



From expectations to behavior: How product characteristics influence consumer responses to brand activism

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Abstract

Title: From expectations to behavior: How product characteristics influence consumer responses to brand activism

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Brand activism is an increasingly widespread brand strategy in which brands publicly express their views on political or social issues. These topics are often controversial and therefore brands take risks, as this can have positive and negative effects on brand outcomes and consumer behavior. A 2x2 factorial between-subjects experimental design with 219 participants explores whether product characteristics based on the Foote, Cone and Belding (FCB) grid influence consumers' pre-existing expectations toward brand activism. Further, it is examined how these expectations predict perceived brand credibility and purchase intentions following an authentic activism message. The results show that product involvement and decision type influence pre-existing expectations toward brand activism, with high involvement and feel oriented product generating the highest expectations. A significant interaction effect shows that the combination of low involvement and think products creates the lowest expectations toward brand activism. Additionally, pre-existing expectations toward brand activism are positively associated with perceived credibility and this is further the strongest predictor for subsequent purchase intentions after controlling for political orientation and general attitudes toward brand activism. Practical implications cover understanding consumer expectations and political orientations as well as creating authenticity. Limitations include the fictional brand, the specific activism topic and the execution in the German market. The study highlights the importance of product characteristics in brand activism that shape consumer responses.

Sumário

Título: Das expectativas ao comportamento: como as características do produto influenciam as reações dos consumidores ao ativismo de marca

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Palavras-chave: ativismo de marca, expectativas dos consumidores, modelo FCB, credibilidade percebida da marca, intenções de compra

O ativismo de marca é uma estratégia cada vez mais difundida, na qual as marcas expressam publicamente as suas opiniões sobre questões políticas ou sociais. Estes temas são frequentemente controversos e, por isso, as marcas assumem riscos, com efeitos positivos e negativos nos resultados da marca e no comportamento dos consumidores. Um design experimental fatorial 2x2 entre sujeitos, com 219 participantes, explora se as características do produto com base na grelha de Foote, Cone and Belding (FCB) influenciam as expectativas pré-existentes dos consumidores em relação ao ativismo de marca, e de que forma estas predizem a credibilidade percebida e as intenções de compra na sequência de uma mensagem de ativismo autêntica. Os resultados mostram que o nível de envolvimento e o tipo de decisão influenciam as expectativas pré-existentes, sendo que produtos de elevado envolvimento e orientados para as emoções geram as expectativas mais elevadas. Um efeito de interação significativo revela que a combinação de baixo envolvimento e produtos racionais gera as expectativas mais baixas. As expectativas pré-existentes estão positivamente associadas à credibilidade percebida, sendo esta o preditor mais forte das intenções de compra subsequentes, após controlo da orientação política e das atitudes gerais. As implicações práticas incluem a compreensão das expectativas dos consumidores e a criação de autenticidade. As limitações incluem a marca fictícia, o tema do ativismo e a execução no mercado alemão. O estudo destaca a importância das características do produto no ativismo de marca na formação das respostas dos consumidores.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, companies have increasingly started to speak out on current political and social issues. As a result, some brands have become known for actively creating collective awareness and supporting progressive values (Vredenburg et al., 2020). For example, Ben & Jerry's have promoted equality and same-sex marriage, Patagonia has committed itself to environmental protection, and Katjes has raised awareness among women about breast cancer. Although these issues often go beyond the core business activities of the brands, such initiatives demonstrate the growing role of companies as influential players in social debates (Moorman, 2020).

This phenomenon is called brand activism. As a continuation of corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices, brand activism is seen as an act in which brands publicly take a stand on political and social issues, thereby creating social change (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). While authentic brand activism strengthens consumer identification with the brand and therefore consideration and loyalty, inauthentic brand activism threatens credibility and may lead to backlashes and boycotts (Lou et al., 2024). Further, pre-existing consumer expectations are relevant as they influence the consumer evaluation and response to brand activism (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Existing literature has examined the outcomes of brand activism including consumer attitudes and purchase intentions (Hydock et al., 2020). However, the antecedents that shape consumer expectations remain largely unexplored. Specifically, product characteristics as drivers of expectations toward brand activism before exposure to an activism message have not been investigated.

The Foote, Cone, and Belding (FCB) grid provides a framework for categorizing products according to decision type and consumers' product involvement (Vaughn, 1980), which can influence how consumers perceive and evaluate brands and their practiced brand activism. Within existing literature, limited research has been conducted on whether product characteristics affect consumers' expectations of activism.

Therefore, this study investigates whether product characteristics shape consumer expectations toward brand activism and how this further relates to behavioral intentions. A 2x2 factorial between-subjects experimental design is therefore used to test different product characteristics according to the FCB grid. This is conducted in an online survey in Germany. The study explores how expectations toward activism differ depending on the product category before showing an activism message. After an authentic activism message is shown, perceived brand credibility, purchase intentions, and political attitudes are surveyed. The aim is to examine how

product characteristics influence brand activism expectations and how this predicts perceived brand credibility and ultimately purchase intentions. These results contribute to existing literature and managerial practice. Theoretically, the study demonstrates how product characteristics, such as involvement and decision type, function as antecedents of pre-exposure expectations toward brand activism. This relationship has not been researched. From a managerial perspective, the findings provide actionable guidance by identifying which product categories are best suited for brand activism practices and what other factors are relevant in achieving positive consumer responses.

2. Literature Review

Brand activism has emerged as a relevant strategy for brands. The following section explains the key components of the underlying theoretical framework from the literature. It focuses in particular on the concept of authenticity in brand activism and its effects on consumers and brand outcomes. In order to answer the question of how expectations toward brand activism differ between different product types, the FCB grid is presented. It structures product involvement levels and decision types in order to categorize products. This builds the basis for evaluating how brand activism is perceived across different product categories and how it further predicts behavior.

2.1 Brand activism

Brand activism is the act of a brand taking a public stand on certain and often polarizing political or social issues and trending topics (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). Since these topics are often controversial and a new phenomenon in branding, brand activism is distinguished from corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities (Cammarota et al., 2023). Unlike brand activism, CSR activities cover more general widely distributed topics that are not contentious and where there is an objective correct side (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). In addition, the risk of facing criticism and negative consequences is higher for companies engaging in activism than in CSR activities. Brand activism adds dedication and engagement into the corporate identity (Cammarota et al., 2023). Therefore, it is also perceived as the evolution of CSR, that is driven by values, goes beyond corporate practices and is consumer oriented (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

While existing research mainly agrees that brand activism represents a continuation of CSR, it differs in where to draw the boundary. Kotler and Sarkar (2017) identify brand activism as a

distinct approach that is driven by values and purpose and communicates those, rather than a corporate strategy. Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020), however, locate the difference in final intentions. While the main goal of CSR activities is to provide support, brand activism aims to bring real change and influence (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020). Lou et al. (2024) further build on this by arguing that brand activism is more time sensitive than CSR and addresses current issues. Therefore, brand activism requires concrete actions that go beyond symbolic gestures, including raising funds or making concessions such as sacrificing profits that have a direct impact on communication and external perception. These perspectives collectively suggest that brand activism differs from CSR not only in communication style but also in societal responsibility and concrete actions it demands from brands.

Beyond its differentiation from CSR, brand activism serves a broader societal function as it promotes social change (Kumar et al., 2025). This is achieved through raising awareness, educating about certain topics, and mobilizing stakeholders through specific actions (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020). Beyond values and purpose, Moorman (2020) even argues that brands use their products as tools to create a shift in societal mindset.

Brands are thus becoming powerful players who have a moral responsibility and can influence the morality of others (Moorman, 2020). Therefore, consumer expectations grow, as consumers prefer brands that engage in brand activism (Shukla et al., 2025). This suggests that remaining neutral on societal topics is becoming less viable as a long-term brand strategy (Bahr, 2025). However, successful engagement in brand activism depends on authenticity and credibility that is perceived by stakeholders (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019).

2.1.1 Authenticity in brand activism

Beyond communicating values, authenticity is considered as an essential prerequisite for credible and effective brand activism (Hydock et al., 2020). Therefore, the fundamental activist spirit must be anchored not only in the internal core identity of the company but also in its external communication activities (Cammarota et al., 2023). Vredenburg et al. (2020) add that specific activism activities but also all corporate actions need to be based on the purpose and values of a brand (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Madathil and Murugan (2024), however, emphasize effort as a key element for perceived authenticity. The more effort and financial, human and time resources a brand puts into its activism messages, the more authentic they are (Madathil & Murugan, 2024). While Cammarota et al. (2023) and Vredenburg et al. (2020) root authenticity in brand values and identity, Madathil and Murugan (2024) suggest that efforts and

resources are decisive, implying that authenticity is not only what a brand stands for but also of what it visibly commits to. Virkus and Klein (2026) further build on this by arguing that activism goes beyond symbolic gestures and that perceived credibility is fostered through traceable and measurable actions, as well as strong brand consistency. Therefore, a holistic brand presence is essential (Kumar et al., 2025). There is an interaction between online and offline activism activities, as online activism can reinforce offline activism and mobilize consumers as well as explore topics in greater depth (Ghosh, 2021).

