THE IMPACT OF BRAND ACTIVISM ON BRAND EQUITY AMONG GENERATION Z CONSUMERS

Dissertation to Universidade Católica Portuguesa to obtain a Master's Degree in Communication Studies – Communication, Marketing and Advertising

By

Paula Kubetzek

Faculdade de Ciências Humanas

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Abstract

With increasing global competition due to the diffusion of information and communication technologies, enhancing value for the customer is critical to build and maintain a unique and competitive position as a brand. One communication trend that has been frequently discussed recently and is seen as adding value in various ways is brand activism. Brands that take a stand on political issues not only drive social change, but can also build a closer bond with their customers through brand identification. One target group that is expected to value social engagement and place even more emphasis on value identification in their interactions with brands is Generation Z (Gen Z).

Given the relevance of brand activism as a current communication trend and Gen Z seemingly different in their consumer behaviour, this thesis aims to contribute to the ever-growing stream of research investigating influences on brand equity. Based on a literature review of different brand equity models, the consumer profile of Gen Z and relevant concepts related to brand activism, an empirical experimental pretest-posttest study design was conducted with brand activism campaigns from two well-known brands and focus on Gen Z consumer (N=194), to explore the influence of brand activism on four brand equity dimensions among Gen Z consumers.

The study concludes that while a significant generational difference in favouring brand activism was found between Gen Z consumers and other generations (N=277), exposure to an activism campaign does not reliably increase brand equity, but depends on several factors. First, the impact of exposure to brand activism appears to vary between the different dimensions of brand equity. Second, the study sample suggests that an activism campaign does not seem to be as effective in improving brand equity for brands with already high levels of brand equity prior to stimuli exposure. Third, authenticity seems to play a key role in how brand activism is perceived and how it affects brand equity.

Keywords: *Brand Equity, Consumer-brand Relationships, Communication Trends, Brand Activism, Generation Z*

Resumo

Com a crescente concorrência global devido à proliferação das tecnologias de informação e comunicação, aumentar a criação de valor para o cliente tornou-se crucial para que a marca construa e mantenha uma posição única e competitiva. Uma tendência de comunicação que tem sido frequentemente discutida recentemente e que é vista como um valor acrescentado de várias formas é o ativismo da marca. As marcas que tomam posição sobre questões políticas não só impulsionam a mudança social, como também podem construir uma ligação mais próxima com os seus clientes através da identificação da marca. Um grupo-alvo que se espera que valorize o envolvimento social e coloque ainda mais ênfase na identificação de valor nas suas interações com as marcas é a Geração Z (*Gen Z*).

Dada a relevância do ativismo das marcas como tendência de comunicação atual e da Geração Z aparentemente diferente no seu comportamento de consumidor, esta tese visa contribuir para o crescente fluxo de investigação que analisa as influências sobre o *brand equity*. Com base numa revisão bibliográfica de diferentes modelos de *brand equity*, do perfil do consumidor *Gen Z* e de conceitos relevantes relacionados com o ativismo da marca, foi realizado um estudo empírico experimental de conceção pré-teste-pós-teste, com campanhas de ativismo da marca de duas marcas bem conhecidas e com enfoque no consumidor *Gen Z* (N=194), para explorar entre os consumidores *Gen Z* a influência do ativismo da marca em quatro dimensões de *brand equity*.

O estudo conclui que embora tenha sido encontrada uma diferença geracional significativa no favorecimento do ativismo da marca entre os consumidores *Gen Z* e outras gerações (N=277), a exposição a uma campanha de ativismo não aumenta de forma fiável o *brand equity*, mas antes depende de vários fatores. Primeiro, o impacto da exposição ao ativismo da marca parece variar entre as diferentes dimensões do *brand equity*. Em segundo lugar, a amostra do estudo sugere que uma campanha de ativismo não parece ser tão eficaz para marcas com níveis já elevados de *brand equity* antes da exposição ao estímulo. Terceiro, a autenticidade parece desempenhar um papel fundamental na forma como o ativismo da marca é percecionado e em como afecta o *brand equity*.

Keywords: *Brand Equity, Relações Consumidor-Marca, Tendências de Comunicação, Ativismo de Marca, Geração Z*

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Index

Abstract II
Resumo III
Acknowledgements IV
Index V
Index of Tables VII
Index of Figures VIII
1. Introduction 1
1.1 Background and Relevance 1
1.2 Research Goals 3
1.3 Scientific Positioning 4
1.4 Dissertation Structure 4
Part I: Theoretical Framework 7
2. Brand Equity 7
2.1 Brands in a Hyper-connected World 7
2.2 Defining and Conceptualising Brand Equity 8
2.2.1 Brand Equity Model by Aaker 10
2.2.2 Brand Equity Model by Yoo et al. 13
2.2.3 Brand Equity Model by Cobb-Walgren et al. 14
2.2.4 Brand Equity Pyramid by Keller 14
2.3 Consumer-Brand Relationships, Identification and Brand Attachment 15
2.3.1 Brand Salience 15
2.3.2 Brand Meaning 16
2.3.3 Brand Identification 17
2.3.4 Brand Responses 19
2.3.5 Brand Communities 21
3. Generation Z as a Relevant Target Group 23
3.1 Generational Cohort Theory 23
3.2 Consumer Profile of Gen Z 24
3.3 Socio-Political and Environmental Engagement of Gen Z 27
3.3.1 Defining Political Engagement, Participation and Activism 28
3.3.2 Drivers for the Political Engagement and Activism of Gen Z 28
3.4 Gen Z's Interaction with Brands 32
4. Social Activism for Brands 35
4.1 Increasing Demands on Activist Engagement 35
4.2 Defining Brand Activism 35
4.3 Woke Authenticity 37
4.4 Effects and Perceptions of Brand Activism 41
4.5 Dealing with Consumer Backlash 43
5. Brand Equity and Brand Activism 47
5.1 Previous Findings on the Impact of Brand Activism on Brand Equity 47

5.2 Research Question and Hypotheses 47
5.2.1 Brand Salience 48
5.2.2 Brand Performance and Brand Imagery 48
5.2.3 Brand Judgements and Brand Feelings 49
5.2.4 Brand Resonance 50
Part II: Empirical Study 52
6. Methodology 52
6.1 Study Design 52
6.2 Selection of Brands and Controversial Socio-political Theme 53
6.2.1 Sprite 54
6.2.2 Starbucks 56
6.3 Measures 57
6.4 Sample and Data Collection 61
6.5 Procedure 63
6.6 Ethical Consideration 64
7. Data Analysis 65
7.1 Overview of Data Analysis 65
7.2 Hypotheses Testing 66
7.2.1 Results 66
7.2.2 Analysis 70
7.3 Influencing Factors 71
7.3.1 General Attitude of Brand Activism 71
7.3.2 Campaign Authenticity 75
7.3.3 Generational Effects 81
7.4 Discussion 83
8. Conclusion 87
8.1 Summary and Practical Implications 87
8.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research 90
Bibliography IX
Appendices XXIX

Index of Tables

Table 1. The new brand roles....8
Table 2. Dataset validation steps. 63
Table 3. Sample overview....63
Table 4. Cronbach's alpha analysis. 65
Table 5. Descriptive analysis of Sprite's measurements. 67
Table 6. T-test results of Sprite's measurements 68
Table 7. Descriptive analysis of Starbucks' measurements. 69
Table 8. T-test results of Starbucks' measurements. 69
Table 9. Attitudes towards brand activism. 72
Table 10. Correlation analysis of Sprite's measurements....74
Table 11. Correlation analysis of Starbucks' measurements 74
Table 12. Generational comparison of Sprite's pretest and posttest mean values. 82
Table 13. Generational comparison of Starbucks' pretest and posttest mean values. 82

Index of Figures

Figure 1. Brand Equity Model by Aaker. 11
Figure 2. Brand Equity Model by Yoo et al.....13
Figure 3. Brand Equity Model by Cobb-Walgren et al.....14
Figure 4. Customer-Based Brand Equity Pyramid by Keller. 15
Figure 5. Brands as Intentional Agents Framework. 21
Figure 6. Typology of brand activism.....38
Figure 7. Posttest measurements of Sprite per attitude group 72
Figure 8. Posttest measurements of Starbucks per attitude group. 73
Figure 9. Concept map of the Sprite campaign.....75
Figure 10. Concept map of the Starbucks campaign. 76

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Relevance

Understanding consumer-brand relationships – where brands are seen as active co-creators of these relationships – has long attracted the attention of scholars and practitioners (Blackstone, 1993; Fournier, 1998). In the face of ever-changing consumer trends, there continues to be an ongoing interest in understanding how specific marketing or communication interventions can influence the direction, intensity and outcomes of such relationships (e.g., Fetscherin et al., 2019). Given the high level of academic and practical engagement with the topic, it was deemed relevant to further support research in this area through this dissertation.

