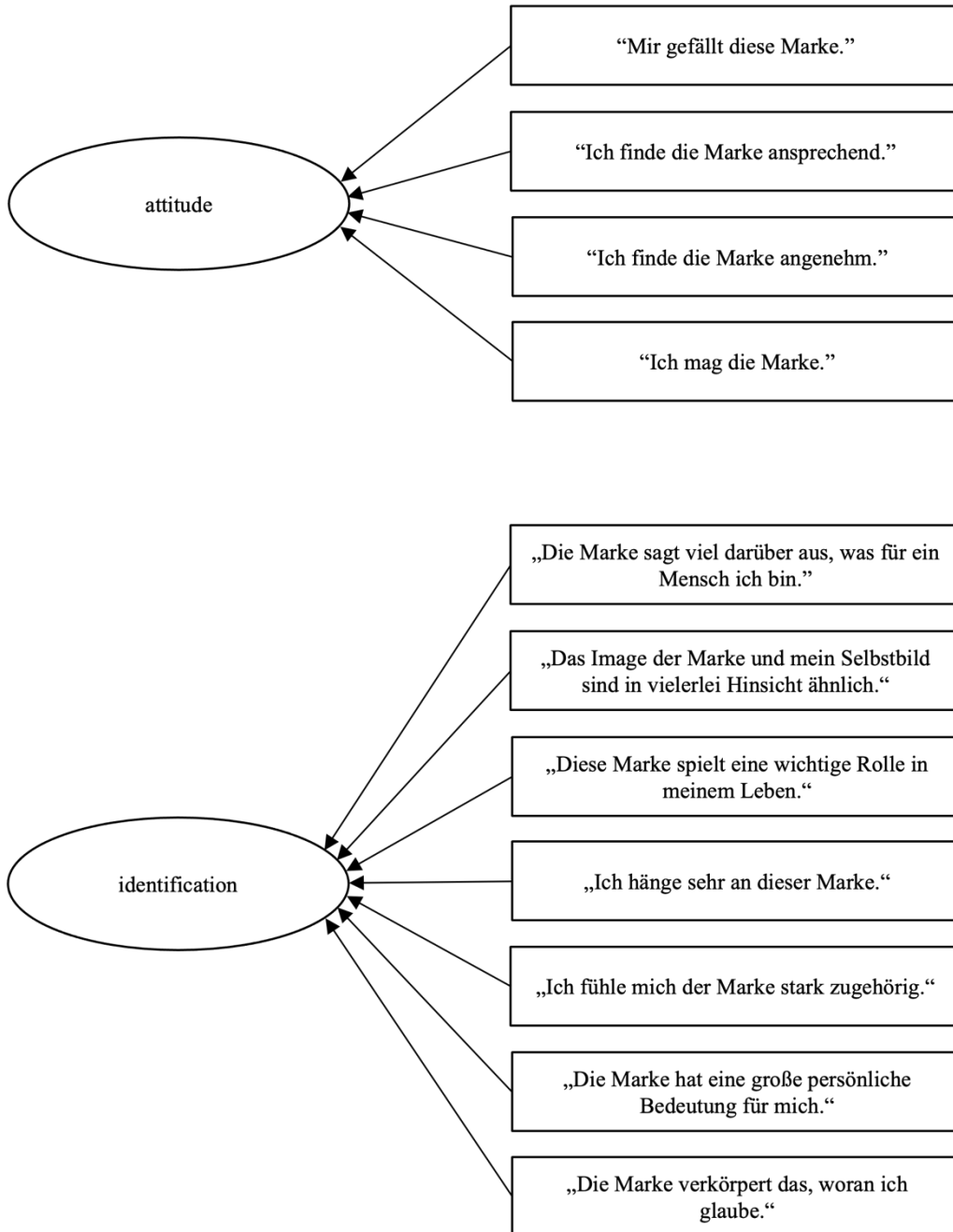
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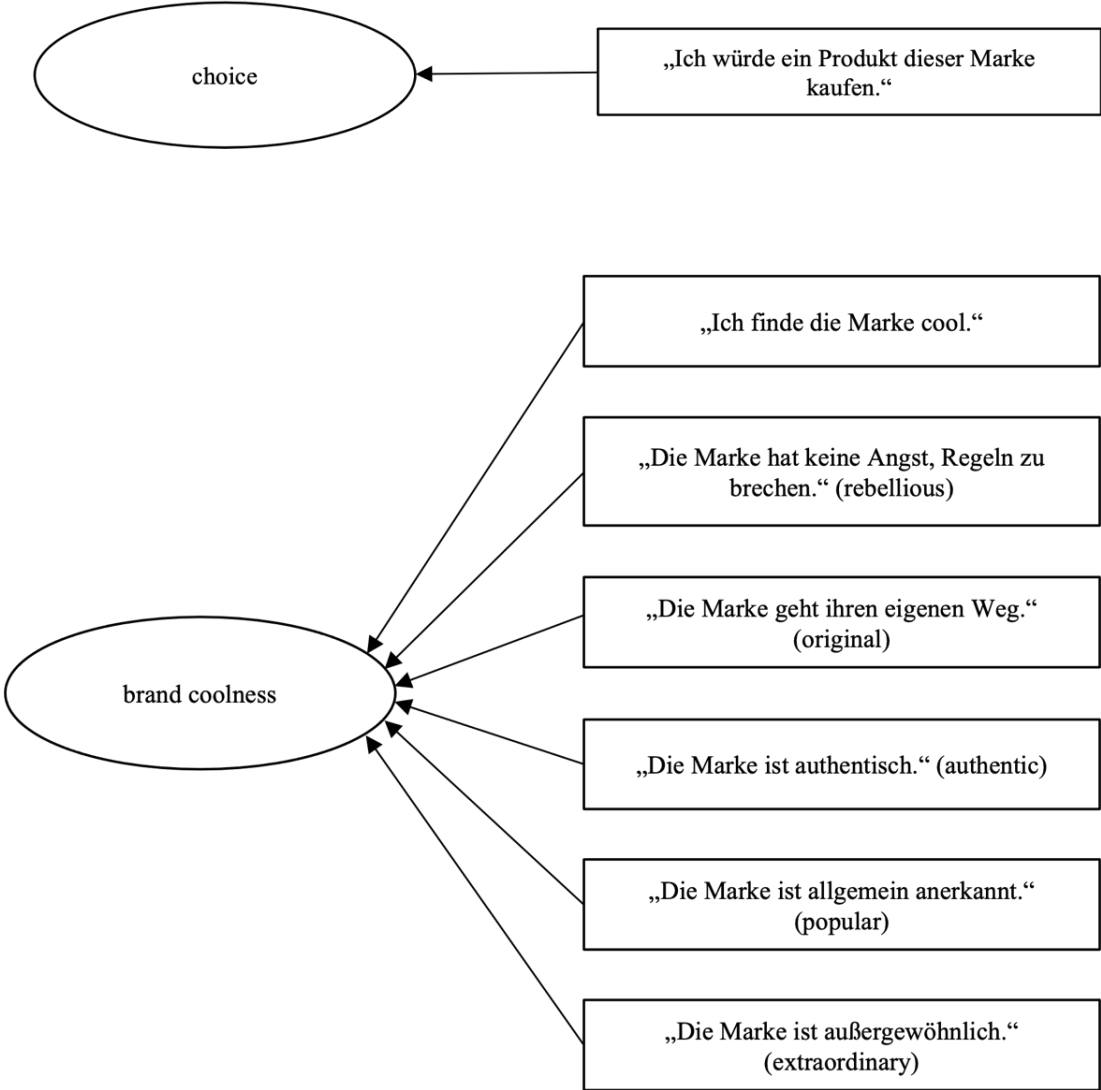Bagozzi, R.P., Batra, R., Loureiro, S.M.C. & Warren, C. (2019). Brand Coolness. *Journal of Marketing*, 83(5), 36-56.

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Appendix

Constructs used in main study:

"Mir gefällt diese Marke."

"Ich finde die Marke ansprechend."

"Ich finde die Marke angenehm."

"Ich mag die Marke."

attitude

„Die Marke sagt viel darüber aus, was für ein Mensch ich bin."

„Das Image der Marke und mein Selbstbild sind in vielerlei Hinsicht ähnlich."

„Diese Marke spielt eine wichtige Rolle in meinem Leben."

„Ich hänge sehr an dieser Marke."

„Ich fühle mich der Marke stark zugehörig."

„Die Marke hat eine große persönliche Bedeutung für mich."

„Die Marke verkörpert das, woran ich glaube."

identification

Used pictures

Axe product:

https://static.mueller.de/5620977898-PV-0/pdmain/axe-duschgel-alaska-250-ml.jpg, last visited: 10.07.2022.

Axe Testimonial female: https://i.pinimg.com/564x/b1/c3/6a/b1c36a23e50e9b34e9988d5d10b4a7df.jpg, last visited: 10.07.2022.

Axe Testimonial male:

https://asset1.modelmanagement.com/mm-eyJ0Ijp7InIiOnsibCI6/IjE2MDAiLCJoIjoiNTEy/In19LCJpZCI6ImkxMzg2/OTA4MiIsImYiOiJqcGci/fQ;;.jpg, last visited: 10.07.2022.

Pantene Pro-V product:

https://prd-cdn-emea1-joltx.pgsitecore.com/-/media/growing-families-version1/gf-de/2020/00_joltx/07-product-images/10/201015-pantene-purelift/unbenannt-3.ashx?rev=8e8c3acc4c564a158d84464302c5e154, last visited: 10.07.2022.

Pantene Pro-V Testimonial female:

https://i.pinimg.com/originals/ee/1d/45/ee1d45b1015066875e7bde2b733ba81d.jpg, last visited: 10.07.2022.

Pantene Pro-V Testimonial male:

https://i.pinimg.com/564x/22/d2/28/22d2286296cb25ff53b8fd35ebea4b16.jpg, last visited: 10.07.2022.

Is brand activism boosting employer brand attractiveness?

Irene Reichert, Mara Drzimalla, Anne Böthig

Abstract

Abstact

Purpose – This study examines the impact of brand activism on the employer brand attractiveness perceived by academics and non-academics, considering their political interest and their perceived value fit towards the activist statement.

Design/methodology/approach – Experimental research using an online questionnaire was conducted including manipulation of brand activism. Respondents (n = 183) rated a career page and a social media post that varied over three independent conditions: (a) pro-choice, (b) pro-life, and (c) neutral.

Findings – If a brand takes a stance on sociopolitical activism, it rather has a negative effect on employer brand attractiveness. Academics do not rate the attractiveness of organizations that provide brand activism information significantly higher than non-academics.

Research limitations/implications – The results are mostly based on the perception of entry-level job seekers. The influence of brand activism on employer brand attractiveness may be perceived differently by employees from other generations. Since this study evaluates the results descriptively, future research should test the research model statistically.

Practical implications – Brand managers must consider wisely if their brand should take a socio-political stance, as it could harm the employer brand. Therefore, brand managers should know the values of their target group and take a stand on their beliefs.

Originality/value – To the best of our knowledge this is the first research paper that investigates the relationship between brand activism and employer branding.