Vredenburg et al. (2020) demonstrate this approach in an authenticity framework that distinguishes between four types of activism that are authentic, silent, inauthentic, and absent brand activism and analyzes associated messaging effects. Silent activism refers to prosocial practices that are not communicated externally and therefore not seen. Inauthentic activism occurs when brands communicate activism, but it is not aligned with the brand's values or corporate actions, which can damage credibility. To be authentic, brands must follow a prosocial purpose and values, be controversial and progressive. Their activism messages are paired with targeted actions that achieve results and demonstrate a high level of commitment. Lastly, they address the public interest and stand fully behind their statements and actions (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Another decisive element for the effectiveness of brand activism is the addressed activism topic by a brand (Kumar et al., 2025). While Lou et al. (2024) and Mukherjee and Althuisen (2020) argue that personal relevance of the addressed topic is the key driver for consumer engagement and therefore more decisive than whether the issue is closely related to the brand or its products, Miguel and Miranda (2023) counter that a certain level of brand-cause fit must exist for brand activism to be seen as authentic. If the brand values and identity match a social or political issue that the brand addresses, consumers perceive this as credible and supportive (Lou et al., 2024). However, according to the optimal incongruency framework by Vredenburg et al. (2020), a slight discrepancy between the brand and issue can attract more attention. This incongruency encourages people to interact with the activism message and increases consumer engagement (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Accordingly, activism should be chosen in such a way that the cause fits the brand, but the issue addressed is not taken for granted, in order to attract attention. Lastly, supporting a topic that is not addressed and supported by many other companies is more effective. In this way, the brand takes on a pioneering role and does not conform to the competition (Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020). These perspectives suggest that different approaches to selecting an activism topic shape how authentic the brand activism is perceived.

2.1.2 Effects of brand activism

When brand activism is authentically practiced and communicated externally, it can have various effects on consumer behavior and brand outcomes (Madathil & Murugan, 2024).

A central element that is highlighted by Hydock et al. (2020) is consumer identification. If consumers' own values align with the brand's stance, conscious engagement is built and consumers identify with the brand. Shukla et al. (2025) further describe this mechanism as a self-brand connection where consumers show deep attachment to the brand which positively influences behavioral intentions. On the other hand, if the values do not align, consumers distance themselves from the brand.

Beyond engagement, brand activism is positively associated with brand credibility that reflects the perceived authenticity achieved through high-effort messages (Madathil & Murugan, 2024). This builds a prerequisite in brand activism, as credibility has a positive effect on further outcomes such as brand trust and advocacy (Virkus & Klein, 2026). Additionally, the brand is perceived trustworthy, which increases consideration (Erdem & Swait, 2004). This brand consideration further leads to an improved brand image and, above all, to increased behavioral intentions (Miguel & Miranda, 2023). Therefore, these perspectives suggest that perceived credibility functions as a central mechanism through which brand activism translates into positive brand outcomes.

Hydock et al. (2020) and Cristobal et al. (2022) further argue that brand activism has effects on behavioral intentions such as purchase intentions. On the one hand, purchase intentions increase for consumers who have a strong connection to the brand. This explains price inelasticity, where price plays a smaller role than the values and attitude of the brand (Hydock et al., 2020). However, Cristobal et al. (2022) argue that brand activism is not a decisive factor for higher purchase intentions. A distinction can be made between active and passive support for activism. With active support, consumers specifically choose a brand because of their attitude and express this through a purchase. Passive support occurs when consumers represent and share the attitude of a brand, but do not let this influence their purchasing decision, as the functional attributes of products have priority (Cristobal et al., 2022). This is consistent with Lou et al. (2024) who state that while brand activism may increase consumer inclination toward a brand, price and quality remain decisive factors in the final purchase decision.

Further, long-term brand loyalty is a subsequent outcome of behavioral intentions of authentic brand activism that builds on increased purchase intentions (Luna-Amador et al., 2025). This loyalty can also act as a multiplier. Loyal customers act as ambassadors and recommend the brand to their friends and family. This reinforces the social impact (Kumar et al., 2025).

However, these effects only occur when consumers' own values align with the brand's position. If this is not the case, consumers react much more strongly to a lack of alignment than to agreement (Hydock et al., 2020). In this case, there are no positive effects and the brand is rejected (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). According to Ghosh (2021), this effect of negativity bias is stronger than agreement with the brand's stance. Accordingly, activism messages are perceived as marketing gimmicks or woke-washing and lead to calls for boycotts or backlash scenarios (Sobande, 2020). These damage the brand and trigger skepticism among existing consumers (Kumar et al., 2025). According to Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020), the phenomenon of moral coupling can occur. Here, a negatively perceived attribute is projected onto the entire brand and leads to negative judgement (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). In the long term, consumers are lost and purchase intentions decline (Miguel & Miranda, 2023).

Brand activism inevitably polarizes and brings risks, as taking a public stand on controversial issues means that some consumers will be opposed to it (Camarota et al., 2023). These different reactions, however, give rise to consumer expectations of brands and their attitudes. According to Hydock et al. (2020), higher-consumption consumers tend to have higher expectations of brands engaging in brand activism. These expectations increase when it comes to favorite brands (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). However, research has not focused on expectations toward brand activism for different product categories and their related characteristics.

2.2 Differentiation of product characteristics

When looking at different product characteristics, the Foote, Cone and Belding (FCB) grid developed by Richard Vaughn in 1980 helps to categorize them (see Figure 1). The framework assigns products to four different categories that are helpful in advertising and marketing strategies (Vaughn, 1980). This framework can be used to determine whether different product categories trigger different expectations toward brand activism. The FCB grid has been widely applied in advertising strategies and research (Ratchford, 1987). However, it has also been criticized for oversimplifying consumer decision-making (Cheong & Cheong, 2021). Huang

and Lin (2022) argue that by assigning products to fixed categories, personal differences and individual preferences are excluded.

In the FCB grid, products are divided along two dimensions which are product involvement and decision type (Vaughn, 1980). The involvement category distinguishes between high and low involvement. These describe the personal relevance and degree of intensity with which the consumer engages with products. The decision type category distinguishes between emotionality and rationality. These are based on the theory of right and left-brain decisions. In the framework, they are shown as think and feel categories, depending on how much the purchase of a product is influenced by this decision type (Vaughn, 1986). This matrix results in four categories into which products are divided, enabling purchasing decisions to be systematically classified in order to develop differentiated communication and advertising strategies (Cheong & Cheong, 2021).

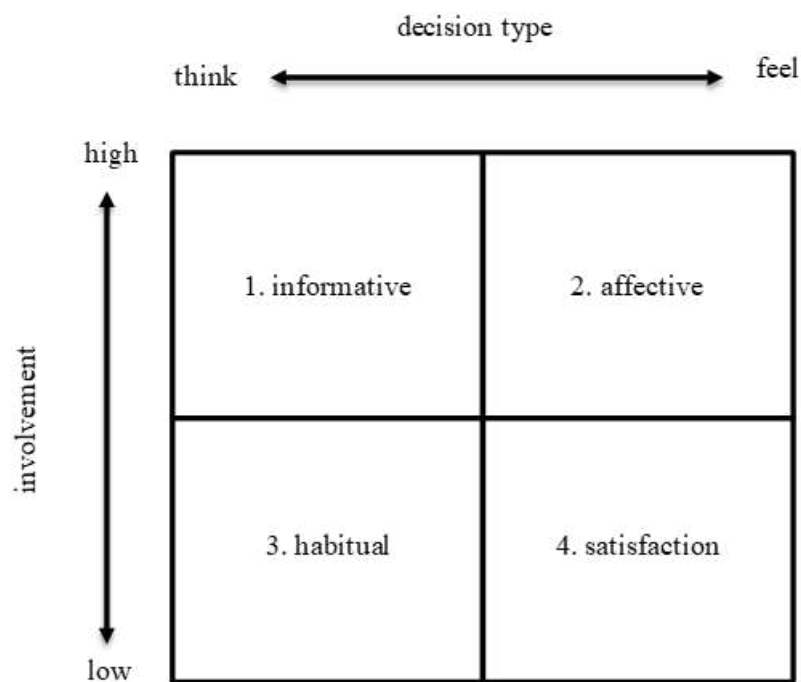


Figure 1: FCB grid by Vaughn (1980)

The first category is referred to as informative (Vaughn, 1986). This part includes products that have a high level of involvement and are therefore relevant to the consumer, as well as requiring rational thinking decisions. This quadrant includes expensive products that are rarely purchased and where a lot of information is collected in order to avoid risk (Huang & Lin, 2022). The second category is referred to as affective (Vaughn, 1986). This part clusters products that also

have a high level of involvement, but where the decision is made emotionally based on feelings. These products are often impulse purchases that satisfy emotions or boost self-esteem (Huang & Lin, 2022). The third category is referred to as habitual (Vaughn, 1986). This area includes products that have low product involvement and where the purchase decision is made rationally. These products are often routine purchases where the functionality is only decided after the purchase as well as repurchase (Huang & Lin, 2022). The fourth category is called satisfaction (Vaughn, 1986). This category includes products that have low involvement and whose purchase is influenced by feelings. These products are usually cheap and suit personal preferences (Huang & Lin, 2022).