For sustainable success, brand managers aim to build meaningful emotional relationships with their customers based on long-term strategic delivery of valuable brand content (Lundqvist et al., 2013). This used to mean that brand managers aimed not to alienate any consumer group by remaining neutral on contentious issues. In recent years, however, there seems to be a shift in brand strategy, with more and more brands moving towards incorporating social and political issues into their marketing campaigns (Amed et al., 2019).

The basic idea of companies publicly demonstrating their support for or opposition to one side of a controversial issue, also referred to as *brand activism* (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 2), consists of taking a proactive approach and using their reach to address and/or educate on social issues such as racism or sexism (Moorman, 2020). In a time of public social justice movements (e.g., #blacklivesmatter or #MeToo), many brands seek to extend their value to customers beyond the functional benefits of their products or services and show support for promoting socio-political change (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

However, if consumers feel that a brand's activist communication is aimed at other intentions than awareness-raising and education, this can lead to consumer boycott, backlash and depreciation of brand equity (Lucas, 2019). Thus, authenticity has become a critical factor in this trend (Mirzaei et al., 2022). This is supported by a study by Edelman (2019), which found that more than half of the consumers believe that brand engagement on socio-political issues is mainly a marketing ploy to sell more products. However, when consumers trust the brand's intentions behind its activist communication, they not only buy from the brand, but 7 in 10 will advocate and defend the brand (Edelman, 2020). This is more than 20 percentage points higher than if they only trust the brand for product quality.

A recent example of brands engaging in a political debate rather than remaining apolitical is their reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, which led most major brands to withdraw their investments, close shops and stop selling in Russia (Race & Hooker, 2022). Brands that did not change their relationship with Russia quickly enough and continued to keep their shops open were berated on social media for supporting Putin's decision and not standing behind Ukraine. According to a global study by Accenture, 62% of customers expect companies to speak out on social issues; failing to do so could lead to negative reaction: 53% of consumers are likely to express their complaints if their values do not match the words or actions of the brand, 47% will switch to other brands and 17% may boycott the brand forever (Barton et al., 2019). Hawkins (2022) pointed to a generational difference in the response to agreeing or disagreeing to a brand's stance. The author claimed that 1 in 4 Baby Boomers would actively boycott a brand they disagree with, but only 1 in 13 would support a brand that shares their beliefs, whereas Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z (Gen Z) seem less likely to boycott but more likely to consciously support like-minded brands (Hawkins, 2022).

Prior research has suggested that Gen Z, a generational cohort defined as persons born between 1996 and 2012 (The Pew Research Center, 2019), values socio-political engagement more (Francis & Hoefel, 2018), focusing their mobilisation efforts on defending identity-related causes, such as LGBTQIA+ issues, gender or racial equality, as well as challenging climate policies (Andersen et al., 2020). Their connection through digital media facilitates political participation and civic engagement (McKeon & Gitomer, 2019; Turner, 2015). An example of Gen Z's activist engagement is the *Fridays For Future* movement which aims to emphasise the urgency of taking action to combat climate change (Sommer et al., 2019). This movement has been discussed in the national and international media as well as in academic publications, receiving worldwide recognition for the mobilising power of the youth (Hayward, 2021; Ernman et al., 2020).

Because of their proven collective power, Gen Z activists can be considered an important consumer group for brands. Even if they don't buy a brand's products, just a few digital activists can have an impact by convincing existing customers to boycott the brand (Bakhtiari, 2021). According to Bakhtiari (2021), activists do not blame ordinary consumers for their individual lifestyle choice, but believe that companies should take responsibility for improving their supply chain and changing consumer behaviour. Consistently, the Edelman study

attributed more power to brands than governments in addressing and solving social problems (Edelman, 2018).

The older members of Gen Z are now entering the workforce and thus expanding their purchasing power (Amed et al., 2019). A study by McKinsey & Company (Amed et al., 2019) projected that Gen Z consumers will make up about 40% of global consumers by 2020 and have a purchasing power of about $150 billion in the United States. Given this data and the fact that Gen Z consumers seem to differ in their consumption behaviour from previous generations, as some studies have suggested (e.g., Milotay, 2020), it is indeed worth taking a closer look at this generation. Therefore, this dissertation will examine how Gen Z consumers' perceptions of brands change through exposure to brand activism.

1.2 Research Goals

The goal of this research is to better understand how Gen Z consumers' perceptions of brands are affected by social activism on the part of the brand, specifically focusing on brand equity and comparing respondents' brand attitudes before and after exposure to an activist campaign. Brand equity has been recognised in previous research as an effective multidimensional concept (Keller & Brexendorf, 2019) used to understand the sources and outcomes in order to provide information on how and where specific marketing interventions can add value to a brand (Keller, 1993). A few other studies have examined the impact of brand activism on brand equity. While some authors assume an asymmetric effect between brand activism and brand attitude, intentions or behaviour (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2018), others assume that the relationship is positive, with brand activism generating positive attitudes and behaviours among customers, strengthening brand image or stakeholder-company relationships in the long run (Du et al., 2010). By measuring brand equity in an experimental pretest-posttest design, this dissertation aims to further contribute to the understanding of how brands that take a stand on a socio-political controversial issue are perceived by a specific consumer group.

This study aims to make three contributions. First, it examines how consumer-brand relationships have changed in recent years and the role that brand identification and shared values play in perceptual and behavioural aspects of brand equity. Second, it analyses the unique consumer profile of Gen Z and posits that their value on socio-political engagement has an impact on how they interact with brands and what they demand from them. Third, various factors that moderate the impact of brand activism on brand equity are explored through the analysis of theoretical and empirical data. It examines whether the effects of brand activism on

brand equity hypothesised in previous research also apply to Gen Z consumers, and if not, how they differ for this younger generation.

This study follows the path of pioneering research on the impact of brand activism on brand equity that focuses exclusively on Gen Z consumers. The proposed findings on brand activism as a marketing activity targeting Gen Z can provide brands with a comprehensive perspective on how to incorporate socio-political issues into their communications, while emphasising the importance of authenticity when doing so.

1.3 Scientific Positioning

Communication studies offer a wide range of research topics associated with different research paradigms (Potter et al., 1993). A *research paradigm* refers to a set of fundamental beliefs that scholars in a community use to make various practical decisions about their research (Kuhn, 1977, as cited in Potter et al., 1993). These assumptions determine the way questions are asked, the methods used, the criteria for what is most meaningful as data, and the standards for assessing the validity of knowledge claims (Creswell, 2009). Research on the influence of communication tools on marketing outcomes is often based on the assumption of cause-effect relationships and the idea that certain laws or theories determine the world and need to be reviewed and/or refined depending on the context. Given this view, this study follows a post-positivist research paradigm based on a deterministic philosophy that assumes that data, evidence and rational considerations shape knowledge. Assuming generational effects, causal relationships and aiming to validate previous findings for a different audience, the author believes that developing numerical measures of observations with quantitative evidence in mind is the most appropriate way to understand how causes affect outcomes. However, compared to the traditional positivist research paradigm, post-positivists recognise that there is no single truth, particularly in the study of attitudes and perceptions, but that it varies within political, social and historical contexts (Creswell, 2009). The author has therefore opted for a quantitative study design, but one that does not rely on simple close-ended items alone, but also includes an experimental treatment to see how people's attitudes evolve over the course of the study, as well as open-ended questioning to get a better picture of individual opinions.

1.4 Dissertation Structure

This dissertation is divided into two parts: 1) the theoretical framework, which creates a comprehensive understanding of the topic under study and develops the hypotheses, and based

on this, 2) the empirical study, which explains the research design and highlights, analyses and discusses the empirical findings.

The literature review begins by examining the different roles of brands and the increasing importance of branding in today's hyper-connected world in order to understand the relevance of further investigating brand equity (chapter two). To this end, the consumer-oriented brand equity examined in this dissertation is distinguished from financial-oriented brand equity and the four most commonly used consumer-oriented brand equity models are discussed. Based on one of the four proposed models, the various dimensions of brand equity are presented in detail and connected to current communication trends such as the ubiquitous use of social media or the discernible trend towards self-expression and brand identification.

Chapter three is devoted to characterising the target group of this study: Gen Z. It begins with a brief discussion of the rationale for the generational theory in general and concludes that there are indeed differences between generations. In order to hypothesise how Gen Z will respond to brand activism, this chapter is dedicated to a critical review of Gen Z's background, their values, how this influences their interaction with brands, and to understand their motivations for socio-political activism.

Having established that expectations of brand value creation have changed, particularly in the eyes of Gen Z, chapter four defines and conceptualises brand activism as a communication tool to stand out and add value. Recognising the importance of authenticity in relation to activist communication, this chapter also presents various models and frameworks for measuring brand authenticity and explores its role in shaping perceptions of brand activism. Various studies are cited to determine how different psychological mechanisms influence the effects of brand activism and how to deal with them in case of negative effects.

The last chapter (chapter five) of the theoretical framework gives an overview of previous findings on the causal relationship between brand activism and brand equity and in this way introduces the development of the hypotheses. Based on the previous three chapters, the research question is presented and four hypotheses are developed.