1   Introduction

Lately, many brands decided to include socio-political issues within their marketing campaigns and take a stance on a controversial topic (Mirzaei, 2022). Therefore, the topic of brand activism has gained the attention of brand managers. 27,5 percent of marketing leaders within a CMO-survey evaluate brands stating their opinion on political issues as appropriate (Moorman, 2022). Moreover, customers increasingly expect brands to speak up regarding socio-political issues: 37 percent of respondents state, that they would prefer brands that are taking political stances (Accenture, 2018). So, brand managers need to figure out, how to implement authentic brand activism within their communication. The impact of brand activism on customers has already been empirically tested by several studies (Hydock et al., 2020; Shetty et al., 2019; Schmidt et al., 2022; Mirzaei et al., 2022).
As some customers expect brands to engage in socio-political issues (Accenture, 2018), this may be a chance for employer brands as well. In the next years, developed countries expect an increasing shortage of skilled workers. According to studies, Germany will face a shortage of two million experts in different subject areas in 2030 (Statista, 2020). Considering the situation in the labour market, employer branding is becoming increasingly important for companies as they must find ways to stand out (Leekha Chhabra & Sharma, 2014). However, implementing brand activism into their communication could be risky for employer brands: Activist opinions are controversial and may even divide the public (Mirzaei et al., 2022). This could mean that to win new employees, employer brands need to let go of those, who do not agree with their position. Nevertheless, brand activism might be a considerable strategy for employer brands to attract new employees.

Since current research on brand activism rather focuses on customer-brand-relationships, an investigation of the effects of brand activism on the perception of the employer brand by potential employees is of great relevance. Derived from this research gap, this paper investigates the impact of brand activism on employer brand attractiveness. Moreover, the empirical research focuses on potential differences between academics and non-academics since a study has shown that political and social engagement is higher among people with a college degree (Weißeis, 2021). This study adopts an exploratory research approach using a quantitative study. An experiment was conducted using a career page of a fictive company taking a stance on the controversial topic of abortion within a social media post.

The paper is organized as follows. Section two reviews the relevant literature on brand activism, the importance of authenticity for brand activism, prior research, and employer brand attractiveness. Section three explains the conceptual framework including the conceptual model and introduces hypotheses. Section four describes the methodology and section five presents the results. In the last section, the results are discussed, limitations are provided, and possible future research is presented.

2   Literature Review

Brand Activism

Brand activism refers to brands that take a public stance or action to support socio-political issues, such as gun control, immigration, or abortion. According to Vredenburg et al. (2020), an activist brand is characterized by four core attributes: The brand must be value- and purpose-driven; it addresses controversial, socio-political topics; these topics can be progressive or conservative; and they generally do not receive consent from the majority. In addition, the company's positioning drives social change. In line with Bhagwat et al. (2020, p. 4), we define brand activism "as a firm's public demonstration (statements and/or actions) of support for or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue".

In literature, there is a link between brand activism and corporate social responsibility (CSR). Kotler and Sarkar (2017) state that brand activism is an evolution of CSR and may have emerged from it. However, in alignment with the literature, there are several differences between both terms and in the following, CSR is distinguished from brand activism. CSR activities usually involve generally accepted, non-controversial and pro-social issues, such as environmental protection measures (Mukherjee & Althuzien, 2020). Therefore, CSR issues often achieve a high level of social consensus and are seen as beneficial by the majority of society (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). In contrast, brand activism issues tend to be polarizing, highly partisan, and address topics with strong political relevance (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hydock et al., 2020).

Additionally, stakeholders respond differently to brand activism than they do to CSR. Socio-political activism can receive positive and negative responses and has the potential to strengthen or weaken the relationship between a brand and its stakeholders (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hydock et al., 2020). It is more uncertain and the risk of generating negative reactions is higher with brand activism than with CSR (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Prior Research on Brand Activism

Previous research mainly focuses on examining how socio-political activism affects brands from the customer's perspective. Reasons why companies take a socio-political stance differ. From a business perspective, the most important motives are the opportunity to "differentiate the brand, attract new customers, build emotional and self-expressive benefits, boost brand image and generate loyalty" (Schmidt et al., 2022, p. 46). This can lead to enhanced brand equity (Kotler & Sarkar, 2021). On the one hand, companies deliberately avoid making a socio-political statement because potential risks, such as losing customers, are too high (Schmidt et al., 2022; Banet-Weiser, 2012). On the other hand, Schmidt et al. (2022) report that this reluctance may change because more

brands have started to adopt highly controversial topics, e.g., Ben & Jerrys taking a stance for pro-immigrants or pro-choice adopted from Lush.

Brand activism can have either positive or negative effects on brands. If customers agree or disagree with a brand's socio-political stance it affects their brand perception. They prefer brand activism that aligns with their values and beliefs. In case of misalignment, their reactions tend to be stronger (Hydock et al., 2020). Mukherjee and Althuzien (2020) point out that brand attitudes diminish among customers who do not agree with a brand's position. Hydock et al. (2020) conclude that especially brands with a smaller market share benefit from brand activism, while brands with a larger market share are more likely to be harmed.

It depends on several factors like demographics, individual attitudes, or values, whether brand activism is perceived as positive or negative. Shetty et al. (2019) mention that there is no difference among millennials in terms of gender or income in how they perceive brand activism. In contrast, Schmidt et al. (2020) explore, that women think more positively about brand activism than men. Customers usually share different values and beliefs, so companies need to consider the risk of how their customers will perceive the socio-political activism (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

Authentic Brand Activism

Several papers identify authenticity as an important factor for brand activism. Whether customers perceive the actions as authentic affects the efficiency of a brand's socio-political stance. If the customers perceive the message as inauthentic, positive feelings of identification they have towards the brand will be neutralized. Especially customers who align with a socio-political position, consider authenticity as important (Hydock et al., 2020). Furthermore, if customers perceive the stance of a brand as inauthentic, they will probably question the brand's motivation (Vredenburg et al., 2018). The Edelman Trust Barometer indicates that about half of the customers interpret brand's positionings on social issues as marketing ploys, which should be considered by brand managers. In opposite, the report shows that if customers trust brands on their positioning regarding a social issue, more than half of the customers will endorse the brand and decide to buy the products or services (Edelman, 2020). There may be a similar effect when it comes to employer brands and the intention to apply.

In literature, there are different viewpoints of the fit between brand activism the corporate practice of the company. Mirzaei et al. (2022) claim that to be perceived as authentic the stance needs to be connected to a brand's purpose. In contrast, Mukherjee and Althuzien (2020) demonstrate that brand activism can be ad hoc and does not need a direct link to the core business. Vredenburg et al. (2020) state that to be perceived as authentic, brands need to focus on clear messages including precise social benefits. They should avoid misleading claims within their activist communication. In their paper on woke brand activism Mirzaei et al.

(2022) define a framework including six dimensions of authentic brand activism: social context independency, inclusion, sacrifice, practice, fit, and motivation.

Employer Brand Attractiveness

The concept of employer brand attractiveness (EBA) is defined "as the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organization" (Berthon et al., 2005, p. 156). EBA is an individual perception by potential employees and indicates if they recognize an organization as interesting or appealing (Catano & Hines, 2016). Organizations want to be perceived as attractive employers to gain a competitive advantage in hiring new, highly skilled employees (Berthon et al., 2005). Additionally, to be discerned as attractive is one of the goals companies want to achieve through their employer branding activities (Catano & Hines, 2016).

The concept of EBA is closely related to the concept of employer branding and can be seen as an antecedent of it. Employer branding describes the process of building a unique identity for a firm and comprises the firm's value system, policies, and behaviors (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The aim is to create an image in the mind of potential and current employees which conveys that the organization is a better employer than its competitors and an aspirational place to work (Berthon et al., 2005; Ewing et al., 2002). To develop a robust employer brand four phases are considered: Understanding the organization, building an engrossing brand promise for both employees and customers, improving the standards to measure the success of the brand promise, and aligning the people who support the brand promise (Kavitha & Jublee, 2018). The research field of EBA is already widely explored. Previous research identified various indicators that can be decisive for EBA. Factors, such as work environment, work-life balance, training possibilities, image, or career opportunities can affect attractiveness (Rietz & Lohaus, 2015; Deloitte, 2018). In practice and literature, many studies determine which factors impact EBA. Most of the studies present different results. For instance, Rietz and Lohaus (2015) indicate that general awareness of companies and their image strongly impact the perceived employer attractiveness. What a company makes attractive depends on the individual expectations of job seekers.

Current research only linked EBA to the concept of CSR, several studies test if CSR activities can affect the attractiveness of a firm positively. Organizations that act socially responsible can be perceived as more attractive by potential applicants because they assume that the organization cares more about its employees (Highhouse et al., 2007; Ersoy & Aksehirli, 2015). Jones et al. (2014) investigate a significant positive relationship between CSR and organizational attractiveness. The participants in their study tend to prefer a job in a company that provides CSR content on their website. Similar results are presented by Catano and Hines (2016). Moreover, other indicators and benefits a company provides are also relevant to the company's attractiveness. CSR is not the sole deciding factor, but it can make a company appear somewhat more attractive (Klimkiewicz & Oltra, 2017; Catano & Hines, 2016).

People who are in line with the CSR issue perceive the company as more attractive and pay more attention to whether an employer implements and complies with CSR (Klimkiewicz & Oltra, 2017). This finding is consistent with research from the field of brand activism which indicates that people who support the company's stance perceive the brand more positively.

In contrast to CSR, the research does not yet examine whether brand activism influences EBA or not. Additionally, current literature on the topic of brand activism exclusively refers to customer-brands and not to employee-brand-relationships. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to explore to what extent brand activism can affect EBA. To investigate this purpose, the following research question arises: *To what extent does brand activism affect EBA among academics and non-academics?*

3   Conceptual Framework

Regarding the study, five hypotheses are developed. Since previous studies already underlined the connection between CSR and employer attractiveness, the main hypothesis is based on brand activism and EBA (Catano & Hines, 2016; Klimkiewicz & Oltra, 2017). In this context, brand activism was divided into two levels of activation – high and low – and the following hypothesis was defined:

H$_1$: *If a brand takes a stance on socio-political activism, it will have a positive effect on EBA.*

Derived from the literature, three moderators were included in the research model to find out whether they influence H$_1$. It can be supposed that academics have a higher level of awareness and engagement for political topics than non-academics and are therefore more receptive to brand activism (Weißeis, 2021; Knopke et al., 2017). Consequently, we differentiated between two test groups and examined whether there is a distinction in their perception of the stimuli. Since companies that are engaged in brand activism address political topics, it can be assumed that brand activism communication has a stronger impact on respondents with a high level of political interest (Otto & Bacherle, 2011; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Bhagwat et al., 2020). Furthermore, value fit perceptions were analyzed in earlier studies. Accordingly, the extent to which respondents agreed with the values from the brand activism communication was tested (Kristof-Brown, 2000; Klimkiewicz & Oltra, 2017). This leads to the following hypotheses:

H$_2$: *Academics will rate EBA of organizations that provide brand activism information higher than non-academics.*
H$_3$: *People with high political interest will rate EBA of organizations that provide brand activism information higher than people with low political interest.*

H₄: *Respondents who share the same values as the brand activism statement will rate EBA higher than respondents who do not.*

For the last hypothesis, we proceeded to the behavioral level and examined the results from previous studies which referred to the influence of a high perceived EBA on the intention to apply for a company (Agrawal & Swaroop, 2009; Chapman et al., 2005; Saini et al., 2013). Therefore, the last hypothesis was defined:

H5: If EBA is perceived as high, it has a positive impact on the intention to apply.