Literature suggests that different products that are not only hedonistic in nature may trigger different consumer responses (Madathil & Murugan, 2024). The FCB grid provides a suitable framework for this as it can be used for systematic comparisons across product categories (Ratchford, 1987). While existing research focused on the outcomes of brand activism and intentions of consumers, little is known about product-related factors that potentially affect consumer expectations toward brand activism. This study addresses this gap by examining the product characteristics of involvement and decision type as antecedents of pre-exposure expectations toward brand activism. Therefore, a sequential process is conceptualized linking product characteristics to downstream behavioral intentions through pre-exposure expectations and perceived credibility.

3. Research Questions

Building on the identified research gap, this study examines the extent to which product characteristics influence consumer expectations toward brand activism and how this subsequently predicts brand outcomes and behavioral intentions. Especially at a time when companies have little opportunity to remain neutral, the question remains to what extent consumers expect a public statement and further reward this.

The first research question of this study examines how different product characteristics, specifically the level of involvement and decision type, influence expectations toward brand activism. The expectations investigated show the extent to which consumers want a brand with specific product characteristics to speak out on political and social issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020). The second research question then examines subsequent brand outcomes, here perceived brand credibility, and how it is predicted by these factors. This is measured by the degree of authenticity of activism that consumers perceive and how credible and trustworthy it seems

(Erdem & Swait, 2004). Finally, the third research question explores consumers' behavioral intentions, here purchase intentions, and the factors that are associated with them. This illustrates the extent to which consumers support brand activism (Cristobal et al., 2022). Combined, the three research questions provide a comprehensive understanding of how product characteristics shape consumer responses to brand activism. Furthermore, the study focuses on Germany, as brand activism is an increasingly growing phenomenon in the German market, making it a relevant context for examining consumer responses to brand activism (Baumann & Urbiks, 2022). Further, the contextual fit is strengthened by the addressed activism topic on right-wing extremism and rising hatred that reflects current debates in Germany (Zick et al., 2023). Additionally, restricting the sample to one country avoids cultural biases and ensures that findings and implications are related to a single market.

The following three research questions will be examined, and the conceptual model can be seen in Figure 2.

RQ1: How do product involvement and decision type influence consumers' expectations toward brand activism?

H1a: High involvement products lead to higher expectations toward brand activism than low involvement products.

H1b: Feel oriented products lead to higher expectations than think oriented products.

H1c: There is an interaction effect between involvement and decision type on expectations.

The first research question aims to answer if different product characteristics shape different consumer expectations toward brand activism. Key elements are involvement that differs in high and low and decision type with the think and feel category. It is being tested whether higher pre-exposure expectations go along with higher involvement and feel oriented decision making. The two manipulated independent variables are product involvement and decision type. Consumer expectations toward brand activism serve as the dependent variable.

RQ2: To what extent do pre-exposure expectations toward brand activism influence perceived brand credibility following exposure to an activism message?

H2: Expectations toward brand activism are positively associated with perceived brand credibility after exposure to the activism message.

The second research question aims to determine whether the expectations identified in RQ1 are associated with consumers' perceived credibility after reading an authentic activism message. Consumer expectations toward brand activism serve as the independent variable, while perceived brand credibility serves as the dependent variable.

RQ3: How does perceived brand credibility following exposure to an activism message influence consumers' purchase intention?

H3: Perceived brand credibility positively predicts purchase intentions following exposure to the activism message.

Lastly, the third research question aims to answer if perceived brand credibility following an activism message predicts subsequent purchase intentions and how this is not mediated by ideology. Therefore, control variables measuring political orientation and attitude toward activism will be applied. Perceived brand credibility serves as the independent variable, while purchase intention is the dependent variable. Political orientation and attitude toward brand activism are included as control variables to account for potential ideological influences.

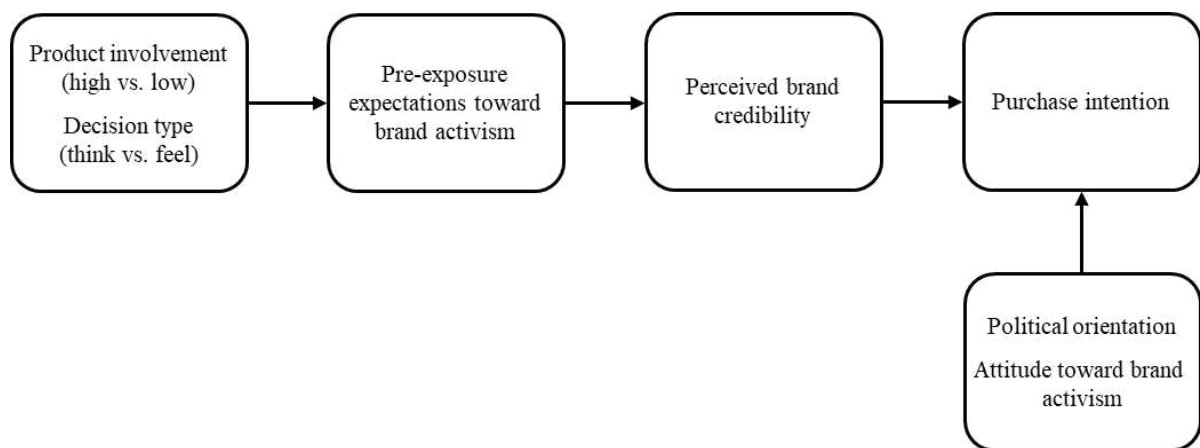


Figure 2: Conceptual model of the study

Source: Author's own illustration

4. Methodology

The following section explains the underlying methodology for the 2x2 factorial between-subjects experimental design in this study. It discusses the structure of the survey questionnaire, as well as the sampling, data collection, and method of analysis.

4.1 Survey Design

To examine the precise impact of product characteristics on brand activism expectations, brand credibility, and purchase intentions, a quantitative study was conducted.

In order to avoid cultural biases and ensure that the activism topic as well as the activism message is understood by all participants, the survey was only completed by people living in Germany. A screening question was used to exclude all participants from the survey who do not live in Germany. Following this filter, the 2x2 factorial between-subjects experimental design was implemented. This experiment involved a random assignment to a brand that offers one of the four product categories regarding the FCB grid combinations. The brand name used for the products in each product category was “Linden,” and it was consistent across all categories to minimize biases and differing perceptions and to ensure consistent terminology and expectations. The product descriptions differed in order to highlight differences regarding involvement and decision type. For the high involvement conditions, smartphones (condition 1) were used as the example product for think purchase decisions, whereas fragrances (condition 2) were used for feel purchase decisions. In contrast, for the low involvement conditions, toothpaste (condition 3) represented think purchase decisions, while chocolate bars (condition 4) were chosen for feel purchase decisions. These products are each assigned to the different FCB grid quadrants according to Huang and Lin (2022) and Cheong and Cheong (2021).

Product categorization was assessed through manipulation questions that analyzed product involvement and decision type. This ensured that consumers understood the product categories and that they differed. Without being influenced by brand descriptions and practices, respondents were asked about their expectations that the brand will take an activist stance on issues. Expectations were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, assessing whether respondents expect brands to engage in brand activism, including taking a public stance on social and political issues, speaking up on societal matters, supporting social or political causes publicly, and contributing to positive social change.