The second part of this dissertation begins with the presentation of the chosen methodology (chapter six). It provides a detailed description of the sampling, data collection and research procedure, as well as a rationale for the opted experimental pretest-posttest research design, the selection of brands and the topic of brand activism covered by the chosen campaigns as experimental stimuli.

Chapter seven includes the data analysis and interpretation, highlighting the most compelling findings determined using a range of statistical techniques, including descriptive analysis, t-tests, ANOVA and correlations.

Finally, chapter eight summarises the main findings of both the theoretical and empirical parts of this dissertation, critically examines the limitations, and makes suggestions for future research.

Part I: Theoretical Framework

2. Brand Equity

2.1 Brands in a Hyper-connected World

Over the last century, the brand landscape has changed and branding is a much discussed concern for business and society. This change, fuelled by the diffusion of information and communication technologies, has led to new forms of brands such as idea brands (e.g., Fridays For Future movement) or person brands (e.g., Kim Kardashian) which in turn have shifted consumer behaviour (Swaminathan et al., 2020). Modern technologies facilitate the exchange of information about brands and their products on a global scale, which, combined with the maturation of most industries, is leading to increased global competition in the market (Gómez-Suárez et al., 2017). Given this situation, it is not surprising that the concept of Marketing 5.0 has been developed – a type of marketing that uses the application of technology to create, communicate, deliver and enhance value to the customer (Kotler et al., 2021). In this context, it has become crucial for a brand to offer emotional and symbolic value that goes beyond purely functional product features in order to build and maintain a unique and competitive position in the minds of customers (Rodrigues & Borges, 2020).

To define brands, reference can be made to the American Marketing Association (2022), which originally described a brand as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, [that] is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or a group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors." The branding literature also distinguishes between three main dimensions to view a brand: the firm, consumer and society perspective (Swaminathan et al., 2020). The firm perspective focuses on the development and implementation of brand identities to strategically position, target and grow brands to achieve financial (and non-financial) outcomes (e.g., Kapferer, 2012; Steenkamp, 2017). The consumer perspective views brands as intangible constructs or mental cues that help consumers in their decision-making (e.g., Schmitt, 2012). Lastly, the society perspective places brands in social and cultural contexts where social forces, structures and institutions influence individual consumers both directly and indirectly. From a societal perspective, brands can be seen as social entities that produce cultural capital (e.g., Bourdieu, 2011, Thompson & Arnould, 2005) and act as citizens with responsibilities within a community (Thompson et al., 2006).

Increased availability of information and speed of dissemination of information, new networks of people and devices, and new platform technologies enable an expansion of the geographic reach and social role of a brand (Rodrigues & Borges, 2020). Therefore, Swaminathan et al. (2020) proposed a new brand paradigm that rethinks the functions and roles of brands. Four of these new roles that are relevant to the current work are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The new brand roles (source: Swaminathan et al., 2020).

Role	**Explanation**	**Main Authors**
Brands as Mental Cues	In a hyper-connected world with easy access to a wealth of facts and/or opinions about brands, established brand names facilitate information processing, e.g., quality assessment or comparison of alternatives.	Bearden & Shimp (1982); Aaker (1991); Rao & Bergen (1992); Erdem & Swait (1998); Baek et al. (2010); Wells et al. (2011).
Brands as Instruments of Identity Expression	Part of establishing a brand is linking it to attributes and values that in turn authenticate identity narratives and support the attainment of self-identity goals.	Swann (1983); Bhattacharya & Sen (2003); Thompson et al. (2006); Lam et al. (2010); Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012); MacInnis & Folkes (2017).
Brands as Architects of Value in Networks	Due to hyperconnectivity through the internet and tech devices, brands are increasingly integrated into complex networks of users, partners, co-creators and co-owners that accelerate value creation, e.g., brands can act as nodes of brand communities in social media.	Park et al. (1996); Simonin & Ruth (1998); Katona et al. (2011); McIntyre & Srinivasan (2017).
Brands as Catalysts of Social Change	The responsibility of a brand has changed from the consumers' perspective, challenging them to take a stand on social issues and use their platform and power to raise awareness and take action.	Sethi (1975); Carroll (1999); Spector (2008); Torelli et al. (2012); Bhagwat et al. (2020); Moormann (2020).

2.2 Defining and Conceptualising Brand Equity

One model that was developed in the 1980s and has since been considered a key concept in marketing is *brand equity* (Baalbaki & Guzmán, 2016). In our hyper-connected world, where branding is recognised as an important factor in the success of companies (Swaminathan et al., 2020), many brand managers strive to increase and/or maintain strong brand equity (Yoo et al., 2000). In the literature, two key perspectives of brand equity are distinguished: financial-based and consumer-based brand equity (Davcik et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2013). Financial-based brand equity takes the evaluation of the financial value of a brand as a measure of brand success

(Davcik et al., 2015, Veloutsou & Guzman, 2017). This financial value of brand equity can be described as "the incremental cash flows which accrue to branded products over and above the cash flows which would result from the sale of unbranded products" (Simon & Sullivan, 1993).

The consumer-based brand equity paradigm, by contrast, focuses on the consumer-given value of a brand by assessing the impact of branding on consumer responses. There is considerable debate on the exact definition of consumer-based brand equity (Yoo & Donthu, 2001; Hilgekamp & Shanteau, 2010) and numerous classifications and contributions have been made to delineate and conceptualise it. According to Aaker (1991), consumer-based brand equity can be described as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers." Similarly, Yoo & Donthu (2001), pointed out that brand equity captures the different consumers' reaction to a branded versus non-branded product, when subject to the same marketing stimuli and product attributes.

In terms of the distinction between consumer-based brand equity and financial-based brand equity, some authors have argued that financial-based brand equity emerges from consumer-based brand equity because a brand without meaning or value to the consumer is also irrelevant to investors, manufacturers or retailers (Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995). Since consumer-oriented brand equity is the predominant perspective in marketing research (Davcik et al., 2015), reflecting today's complex consumer dynamics and contributing to the understanding of consumer behaviour, and this dissertation seeks to study the impact of brand activism on Gen Z brand perceptions, analysing brand equity from a consumer perspective seemed to be the most appropriate option for the purpose of this work.

All conceptualisations of brand equity have in common that they imply better business outcomes resulting from marketing efforts for a product or service due to its brand element than for a product or service without such identification (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Extensive literature about the positive outcomes of brand equity for consumers and firms exists (e.g., Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Aaker (1991) pointed out that brand equity provides value to the customer by assisting in the interpretation and processing of information about products or services, ensuring confidence in the customer's purchase decision and increasing the customer's satisfaction in using the product or service.

The main purpose of this concept for firms is to contribute to the creation of a strong brand in order to achieve competitive advantage and product differentiation. To this end, brand equity

is considered to strengthen brand loyalty, increase customer satisfaction, enable higher price margins for the product and/or service, increase willingness to pay and reduce perceived risk (Aaker, 1991; Yoo et al., 2000). It also enables increased marketing efficiency and effectiveness and facilitates growth through product extensions and favourable signals to channel members, as well as resilience to competitive threats or internal crises (Aaker, 1991). Looking more at the financial benefits, brand equity also has a positive impact on brand reputation (Liu et al., 2017), market share (Sharma et al., 2016) and stock market reactions (Lane & Jacobson, 1995). Lemon et al. (2001) summarised the impact of brand equity as attracting new customers, retaining existing customers and serving as a mechanism to foster emotional consumer-brand relationships.

As brand equity is a rather abstract construct, there are also different models and scales for measuring it (Davcik et al., 2015). Based on the review of Farjam & Hongyi (2015), some of the most frequently cited academic models for measuring consumer-based brand equity, will be briefly presented below.

2.2.1 Brand Equity Model by Aaker

One of the most comprehensive multidimensional brand equity models was proposed by Aaker (1991) and comprises five different aspects on which the value creation for the customer is built (see Figure 1). These dimensions include: brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand associations, perceived quality and other proprietary assets.

2.2.1.1 *Brand Awareness.* According to Aaker, the first step in building brand equity is creating *brand awareness*. This occurs when consumers come into contact with brand-related elements and begin to recognise and remember a brand (Aaker, 1991). Brand awareness is composed of two dimensions that differ in their impact (Keller, 1993). In the recognition dimension, it gives a brand a sense of familiarity and signals substance (Keller, 1998). In the recall dimension, it affects choice, perception, attitude and loyalty and influences which brands are considered and selected (Dodds et al., 1991; Grewal et al., 1998).

Aaker (1996) highlighted that not only brand name recognition and recall should be considered as measures of brand awareness, but also other attributes, such as a brand's visual identity and symbols that are important for understanding the value of a brand.