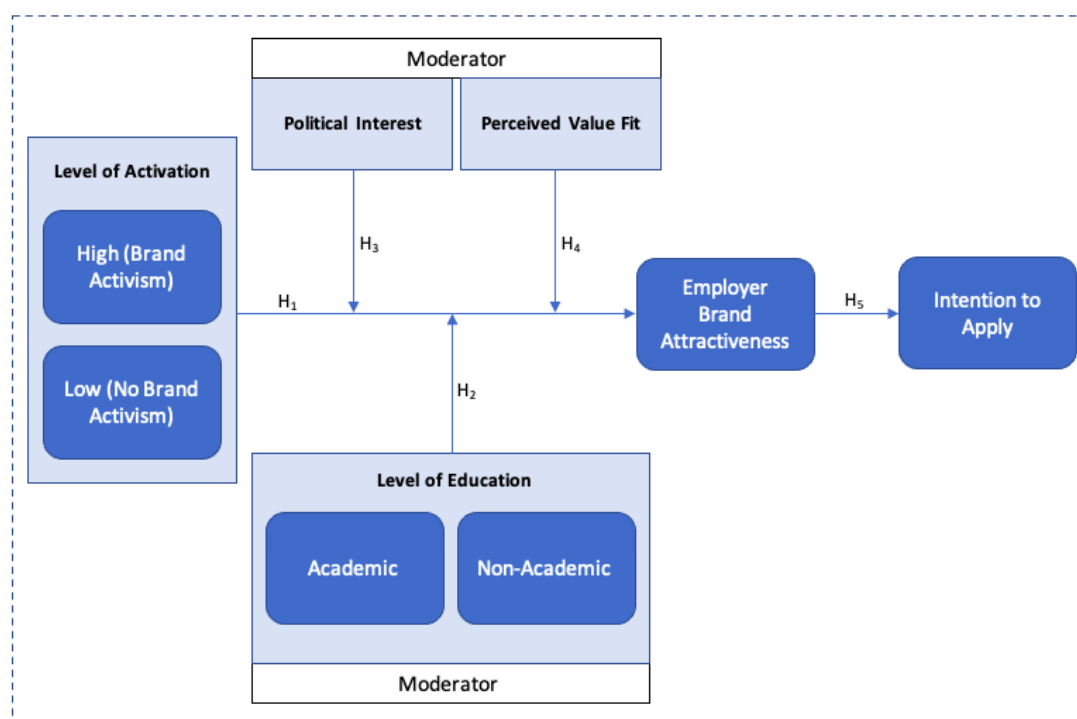Derived from the before mentioned hypotheses, we developed the following research model displayed in figure 1:

Figure 2. Research model, own visualization

4   Methodology

To address the research question, an empirical research method was deployed. Within the scope of the experimental study approach, an online questionnaire including manipulation of brand activism was conducted. The design of the experiment is based on similar studies that have examined the relationship between CSR and employer attractiveness (Catano & Hines, 2016; Klimkiewicz & Oltra, 2017).

Sample

In total 183 people participated in the main study (n = 183). The sample consisted of both academics and non-academics aged 16 to 33. In this context, academics are defined as people that are studying or already completed their degrees. The focus of the sample was on millennials, born between 1980 and 1995, and generation Z, born between 1995 and 2010 (Bencsik et. al., 2016). As mentioned earlier, millennials have a high affinity for brands, that take a stance on activist topics (Shetty et al., 2019). Only the younger part of millennials was included in the sample, since older people from that generation have considerably more professional and life experience, which might impact their rating of EBA (Chung et. al., 2015). We limited the sample to the lowest age of 16 years, because younger participants usually do not have work experience. It can be noted that the reached audience is well balanced as 71 male and 108 female respondents participated. The chi-squared test approved this point since there are no significant differences between the sample groups (p = .47). The age distribution was tested with ANOVA and there were no significant differences indicated either (p = .91). Also, with regards to the education level, it becomes clear that the sample was similarly distributed since it contained 102 academics and 81 non-academics.

Stimuli

First, we created the fictive company ‚health.space', which enables simple, digital access to support people with mental disorders. To provide the participants with context about the brand, we developed an online career page for the company (figure 2). The respondents were asked to visit it to receive more information. In addition, 85 percent of the respondents (n = 156) stated that they would visit the career page of a company before they apply for a job. The career page was shown to every participant, and we implemented a control question to check if participants visited the page.
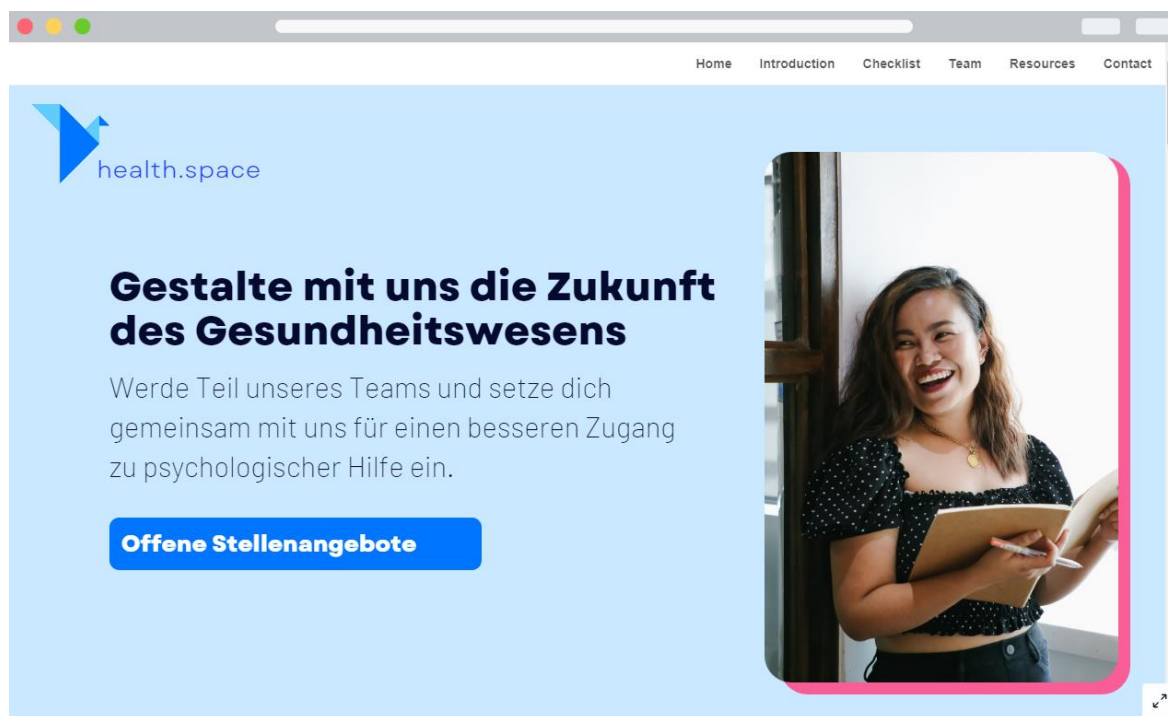
Figure 2. Screenshot of the stimulus career page

Secondly, social media postings based on three different conditions were displayed (*figure 3*). One posting contained a neutral message and served as a control measurement. The other two postings were manipulated with brand activism information referring to the controversial topic of abortion. While one of them represented pro-choice and supporting abortion, the other one represented the pro-life-position rejecting abortion. The participants were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions: pro-choice, pro-life, or neutral. After the survey was conducted, it was found that the groups for the three conditions were well balanced: 65 participants completed the survey based on pro-choice, 62 respondents finished the survey including the pro-life statement and 56 participants received the neutral social media posting.
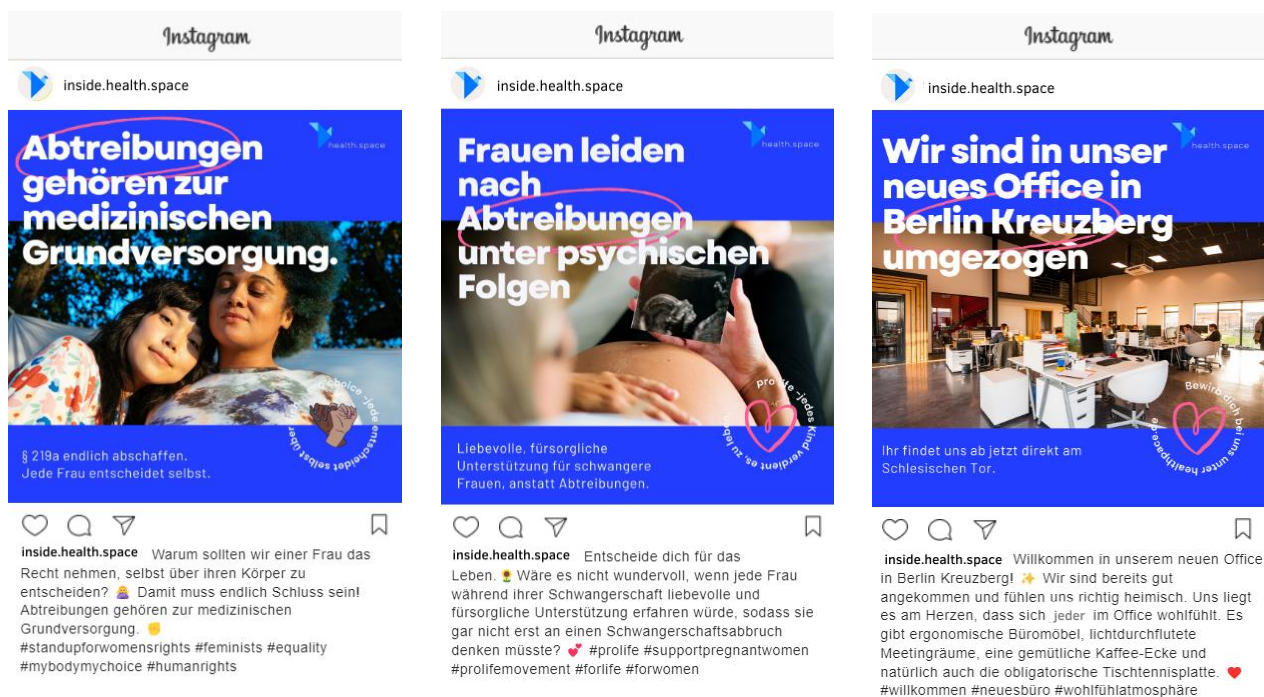
Figure 3. Stimuli social media posts: pro-life, pro-choice and neutral (LTR)

Procedure

In advance, a pretest (n = 30) was conducted to evaluate if the created manipulations are perceived as authentic brand activism. The questionnaire of the final study was active for two weeks. A convenience sample was chosen. Data was collected via online surveys which were distributed in a vocational school in Germany and social media groups for universities and training occupations. The questionnaire was conducted in German to ensure that no comprehension problems occur.

The survey started with questions regarding socio-demographic data and application behavior, followed by an instruction guiding through the stimuli. Afterwards, the participants had to answer questions referring to the different constructs. To avoid people being biased by the order of items, they were displayed randomly. Apart from questions regarding socio-demographic data and job-seeking habits, 5-point Likert scales were used – ranging from 1=‚I disagree' to 5=‚I agree'.

Cronbach's alpha was computed to examine the internal consistency of the scales. First, a scale for EBA was used to test the dependent variables. Therefore, regarding EBA, the scales for general attractiveness (α = .84) and the prestige of the organization (α = .82) were used. For the variable intention to apply (α = .89), a scale of the same name was implemented (Highhouse et al., 2003). In addition, the participants had to answer questions concerning their level of political interest and engagement. For this construct, a scale for political interest (α = .90) was applied (Otto & Bacherle, 2011). In the next step, the value fit between the participant and the company's brand activism statement was tested with the help of a scale for the perceived value fit (α = .94)

(Cable & DeRue, 2002). Furthermore, the internal consistency for the scale on perception of brand activism (α = .74) and authenticity (α = .73) was tested and considered as acceptable. Therefore, we proceeded with these scales.

5   Results

Manipulation Checks

Within the pretest the perception as brand activism and the authenticity of the stimuli was evaluated. A t-test was run to evaluate if the stimuli are perceived as brand activism. For both brand activism groups, variance equality and a significant difference compared to the control group were found (pro-choice T = -7,78, p = .00; pro-life T = -9,04, p = .00). We reviewed the mean values of authenticity to ensure that the stimuli were perceived as authentic. For both manipulations, the mean scores had a strong tendency towards authenticity. The majority perceived the manipulations as authentic. Therefore, they were considered as successful. We repeated the same test within the final study and received similar results.