Further to the survey, an authentic activism message was presented. Standing up for values and social change, along with clear action ensured the message’s high level of authenticity (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Additionally, the message was presented in the form of a social media post, as these platforms are well-suited for engaging in dialogue with consumers and effectively communicating the activism (Ghosh, 2021). According to existing literature, the specific

activism topic must be selected precisely. A mismatch between brand and activism triggers interest and therefore supports consumer engagement (Vredenburg et al., 2020). The topic addressed in the activism message in this study from the brand Linden therefore dealt with right-wing extremism and rising hatred in German society, which draws on current debates and is a relevant societal topic (Zick et al., 2023). After processing the activism message, participants were asked to indicate perceived brand credibility. This was measured on a 5-point Likert scale adapted from Erdem and Swait (2004), assessing the brand's sincerity, credibility, trustworthiness and the activism message's authenticity. Further, purchase intentions were surveyed. These were captured using a 5-point Likert scale adapted from Dodds et al. (1991), assessing the likelihood of purchasing the product, the extent of preferring the brand over others and the willingness of committing to the brand in the future. Additionally, political orientation of participants and general attitudes toward brand activism were surveyed as control variables to account for potential influences on the results. Political orientation was measured on a categorical scale, where participants indicated their political orientation from "Very liberal" to "Very conservative" with an option to not answer. Attitudes toward brand activism were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, assessing whether participants support brands engaging in activism, value brand activism, think brands should take responsibility beyond selling products or think brands should stay neutral on controversial societal issues. Lastly, demographic data of participants was collected. The complete questionnaire of the survey can be viewed in Appendix D.

4.2 Data collection method

The survey was created using Qualtrics and was active for 15 days, from March 21st to April 5th in 2026. The main language of the questionnaire was English, only the activism message was displayed in German. The survey was distributed via convenience sampling and shared within personal and professional networks on WhatsApp and Instagram. Additional responses were collected through Survey Cycle.

4.3 Sampling

The survey's target group consisted of people living in Germany. A total of 219 valid responses were collected, which are analyzed in this study. These responses were obtained through convenience sampling, whereby the survey was distributed in personal and professional networks. It is important to note that people in this environment may be similar in terms of

background and orientation. Consequently, certain groups may be over- or underrepresented, which does not necessarily provide a representative picture of the population. Furthermore, participants took part voluntarily and may therefore be biased.

Out of the 219 participants, 58% identified as female, while 40.6% were male, one person was non-binary/third gender (0.5%) and two participants preferred not to say (0.9%). This can be seen in Appendix A.1. Further, 55.7% of participants belonged to the age range of 25-34, followed by 37.4% of the age range 18-24, 5% of the age range 35-44, 1.4% of the age range 55 or older and 0.5% in the age range of 45-54. This distribution is shown in Appendix A.2. Participants had an overall high level of education, with 48.9% of participants holding a Bachelor's degree, 29.2% of participants holding a Master's degree and 0.5% holding a Doctorate. Additionally, 16.9% of participants have a High school diploma and 4.5% of participants preferred not to say. This distribution is shown in Appendix A.3. Lastly, 56.6% of participants were students, while 39.3% were employed and 2.7% self-employed. Only 0.9% were unemployed and 0.5% preferred not to say as shown in Appendix A.4. This demographic data shows a high level of education, a young average age, and a high proportion of employed individuals and students.

Following the 2x2 factorial between-subjects experimental design, each participant was assigned to one of the four product conditions. The number of conditions assigned to the participants is as follows:

Condition	Stimulus	Participants (N)
1 (High involvement & Think)	Smartphones	56
2 (High involvement & Feel)	Fragrances	60
3 (Low involvement & Think)	Toothpaste	49
4 (Low involvement & Feel)	Chocolate Bars	54

Table 1: Distribution of the conditions

4.4 Method of analysis

The IBM SPSS Statistics tool was used to analyze the data collected from the survey. A significance level of 5% was selected for all analyses. Prior to the analyses, invalid data records such as responses that were not completed or survey previews were removed. In addition, three questions were recoded. This applied to two items from the decision type section and one item from the attitudes toward brand activism section. To make group comparisons, participants with

conditions 1 (smartphones) and 2 (fragrances) were assigned to the high involvement group, and participants with conditions 3 (toothpaste) and 4 (chocolate bars) were classified into the low involvement group. The same applied to the decision types. Here, participants with conditions 1 (smartphones) and 3 (toothpaste) were assigned to the think group, and participants with conditions 2 (fragrances) and 4 (chocolate bars) were classified into the feel group. Furthermore, means were calculated to summarize all surveyed items for multi-item scales. This was applied to involvement, decision type, expectations toward activism, perceived brand credibility, purchase intentions, and attitudes toward activism. Prior to the main analyses, the reliability of multi-item scales was tested using Cronbach's Alpha. Accordingly, internal consistency was achieved for the scales of involvement ($\alpha = 0.72$), decision type ($\alpha = 0.89$), expectations toward brand activism ($\alpha = 0.85$), perceived brand credibility ($\alpha = 0.88$), purchase intentions ($\alpha = 0.86$), and attitude toward brand activism ($\alpha = 0.81$). These can be seen in Appendix B.1. For the various analyses, independent samples t-tests, a Two-way ANOVA, a linear regression and a multiple regression were conducted.

5. Results

The following chapter describes the statistical tests used to analyze and answer the research questions and their results. Manipulation checks are conducted beforehand to verify whether participants understood the manipulated product characteristics.

5.1 Manipulation checks

Involvement:

An independent samples t-test was conducted as a manipulation to confirm that participants perceived different levels of product involvement. The test compares the scores between the high involvement group for conditions 1 (smartphones) and 2 (fragrances) and the low involvement group for conditions 3 (toothpaste) and 4 (chocolate bars). The results show that participants with a high involvement condition rated it significantly ($p < 0.001$) higher in terms of product involvement ($M = 3.95$ and $SD = 0.84$) than participants assigned to low involvement conditions ($M = 2.73$ and $SD = 0.93$). The effect size was large (Cohen's $d = 1.37$), which shows the real difference between the two groups and demonstrates a noticeable difference in perceived involvement levels. Participants clearly distinguished between high and low product involvement. Therefore, the involvement manipulation was effective as can be seen in Appendix B.2.

Decision type:

An independent samples t-test was also performed for the manipulation of decision type. The test compares scores between the think group for conditions 1 (smartphones) and 3 (toothpaste) and the feel group for conditions 2 (fragrances) and 4 (chocolate bars). The results confirm that participants assigned to the think group rated their purchase decision significantly ($p < 0.001$) more rational ($M = 3.95$ and $SD = 0.79$) than participants who were assigned to the feel group ($M = 2.4$ and $SD = 0.75$). The effect size was large (Cohen's $d = 1.99$), which shows a substantial difference in perceived decision types, proving that participants distinguished between think and feel oriented. These results indicate a successful manipulation as can be seen in Appendix B.3.

5.2 Hypothesis testing

RQ1: How do product involvement and decision type influence consumers' expectations toward brand activism?

H1a: High involvement products lead to higher expectations toward brand activism than low involvement products.

Hypothesis 1a states that higher product involvement leads to higher consumer expectations that brands will engage in brand activism and speak out on political and social issues, compared to low product involvement. To test this, a Two-way ANOVA was conducted as can be seen in Appendix C.1. Expectations toward brand activism are the dependent variable, which measures the extent to which consumers expect a brand to take a public stand on current political and social events. Product involvement (high and low) and decision type (think and feel) are independent variables.

The descriptive statistics show that participants assigned to the high involvement group have a higher mean score regarding expectations toward brand activism ($M = 3.16$ and $SD = 0.84$), while that of participants with low involvement is comparatively lower ($M = 2.80$ and $SD = 1.00$). Further, the Two-way ANOVA also reveals a significant main effect ($p = 0.002$) of product involvement on consumer expectations toward brand activism. Thus, H1a is supported by the data.

H1b: Feel oriented products lead to higher expectations than think-oriented products.

Hypothesis 1b states that products in the decision type feel group are associated with higher consumer expectations regarding brand activism than products in the think group. Here, too, a Two-way ANOVA was used to examine this effect as can be seen in Appendix C.1. Expectations toward brand activism are the dependent variable, while product involvement (high and low) and decision type (think and feel) serve as independent variables.

The descriptive statistics show that participants assigned to feel oriented products have a higher mean score regarding expectations toward brand activism ($M = 3.16$ and $SD = 0.88$) than participants with think oriented products ($M = 2.8$ and $SD = 0.96$). Additionally, the Two-way ANOVA reveals a significant main effect ($p = 0.002$) of decision type on expectations toward brand activism. Therefore, H1b is supported.

H1c: There is an interaction effect between involvement and decision type on expectations.

Hypothesis 1c states that there is an interaction effect between product involvement and decision type. Here, too, a two-way ANOVA was used to investigate this as can be seen in Appendix C.1.

The descriptive statistics reveal differences between the conditions. While the high involvement group shows no major differences between the scores of the think condition ($M = 3.11$ and $SD = 0.89$) and feel condition ($M = 3.2$ and $SD = 0.79$), the low involvement group scores differ widely between the think condition ($M = 2.44$ and $SD = 0.92$) and the feel condition ($M = 3.13$ and $SD = 0.97$). Additionally, the Two-way ANOVA reveals a significant interaction effect ($p = 0.015$) between product involvement and decision type. Thus, H1c is supported.

RQ2: To what extent do pre-exposure expectations toward brand activism influence perceived brand credibility following exposure to an activism message?