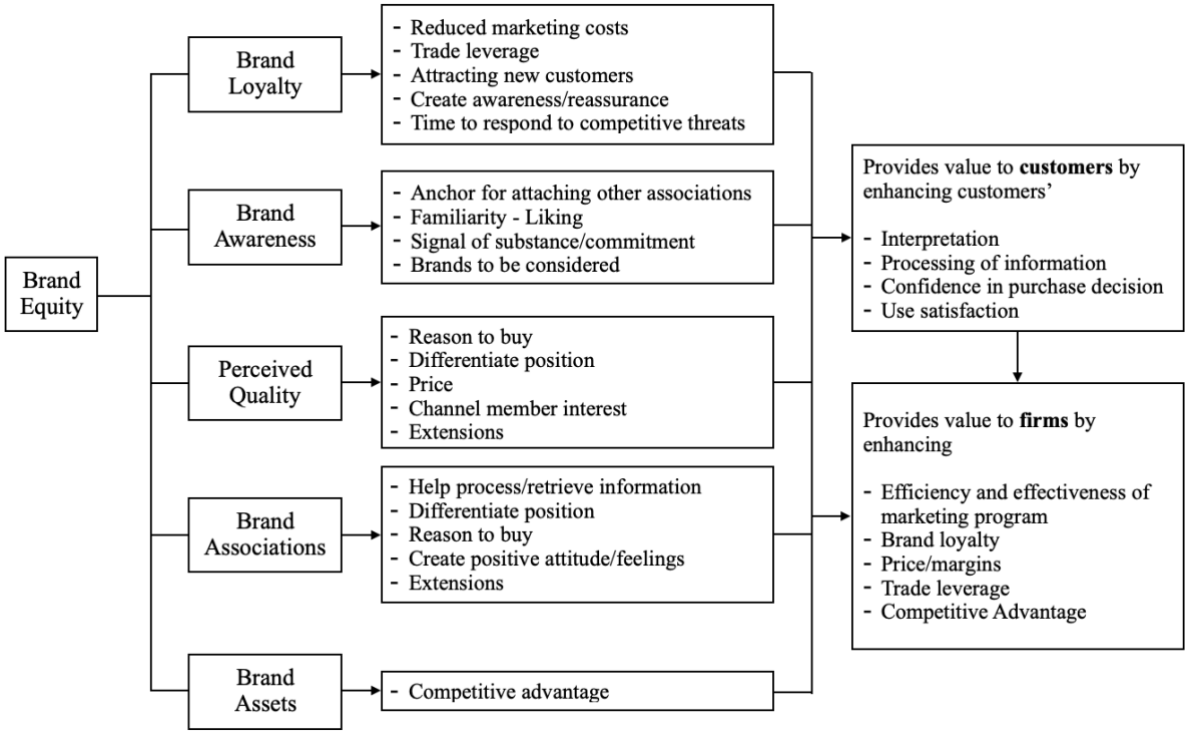

Figure 1. Brand Equity Model by Aaker (source: Aaker, 1991).

2.2.1.2 *Brand Loyalty.* After several encounters with a brand, a consumer may develop *brand loyalty*, which can be described as a deep-rooted consistent commitment to rebuy and prefer a brand, regardless of competitors' efforts (Yoo et al., 2000; Oliver, 1997). For this reason, brand loyalty not only generates resistance to competition, as loyal consumers tend to switch brands less than non-loyal consumers, but also increases marketing efficiency and effectiveness, as retaining existing customers costs less than attracting new ones, and loyal consumers are more willing to pay higher prices (Liu et al., 2017).

Keller (1998) distinguished two levels of brand loyalty: *behavioural loyalty*, which refers to the consumer's buying behaviour and can be indicated by the actual number of purchases he or she makes, and *attitudinal/cognitive loyalty*, which refers to the consumer's intention to consider the brand as a first choice (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Similar to the other dimensions of brand equity such as brand associations and perceived quality, brand loyalty relies on the individual perception of a brand (Keller, 2001). Tangible and intangible attributes influence a consumer's decision whether or not to be loyal to a brand (Liu et al., 2017).

2.2.1.3 *Brand Associations*. Based on brand communication and the consumer's own and other consumers' experiences with the brand, certain positive or negative *brand associations* are anchored in the consumer's memory (Aaker, 1991). In order to decrease the cognitive load,

consumer memory prefers to group information into certain clusters (Huang & Sarigollu, 2014). These groups are organised in the form of a network, with associations being the connections that make up this network (Yoo et al., 2000). The number of associations and their strength depend on how consumers perceive all the stimuli to which they are confronted with (Keller, 1993). Therefore, Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) suggested a strong, linear relationship between brand awareness and the valence of brand associations.

Brand associations can be categorised as product-related or organisational, with product-related associations being further divided into tangible (functional) and intangible (symbolic) attributes, and organisational associations relating to entrepreneurial capabilities or associations with social responsibility (Chen, 2001).

The concept of brand associations is also closely related to brand image (Lee et al., 2011). A unique bundle of associations in the minds of consumers represents the image of a brand (Graeff, 1998). *Brand image* describes a consumer's current view of a brand, i.e., what the brand or its products stand for. It is a set of beliefs and is therefore often based on subjective perceptions (e.g., Roberts, 2004). Congruence between brand image and self-image is crucial for the formation of sustainable consumer-brand relationships (Graeff, 1998), which will be further explored in 2.3.

2.2.1.4 *Perceived Quality*. The fourth dimension of Aaker's model, *perceived quality*, describes the consumer's judgement of the overall superiority or excellence of a product or brand, mostly in comparison to other products or brands (Aaker, 1991). Consumers' experiences with the brand have a positive impact on this construct, i.e., the better consumers' interactions with the brand, the higher the perceived quality (Yoo et al., 2000). It is also assumed that this dimension varies greatly between individuals (Aaker, 1991) and is therefore not rational, but rather based on superficial associations, including appearance, functionality, influential groups or other mental cues (Baalbaki & Guzmán, 2016). Furthermore, the existing literature finds a strong link between willingness to pay a premium and extrinsic/intangible attributes of perceived quality, rather than justifying high prices solely on the basis of tangible better product quality (e.g. Homburg et al., 2005; Fayrene & Lee, 2011).

2.2.1.5 *Other Brand Assets*. The final dimension is *other proprietary brand assets* such as patents, trademarks or partnerships that are critical to protect against competition (e.g., patents, trademarks) and create sustainable competitive advantages (e.g., distribution channels, information systems) (Aaker, 1991).

2.2.2 Brand Equity Model by Yoo et al.

Yoo et al. (2000, p. 196) suggested that "brand equity can be estimated by subtracting the utility of physical attributes of the product from the total utility of a brand." Building on Aaker's (1991) brand equity model, the authors proposed a conceptual framework that links selected marketing mix elements to the creation of brand equity (Yoo et al., 2000). Instead of examining only the dimensions of brand equity, the authors explored how specific marketing activities, such as store image, price or advertising spending, increase or decrease brand equity and thus help to create and manage brand equity. Figure 2 shows their conceptual framework, which, similar to Aaker (1991), states that 1) brand equity captures value creation for both the customer and the company, where 2) the value to the company is derived from the value to the customer and 3) brand equity is composed of several dimensions.

However, according to Yoo et al. (2000), brand equity is a construct that results from three main dimensions: perceived quality, brand loyalty and brand awareness with strong brand associations, i.e., high brand equity means that "customers have a lot positive and strong associations related to the brand, perceive the brand is of high quality and are loyal to the brand" (p. 196).

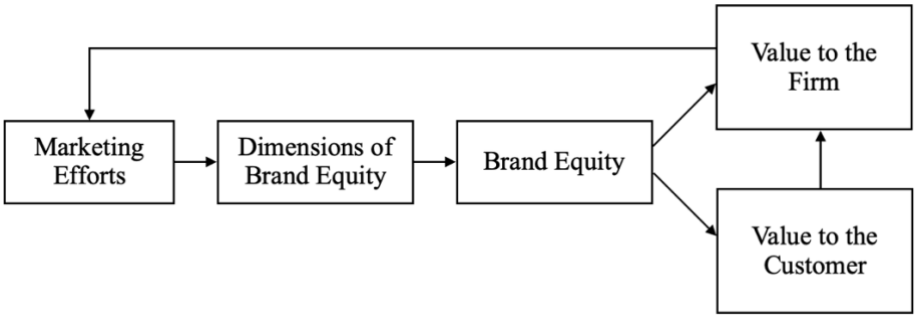

Figure 2. Brand Equity Model by Yoo et al. (source: Yoo et al., 2000).

Yoo et al. (2000) extend Aaker's (1991) model by 1) considering brand equity as a distinct entity, separated from the dimensions of brand equity and value to the customer and the company to highlight how the three dimensions contribute to brand equity, and 2) including marketing activities as antecedents of brand equity dimensions in the model. As a result of their study, two types of marketing management efforts were suggested from a long-term brand management perspective: brand-building and brand-harming activities (p. 206). While the frequent use of price promotions negatively affects perceived quality or brand associations and is therefore considered a brand-harming activity; high advertising spending, high price,

distribution through retailers with a good store image or high distribution intensity are considered brand-building measures, as they increase brand loyalty, brand awareness and perceived quality.