Test of Hypothesis 1

To test the first hypothesis and to determine whether brand activism has a positive effect on EBA, a t-test was conducted. There was a significant effect with no equality of variances (T = -2.69, p = .01) of the brand activism conditions on EBA and therefore a Welch test was applied. Remarkably, the standard deviations were especially higher in the groups with brand activism stimuli (pro-choice s = .78; pro-life s = .88), compared to the control group (s = .69). However, the effect of brand activism on EBA was not positive, as expected in H_1, but negative. Therefore, H_1 must be withdrawn. Additionally, several t-tests were conducted to examine differences between all three conditions. A significant difference between the pro-life condition and the neutral condition was detected (T = 4.52, p = .00), but there was no significant difference between the pro-choice condition and the neutral one (T = -.11, p = .91).

Based on the results, we conclude that brand activism has an impact on EBA. However, brand activism rather decreases the EBA than increasing it.

Test of Moderators

To test H_2, H_3 and H_4 t-tests were conducted. H_2 claimed that the level of education would have an impact on the relationship between brand activism and EBA. For this hypothesis, no significant difference between academics and non-academics was detected in EBA after being exposed to brand activism (T = -1.93, p = .06). Once again, the variances were homogenous and the standard deviation high (academics s = .99, non-academics s = .73). Five academic respondents strongly supported the pro-choice activism and rated EBA high. There is a

slight tendency that academics rate EBA higher ($\overline{X}$ = 3.44) than non-academics ($\overline{X}$ = 3.36). The results do not support H_2. The moderator level of education degree has no impact on EBA.

To investigate if political interest impacts the relationship between brand activism and EBA, the sample was classified into very, moderate, and low politically interested groups. Therefore, we divided the sample into three equal percentiles. We did not observe the moderate group within the t-test, because the aim was to examine if high or low political interest was decisive for the rating of EBA. The study determined that strongly politically interested respondents did not perceive the company as more attractive through brand activism than low politically interested respondents (T = -.07, p = .94). Therefore, H_3 is rejected.

H_4 stated that the perceived value fit of the respondents impacts the relationship between brand activism and EBA. The same classification procedure was used as for H_3. The t-test determines that there is a significant difference between the groups with a high and low perceived value fit (T = -6.46, p = .00). H_4 is supported: Respondents, who share the values, that were expressed within the brand activism statement, rate EBA significantly higher than respondents who do not. Within the investigation of H_1, it was found that respondents, who were exposed to the pro-life condition, rated EBA lower. It can be suspected that this was caused by the perceived value fit, which was significantly lower for the pro-life group than for the pro-choice group (T = -2.52, p = .01).

Test of Hypothesis 5

The last hypothesis stated that a high perceived EBA positively impacts the intention to apply. For the investigation of H_5, a linear regression was conducted. The relationship between the two constructs is highly significant (p = .00). Results show a strong correlation between both variables (β = .95, R^2 = .69), which allows the assumption that 69 percent of intention to apply is explained by EBA. In line with the findings of previous studies, H_5 is accepted (Agrawal & Swaroop, 2009; Sharma & Prasad, 2018; Saini et al., 2013). The stronger EBA is, the higher is the intention to apply.

Hypothesis	Path	Verification/Falsification
H_1	Brand Activism → EBA	✗ (only negative and no positive effect)
H_2	Level of Education ↓ Brand Activism → EBA	✗
H_3	Political Interest ↓ Brand Activism → EBA	✗
H_4	Perceived Value Fit ↓ Brand Activism → EBA	✓
H_5	EBA → Intention to Apply	✓

Figure 4. Verification and falsification of the hypotheses

6   Discussion

Theoretical Implications

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first research paper that empirically investigates the relationship between brand activism and EBA. The derived findings contribute to the emerging literature on brand activism by providing a novel perspective on the link to employer branding. This study extends the literature by determining that brand activism rather has a negative than a positive effect on overall EBA. Additionally, the perceived value fit was identified as a decisive factor for the outcoming EBA effects. Therefore, we can confirm the finding by Hydock et al. (2020), who state that customers who oppose the socio-political stance of a company react more strongly to brand activism than those who agree, for potential employees as well. We also identify that the political interest as a moderator has no significant impact on the perceived EBA of the respondents after being exposed to brand activism. The same applies to the educational background: In the study a slightly more positive reaction towards brand activism by academics could be identified. Furthermore, with the results of the study, we can confirm that EBA significantly influences the intention to apply, which was already found in previous studies (Agrawal & Swaroop, 2009; Sharma & Prasad, 2018; Saini et al., 2013). Although this study focuses on brand activism in the context of employer branding, our findings may also apply to the customer attractiveness of brands.

Practical Implications

This study includes several implications for practitioners. Firstly, we found that when a brand engages in socio-political topics it rather has a negative than a positive effect on EBA. Especially, when possible, applicants do

not agree with the stance, it is likely to harm EBA. Therefore, managers should be aware that brand activism can be risky and might have negative effects. As our results present, it is important to know the values of potential applicants a company wants to attract. A company can increase its attractiveness if they manage to address and pick up the values and beliefs of their potential applicants. To achieve this, highly targeted employer branding measures are necessary.

Despite the high risk, brand activism can provide an opportunity for employer branding, especially when a company aims to target a small group of specific candidates who ideally fit the brand and properly endorse activism. In the evaluation of EBA, we identified high variances in the results. Therefore, some respondents might be very strongly in favour of brand activism and thus perceive the company as very attractive.

None of our findings indicated that brand activism made companies appear significantly more attractive to academics than to non-academics. However, we noticed that academics slightly tend to prefer brand activist statements. Therefore, an interesting and important practical question for future research could be whether brand activism impacts the characteristics of the applicant base. For instance, it could be interesting to know whether brand activism has the power to attract applicants with higher skills.

Limitations and Future Research

The study also reveals some limitations and provides a basis for future research. Firstly, the results are based on relatively young participants in Germany with most of them having little work experience. Even though this sample is relevant for research because people of this age are commonly looking for job offers, this constraint may call into question the generalizability of the study. Consequently, it would be interesting to explore, whether older generations with different career levels or people from other countries with different religious and cultural backgrounds perceive brand activism differently. Moreover, considering that the topic of the postings is abortion, it would be interesting to see if the results for female respondents turn out differently.

Another limitation results from the fact that a fictive company has been used within the stimuli. It would be revealing to replicate the study with real brands from different industries to compare the outcomes. Additionally, the fictive company represents a health care company with a start-up culture. This approach does not take into consideration that not every person prefers to work for a start-up and this limitation could influence EBA. Further research should be based on companies from different industries or of different sizes as a stimulus to cover a broader range of company type preferences.

Additionally, the moderators in this paper were only examined descriptively. To receive more detailed information about the strength of each moderator within the research model, it should be tested statistically.

Finally, it is important to investigate whether the results would remain the same if the study would be performed within a field experiment. In this way, the respondents would see the stimuli directly on Instagram, where the fictive postings were published and participate in the survey in a more realistic environment, which could lead to different reactions and outputs.

Conclusion

Many brands decide to take a socio-political stance on a controversial topic (e.g., MeToo-movement, Black Lives Matter). In summary, it can be concluded that taking an authentic stand on a socio-political topic does not affect overall EBA in a positive, but rather in a negative way. There is no significant difference between the employer target groups of academics and non-academics. The perceived value fit of potential employees was identified as a decisive factor for the impact of brand activism on the perceived EBA. Overall, when a brand engages in socio-political topics, it should make sure to represent the values of its target group.

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Get woke, go broke?! Co-Created vs. company centered brand activism on Instagram within the fashion industry

Michelle Basak, Anne-Pauline Piper

Abstract

Purpose– This study investigates brand activism during pride month of fast and commercial fashion companies in a social media context. The aim is to explore the different ways of campaign creation and its target groups' reactions.

Design/methodology/approach– This study was conducted in the form of a descriptive design using a multiple case study where the brand activism of four fast and commercial companies has been analyzed. For this purpose, a 2 x 2 matrix was established which includes the dimensions of co-created and company centered campaigns as well as communicative and product oriented characteristics. To investigate the customers' reactions, a content analysis was conducted by following an inductive and deductive approach. Therefore, a codebook was designed consisting of nine codes and analyzing 49 customer reactions. A pretest was carried out to ensure its functionality.

Findings– Co-created and company centered brand activism differ in the reactions. Company centered activism is perceived more negatively by the target group than co-created brand activism. However, all campaigns that are product oriented are accused of woke washing. In addition, other factors play a central role in successful brand activism, such as evidence for the activism and monetary as well as ideational support of the communities.

Research limitations/implications– Only the social media channel Instagram was used as a source for the content analysis and a limited set of fashion and commercial companies were analyzed. Additionally, only a limited set of comments was investigated.

Originality/value– There are no studies so far concerning co-created and company centered brand activism of fast and commercial fashion companies during pride month. Therefore, this study addresses a research gap that is becoming more relevant because many consumers expect companies to make social and political statements on their social media channels.

1   Introduction

According to LGBT Capital, the buying power of the LGBTIQ+ community is 3,7 trillion US dollars and the number of individuals who identify themselves as LGBTIQ+ is constantly growing and with them the general support in the society for LGBTIQ+ rights (Gallup, 2022). This leads companies to target the LGBTIQ+ customer group and do brand activism. In addition, 65% of individuals want companies to take a stand on social issues (Edelman, 2018; Larcker and Tayan, 2018).

Companies like Nike, Adidas and American Apparel (Ennis, 2020; Adidas, 2020; Komar, 2019) included pride campaigns in their communication strategies in 2019 and 2020. Thus, the engagement is often perceived as inauthentic and exploitative as consumers feel no connection between the brands and the LGBTIQ+ community. However, companies that aren't consistent while supporting the community are accused of woke washing (Kontio, 2019; Portal et al., 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Not only do consumers see the difference between genuine support and woke washing, but also media articles published during June 2022, which is considered pride month, reflect the backlash (Rivera, 2022). Some statements reflecting this backlash are the following: "The tired corporate critique of Pride Month misses the point" (Competitive Enterprise Institute, 2022), "Brands need more than rainbow-coloured products if they want to celebrate Pride in 2022" (Beer, 2022) as well as "Rainbow Capitalism Minimizing Authentic Queer Content?" (Hunt, 2022).

According to previous research, premature attempts of communication can detach the customer base, result in perceived hypocrisy, reduced brand trust, or even boycotts (Shetty et al., 2019).

To successfully practice brand activism, the message of the company needs to be achieved and communicated authentically, while having an alignment of the communicated marketing and the explicit purpose and values of the company. For the LGBTIQ+ community, this means that if companies support LGBTIQ+ during Pride Month it should also align with the values of the company during the rest of the year (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Brand activism during pride month is an effective marketing approach to reach and engage the target customer base, establish trust, build brand awareness and personality and show authentic brand activism (Shetty et al., 2019).

This study was limited to communication on Instagram during pride month by four fast and commercial fashion companies. These companies are Abercrombie and Fitch, Happy Socks, Stradivarius and H&M. A distinction was made between the dimensions of company centered and co-created campaigns as well as communicative and product-oriented characteristics of the campaigns. This paper is one of the first scientific studies aiming to explore different communication strategies of LGBTIQ+ brand activism. Consequently, the main research question this paper aims to answer is: "To what extent do co-created versus company centered LGBTIQ+

campaigns differ in the evaluation of the target groups?". Secondly, this research paper aims to find the answer to the corresponding research question: "If campaigns differ in the evaluation by the target group, what are the potential reasons for the different evaluations regarding co-created or company centered campaigns?".