H2: Expectations toward brand activism are positively associated with perceived brand credibility after exposure to the activism message.

Hypothesis 2 examines the extent to which pre-exposure expectations toward brand activism predict the subsequent perceived credibility of an activism message. To investigate this, a linear regression was performed, with expectations toward brand activism serving as the independent variable and perceived credibility as the dependent variable as can be seen in Appendix C.2.

Pre-exposure expectations toward brand activism ($M = 2.99$ and $SD = 0.94$) are positively associated with perceived credibility following exposure to an activism message ($M = 3.36$ and

SD = 0.83) which is shown through a significant ($p < 0.001$) Pearson correlation ($r = 0.39$). The model summary further reveals that 15% ($R^2 = 0.15$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.15$) of the variance of perceived credibility is explained by pre-exposure expectations toward brand activism, which is also significant ($p < 0.001$) as well as the overall model ($p < 0.001$). Additionally, the Coefficients table confirms a positive significant association ($p < 0.001$) that pre-exposure expectations toward brand activism have on perceived credibility after seeing an activism message ($\beta = 0.39$). Therefore, H2 is supported and higher expectations toward brand activism are associated with higher perceived credibility.

RQ3: How does perceived brand credibility following exposure to an activism message influence consumers' purchase intention?

H3: Perceived brand credibility positively predicts purchase intentions following exposure to the activism message.

Hypothesis 3 examines the extent to which perceived brand credibility predicts consumers' purchase intentions. A multiple regression was used for this purpose as can be seen in Appendix C.3. In the first step, perceived brand credibility was tested as an independent variable to identify its association. In the second step, the control variables political orientation and attitude toward brand activism were added. In addition, all responses in which participants indicated "prefer not to say" for political orientation were excluded. This resulted in a sample of 184 participants.

Perceived brand credibility ($M = 3.4$ and $SD = 0.84$) is positively associated with purchase intention ($M = 3.34$ and $SD = 0.81$) which is shown through a significant ($p < 0.001$) Pearson correlation ($r = 0.58$). Attitude toward brand activism ($M = 3.72$ and $SD = 0.77$) also has a significant ($p < 0.001$) positive correlation ($r = 0.5$), while political orientation ($M = 2.5$ and $SD = 0.86$) shows a negative correlation ($r = -0.34$) that is significant ($p < 0.001$).

Model 1 examines only the effect of perceived brand credibility. The results show that credibility explains 33.4% of the variance in purchase intention ($R^2 = 0.334$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.33$) and the model is significant ($p < 0.001$). The coefficients also indicate that credibility is significant ($p < 0.001$) and a positive predictor of purchase intention ($\beta = 0.58$). Therefore, H3 is supported. In Model 2, the variables of political orientation and attitude toward brand activism are added. This adds 10.3% in additional explanatory power, accounting for 43.7% of the variance in purchase intention ($R^2 = 0.44$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.43$). The overall model remains

significant ($p < 0.001$). Perceived brand credibility remains a positive predictor of purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.46$), which is significant ($p < 0.001$). Attitude toward brand activism is also positively associated with purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.26$), which is significant ($p < 0.001$). However, political orientation is negatively associated with purchase intentions ($\beta = -0.13$), which is not significant ($p = 0.051$). Thus, H3 is supported, and perceived brand credibility remains positively associated with purchase intentions, even after controlling political orientation and attitude toward brand activism.

6. Discussion

This master thesis examined the influence of product characteristics on consumer expectations toward brand activism. Furthermore, it investigated how these expectations predict perceived brand credibility following exposure to an authentic brand activism message, and how this subsequently affects purchase intention. The displayed activism message was designed in line with the characteristics of authentic brand activism as defined by Vredenburg et al. (2020). The following chapter discusses the findings in relation to the research questions to draw conclusions.

6.1 Theoretical implications

RQ1: How do product involvement and decision type influence consumers' expectations toward brand activism?

The outcomes of the study show that product characteristics have significant influence on consumer expectations toward brand activism.

As confirmed by the results, higher product involvement is associated with higher consumer expectations toward brand activism than low product involvement. This finding aligns with Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020), who show that consumer expectations are highest for brands with which consumers strongly identify. This suggests that consumers transfer expectations associated with stronger brand engagement into expectations regarding social positioning. High involvement products that are characterized by deeper brand engagement, consumer interaction and rare purchases tend to generate stronger expectations. This is further consistent with Hydock et al. (2020) who observe that higher-consumption consumers hold higher expectations as they are more engaged and invested into a product category and therefore attached. However, the frequency of the purchase introduces a factor that should be taken into account. High

involvement products are by definition rarely purchased and associated with extensive information search (Huang & Lin, 2022). Hydock et al. (2020), on the other hand, refer to higher-consumption consumers as those who purchase frequently. These are not necessarily the same group. While this study demonstrates that high involvement products that are characterized by rare purchase occasions generate higher expectations, Hydock et al. (2020) attribute higher expectations to frequent consumption. This suggests that the relationship between consumption patterns and activism expectations is more complex. Altogether, involvement levels shape not only purchase decisions but the general expectations that consumers build and hold toward brand activism.

Decision type is also a significant predicting factor when shaping expectations toward brand activism. This dimension is relatively unexplored in the area of brand activism. The results of the study show that emotional decision making is associated with higher expectations toward brand activism than rational decision making. Therefore, feel oriented products appear to be more strongly associated with expectations toward brand activism as they are connected to a stronger self-brand connection through emotional decision making (Shukla et al., 2025). However, the difference in think and feel decision type is not as big as in high and low involvement. This implies that the rational against the emotional purchase decision shapes activism expectations, but to a lower degree than the level of consumer involvement. A possible explanation for this is that while emotional and rational purchase decisions differ in their decision-making process, the intensity of brand engagement appears to be more strongly associated with the level of involvement than with the nature of the decision. This indicates that involvement acts as a stronger driver for expectations. This is further consistent with the value-driven nature of brand activism. Vredenburg et al. (2020) argue that authentic activism is anchored in brand values and identity which aligns more with emotionally oriented product categories where consumer decisions are driven by feelings.

The interaction effect between involvement and decision type also supports these findings. While both dimensions independently influence expectations toward brand activism, they also have a significant combined influence. In particular, products with high involvement generate high expectations regardless of decision type. This suggests that involvement is the dominant factor in shaping expectations toward brand activism. This is consistent with Madathil and Murugan (2024) who assume that brand activism has different effects on hedonic and utilitarian products. Further, the combination of low involvement and think oriented products in particular generates the lowest expectations. This indicates that low involvement and rational decision-

making create a context in which brand activism is least expected and therefore least relevant. In contrast, feel oriented products with low involvement still create relatively high expectations toward brand activism, suggesting that the emotional nature of a product category can compensate for lower involvement when it comes to brand activism expectations. Finally, the findings support Moorman's (2020) argument that brands can use their products as tools to create societal change with brand activism beyond values and the brand's purpose. However, the study suggests that this pattern is not identical across product categories but depends on the specific combination of involvement and decision type.

RQ2: To what extent do pre-exposure expectations toward brand activism influence perceived brand credibility following exposure to an activism message?

The results of the regression analysis show that expectations toward brand activism are positively associated with perceived brand credibility. This shows that the higher consumers' expectations toward brand activism are, the more credible they perceive the activism messages. Virkus and Klein (2026) argue that credibility is an important factor in increasing consideration, and it also has a positive impact on brand trust and advocacy, which makes it essential. This highlights the importance of perceived credibility, and expectations can be leveraged as a driver of this. Credibility is further achieved through consistency between brand communication and consumer expectations (Virkus & Klein, 2026). Therefore, a brand is perceived credible and trustworthy when it constantly aligns with what consumers anticipate.

However, the results also show that only 15% of the variance in credibility is explained. This leaves room for other factors that influence perceived credibility. In particular, the authenticity of activism messaging, as highlighted by Vredenburg et al. (2020), is essential. When messages contain high effort, have a clear call to action, and are linked to values, they are perceived as authentic and credible (Madathil & Murugan, 2024). This once again highlights the importance of precision in messaging and the significant impact it has. Additionally, other factors that could not be accounted for in this experiment, such as brand familiarity, may also be decisive and predict perceived credibility. According to Lou et al. (2024), personal relevance is a key driver in consumer engagement with brand activism. This indicates that consumers who find the addressed topic personally relevant are more likely to perceive the activism as credible regardless of their expectation. This personal importance could not be controlled for.

Furthermore, these findings demonstrate that consumers do not evaluate activism messages in isolation and pre-existing expectations shape how the message is perceived. Consumers who

already expect a brand to take a stance are more likely to find its activism credible, which suggests that higher expectations are associated with more favorable credibility perceptions and serve as a reference against which the activism is evaluated. This process does not necessarily occur consciously.