2.2.3 Brand Equity Model by Cobb-Walgren et al.

While the aforementioned model focuses on highlighting the antecedents of brand equity, the Cobb-Walgren et al. (1995) framework aims to examine the additional consequences (see Figure 3). In their study, the authors measured brand equity using certain criteria, such as advertising, psychological and physical characteristics as antecedents, which in turn influence brand perception, and examined the impact of brand equity on consumer preferences and purchase intentions. Similar to Yoo et al. (2000), they pointed out that higher advertising budgets lead to higher brand equity and that high brand equity in turn increases consumer preferences and purchase intentions (Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995).

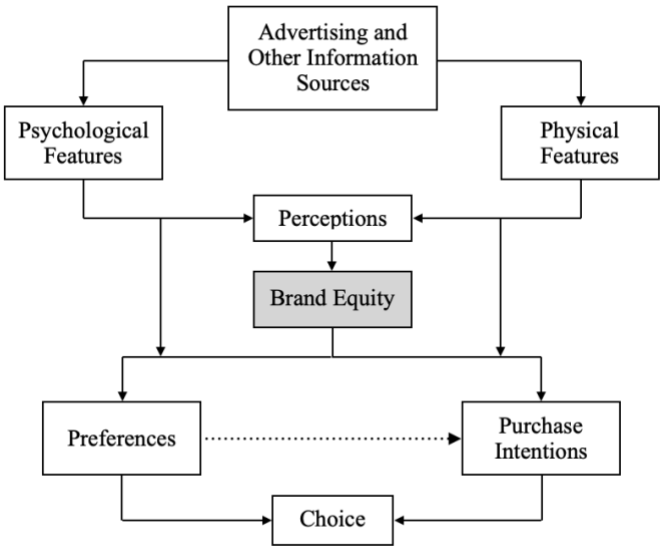

Figure 3. Brand Equity Model by Cobb-Walgren et al. (source: Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995).

2.2.4 Brand Equity Pyramid by Keller

Another widely used model for conceptualising and measuring brand equity comes from Keller (1993), who defined brand equity as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand" (p. 8). This underlines the premise of brand equity that this concept is based on consumers' subjective perceptions of their past experiences and their learned knowledge about the brand over time (Keller, 2003).

Represented through a pyramid (see Figure 4), Keller's model (2001) is composed of four steps, which must be carried out in sequence, in order to build a strong brand. Each step implies achieving specific goals with existing and potential customers and is dependent on the successful completion of the preceding step. According to Keller (2001, p. 5), building a strong brand requires 1) establishing an appropriate brand identity that consumers are aware of and can identify with; 2) creating brand meaning in the minds of consumers that is associated with strong, positive and unique brand associations; 3) triggering positive, accessible brand responses to this brand identity and brand meaning; and 4) transforming brand responses into an intense, engaging and loyal consumer-brand relationship.

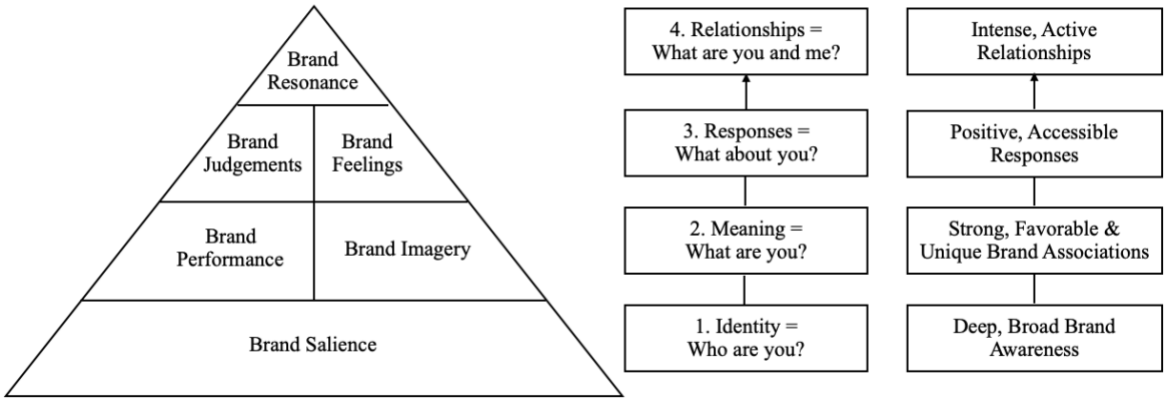

Figure 4. Customer-Based Brand Equity Pyramid by Keller (source: Keller, 2001).

2.3 Consumer-Brand Relationships, Identification and Brand Attachment

As Keller's (2001) conceptualisation of brand equity has been recognised as one of the most complete and comprehensible (Vukasovic, 2015; Kuhn et al., 2008), the further development of this chapter will be based on it. In the following, each of the proposed brand-building blocks and related concepts will be addressed in order to draw a comprehensive picture of what is important for creating sustainable consumer-brand relationships in today's competitive, hyper-networked and value-driven brand landscape (Voorn et al., 2018; Swaminathan et al., 2020).

2.3.1 Brand Salience

First and foremost, creating a strong brand identity involves achieving brand salience. *Brand salience*, similarly to brand awareness, describes the consumer's ability to retrieve brand attributes (brand name, logo, symbol, etc.) from one's memory and link them to certain associations (Keller, 2001). Building brand salience is therefore considered a fundamental step as it shapes the formation and strength of brand associations that define the brand image, give

meaning to the brand and guide consumers on how to satisfy their needs in potential purchase or consumption opportunities, especially for low-involvement purchases.

In order to achieve strong brand salience, brands should consider two dimensions: depth of brand awareness, referring to "how easily customers can recall or recognize the brand;" and breadth of brand awareness, referring to "the range of purchase and consumption situations in which the brand comes to mind" (Keller, 2001, p. 9).

2.3.2 Brand Meaning

However, knowledge of a brand's existence only helps if consumers attach value to it, because brand associations can only be influential when they are meaningful to consumers (e.g., Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Elbedweihy et al., 2016). This includes defining what the brand is characterised by and stands for in the minds of customers. Extant literature has discussed brand meaning in two dimensions, distinguishing functional and symbolic brand associations or aspects of value creation (e.g., Bhat & Reddy, 1998; Fernandes & Moreira, 2019).

Consumers may attach meaning to a brand based on its functional, usually tangible benefits, i.e., the brand's performance, which is made up of various aspects, such as the product reliability or durability, the service effectiveness or efficiency, the style and design, or the price (Keller, 2001). Developing and delivering high quality products that fully meet consumers' functional needs and desires is essential for successful marketing, resulting in increased brand loyalty, positive word of mouth and higher returns on investment (Fernandes & Moreira, 2019).

The other dimension concerns the satisfaction of consumers' emotional, psychological or social needs. *Brand imagery* refers to more intangible, symbolic attributes of the brand, such as associations of a typical or idealised brand user, reflections on typical buying situations, alignment with brand values and personality, brand experiences and heritage (Keller, 2001).

Various authors have looked into how consumer-brand relationships and their ramifications vary depending on whether the relationship is of a functional or emotional nature, i.e., whether consumers seek out a brand primarily for the brand performance or brand imagery (Bairrada et al., 2018). Fernandes & Moreira (2019), for example, found that consumer-brand engagement, defined as a consumer's cognitive, emotional and behavioural interactions with a brand (Hollebeek et al., 2014), is stronger when the relationship is emotional than when it is solely functional, and also has a stronger impact on brand loyalty.

Similarly, Voorn et al. (2018) explored the relative importance of functional attributes and benefits versus a brand's personality traits, or a brand's values in consumer-brand relationships. While a brand's personality traits describe human-like characteristics or typical behaviours, such as excitement, competence or sophistication (Aaker, 1997), a brand's values are a more stable and enduring construct of the brand's motivations and intentions, such as concern for safety, the environment or equality (Voorn et al., 2018). The authors found that although functional attributes are the most important determinants in the immediate purchase decision situation, perceived values are more important than perceived personality traits in longer relationships, i.e., over the time a service or product is used. This underlines that value creation, and especially value congruence is a key predictor in building and particularly maintaining successful, positive consumer-brand relationships that in turn result in high brand equity (Zhang & Bloemer, 2008; Voorn et al., 2018).

Another contribution comes from Kumar & Kaushik (2020), who explored the significance of symbolic brand attributes in the formation of sustainable consumer-brand relationships. While brand experience, referring to "subjective, internal consumer reactions (sensations, feelings and cognitions) and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli" (Brakus et al., 2009, p. 53), has been shown to significantly predict a consumer's interest in engaging in a two-way dialogue and emotional exchange with the brand; brand identification acts as a moderator that strengthens the consumer's desire to connect with a brand after positive brand experiences. Since repeated consumer interactions can be evaluated as antecedents and consequences of brand equity (e.g., Yoo et al., 2000; Keller, 2001) and are better moderated by shared value than by functional benefits (Voorn et al., 2018; Bairrada et al., 2018), it seems necessary to take a closer look at this dimension.

2.3.3 Brand Identification

According to Lam et al. (2010, p. 130), *brand identification* refers to "a customer's psychological state of perceiving, feeling, and valuing his or her belongingness with a brand."