These questions will help identify a consistent pattern of communication during pride month to convey credible brand activism and not be accused of woke washing by consumers. To the best of the author's knowledge, there is no similar study researching this topic.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Brand Activism

Brand activism is defined as an emerging marketing tactic for brands that are seeking to stand out in a divided marketplace by communicating and taking public stances on social and political issues (Moorman, 2020; Sarkar and Kotler, 2021). The key factor is that these statements are in line with the company's values (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Brand activism is mostly communicated through the company's marketing and advertising channels (Buckow, 2021). This includes social media channels such as Instagram, LinkedIn and TikTok. In this way, the company can communicate its position on social and political issues to the wider community with the message of how the company is contributing. For brand activism, it is important to engage with the customer on an emotional level, creating customer loyalty and association (Buckow, 2021). Brand activism aims to stimulate larger debates to challenge the status quo as well as innovatively change society. Moreover, brand activism is properly implemented when the brand is perceived as making an important contribution to raising awareness as well as fighting for the cause which can then lead to a competitive advantage (Eyada, 2020). Furthermore, it can result in increased exposure by third parties and customers as well as influencers (Eyada, 2020). It can also result in increased customer loyalty as the brand aligns with its values. However, the companies allow consumers to become brand ambassadors by sharing advertisements and social media content to raise awareness and support their values (Eyada, 2020).

In conclusion, brand activism needs to align with the core values of the company. If the values and the activism don't match, it will be considered woke-washing by consumers and the target group (Shetty et al., 2019). Furthermore, customers who have different social, political and environmental beliefs can also feel betrayed by the campaigns which may lead to a backlash and can result in the loss of consumers.

2.2   Pride and LGBTIQ+

In this paper, the acronym LGBTIQ+ will be used to include all sexual orientations and genders. LGBTQ is the acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (GLAAD, 2022). The term LGBTIQ+ includes the recognition of all non-straight, non-cisgender identities. Therefore, the I stands for Intersex. The '+' sign is used as a "plus" to include the other gender and sexual orientations that don't fit into the letters (Terang and Mortlake Health Service, 2019).

For a better understanding of the research, the term pride month will be defined. Pride month is celebrated yearly in June and is dedicated to the uplifting of LGBTIQ+ voices, the celebration of LGBTIQ+ culture and the support of LGBTIQ+ rights. Pride month is the month that marks the day of the Stonewall Riots of 1969, a series of violent and unplanned demonstrations between the gay community and the police of New York City. That day marked a major turning point in the modern LGBTIQ+ rights movement. These were the first demonstrations in which homosexual and transsexual people demonstrated their rights. One of the demonstrations escalated in the gay bar "Stonewall Inn" on Christopher Street - which is considered a turning point for the LGBTIQ+ movement in the United States (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2021; Lucero, 2019).

To commemorate the Stonewall Uprising, the last Sunday in June was celebrated as Gay Pride Day, which was gradually expanded to become pride month. Today, however, pride month is above all an important month to honour the LGBTIQ+ community, pay attention to them and strengthen awareness of equality (Seering et al., 2022).

All around the world parades, protests, drag shows and celebrations and parades are taking place (Wurzburger, 2022) while showing the pride flag. This flag also known as Rainbow Flag features eight colours and each has a meaning. Hot pink represents sex, red represents life, orange represents healing, yellow signifies sunlight, green represents nature, turquoise represents art, indigo indicates harmony, and finally violet at the bottom stands for spirit (Morgan, 2020). Pride month is partly political activism and partly a celebration of the achievements of the LGBTIQ+ community.

2.3   Woke Washing

Woke washing is defined as inauthentic brand activism in which the company detaches its activism from the values of the company (Vredenburg et al., 2020). The term was originally used by African American activists in the USA to call for "vigilance" against racism and discrimination (Prevency GmbH, 2020). The term woke washing is now also used by activists regarding other social and political issues such as LGBTIQ+ rights and women's rights. In contrast to the above-described brand activism where a company takes an active stance on a

political, social or environmental issue - woke washing is the misuse of brand activism only to improve their image or to generate attention (Bauer, 2022). Woke washing is thus opposed to genuine and authentic brand activism and is the antithesis of a lived corporate purpose (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

When companies are "woke", they spread awareness of socio-political issues and social injustice. In comparison when companies are accused of "woke washing" the companies use social and political issues solely for marketing purposes. The reason for woke washing is often to increase profits (Howard, 2021). Woke washing involves spreading and posting activist messages on websites and social media platforms about key socio-political issues through communication and marketing measures without actually standing behind the message they are spreading. In the case of woke washing, a (communicated) stance is not followed by a consequence and there is a clear discrepancy between the communicated and practised values of the brand.

Nowadays, the woke washing issue is a present theme in the digital world (Jones, 2020), and one of the main arenas, where these marketing campaigns are carried out, is social media. As a result, "woke washing" harms a company's credibility and consequently its reputation.

The term woke washing is broad as it includes different political and social issues such as greenwashing, blue washing or pinkwashing. Pinkwashing (sometimes also known as rainbow washing) refers to solidarity with the LGBTIQ+ community (Mentis, 2022). Since the term pinkwashing or rainbow washing is not yet specified and is also used in the context of the fight against breast cancer, the authors will use the term woke washing while referring to companies practising brand activism to support the rights of the LGBTIQ+ communities (Schumer, 2022).

2.4   Co-creation and company centered campaign

Since this paper will analyze advertising campaigns, it is important to underline that they are planned and targeted marketing actions with a predefined duration over a certain period. They aim to promote products, increase sales, raise brand awareness or strengthen or change the image. Marketing campaigns usually use several channels and formats and are a combination of various advertising media (media mix) (Parente and Strasbaugh-Hutchinson, 2014).
When communicating campaigns, companies approach communication differently.

In this paper, a distinction is made between company centered and co-created. To differentiate co-creation and company centered campaigns, the two different approaches are being presented.

The authors use the term "company centered", to underline that the company is the sole creator of the campaign and is responsible for the entire communication. The creation and dissemination of the campaign are done

internally. A campaign manager or department takes over the coordination and planning of the whole campaign. They coordinate the campaign and manage the budget of the underlying measures. Another way of creating a campaign is "co-creation" which attempts to collaborate with customers, stakeholders, and sometimes even competitors (Akhilesh, 2017). Co-creation aims to emphasize with customers and create a special customer value (Lusch et al., 2007). It includes the exchange of ideas and knowledge between the customer and the company, followed by working and realizing the idea together (Roser et al., 2009). Co-creation is an active, creative, dynamic, and social process where collaborations are used for the development of new products or services (Ind et al. 2017; Markovic and Bagherzadeh, 2018, Piller et al., 2011). Brands use co-creation for competitive advantage but also for the company organization as co-creation results in cost efficiencies, risk reduction and better insights into the community (Hatch and Schultz 2010; Ind et al., 2017; Kazadi et al., 2016).

3   Theoretical Background

3.1   Design, methodology and sample

Since brand activism has not been explored yet in a co-created or company centered context, the authors used a qualitative descriptive research design in this paper. It is important to point out that the research design has changed during the process of data collection because of an insufficient database. However, this first design approach will be explained so that these findings gained during the first process will not be discarded. Then, the used design approach will be explained.

The first design approach was built to investigate how virtue-signalling efforts can be authentic in a commercial and product-oriented context (Mirzaei et al., 2022) within the fashion industry. The reactions of the target groups towards social media pride campaigns should have been analyzed to indicate authentically and unauthentically perceived campaigns by the target group during pride month 2022. Therefore, multiple decades of campaigns and multiple decades of comments underneath the pride month posts should have been analyzed in content analysis. Afterwards, the focus should have been on these extremely different campaigns while finding out what their "success-" or "failure-factors" were.

A differentiation between company centered and co-created campaigns did not take place so far since this differentiation was only observed by the researchers after the first data collection period during pride month 2022. As a result, a differentiation between company centered and co-created campaigns in a brand activism context does not yet occur in the literature as well as in the first research design. Moreover, the researchers observed in this first round of data collection the first two major characteristics: campaigns differentiate additionally by being product oriented or communicative. Product oriented campaigns promote products

branded with pride elements, such as the rainbow flag or the trans logo, whereas communicative campaigns don't promote products and are built around communicative input, such as interviews or footage.

However, a lack of data occurred so it was impossible to compare multiple decades of fashion companies that posted content based on their brand activism during pride month 2022.

Since the first research design was not feasible and the researchers highlighted a differentiation between company centered and product oriented campaigns during this first period of the research, the researchers decided to investigate this observation in more detail while considering the accompanying characteristics of campaigns being product oriented or communicative.

To understand the dynamics regarding co-created vs. company centered brand activism the following research questions will be answered:

RQ1: To what extent do co-created versus company centered LGBTIQ+ campaigns differ in the evaluation of the target groups?

RQ2: If campaigns differ in the evaluation by the target group, what are the potential reasons for the different evaluations regarding co-created or company centered campaigns?

To answer these research questions, the research design is composed of two parts: a multiple case study and a content analysis. Afterwards, the findings of four cases and their characteristics are examined for conspicuousness while considering the reactions of the target group towards the different pride campaign strategies.

Firstly in the multiple case study approach, the characteristics of co-created and company centered campaigns are emphasized while considering the additional variables of product oriented and company centered campaigns. As a result, one case for each category is investigated: a company centered communicative campaign, a company centered product oriented campaign, a co-created communicative campaign and a co-created product oriented campaign. The purpose of the multiple case study approach is twofold, on the one hand, it provides descriptive information and on the other hand, it suggests theoretical relevance. A detailed description allows a deeper or clearer understanding of the case (Yin, 2009). Since case studies typically combine collected data (Eisenhardt, 1989), the study focuses on the details and settings of the brands' campaigns including those involved in creating the campaign, the period of the campaign, and, if available, the fundraising goal of the campaign's revenue.

Figure 1 shows the 2x2 brand activism matrix developed by the researchers for the multiple case study approach. There, the chosen cases for each category are visualized. Those cases were selected out of a total sample of 37

companies that launched campaigns on Instagram during pride month 2022. Those 37 companies were then sorted into the four categories and finally, those with the highest total number of comments were chosen to represent each category. The highest number of total comments was chosen as an indicator to keep the variance of comments as high as possible. As a result, H&M represents co-created communicative campaigns, Happy Socks represents co-created product oriented campaigns, Abercrombie and Fitch represents company centered product oriented campaigns and Stradivarius represents company centered communicative campaigns.
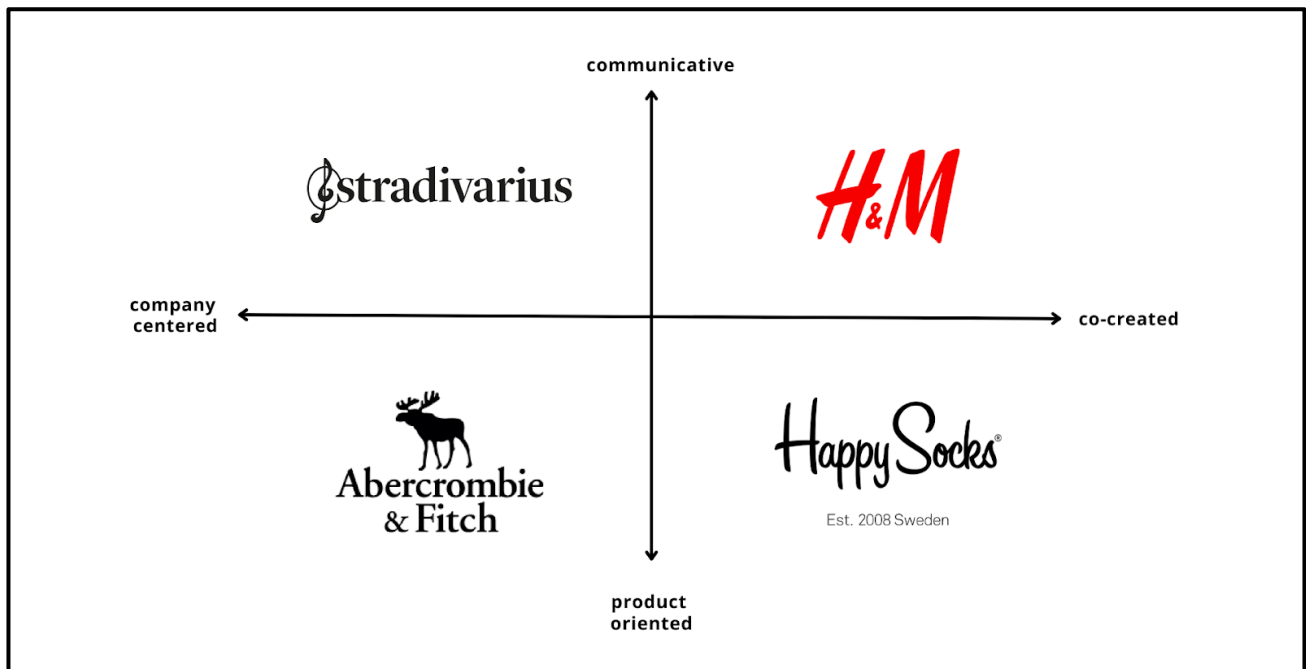