This marks a new theoretical contribution by demonstrating that pre-exposure expectations function as a mechanism linking product characteristics to perceived credibility. This extends existing literature by showing that consumer responses to brand activism are not only determined by the activism message itself but are shaped by the product.

RQ3: How does perceived brand credibility following exposure to an activism message influence consumers' purchase intention?

The results of the multiple regression analysis show that perceived brand credibility is positively associated with purchase intentions. This highlights the importance of credibility in consumer behavior as well as its relevance in the experiment's effect chain. Once an activism message is perceived as authentic and credible, it is associated with not only consumer attitudes but also purchase intentions toward that brand. This is consistent with existing literature. Cristobal et al. (2022) confirm that brand activism strengthens purchase intentions among consumers. This is particularly the case when there is active support and consumers purchase the product as a result of brand activism (Cristobal et al., 2022). Furthermore, these positive purchase intentions are consistent with the authenticity of the activism message. This is in line with existing literature, suggesting that inauthentic activism risks being perceived as woke-washing, which would undermine credibility and purchase intentions (Sobande, 2020).

Perceived credibility is the strongest predictor of purchase intentions and explains 33.4% of the variance. By adding the control variables, a total of 43.7% of the variance in purchase intentions can be explained. Among the control variables, attitude toward brand activism stands out, as it is positively associated with purchase intentions like perceived credibility. Accordingly, when consumers are open to brand activism and value it, they are more likely to translate positive perceptions into purchase intentions. This is also demonstrated by Hydock et al. (2020), who state that price plays a smaller role than values, which leads to a higher willingness to pay. Generally positive attitudes toward activism reinforce the effect of credibility on purchase intentions. The control variable political orientation, on the other hand, has a non-significant negative effect on purchase intentions. This suggests that more conservative consumers tend to respond less favorably to brand activism which results in comparatively lower purchase

intentions. Since this effect is not significant, political orientation is a less decisive factor predicting purchase intentions compared to credibility and attitudes toward brand activism. However, the effect is only marginally non-significant ($p = 0.051$), indicating that a tendency exists but has not been confirmed by the sample. This suggests that perceived credibility can bridge political differences in consumer responses to brand activism, making prevailing political views less relevant. Consequently, other factors may be decisive in ensuring that brand activism resonates across different political views.

This chain of effects marks a theoretical contribution by demonstrating that perceived brand credibility emerges as a central explanatory factor associated with purchase intentions. This extends existing literature by integrating product antecedents into the brand activism effect chain.

6.2 Practical implications

These findings demonstrate a consistent chain of effects. Different product characteristics have different effects on consumer expectations toward brand activism. Pre-exposure expectations are positively associated with brand credibility, which is perceived higher when prior expectations were high. Furthermore, higher perceived credibility is associated with stronger purchase intentions. These findings not only contribute to existing literature but also provide important insights for practical implications that should be taken into account when implementing brand activism. However, it is important to recognize that not all consumers view this positively. Brand activism is a practice that not all brands wish to or should practice.

From a brand perspective, a specific understanding of the product category in which a brand operates is essential. Products should be mapped to the FCB grid to understand their positioning and to classify their level of involvement and decision type.

Since high involvement products generate higher activism-related expectations, there is substantial potential to meet and leverage those expectations. However, this can also lead to greater responsibility, as consumers already have pre-existing expectations. Remaining neutral on social and political issues is rarely an option for brands in this category (Bahr, 2025). On the contrary, brands with products in the low involvement category, encounter comparatively lower consumer expectations. Here, engaging in brand activism and communicating it may be perceived as ineffective or unexpected.

Such categorization should also apply to the decision type category. Brands with feel oriented products are more strongly associated with brand activism, as emotional purchase decisions are associated with higher expectations toward brand activism, regardless of product involvement. Brands in this category can leverage this emotional connection to participate authentically in brand activism, which consumers are open to. However, this does not apply to brands with think oriented products, as these are purchased for rational reasons and do not give rise to higher expectations. Here, too, brand activism may be viewed with skepticism. Brands with low involvement think products appear comparatively less suitable for brand activism.

Furthermore, the results show that pre-exposure expectations predict subsequent perceived credibility, which brings far-reaching practical implications. Both conscious and subconscious consumer expectations require careful management. This can begin even before brand activism campaigns or messages are launched. It can be accomplished through consistent communication of the brand's values, a suitable brand purpose, and engagement. On this basis, expectations can be fostered, and existing expectations have a positive effect on perceived credibility following an activism message or campaign. If, on the other hand, the activism comes as a surprise, it may be perceived as woke-washing and viewed critically. Therefore, a holistic and consistent brand presence should be ensured, in which the brand's values are clearly communicated.

Perceived brand credibility is the most significant factor in translating brand activism into behavioral intentions. Purchase intentions are a central outcome, as they indicate whether consumers support the brand and its communicated stance through their purchases. Therefore, authenticity in activism messaging plays a decisive role in ensuring that the brand is perceived as credible. If this does not occur, the activism may be perceived as woke-washing, which undermines the credibility not only of the activism itself but of the entire brand. Activism messages and campaigns are authentic when they are deeply rooted in the brand's values, follow a clear purpose with commitment, and are accompanied by concrete actions (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Brands must clearly stand behind their statements and actions to be perceived as credible.

Another implication relates to the alignment with consumers' existing attitudes toward brand activism, as this is also a predictor of final purchase intentions. Brand activism efforts are most effective and impactful when consumers have a positive attitude toward brand activism. By specifically targeting this group of consumers, the brand can identify their common

expectations and address them directly. However, this approach causes the brand to move in specific political directions, which may repel consumers with different attitudes.

Although political orientation was not tested as a significant predictor on purchase intentions, it is important to consider prevailing political attitudes. The more conservative consumers are, the less favorably they tend to respond to brand activism. The political diversity of consumers should be taken into account in all decisions. Brand activism messages that appeal to a broader audience may be effective, but also less controversial and thus less impactful (Lou et al., 2024). Brand activism is not exclusively associated with liberal values. Aligning the activism topic and the communication of it with values and consumer expectations is essential for credible brand activism. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that brand activism carries risks, as it never appeals to everyone and therefore faces resistance (Cammarota et al., 2023).

7. Limitations and future research

As an empirical study, this work has certain limitations that must be taken into account when interpreting the results and findings. However, these limitations also create opportunities for further research.

A fictional brand was used in the survey for the 2x2 factorial between-subjects experimental design. This ensured that participants had no prior knowledge or biases of the brand. However, this approach has limitations, as the brand is fictional and may therefore be difficult to conceptualize or consumer responses vary to a known brand. The brand's simple appearance can be limiting, as well as the chosen brand name "Linden," and thus the external validity of these findings may be restricted. With a different brand, consumer responses and, consequently, consumer behavior may differ. In future research, a similar study could be conducted using existing well-known brands. Regarding brand appearance, the products selected for the experiment may also be limiting. As the products are categorized on the FCB grid, other product dimensions are neglected. While manipulation checks confirmed perceived differences in product characteristics, the product descriptions provided may not fully convey the specific features or these are interpreted personally. Therefore, the products are not necessarily representative of the entire product category. A variety of researched product types and a broader range of options could lead to better insights in future research. Furthermore, limitations of the FCB grid must be taken into account. The product categorization does not account for individual differences and personal relevance of the products or other factors that influence perceptions (Huang & Lin, 2022). In addition, the four quadrants are simplified and

do not capture the complexity of consumer decision-making (Cheong & Cheong, 2021). Other frameworks for categorizing products could improve results in the future.

Furthermore, the activism message is limiting. Participants are exposed only to a standardized activism message, which may not have the same impact as a consistent activism campaign. In addition, the specific topic of extremism and rising hatred in German society chosen for the activism message may represent a constraint, as well as the format of a social media post. In the future, further research may provide insights into various activism topics and the extent to which they have different effects. In addition, the language of the survey is a limitation. While the survey is in English, the activism message was in German, which requires language switching throughout responding to the survey.

The survey participants were exclusively people living in Germany, which makes it difficult to generalize the study's findings. Other cultural contexts may lead to different results. Also, some characteristics of the participants are not necessarily representative. The results show that participants are generally slightly more liberal in their political views, which influenced the study's findings. Moreover, it is possible that participants did not report their personal opinions and attitudes, but what is socially desirable. This could falsify the study's results. Future research in this context could incorporate additional cultural and societal characteristics.

In addition, the measurement of purchase intentions reflects a hypothetical behavioral tendency rather than an actual purchase decision. Accordingly, stated intentions do not always translate into actual behavior. Here, other components such as individual preferences, price sensitivity, availability or situational factors can influence the purchase. This gap is relevant in the context of brand activism, as there are several ways to express support for a brand's stance. According to Cristobal et al. (2022), a distinction can be made between active and passive support of brand activism that translates into varying purchase behavior. Therefore, purchase intentions observed in this study may reflect passive support, as participants may overestimate their actual behavior. Future research in this context could address this limitation by incorporating purchase data or creating a realistic setting to accurately assess intentions.