As mentioned in Keller's (2001) brand equity model, this brand identification can be based on the consumer's identification with values that are also communicated/presented by the brand and/or identification with a certain consumer personality and lifestyle. It is well established that purchase decisions are made on the basis of psychological benefits, such as instrumentalising brand use to express something about one's own identity (Aaker et al., 2001) or belonging to a group (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1985).

Past research on consumer identification focuses on consumers' aspired self-concept and how brands may act as carriers of symbolic meaning, as they help individuals to accomplish their self-identity goals (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). As such, it was assumed that consumers have one ideal self that they are looking to verify by choosing a brand that embodies those same traits and values. This matching process between consumers' personal values and their perceptions of a given brand's values can be termed *consumer-brand value congruence* (Edwards & Cable, 2009). Value congruence, controlled by brand managers, for example, through positioning and marketing activities, can guide a consumer's selection of brands or products based on how they meet the consumer's needs for continuity or verification (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012).

More recently, however, identity studies have addressed the complexity of identity, where brands can be linked to multiple individual and group-based identities, having symbolic significance for culture and an instrumental role in authenticating narratives for consumers' 'identity projects' (Swaminathan et al., 2020). New research directions in consumer research assume that consumers may adopt multiple personalities and switch identities frequently as a result of hyperconnectivity on their devices (Turkle, 2017). As consumers spend more and more time online, there is a possibility that their online self and offline self may diverge, resulting in identity conflicts (Suh, 2013, as cited in Swaminathan et al., 2020). Consumers' multiple (sometimes conflicting) dynamic identities, especially in online and offline environments, require a rethinking of how brands can help form and authenticate identities (Reed et al., 2012, as cited in Swaminathan et al., 2020). For this reason, some authors have suggested that brand associations should be constructed to enable a more flexible view of identity (e.g., Turkle, 2017), while others have expressed concern that this may send confusing signals and make it more difficult for consumers to identify (Swaminathan et al., 2020). Some consumers are still looking for brands that have a clearly defined meaning that allows them to anchor a particular aspect of their identity and thus send stronger signals about a particular self, rather than more malleable brand identities, which allow for a broader spectrum of self-expression.

On the other hand, not only do the perceived values of the brand need to match one's own value system, but brand identification also captures the extent to which consumers perceive other brand users as similar to themselves or as wanting to be like them (Elbedweihy et al., 2016). User profiles describe mental images of actual users or idealised users. The associations of a

typical or idealised brand user can be built on descriptive demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, etc.) or more abstract psychographic factors (e.g., lifestyle, personality, etc.). Such customer-to-customer similarity further strengthens brand identification, as it contributes to a sense of belonging to a community that has identity-creating significance (Lam et al., 2010).

In order to measure brand associations that build the foundation for consumer identification (Elbedweihy et al., 2016), Keller (2001, p. 12) suggested three dimensions:

Strength: How strongly is the brand identified with a brand association?

Favourability: How important or valuable is the brand association to customers?

Uniqueness: How distinctively is the brand identified with the brand association?

It is important to mention that the order of these three dimensions is also important for creating meaningful consumer-brand relationships based on consumer identification, which in turn lead to high brand equity (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Kumar & Kaushik, 2020). A unique brand association is only significant if customers value the association positively, and a positive brand association is only significant if it is strong enough for customers to actually remember and associate it with the brand. It should also be noted that not all strong associations are positive and not all positive associations are unique (Keller, 2001).

2.3.4 Brand Responses

As a last step, once brand associations that are sufficiently strong, positive and unique are established, positive brand responses may follow. Ma (2020) investigated how different levels of identification with a brand influence brand responses. While *non-identifying* consumer-brand relationships imply satisfaction, trust and commitment (Gregoire & Fisher, 2008; Johnson et al., 2011) and are more stable in crisis situations; *identifying* consumer-brand relationships entail deep positive feelings of belonging and self-expression when consuming a brand, but are also more prone to negative repercussions in crisis situations (Ma, 2018; Gregoire & Fisher, 2008).

Similarly, Keller (2001) suggested that brand responses predicted on the basis of what consumers think (brand judgements) and feel (brand feelings) about a brand are to a great extent based on subjective perceptions. A brand is judged on the basis of customers' personal opinions and evaluations in relation to the various performance and imagery associations. Consumers may consider *brand quality*, referring to their perception of value and satisfaction; *brand consideration*, referring to the extent to which consumers not only have a positive attitude and

perception towards a brand, but also view the brand as personally relevant and therefore seriously consider buying or using the brand; and *brand superiority*, referring to consumers' belief that the brand is unique and offers more advantages compared to competing brands (Keller, 2001). *Brand credibility* is highlighted as another aspect of consumer judgement in Keller's (2001) brand equity pyramid and can be defined as "the believability of the product information contained in a brand, which requires that consumers perceive the brand having the ability (expertise) and willingness (trustworthiness) to deliver continuously what has been promised" (Erdem et al., 2006, p. 35). While a large part of the research has considered brand credibility as consisting of the two components perceived expertise and trustworthiness, Keller (2001) suggested adding the dimension of likeability as well. A brand whose credibility is rated as high is considered competent and innovative; reliable and sensitive to customers' interests; and interesting or worth spending time with.

Brand credibility is often associated with *brand authenticity* which Mohart et al. (2015) defined as "the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful towards itself (continuity), true to its consumers (credibility), motivated by caring and responsibility (integrity) and able to support consumers in being true to themselves (symbolism)" (p. 203). As mentioned earlier, brands are seen as credible overall when they deliver on their promises in terms of product quality or innovation, for example; in the context of social media, they are often held accountable for delivering on their messages (Pittman et al., 2022). Therefore, some authors assumed that in social media, the perception of authenticity can supersede the perception of quality and is the more persuasive mechanism for generating purchase intentions and digital engagement (Yang et al., 2021). In cases of greenwashing (making false claims about a brand's environmental practices or the environmental benefits of its products or services (Delmas & Burbano, 2011)) allegations, for example, brand authenticity is low, which in turn negatively impacts green brand equity (Chen, 2010).

In terms of what consumers feel about a brand, Keller (1993) also suggested some sub-dimensions. This builds on some of the feelings that also have been mentioned as a result of consumer identification. The six brand-building feelings by Keller (2001) include: warmth, fun, excitement, security, social approval and self-respect. The Brands as Intentional Agents Framework (BIAF) by Kervyn et al. (2012) agrees that feelings of warmth and sociability

influence brand perceptions. Their framework depicts a two-by-two matrix (see Figure 5) that illustrates the different possible combinations of warmth and competence.

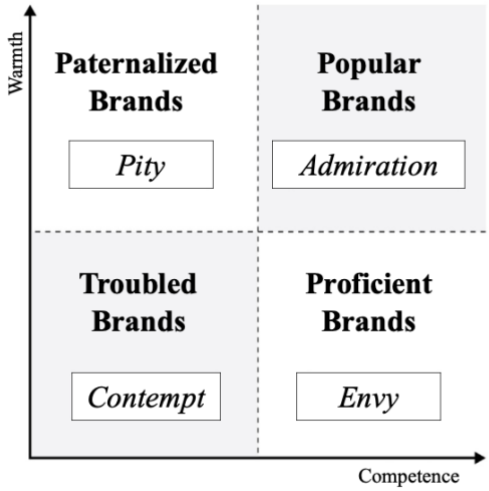

Figure 5. Brands as Intentional Agents Framework (source: Kervyn et al., 2012).

The four quadrants show the evaluation of brands in terms of their intentions (warmth) and abilities (competence). The words in bold and italics represent the corresponding emotional and behavioural responses. Brands perceived as capable and well-intentioned are thought to elicit the highest levels of admiration and loyalty from consumers, while brands perceived as incapable and ill-intentioned tend to receive bad publicity or even be 'cancelled' (Kervyn et al., 2012). Portal et al. (2018) suggested that for a brand to be considered as belonging to the 'popular brands' quadrant, it should exhibit warm and competent attributes in the following areas: "people management (warmth); social responsibility (warmth); quality of products, services, and management (competence); and financial security (competence)" (Fortune Magazine, 2015, as cited in Kervyn et al., 2012).

2.3.5 Brand Communities

Behavioural or attitudinal loyalty are two responses that depend on *brand resonance* characterised by the intensity or depth of customers' psychological attachment to the brand (Keller, 2001). In addition to these two, another commonly discussed response to brand resonance is the development and use of brand communities that foster a sense of community and active engagement (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Santos et al., 2021).

A *brand community* can be defined as "a specialised, non-geographically bound community, based on a set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p

412). The authors also suggested three characteristics of brand communities: consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). These three attributes relate to 1) a connection that individuals feel with the brand and community members, and how legitimate they perceive that connection; 2) shared consumption experiences among brand community members, including stories told in the community; 3) a commitment of community members to stay in the group, retain members and welcome new members (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Another interesting contribution to brand communities comes from Baldus et al. (2015) who conceptualised online brand community engagement as a construct made up of eleven dimensions: brand influence, brand passion, community connection, helping others, like-minded discussion, seeking assistance, self-expression, validation, hedonic rewards, utilitarian rewards, and up-to-date information. In that way, brand communities can serve as a source of information, entertainment, inspiration, as well as a channel for personal identity development, social integration and empowerment (Tsai & Men, 2014).