Figure 1. 2x2 brand activism matrix

Then the second part of the research design consists of a content analysis which aims to analyze if the campaigns differ in the evaluation of the target groups. Therefore a codebook assists to categorize the different reactions. This codebook is based on and inspired by the paper "Woke brand activism or the lack of fit" by Mirzaei, A. et al. (2022) where the dimensions of woke branding activism were explored. In this paper, six dimensions for woke activism authenticity were emphasized: social context independence, inclusion, sacrifice, practice, fit and motivation (Mirzaei et al., 2022). However, Mirzaei et al. (2022)'s dimensions focused on what companies should fulfill to be perceived as authentic, whereas this paper's codebook aims to identify the reactions of the targets to the content. Thus, not all dimensions could be adopted for the codebook of this paper. As a result, the codebook was extended and therefore, the research methodology is inductive and deductive. The final codebook consists of the nine codes "homophobic criticism", "product over the context of activism", "LGBTIQ+ support", "campaign criticism", "appreciation of inclusion", "lack of fit", "distancing", "questioning of the brand activism

practice" and "woke washing" (table 1). These codes were created by categorizing and supplementing the missing dimensions in addition to the selected codes of the paper by Mirzaei et al. (2022). The rules and the associated keyword as well as an example for each code can be observed in table 1.

Code	Operational Description	Key words	Example
homophobic criticism	Homophobic statement	god, Muslim, Arab, not normal	Kids are watching this, it's not normal! Normal is what God create!
product over context of activism	Product shown in the campaign is primarily (product does not necessarily have to be related to brand activism)	product	Omg what sweater is that? I need that!!!
lgbtiq+ support	Community support of a customer that is not specifically part of the LGBTIQ+ community	pride flag, love, pride month, equal	Wow maybe you should take care of all those sick comments…. LOVE IS LOVE
campaign criticsm	Content of the campaign criticized for no specific reason	campaign, bad, worst	The worst campaign ever
appreciation of inclusion	Personal appreciation of feeling safe and accepted	feeling, acceptance, appreciation, me, us, support	Thank you for inviting our family to be part of this beautiful masterpiece!
lack of fit	Statement is not related to the campaign	order, customer service	Hello, I can't seem to get in touch with your customer service. Kindly help me out.
distancing	Statement that consumers will no longer buy from this brand without specific reason	Unfollow, blocking, never again	Never buying again
questioning of the brand activism practice	Lack of evidence for brand activism	wondering, evidence	I would like to know however what HM is doing to help the lgbtq community the rest of the year or if they're just banking on pride month like so many other companies
woke washing	Accusing directly of brand activism marketing and communication measures do not match the company's actions	woke, washing, capitalism	Loving the socks, hating political statements.. every single person gets my respect, but the WOKE movement is being pushed down throats.. so, see ya later, devastator. #respectforall #nooneisbetterthananyone #done

Table 1. Final codebook

To conduct the content analysis, a sample of 49 comments from the four selected pride campaigns was randomly chosen. The number of comments per case was calculated from 25% of the total number of reactions of each campaign.

In the following, the codebook's function will be explained while describing the scenario of the pretest.

3.2   Pretest

Since the case study design is descriptive and did not afford a detailed pretest, the codebook's function was tested more in detail. Therefore, a randomly chosen brand that published a campaign during pride month 2022 on Instagram was selected to test, on the one hand, whether the codes are similarly used by the researchers to categorize comments so that each comment matches the same code. Additionally, it was tested whether all codes are precisely defined to avoid unspecific or doubled categorization. To perform the pretest, 20 comments were reviewed from the selected campaign. The researchers then categorized these comments independently of each other and then finally compared their results.

As a result, the researchers were able to fit the comments into the same categories and found all codes relevant to the pretest. Moreover, the descriptions were precise enough to avoid that comments that would match two or more codes.

4   Findings

Since the first planned research design and its findings should not be squandered, the main findings will be discussed shortly. During the first data collection, it turned out that less content was posted than needed for this design approach. The first observation, that campaigns are co-created or company centered in addition to the respective characteristics "communicative" or "product oriented", was already explained, since these were essential for the actually used design model. However, another observation was that companies which practised brand activism during pride month in 2021, did not practice it this year. As a result, with the sample at hand, fewer companies published pride campaigns during pride month 2022 compared to 2021.

However, the research design has changed. As a result, the first part of the actually used research design consisted of the multiple case study that aimed to analyze the characteristics of the four campaign types.
First, H&M's pride campaign was chosen as a co-created and communicative case with a total of six posts during pride month 2022. H&M invited influencers and people from the queer community to tell their stories as part of the "My chosen family" campaign. In connection with the campaign, 100.000 US dollars were donated by H&M to the United Nations Free and Equal Campaign, which supports the rights of the LGBTIQ+ community (H&M, 2022).

Secondly, Happy Socks' pride campaign was chosen to represent the co-created and product oriented approach. Happy Socks' campaign "Always walk with Pride" is overlapping with the activism during and after pride month. Therefore, the campaign continued in July 2022. Happy Socks sells products branded with queer elements throughout the year. 10% of these products' profits go to Inter Pride, an organization that stands for LGBTIQ+ rights (Instagram, 2022b). Moreover, these products have been designed by a designer of the LGBTIQ+ community.

Thirdly, the category company centered and product oriented is represented by Abercrombie and Fitch. These campaign's products are neither co-created by members of the LGBTIQ+ community nor the profits of these pride products are donated. However, on the first of July 2022, Abercrombie and Fitch announced that it will donate 1 US dollar per used hashtag #TrevorLoveChain to the Trevor project which is the largest foundation that supports suicide prevention for people identifying as queer (Instagram, 2022a). A maximum amount of 100.000 US dollars will be donated.

Finally, Stradivarius will complete the multiple case study by representing the categories company centered and communicative. For this category, only four out of the 37 investigated brands were considered. Stradivarius was chosen because of the number and quality of comments since the other companies almost did not have comments under their campaigns. Stradivarius uploaded a video with pride colours on the 30th of June 2022, saying "Love is love. Love and Pride!" (Instagram, 2022c). There is no evidence to suggest that this video was co-created with the help of a community member.

In the second part of the research, a content analysis was used to describe, show, and summarize the basic features of the evaluation of the targets concerning the four different types of pride campaigns. Therefore, the developed codebook helped to indicate individual perceptions

Code	Company centered + Communicative	Company centered + Product oriented	Co-created + Communicative	Co-created + Product oriented
Homophobic criticism	50,00%	25,00%	10,53%	0,00%
LGBTIQ+ support	0,00%	16,67%	26,32%	36,36%
Campaign criticsm	0,00%	8,33%	5,26%	0,00%
Lack of fit	0,00%	16,67%	10,53%	0,00%
Woke washing	0,00%	25,00%	0,00%	27,27%
Product over context of activism	0,00%	0,00%	5,26%	0,00%
Appreciation of inclusion	0,00%	8,33%	10,53%	27,27%
Questioning of the brand activism practice	0,00%	0,00%	10,53%	0,00%
Distancing	50,00%	0,00%	21,05%	0,00%

Table 2. Frequencies of codes

Table 2 shows the results of the codebook sorted by each category of brand activism and code that appeared in these categories. The frequencies of the codes that appeared in each category are given in per cent. The percentages are calculated based on the frequency of codes appearing in each category. If the analyzed comments did not match a code in a category then the result for this code in the category is 0%.

Additionally, figure 2 visualizes the relations between the codes by modelling the different evaluations of co-created and company centered campaigns.

Here it is noticeable that company centered campaigns lead to distinctive homophobic criticism whereas co-created campaigns do not. Moreover, company centered campaigns are largely evaluated as woke washing if products are at the center of the campaign (25%) whereas communicative company centered campaigns lead to a distancing of the target group (50%). That means the target group of the communicative company centered campaign stated to avoid shopping and interacting with the brand in the future. As a result, the company centered communicative campaign is without exception, perceived negatively by the target group. While the product oriented company centered campaign is also largely perceived negatively, a minority of the target group perceives the campaign as inclusive (8,33%) and supportive (16,67%) towards the LGBTIQ+ community.

However, co-created campaigns are evaluated as supportive (26,32% and 36,36%) no matter if the campaign is communicative or product oriented. Thus, communicative and product oriented co-created campaigns differ in the evaluation. Product oriented campaigns are mainly perceived as inclusive if they are co-created by an individual that is part of the LGBTIQ+ community (27,27%). But having a product involved in the campaign leads to accusations of woke washing by the target group (27,27%). On the other hand, the communicative co-created campaign was evaluated negatively since the target group stated to distance themself from the company (21,05%). Finally, both the communicative and product oriented co-created campaigns are perceived largely positively and negatively by the target group.
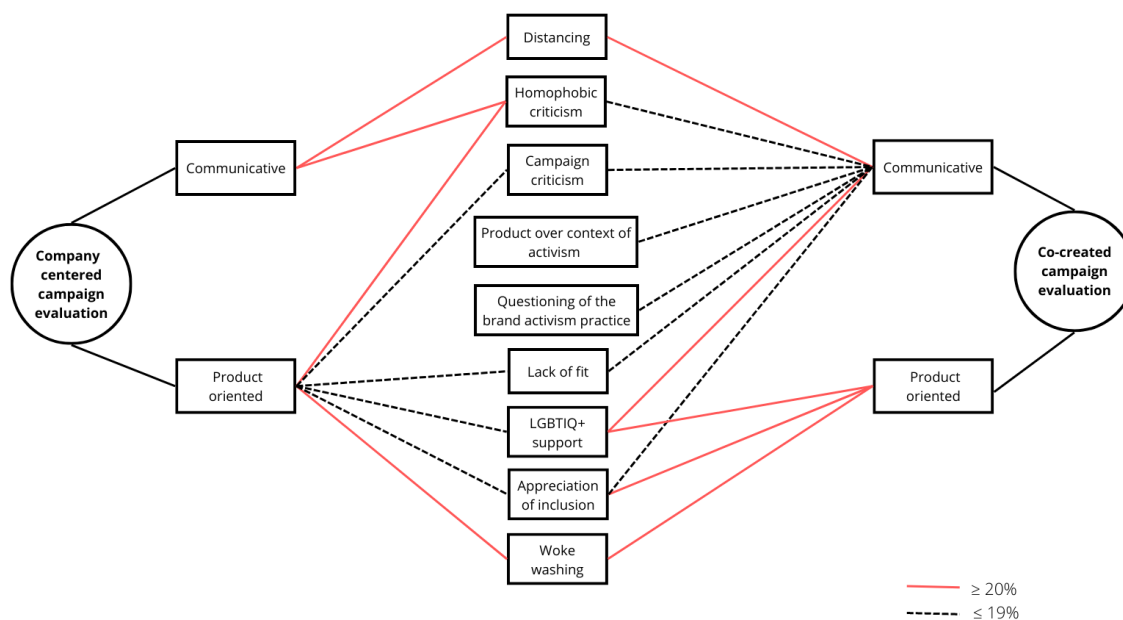

Figure 2. Company centered vs. co-created campaign evaluation

The findings of both parts, the multiple case study and the content analysis, will be used to answer the research questions of the paper.