Political orientation introduces another limitation. Firstly, all responses in which participants indicated "Prefer not to say" were excluded for the analysis of RQ3 which reduced the sample size. This highlights the fact that political orientation is a sensitive topic. Secondly, political orientation was not tested as a significant predictor of purchase intentions, which questions its

relevance. Future research could further investigate how to include all political orientations and how these affect consumer behavior in response to brand activism.

8. Conclusion

This study examined the influence of product characteristics on consumer expectations and, subsequently, on perceived credibility and purchase intentions in the context of brand activism. Using the FCB grid as a fundamental framework for categorizing products, the study shows that product involvement and decision type significantly influence consumer expectations toward brand activism. These expectations increase, in particular with high involvement and feel products. The interaction effect also shows that the combination of low involvement and think products elicits the lowest expectations toward brand activism, suggesting that these products are the least suitable for brand activism. Further, the results indicate that pre-exposure expectations positively predict perceived credibility following an activism message. This perceived credibility is further the strongest predictor of subsequent purchase intentions, which demonstrates that authenticity and credibility are essential in brand activism.

The study makes a theoretical contribution by identifying the product characteristics involvement and decision type as antecedents of pre-exposure expectations toward brand activism. This relationship has not been researched before. Therefore, this thesis extends existing literature and highlights the importance of consumer expectations toward brand activism demonstrating that consumer responses do not start with an activism message but are shaped by the product prior to exposure. Consumers who have higher expectations before dealing with an activism message are more likely to perceive it as credible, which ultimately translates into higher purchase intentions. Managing and fostering these expectations helps brands in building credibility even before activism is practiced. Additionally, the findings provide actionable guidance for managerial practice by identifying which products are best suited for brand activism.

Overall, the study demonstrates that successful and credible brand activism depends not only on the authenticity and quality of an activism message but also on expectations that consumers already hold before being exposed to brand activism.

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Appendix A

Demographics

A.1 Gender

Please indicate your gender.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	89	40,6	40,6	40,6
	Female	127	58,0	58,0	98,6
	Non-binary/ third gender	1	0,5	0,5	99,1
	Prefer not to say	2	0,9	0,9	100,0
	Total	219	100,0	100,0	

A.2 Age

Please indicate your age.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18-24	82	37,4	37,4	37,4
	25-34	122	55,7	55,7	93,2
	35-44	11	5,0	5,0	98,2
	45-54	1	0,5	0,5	98,6
	55 or older	3	1,4	1,4	100,0
	Total	219	100,0	100,0	

A.3 Education

Please indicate your highest level of education.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	High school diploma	37	16,9	16,9	16,9
	Bachelor's degree	107	48,9	48,9	65,8
	Master's degree	64	29,2	29,2	95,0
	Doctorate	1	0,5	0,5	95,5
	Prefer not to say	10	4,5	4,5	100,0
	Total	219	100,0	100,0	

A.4 Occupation

Please indicate your occupation.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Student	124	56,6	56,6	56,6
	Employed	86	39,3	39,3	95,9
	Self-employed	6	2,7	2,7	98,6
	Unemployed	2	0,9	0,9	99,5
	Prefer not to say	1	0,5	0,5	100,0
	Total	219	100,0	100,0	

Appendix B

Manipulation Checks

B.1 Cronbach's Alphas

Involvement:

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0,715	3

Decision type:

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0,890	4

Expectations:

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0,849	4

Credibility:

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0,876	4

Purchase intentions:

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0,860	3

Attitude toward brand activism:

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's	
Alpha	N of Items
0,805	4

B.2 Involvement

Group Statistics

involvement_group		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
involvement	High Involvement	116	3,9454	0,83631	0,07765
	Low Involvement	103	2,7314	0,93475	0,09210

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	One-Sided p	Two-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
involve-ment	Equal variances assumed	2,170	0,142	10,144	217	<,001	<,001	1,21401	0,11967	0,97814	1,44988
	Equal variances not assumed			10,077	206,151	<,001	<,001	1,21401	0,12047	0,97650	1,45152

Independent Samples Effect Sizes

		Standardizer ^a	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
involvement	Cohen's d	0,88395	1,373	1,077	1,667
	Hedges' correction	0,88702	1,369	1,073	1,661
	Glass's delta	0,93475	1,299	0,977	1,616

a. The denominator used in estimating the effect sizes.

Cohen's d uses the pooled standard deviation.

Hedges' correction uses the pooled standard deviation, plus a correction factor.

Glass's delta uses the sample standard deviation of the control (i.e., the second) group.

B.3 Decision type

Group Statistics

decisiontype_group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
decisiontype Think	105	3,9524	0,79292	0,07738
Feel	114	2,4189	0,75221	0,07045

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	One-Sided p	Two-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
decision type	Equal variances assumed	0,075	0,785	14,686	217	<,001	<,001	1,53352	0,10442	1,32771	1,73933
	Equal variances not assumed			14,654	213,108	<,001	<,001	1,53352	0,10465	1,32724	1,73980

Independent Samples Effect Sizes

			95% Confidence Interval		
Standardizer ^a			Point Estimate	Lower	Upper
decisiontype	Cohen's d	0,77199	1,986	1,661	2,309
	Hedges' correction	0,77467	1,980	1,655	2,301
	Glass's delta	0,75221	2,039	1,661	2,412

a. The denominator used in estimating the effect sizes.

Cohen's d uses the pooled standard deviation.

Hedges' correction uses the pooled standard deviation, plus a correction factor.

Glass's delta uses the sample standard deviation of the control (i.e., the second) group.

Appendix C

Hypothesis Testing

C.1 RQ1

Between-Subjects Factors

		Value Label	N
involvement_group	1,00	High Involvement	116
	2,00	Low Involvement	103
decisiontype_group	1,00	Think	105
	2,00	Feel	114

Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: expectations

involvement_group	decisiontype_group	Std.		N
		Mean	Deviation	
High Involvement	Think	3,1116	0,89433	56
	Feel	3,2000	0,79164	60
	Total	3,1573	0,84024	116
Low Involvement	Think	2,4439	0,91752	49
	Feel	3,1250	0,97462	54
	Total	2,8010	1,00328	103
Total	Think	2,8000	0,96102	105
	Feel	3,1645	0,87986	114
	Total	2,9897	0,93551	219

Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances^{a,b}

		Levene	df1	df2	Sig.
		Statistic			
expectations	Based on Mean	1,209	3	215	0,307
	Based on Median	0,892	3	215	0,446
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	0,892	3	208,609	0,446
	Based on trimmed mean	1,226	3	215	0,301

Tests the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups.

a. Dependent variable: expectations

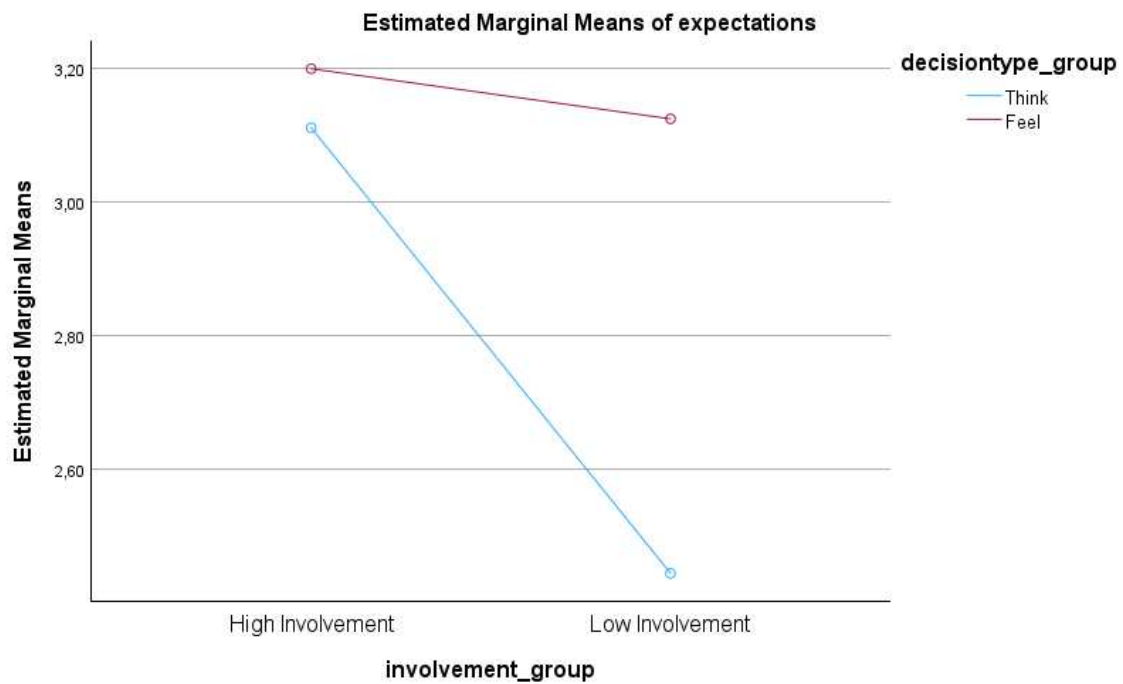
b. Design: Intercept + involvement_group + decisiontype_group + involvement_group * decisiontype_group