Ultimately, it can be concluded that 1) brand salience serves as the foundation for brand building; 2) the dual nature of brands, encompassing both rational (functional, tangible) and emotional (symbolic, intangible) aspects, must be taken into account; and 3) a brand is only as strong as it resonates with its consumers in one or more meaningful ways. Only when the right building blocks for brand building are in place can significant brand equity be created.

3. Generation Z as a Relevant Target Group

3.1 Generational Cohort Theory

The division of consumers into generational segments is a common practice in marketing in order to adapt marketing practices to generation-specific characteristics (Kitchen & Proctor, 2015). The idea that people differ in their consumer behaviour because they belong to a certain generation is derived from the generational theory, which this section will briefly address.

Mannheim's (1952) theory of generations originally stated that people within a generational group or cohort are connected as they are shaped by historical events or experiences related to economic, socio-political, ecological or technological factors, such as changes in social norms, disruptive innovations, or new celebrities and cultural icons (Macky et al., 2008; Goldring & Azab, 2021). Howe & Strauss (2000, as cited in Goldring & Azab, 2021) included two further dimensions to define a generation: 1) perceived awareness of belonging to a group, 2) shared beliefs and behaviours that can be articulated by the group, and 3) as suggested by Mannheim (1952), significant historical macro events, both positive and negative, shared by the group during their adolescence or early adulthood. The idea of dividing the population into generational cohorts as a means of consumer segmentation is thus based on the notion that historical events and experiences lead to shared values, beliefs, expectations and behaviours that remain constant throughout the life of a generation and create a generational identity (Howe & Strauss, 1991; Macky et al., 2008).

Generations are usually defined with a duration of about 17–20 years, as this is roughly the time needed for cultural changes to emerge (Howe & Strauss, 1991). The determination of the span from one generation to the next is fluid, which is why the boundaries where one generation ends and the next begins can vary by 2–3 years throughout the literature (Munsch, 2021). It should be noted that there is some disagreement about the validity of generational differences. Although some researchers argue against meaningful differences among generations (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015), a larger body of research finds small but significant generational effects (Macky et al., 2008). This dissertation adopts the scholarly majority view that there are small but meaningful differences between generations and follows the determination by The Pew Research Center (2019) of those born between 1996 and 2012 as Generation Z (Gen Z).

3.2 Consumer Profile of Gen Z

This section seeks to understand what events and experiences have given Gen Z their unique generational identity.

Most scholars suggest that Gen Z's distinctive behaviour is driven by their use of technology (Munsch, 2021; The Pew Research Center, 2019). Never before have people been connected to the internet via mobile devices, WiFi and high-bandwidth mobile services at such a young age, as was the case for most members of Gen Z (The Pew Research Center, 2019). In this context, Prensky (2001a) was the first to coin the term *digital natives*, characterising a group that "think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessor" (p. 1), even claiming that their "brains have physically changed" (p. 1) as a result of the digital input they received growing up. In a second paper, he presented evidence for this assumption from neurobiology, social psychology and studies of children using games for learning (Prensky, 2001b). Prensky (2001b) concluded that brain structures do change after exposure to certain stimuli over a long period of time, affecting the way people think, and that these changes last a lifetime. He therefore pointed to some behavioural differences compared to other generations that did not grow up with technology such as preferring to parallel processing and multitasking; favouring receiving information in the form of graphics rather than text; functioning best when networked; and thriving on instant gratification and frequent rewards (Prensky, 2001a, p. 2). In addition, the shortened attention span of younger generations has been frequently discussed (Turner, 2015; Fromm & Read, 2018) as another adjustment to the digital environment. The shortened attention span of about eight seconds (Munsch, 2021) is often attributed to a lack of focus, but may rather be a mechanism to be able to absorb the vast amounts of information that come at them. It gives Gen Z the ability to filter for content that adds value and is interesting faster than other generations (Turner, 2015).

With technological advances in multimedia, such as smartphones, social media and on-demand entertainment, Gen Z have grown used to interacting and communicating in a hyper-connected world at any time (Turner, 2015). Besides breakthrough technological innovations (Prensky, 2001a), socio-political and economic events have shaped Gen Z's behaviour, attitudes and lifestyle. Some authors have pointed to influential events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks or the Great Recession of 2008, which led Gen Z to perceive the world as less secure as they witnessed increased stress level from their parents due to safety or financial concerns at that time (Turner, 2015; Andersen et al., 2020). While this may be true for some households, most

members of Gen Z were too young to personally feel the impact of such events. Rather, the economic expansion that ended with the recent Covid-19 pandemic and the increasing debate about social equality sparked by events such as Trump's election in 2016, the legalization of same-sex marriage in the US and Europe, the Iraq-Afghanistan war, or George Floyd's death in 2020, are more likely to have directly influenced Gen Z's world views and actions (Seemiller & Grace, 2018).

Milotay (2020) pointed out that Gen Z was among the hardest hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. While some struggled to keep up with what the curriculum expected of them in the first phase of the pandemic due to school closures from 7–19 weeks, others were hit hard by the loss of employment, income and increased difficulty in finding work following the outbreak of the pandemic and its aftermath, either because they worked in the industries most affected by the pandemic or because they were laid off first due to their economic situation – young, without family. This was reflected in the youth unemployment rate, which reached its highest level in March 2020 after years of decline (Eurostat, 2020). Compared to Millennials, who are considered self-centred, idealistic, creative and dependent, Milotay (2020) implied that these events have made the youngest generation more self-confident, persistent, realistic, innovative and independent, but also liberal and open to new social trends.

In line with that, another contribution to Gen Z's values and characteristics comes from a McKinsey & Company study (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). The management consulting firm sought to get insights into the generation's identity through qualitative and quantitative data gathered in Brazil. Their study revealed four core Gen Z behaviours. Firstly, Gen Z values individual expression and avoids labels. More Gen Z youth are growing up in urban areas, which means that more people of this generation are confronted with a variety of cultural influences as in previous generations. Due to the openness associated with living in urban areas, secrecy about sexual orientation is also not as pronounced compared to older generations (Tacoli, 2012). According to a survey by the management consulting firm Gallup (Jones, 2022), Gen Z is the generation with the highest percentage of people identifying as non-heterosexual to date. Overall, Gen Z seems to show much more flexibility in terms of gender identity and sexuality. According to the survey conducted by McKinsey & Company (Francis & Hoefel, 2018), 66% of Gen Z respondents hold the belief that group formation is based on shared interests rather than ethnicity, economic background, or education level. This percentage is significantly higher compared to Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers.

It is slightly contradictory to the findings of Fromm & Read (2018), who identified a duality of traditional and non-conformist values among Gen Z. The authors believe that, on the one hand, the Great Recession, not knowing a world without war, or the threat of national terrorism have shaped Gen Z to resemble much older generations in that they are serious, stubborn, and driven by conservative views of success in terms of money, education, and career advancement. On the other hand, however, in line with Francis & Hoefel (2018), their close connection to the world through technology has also shaped more liberal views on race, gender, identity, and sexuality.

Furthermore, Francis & Hoefel (2018) claimed that Gen Z is convinced of the effectiveness of dialogue in resolving conflicts and accept differences of opinion. According to the study, this is reflected, for example, in Gen Z's greater willingness to accept the mistakes of companies compared to previous generations. However, there are numerous contradictory findings that state that "cancel culture" is most prominent among younger generations (Vogel et al., 2021; Brenner, 2021). *Cancel culture* refers to the withdrawal of support for public figures or companies who have behaved in a way that is considered unacceptable or problematic (Mueller, 2021). It can be directed at those accused of expressing views that are considered reprehensible or offensive, usually in the context of bullying, sexism, racism or homophobia. Social media is thought to have contributed a great deal to the cancel culture movement as it facilitates the mechanisms behind it (Norris, 2020). There seems to be no consensus in this regard. Movements such as Fridays for Future indicate that Gen Z do see the importance of education through dialogue, on the other hand, one can read about more and more call-outs and boycotts after, for example, an advertisement that was deemed racist or sexist.

Third, Gen Z is more pragmatic in their decision-making. With the internet making access to information easier than ever before, this generation has become accustomed to being able to draw on a wide range of arguments when making decisions and values the sustainability of decisions (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Francis & Hoefel (2018) suggested that Gen Z members prefer job stability to high salary or independence, which contradicts other conclusions of the same study; but is consistent with the duality of traditional and non-conformist values proposed by Fromm & Read (2018). Merriman (2020) proposed a combination of both views by introducing the profile of 'stressed strivers' as one of five Gen Z identities. On the one hand, they proactively plan for the future and always try to seize every opportunity that comes their

way; on the other hand, they want to live in the moment and value mental health and a work-life balance.