RQ1: To what extent do co-created versus company centered LGBTIQ+ campaigns differ in the evaluation of the target groups?

Company centered and co-created campaigns differ in the evaluation of the target group. As the content analysis has shown, company centered campaigns lead largely to homophobic criticism and are generally highly perceived as negative. Compared to co-created campaigns, company centered campaigns are marginally evaluated as supportive or inclusive. However, co-created campaigns are both negatively and positively perceived but can also lead to distancing or woke washing. The characteristics of the campaigns have to be considered as well, since product oriented campaigns, no matter if they are co-created or company centered, provoke the allegation of woke washing. However, each campaign points out criticism whether it is campaign criticism, the accusation of woke washing or the campaign causing distancing to the target group. Furthermore, this study aims to determine answers to the second research question:

RQ2: If campaigns differ in the evaluation by the target group, what are the potential reasons for the different evaluations regarding co-created or company centered campaigns?

As the multiple case study showed, the campaigns differ in their characteristics and are therefore perceived differently. This study showed that co-created and company centered campaigns differ in the evaluation by the target group. The characteristics of the cases of the co-created and product oriented campaigns are that the products are designed by a designer of the LGBTIQ+ community and the profits go to a social project as well as that the products are available throughout the year. As a result, consumers stated that they appreciate these characteristics. Moreover, co-creation was generally more positively recognized if the co-creator is part of the LGBTIQ+ community. Furthermore, consumers ask for evidence of the activism practice, if there is a lack of evidence the consumers tend to question it. However, the study did not point out what kind of evidence the consumers ask for.

In conclusion, co-created brand activism is more appreciated than company centered activism if the co-creator is part of the community. However, consumers are sceptical and demand evidence as well as consistent activism throughout the year.

5   Discussion

The research contributes to a better understanding of how fast and commercial fashion industries should communicate their brand activism. Based on the elaborated research questions and the results of the study during pride month, figure 3 provides a preliminary model of the 3C-model of brand activism. The researchers identify that there are three main factors for the communication of brand activism: Commitment, co-creation and contribution.
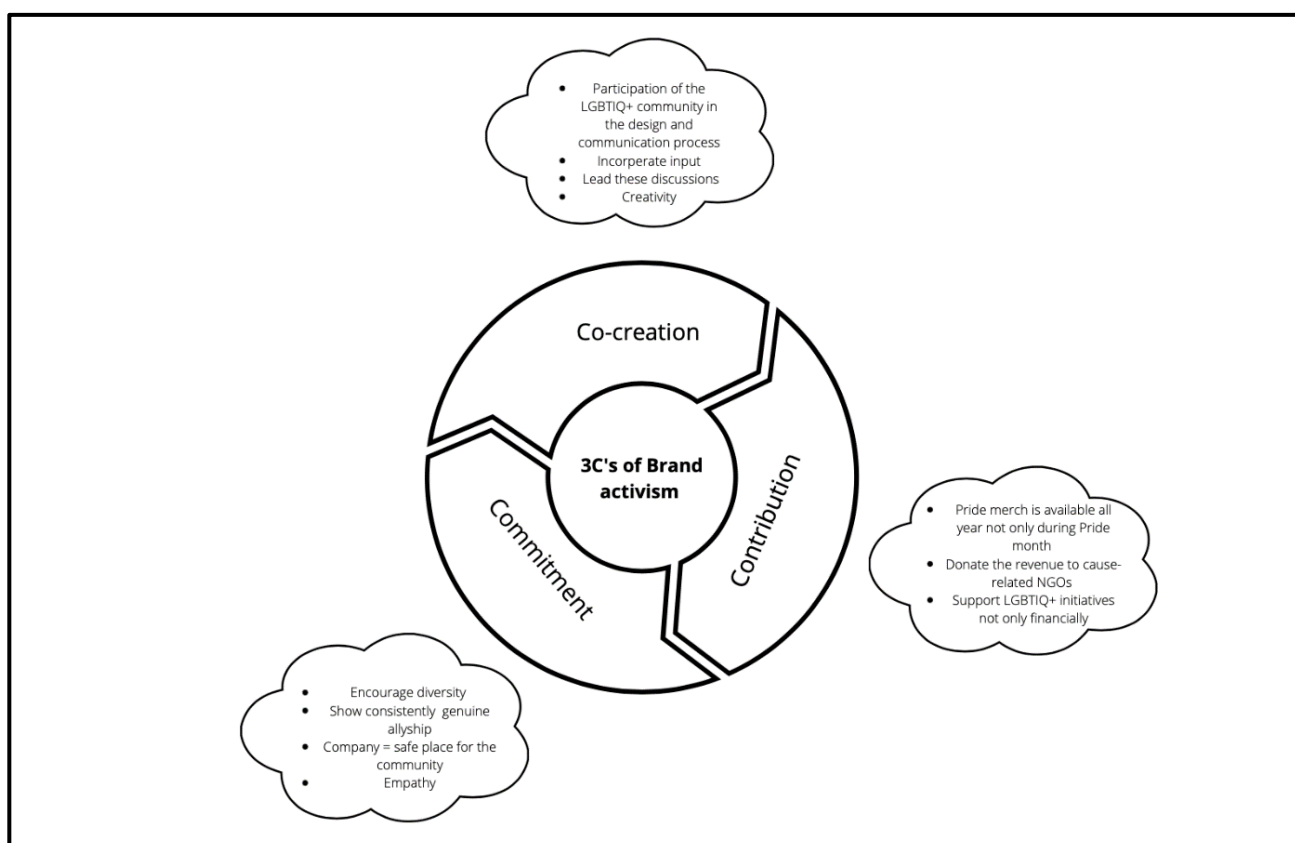

Figure 3. 3C-model of brand activism

Commitment

The research discloses companies encouraging activism and supporting the community throughout the year with a genuine allyship have a more positive outcome of brand activism. A brand that consistently engages in activism and also raises the ethical standards within the company shows an increased perception of the company's commitment which results in higher satisfaction, and trust and enhances loyalty towards the company. This success factor can be supported by the research on Corporate social responsibility as a determinant of consumer loyalty (Park et al., 2017).

Co-Creation

The analysis has evaluated that co-creation exhibits a high value of importance for brand activism. The inclusion of the community leads to increased trust in the company. Collaborating with the community in brand activism can lead to more positive loyalty outcomes. Whether it is drawing on customer knowledge or leveraging customers' amplification capabilities, these co-creation activities establish strategic partnerships with the community and engender trust. This argument can be supported by research that shows that 74% of the total impact generated from CSR on customer loyalty is channelled through co-creation and trust (Iglesias et al., 2018). Co-creation also enables relationship commitment and trust positively among consumers' brand values (Wang et al., 2019).

Contribution

The research revealed that contribution is an important factor while proceeding with brand activism. Also, if the merch of the cause is available all year and the revenue is donated to a cause-related project or NGO the brand activism is viewed as more trustworthy. This connection can be discussed because donating money to a particular cause and making a cause-related statement gets the attention of their target customer base, but also supports the message of the brand activism of the brand and its communication (Shetty et al., 2019). In theory, the impact of donations as a factor for brand activism can be further developed through research on the long-term and embedded commitments resulting in greater social impact (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

6   Practical Implications

The study revealed several implications for companies. First, the research showed that when companies show their allyship to a specific theme during brand activism, the outcome is more positive. Especially when the company feels like a safe place and the approached community feels empathy created by the company during its brand activism. Therefore, managers from the companies should pay attention to how they practice and communicate their allyship throughout the year.

Also, companies should include the community in their communication and encourage co-creation. With the inclusion of the community, the responses on the Instagram platforms showed more likely inclusion and appreciation responses. As a result, managers should look for personalities with a brand fit from the community to invite them to co-create brand activism.

Furthermore, when companies include cause-related merch, the target groups' reactions are perceived more positively. However, it must be noted that the positive outcome only occurs when the profits from the products

go to cause-related NGOs or projects. Moreover, the design of the products should be co-created by a member of the community. For managerial implications, this information can be of great importance. In the future, it will be important to involve the community in the design process of the brand activism and to find a suitable project that will receive the profit of the cause-related merch.

Finally, in the future, the functionality of the 3C-model should be tested, so that managers could concentrate particularly on the 3C-model and integrate it into the company's communication and branding strategy. Nevertheless, negative comments will potentially still be part of brand activism, especially in terms of LGBTIQ+ support.

7 Limitations and Further Research

To the best knowledge of the researchers, this paper can be seen as the first step towards an understanding of the differences between co-created and company centered campaigns regarding brand activism. However, some limitations need to be stated.

Firstly, the researchers only analyzed four fast and commercial fashion companies in each category of the 2x2 matrix after having looked at 37 fast and commercial fashion companies. Secondly, the researchers only included the social media platform Instagram during their research. The campaigns posted on other platforms such as LinkedIn or Facebook were not considered. Thirdly, only a limited amount of comments were analyzed. Therefore further research is necessary to approve or discard the findings. Lastly, campaigns don't have to be assignable in the 2x2 matrix consisting of co-created and company centered campaigns as well as product oriented and communicative campaigns. The research did not include campaigns that could be assigned to several cases and/or characteristics.

Further research should not only include the fast and commercial fashion industry but also consider other markets. However, a larger sample representing more fashion companies should be investigated by testing the following propositions:

P1: If pride campaigns are company centered, homophobic criticism is more likely to be expressed by the target group than in co-created campaigns.
P2: Co-created and company centered pride campaigns that are product oriented are likely to be perceived as woke washing.
P3: The LGBTIQ+ community appreciates the brand activism and feels involved if the company supports the community proactively throughout the whole year, and not only during pride month.

Finally, research should be done on whether pride campaigns hurt the revenue of the company by analyzing the changing revenue of companies before, during and after pride month as many consumers showed negative reactions towards the pride campaigns.