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: expectations

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	19,073 ^a	3	6,358	7,960	<,001	0,100
Intercept	1921,647	1	1921,647	2406,019	<,001	0,918
involvement_group	7,510	1	7,510	9,404	0,002	0,042
decisiontype_group	8,062	1	8,062	10,094	0,002	0,045
involvement_group *	4,783	1	4,783	5,989	0,015	0,027
decisiontype_group						
Error	171,717	215	0,799			
Total	2148,313	219				
Corrected Total	190,789	218				

a. R Squared = ,100 (Adjusted R Squared = ,087)



C.2 RQ2

Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
credibility	3,3596	0,83018	219
expectations	2,9897	0,93551	219

Correlations

		credibility	expectations
Pearson Correlation	credibility	1,000	0,387
	expectations	0,387	1,000
Sig. (1- tailed)	credibility		<,001
	expectations	0,000	
N	credibility	219	219
	expectations	219	219

Variables Entered/Removed^a

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	expectations ^b		Enter

a. Dependent Variable: credibility

b. All requested variables entered.

Model Summary

						Change Statistics			
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	,387 ^a	0,150	0,146	0,76731	0,150	38,190	1	217	<,001

a. Predictors: (Constant), expectations

ANOVA^a

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	22,484	1	22,484	38,190	<,001 ^b
Residual	127,760	217	0,589		
Total	150,245	218			

a. Dependent Variable: credibility

b. Predictors: (Constant), expectations

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1 (Constant)	2,333	0,174		13,410	<,001	1,990	2,676
expectations	0,343	0,056	0,387	6,180	<,001	0,234	0,453

a. Dependent Variable: credibility

C.3 RQ3*Descriptive Statistics*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
purchase_intention	3,3424	0,81458	184
credibility	3,3981	0,84293	184
political_orientation	2,50	0,856	184
attitude	3,7201	0,77207	184

Correlations

		purchase_ intention	credibility	political_ orientation	attitude
Pearson Correlation	purchase_intention	1,000	0,578	-0,344	0,499
	credibility	0,578	1,000	-0,171	0,379
	political_orientation	-0,344	-0,171	1,000	-0,527
	attitude	0,499	0,379	-0,527	1,000
Sig. (1- tailed)	purchase_intention		<,001	<,001	<,001
	credibility	0,000		0,010	0,000
	political_orientation	0,000	0,010		0,000
	attitude	0,000	0,000	0,000	
N	purchase_intention	184	184	184	184
	credibility	184	184	184	184
	political_orientation	184	184	184	184
	attitude	184	184	184	184

Variables Entered/Removed^a

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	credibility ^b		Enter
2	political_orientation, attitude ^b		Enter

a. Dependent Variable: purchase_intention

b. All requested variables entered.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	Change Statistics				Sig. F Change
						F Change	df1	df2		
1	,578 ^a	0,334	0,330	0,66675	0,334	91,150	1	182		<,001
2	,661 ^b	0,437	0,428	0,61604	0,104	16,599	2	180		<,001

a. Predictors: (Constant), credibility

b. Predictors: (Constant), credibility, political_orientation, attitude

ANOVA^a

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	40,521	1	40,521	91,150	<,001 ^b
Residual	80,908	182	0,445		
Total	121,429	183			
2 Regression	53,119	3	17,706	46,657	<,001 ^c
Residual	68,310	180	0,379		
Total	121,429	183			

a. Dependent Variable: purchase_intention

b. Predictors: (Constant), credibility

c. Predictors: (Constant), credibility, political_orientation, attitude

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		Sig.	95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1 (Constant)	1,445	0,205		7,062	<,001	1,042	1,849
credibility	0,558	0,058	0,578	9,547	<,001	0,443	0,674
2 (Constant)	1,137	0,381		2,981	0,003	0,384	1,890
credibility	0,442	0,058	0,458	7,572	<,001	0,327	0,558
political_orientation	-0,123	0,063	-0,129	-1,967	0,051	-0,247	0,000
attitude	0,271	0,074	0,257	3,670	<,001	0,126	0,417

a. Dependent Variable: purchase_intention

Excluded Variables^a

Model	Beta In	t	Sig.	Partial Correlation	Collinearity Statistics Tolerance
1 political_orientation	- ,252 ^b	-4,296	<,001	-0,304	0,971
attitude	,327 ^b	5,373	<,001	0,371	0,856

a. Dependent Variable: purchase_intention

b. Predictors in the Model: (Constant), credibility

Appendix D

Questionnaire

Introduction:

Dear Participant,

thank you for participating in this research project for my Master's thesis at Católica Lisbon School of Business & Economics. In this survey, you will read a short description of a brand and one of its products. Afterward, you will be asked to answer several questions about your perceptions and evaluations.

There are no right or wrong answers. Please read the information carefully and answer the questions based on your personal opinion. Your participation is anonymous, and all responses will be used for academic purposes only. The survey takes approximately 5 minutes to complete.

Filter:

Do you currently live in Germany?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Assignment to one of the four conditions:

Condition 1:

Please imagine the following brand and product:

Linden is a consumer electronics brand that offers smartphones designed for everyday use.

The brand focuses on reliable performance, modern technology, and practical features such as long battery life and high-quality cameras. Linden aims to provide smartphones that combine advanced technology with practical functionality for long-term use.

Condition 2:

Please imagine the following brand and product:

Linden is a fragrance brand that offers perfumes designed to express personality and create a unique emotional experience. The brand focuses on carefully crafted scents that allow individuals to express who they are and feel confident in how they present themselves. Linden aims to create fragrances that evoke emotions, enhance personal identity, and leave a lasting impression in everyday life.

Condition 3:

Please imagine the following brand and product:

Linden is a consumer goods brand that offers toothpaste for daily oral care. The brand focuses on functional benefits such as protecting teeth, maintaining fresh breath, and supporting everyday dental hygiene. Linden aims to provide uncomplicated and reliable products for everyday routines.

Condition 4:

Please imagine the following brand and product:

Linden is a snack brand that offers chocolate bars designed for small moments of joy. The brand focuses on taste, indulgence, and creating enjoyable treats for everyday life in different flavors. Linden aims to provide indulgent chocolate snacks for on the go that add a little pleasure to regular everyday moments.

Please indicate your agreement with the following statements regarding the product described above.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
This product category is important to me.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Buying this product would require careful consideration.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would compare different options before purchasing this product.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Please indicate your agreement with the following statements regarding the product described above.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Buying this product is mainly a rational decision.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Functional aspects are more important than emotional appeal when choosing this product.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My decision for this product is primarily based on feelings.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My choice of this product would be driven more by emotions than logic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Based on the brand and product presented, please indicate your agreement with the following statements.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I expect brands like Linden to take a public stand on social and political topics.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Companies in this product category should speak up on societal issues.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I expect this brand to support social or political causes publicly.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Brands like this one should contribute to positive social change.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Now imagine that the brand Linden recently published the following public statement:



After reading the brand's statement, please indicate your agreement with the following statements.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
The brand's statement appears credible.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I believe the brand is sincere in its message.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The brand appears trustworthy.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The brand's activism message seems authentic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Please indicate your agreement with the following statements.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I would consider buying products from this brand.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would choose this brand over competing brands.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would be willing to purchase products from this brand in the future.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

How would you describe your political orientation?

- ☐ Very liberal
- ☐ Liberal
- ☐ Center
- ☐ Conservative
- ☐ Very conservative
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Please indicate your agreement with the following statements.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I generally support companies that engage in social issues.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Brand activism is something I value positively.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Companies should take responsibility beyond selling products.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Companies should stay neutral on controversial social issues.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Demographics:

Please indicate your gender.

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary/third gender
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Please indicate your age.

- ☐ under 18
- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-34
- ☐ 35-44
- ☐ 45-54
- ☐ 55 or older
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Please indicate your highest level of education.

- ☐ High school diploma
- ☐ Bachelor's degree
- ☐ Master's degree
- ☐ Doctorate
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Please indicate your occupation.

- ☐ Student
- ☐ Employed
- ☐ Self-employed
- ☐ Unemployed
- ☐ Retired
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to say