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Appendix

Codebook and Content Analysis

Code	Operational Description	Key words	Example	Company
homophobic criticism	Homophobic statement	god, Muslim, Arab, not normal	Kids are watching this, it's not normal! Normal is what God create!	H&M
homophobic criticism	Homophobic statement	god, Muslim, Arab, not normal	The family consists of a female and a male without there being different sexes there are no children, all kids and animals know this.	H&M
product over context of activism	Product shown in the campaign is primarily (product does not necessarily have to be related to brand activism)	product	Omg what sweater is that? I need that!!!	H&M
lgbtiq+ support	Community support of a customer that is not specifically part of the LGBTIQ+ community	pride flag, love, pride month, equal	Wow maybe you should take care of all those sick comments…. LOVE IS LOVE	H&M
lgbtiq+ support	Community support of a customer that is not specifically part of the LGBTIQ+ community	pride flag, love, pride month, equal	Lovvvve this	H&M
lgbtiq+ support	Community support of a customer that is not specifically part of the LGBTIQ+ community	pride flag, love, pride month, equal	This is such a beautiful and important campaign 🏳️‍🌈	H&M
lgbtiq+ support	Community support of a customer that is not specifically part of the LGBTIQ+ community	pride flag, love, pride month, equal	Love is love.Get lost homophobes.	H&M
campaign criticism	Content of the campaign criticized for no specific reason	campaign, bad, worst	The worst campaign ever	H&M
appreciation of inclusion	Personal appreciation of feeling safe and accepted	feeling, acceptance, appreciation, me, us, support	Thank you for inviting our family to be part of this beautiful masterpiece!	H&M
lack of fit	Statement is not related to the campaign	order, customer service	Hello, I can't seem to get in touch with your customer service. Kindly help me out.	H&M
lack of fit	Statement is not related to the campaign	order, customer service	I ordered 2 things.. one arrived in a package today. The docket has the 2 items listed and a * saying delivery not complete for the 2nd item.. does this mean its on the way seperately?	H&M
distancing	Statement that consumers will no longer buy from this brand without specific reason	Unfollow, blocking, never again	Never buying again	H&M
distancing	Statement that consumers will no longer buy from this brand without specific reason	Unfollow, blocking, never again	No more shopping H&M	H&M
distancing	Statement that consumers will no longer buy from this brand without specific reason	Unfollow, blocking, never again	Unfollow	H&M
distancing	Statement that consumers will no longer buy from this brand without specific reason	Unfollow, blocking, never again	H&M what's wrong	H&M
questioning of the brand activism practice	Lack of evidence for brand activism	wondering, evidence	I would like to know however what HM is doing to help the lgbtq community the rest of the year or if they're just banking on pride month like so many other companies	H&M
questioning of the brand activism practice	Lack of evidence for brand activism	wondering, evidence	it is a pity that you support the equal rights of only some LGBT people, but not different nations! I would like to see less hypocrisy and your dependence on politics!	H&M
appreciation of inclusion	Personal appreciation of feeling safe and accepted	feeling, acceptance, appreciation, me, us, support	Thank you for making me feel accepted and safe too @hm	H&M
lgbtiq+ support	Community support of a customer that is not specifically part of the LGBTIQ+ community	pride flag, love, pride month, equal	It's gonna be great going into H&M now that all of the homophobes have unfollowed and boycotted them	H&M
lgbtiq+ support	Community support of a customer that is not specifically part of the LGBTIQ+ community	pride flag, love, pride month, equal	Walk with pride today, all month, and the rest of your life	Happy Socks
lgbtiq+ support	Community support of a customer that is not specifically part of the LGBTIQ+ community	pride flag, love, pride month, equal	happy pride month	Happy Socks
lgbtiq+ support	Community support of a customer that is not specifically part of the LGBTIQ+ community	pride flag, love, pride month, equal	I love this! Yes! Thank you for doing things throughout the year and not just for pride month	Happy Socks
lgbtiq+ support	Community support of a customer that is not specifically part of the LGBTIQ+ community	pride flag, love, pride month, equal	Thank you for choosing my queen to sport your cool socks!	Happy Socks
appreciation of inclusion	Personal appreciation of feeling safe and accepted	feeling, acceptance, appreciation, me, us, support	That is such an amazing partnership	Happy Socks
appreciation of inclusion	Personal appreciation of feeling safe and accepted	feeling, acceptance, appreciation, me, us, support	Thanks for the opportunity to work together on this initiative and for generously giving back	Happy Socks
appreciation of inclusion	Personal appreciation of feeling safe and accepted	feeling, acceptance, appreciation, me, us, support	Thank you for your support!!! ❤	Happy Socks
woke washing	Accusing directly of brand activism marketing and communication measures do not match the company's actions	woke, washing, capitalism	Loving the socks, hating political statements.. every single person gets my respect, but the WOKE movement is being pushed down throats.. so, see ya later, devastator. #respectforall #nooneisbetterthananyone #done	Happy Socks
woke washing	Accusing directly of brand activism marketing and communication measures do not match the company's actions	woke, washing, capitalism	You are PLANNING? Why didn't you already start? It's not the first pride. How is this not rainbow washing?	Happy Socks
woke washing	Accusing directly of brand activism marketing and communication measures do not match the company's actions	woke, washing, capitalism	QUEER LIBERATION NOT RAINBOW CAPITALISM	Happy Socks
homophobic criticism	Homophobic statement	god, Muslim, Arab, not normal	how disgusting	A&F
homophobic criticism	Homophobic statement	god, Muslim, Arab, not normal	Just want you to know the rest of society doesn't give a shit about lgbtq. This filth is of insignificance and disgrace	A&F

homophobic criticism	Homophobic statement	god, Muslim, Arab, not normal	Fuckin' forced inclusion	A&F
lgbtiq+ support	Community support of a customer that is not specifically part of the LGBTIQ+ community	pride flag, love, pride month, equal	I love this!! I love that you're posting this	A&F
campaign criticsm	Content of the campaign criticized for no specific reason	campaign, bad, worst	Aww looks like Abercrombie is trying to skew their company's perception away from their racist beginnings.	A&F
lack of fit	Statement is not related to the campaign	order, customer service	Highly disappointed with you guys. Its been more than 2 months that i've been trying to contact the customer service for getting back my refund of 189$ on my card. No one has been helping me.	A&F
lack of fit	Statement is not related to the campaign	order, customer service	I'd love to see you ensure the safety and protection of your garment workers by signing the Accord!	A&F
appreciation of inclusion	Personal appreciation of feeling safe and accepted	feeling, acceptance, appreciation, me, us, support	I love this! They have been supporting the Trevor Foundation for YEARS now! I remember working here in 2017-18 during June and we started a fundraiser for the foundation now they are having full on collaborations with them! Incredible!	A&F
lgbtiq+ support	Community support of a customer that is not specifically part of the LGBTIQ+ community	pride flag, love, pride month, equal	Why can't more brands do this	A&F
woke washing	Accusing directly of brand activism marketing and communication measures do not match the company's actions	woke, washing, capitalism	There's literally a documentary out documenting you excluding black ppl from fashion. Be quiet	A&F
woke washing	Accusing directly of brand activism marketing and communication measures do not match the company's actions	woke, washing, capitalism	Don't try to rebrand now, Abercrombie	A&F
woke washing	Accusing directly of brand activism marketing and communication measures do not match the company's actions	woke, washing, capitalism	Cool so I got the A&F that promoted eating disorders and self hatred but now they're advertising the exact opposite. Good times.	A&F
homophobic criticism	Homophobic statement	god, Muslim, Arab, not normal	You are support the gays, If I not buy you again	Stradivarius
homophobic criticism	Homophobic statement	god, Muslim, Arab, not normal	Ew	Stradivarius
homophobic criticism	Homophobic statement	god, Muslim, Arab, not normal	I and every Arab person will not shop your products in the Middle East, disgusting	Stradivarius
distancing	Statement that consumers will no longer buy from this brand without specific reason	Unfollow, blocking, never again	boycotter	Stradivarius
distancing	Statement that consumers will no longer buy from this brand without specific reason	Unfollow, blocking, never again	block	Stradivarius
distancing	Statement that consumers will no longer buy from this brand without specific reason	Unfollow, blocking, never again	shame on you	Stradivarius

Evaluation of the Content Analysis

Code	A&F	H&M	Stradivarius	Happysocks
homophobic criticism	3	2	3	
lgbtqi+ support	2	5		4
campaign criticsm	1	1		
lack of fit	2	2		
woke washing	3			3
product over context of activism		1		
appreciation of inclusion	1	2		3
questioning of the brand activism practice		2		
distancing		4	3	
Total	**12**	**19**	**6**	**10**

Code	Company centered + Communicative	Company centered + Product oriented	Co-created + Communicative	Co-created + Product oriented
Homophobic criticism	50,00%	25,00%	10,53%	0,00%
LGBTIQ+ support	0,00%	16,67%	26,32%	36,36%
Campaign criticsm	0,00%	8,33%	5,26%	0,00%
Lack of fit	0,00%	16,67%	10,53%	0,00%
Woke washing	0,00%	25,00%	0,00%	27,27%
Product over context of activism	0,00%	0,00%	5,26%	0,00%
Appreciation of inclusion	0,00%	8,33%	10,53%	27,27%
Questioning of the brand activism practice	0,00%	0,00%	10,53%	0,00%
Distancing	50,00%	0,00%	21,05%	0,00%

Overview of conducted companies (in total)

Brand	Pride month Post	Date of the (first) post	Link of the post	Company centered and communicative	Company centered and product oriented	Co-created and communicative	Co-created and product oriented
& Other Stories	yes	07.06.2022	https://www.instagram.com/p/CegSzwHID4K/	x			
Abercrombie & Fitch	yes	01.06.2022	https://www.instagram.com/p/CfZEwZ4g0xA/	x	x		
Adidas	no						
Beneton	no						
Bershka	yes	26.06.2022	https://www.instagram.com/p/CfWdNU_Ih0i/			x	
Boohoo	no						
C&A	yes	23.06.2022	https://www.instagram.com/ca/		x	x	
COS	yes	01.06.2022	https://www.instagram.com/p/CeQb_MFJSOx/				x
Esprit	no						
Fashion Nova	no						
Forever 21	yes	29.06.2022	https://www.instagram.com/p/CfZOI-ig7vO/			x	
Gap	yes	24.06.2022	https://www.instagram.com/p/CfMKzZyD5eK/			x	
HappySocks	yes	01.06.2022	https://www.instagram.com/p/CeQkG9cAPNz/				x
H&M	yes					x	
Mango	no						
Missguided	no						
Monki	yes	29.06.2022	https://www.instagram.com/p/CfYigpdFeJa/	x			
Nasty Gal	no						
New Look	no						
NewYorker	no						
Nike	no						
Oasis	no						
Oysho	no						
Pretty Little Thing	no						
Primark	yes	05.06.2022	https://www.instagram.com/p/CebD0JquMCp/		x		
Pull & Bear	yes	28.06.2022	https://www.instagram.com/p/CfVz70lKSMS/	x			
River Island	yes	15.06.2022	https://www.instagram.com/p/Ce0tG5Ur4A9/			x	
Romwe	no						
s. Oliver	no						
Shein	yes	16.06.2022	https://www.instagram.com/p/Ce3eRXdLpbl/		x		
Stradivarius	yes	28.06.2022	https://www.instagram.com/p/CfV6cVnge0W/				
TopShop	no						
Uniqlo	no						
Urban Outfitters	no						
Victoria's Secret	yes	01.06.2022	https://www.instagram.com/p/CeRA3oJFme8/			x	
Zaful	no						
Zara	no						

Companies that Practiced Brand Activism in 2021

Company & Year of Publication	Campaign	Link
Adidas 2021		https://www.instagram.com/p/CByW-M6AFFP/
Nastygal 2021		https://www.instagram.com/reel/CQInT2xoXe9/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y%3D
New Look 2021		https://www.instagram.com/reel/CQ_yl2xl1VP/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y%3D
Nike 2021		https://www.instagram.com/p/CQJY4wXHCkD/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y%3D
s. Oliver 2021		https://www.instagram.com/p/CQd4DOqoWQm/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y%3D
United colours of benetton 2021		https://www.instagram.com/benetton/
Uniqlo 2021		https://www.instagram.com/p/CRnN_jjDhWe/

Blab Reports

1. Baumgarth, C. (ed.) 2020: Innovative Brand Management I, Berlin.

2. Baumgarth, C. (ed.) 2021: Innovative Brand Management II, Berlin.

3. Baumgarth, C., Kirkby, A. & Lambrecht, A. (2021): End of the AI Winter- Artificial Intelligence in Brand Management, Berlin.

4. Baumgarth, C. (ed.) 2022: Innovative Brand Management III, Berlin.