Finally, Francis & Hoefel (2018) pointed out that Gen Z likes to mobilise for specific causes and interests. The focus of Gen Z's mobilisation efforts is on defending identity-related concerns such as LGBTQIA+ issues, gender or racial equality, as well as questioning climate policies (Andersen et al., 2020). Their connection through digital means facilitates political participation and civic engagement (McKeon & Gitomer, 2019; Turner, 2015).

3.3 Socio-Political and Environmental Engagement of Gen Z

"What do we want? Climate justice. When do we want it? Now!" This is one of many slogans that can be heard during the climate marches of the Fridays For Future movement. Since the movement was initiated by Greta Thunberg in the fall 2018, many young people have regularly gone to the streets on Fridays (Sommer et al., 2019), with the goal of emphasising the urgency of implementing the Paris Agreement 2015, in which many countries set a target of limiting global warming to a maximum of 1.5 ˚C (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC], 2015). In an effort to stand up against climate injustice and lack of climate actions taken by politicians, millions of young people worldwide have taken part in the environmental movement (Parth et al., 2020). The majority of participants were school students (14–19 years old), with age variations between countries (Ernman et al., 2020). This movement has been discussed in the national and international media as well as in academic publications, receiving worldwide recognition for the mobilising power of the youth (Hayward, 2021; Ernman et al., 2020).

Climate change can pose a major threat to intergenerational equity, as younger generations will suffer more from environmental damage in the future than older people (De Moor et al., 2020). At the same time, young people are in most cases not in a position to make major investment decisions for environmental protection, and some of them may not yet be eligible to vote for a party that supports climate protection. Younger people have therefore been seen primarily as consumers rather than active political citizens (Nielsen et al., 2021). However, the Fridays For Future movement and other political activities of Gen Z have made it clear that they play an important role in the context of political engagement and environmental activism and can certainly make a difference on a smaller scale, for example by choosing which brands they support.

3.3.1 Defining Political Engagement, Participation and Activism

According to Barrett & Pachi (2019), *political engagement* refers to "the engagement of an individual with political institutions, processes and decision-making" (p. 3). But not all engagement is reflected in participatory behaviour. That is, people can be interested in socio-political issues and have knowledge, opinions or feelings about them without becoming active. In this case, people may only be cognitively or emotionally engaged, but not behaviourally, which should not be misunderstood as political disinterest (Carreras, 2016). *Political participation* refers to behaviours aimed at influencing processes or decisions of political institutions at the local, regional, national or supranational level (Barrett & Pachi, 2019). These behaviours can be aimed at either influencing the selection of people responsible for policy decisions or influencing the content of those decisions (Barrett & Pachi, 2019).

In the literature on political participation and activism, there seems to be no consensus on whether the two terms are used as synonyms or whether one is a subcategory of the other. Bakker & de Vreese (2011) distinguished between active and passive participatory activities, derived from the observation that some political activities are associated with higher costs than others. Loader et al. (2014), for their part, classified participation as individual or group-based. While participatory acts such as voting tend to be seen as an "institutional," rather passive and individual form of participation (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010), activist participation or *activism* can be defined as citizen-initiated behaviour of advocating for some political cause through a variety of possible means (Corning & Myers, 2002), which are usually implemented on a collective level (Loader et al., 2014), such as initiating a petition or protest.

More recently, a further distinction has been made between online and offline political participation (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). However, most activism movements to date exist in a rather hybrid form, including both online elements, such as recruiting participants or sharing educational content, and offline elements, such as street protests (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012).

3.3.2 Drivers for the Political Engagement and Activism of Gen Z

To elucidate the drivers of political engagement or activism, this section will draw on the social identity model for pro-environmental action (SIMPEA, Fritsche et al., 2008). This model aims to understand the drivers of pro-environmental engagement and has already been applied to understand the drivers of other socio-political behaviours, such as plastic reduction (Heidbreder et al., 2019) or charity involvement (Louis et al., 2019). It was therefore deemed suitable to be

applied in the context of this dissertation as well. The model comprises various explanatory approaches, which will be explained below.

Ingroup identification is assumed to be one of the main predictors of political activism. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) states that individuals tend to strengthen their self-identity by belonging to certain in-groups (i.e., groups of people they feel or aspire to be part of and that are cognitively or emotionally relevant for them, such as "the group of activists"). Tajfel (1978) also assumed that people associate positive emotions with their ingroup, such as pride in being a member. Especially in adolescence and young adulthood, social interactions and identification with others are important. One establishes social relationships outside the family household and learns to behave in collective environments. As a result, social identities emerge during this phase of life (Halle & Darling-Churchill, 2016). Identifying as an activist and joining a collective movement can therefore create positive feelings of belonging among Gen Z young people.

Social norms are thought to be another important driver of political engagement and/or activism (Fritsche et al., 2018). The theory of normative conduct (Cialdini et al., 1990, as cited in Fritsche et al., 2018) distinguishes between descriptive social norms (i.e., one's perception of what most others do) and injunctive social norms (i.e., what others approve of). Especially through social media, it becomes easy to find out what others do or approve of (Schouten et al., 2020). Compared to famous faces from traditional media, so called influencers in social media are believed to have a great impact on shaping opinions and motivating behaviour because of the stronger sense of closeness and connectedness between them and their community (Beer, 2008). For instance, Lady Gaga is known for utilizing social media to mobilize her fandom towards philanthropic and activist causes, such as gay rights (Bennett, 2014). Social media also changes direction of communication structure, promoting horizontal communication where the audience communicates directly with interest groups and networks among themselves instead of the former vertical communication where information flows downwards from the "elites to ordinary citizens" (Thrall et al., 2008, p. 379). Instead of going through the filters of the news media, influencers can upload videos or posts instantly to their social media channels, connecting directly with their global audience and directing action. Moreover, influencers are usually role models or inspirational figures for many of their followers, which is why young people in particular might be inclined to follow their call for political participation (Schouten et al., 2020). However, social media has also been shown to

promote ideal self-promotion, thus encouraging to display biased content, such as only posting about exemplary practices in terms of prosocial or pro-environmental behaviour, and specifically omitting non-exemplary behaviour in this regard (de Lenne et al., 2020).

There are several theories about why the perception of the behaviour of relevant others influences one's own behaviour. Wallis & Loy (2021, p. 3) cited the norm activation model (NAM, Schwartz, 1977) and the theory of planned behaviour (TPB, Ajzen, 1991) and inferred that descriptive social norms and/or injunctive social norms derived from the behaviour of others in turn guide one's own actions. For young people, observation of other people's behaviour can be helpful in learning ways to express themselves as citizens. In the context of environmental activism, the perceived pro-environmental actions of friends have been identified as one of the strongest drivers for young people to become involved in environmental issues themselves (Wallis & Loy, 2021). This dissertation assumes that the same applies for political engagement or activism directed to other causes.

In addition to social expectations, *personal norms* may also play a role in socio-political engagement and/or participation. Following the NAM (Schwartz, 1977), personal norms can be understood as a moral obligation to engage in affairs based on one's own values and beliefs. This can be applied in particular to private political engagement or participation (Loader et al., 2014). As already indicated, members of Gen Z are believed to value social equality and inclusivity and to be committed to mobilising for various causes (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2018). However, based on the explanations offered, it may come into question whether these values and beliefs really come from within and are shaped by the events and experiences described, or whether they are influenced by subjective social norms (i.e., the perceived expected behaviour of a Gen Z member).

A further component of the SIMPEA (Fritsche et al., 2018) is *appraisal* which they define as a phase in which one recognizes that a problem exists before deciding to address it. Individual awareness of problems is usually derived from a collective perception of problems (Fritsche et al., 2018) and further decision to engage in collective action (Wallis & Loy, 2021). In addition to awareness of the problem through peer influence, recognising that a problem exists and taking action is also closely linked to news exposure (Andersen et al., 2020).

Studies investigating the channels through which Gen Z accesses news or political information, find that social media plays a key role (Newman et al., 2017; Andersen et al., 2020). Social media among other digital news outlets deliver political content in a manner that is more

relevant, diverse and direct, easily accessible anywhere and anytime, possibly explaining the high use of social media platforms for political information, especially among young people. A study by Andersen et al. (2020) proved that exposure to political information on social media leads to an increase in political interest across all generations. In fact, the impact of news exposure on interest in political affairs is greatest among Gen Z, followed by Millennials (Andersen et al., 2020).

However, social media content is not only a source of information, but is accompanied by various social cues. Such cues can be comments or the number of likes under a social media post and guide the selection of content, help interpret it and influence how it is processed, what is learned from it and how users react to it (Ohme & Mothes, 2020). Andersen et al. (2020) concluded that younger generations who are still developing their political interest, are more malleable and therefore more easily influenced by such media effects. This could also be a reason why Gen Z, as digital natives who increasingly consume news via social media, are more politically active than young people of previous generations for whom news was not so easy and ubiquitous to access (Andersen et al., 2020).

News exposure can result in a higher level of perceived efficacy (Andersen et al., 2020). Similarly, the SIMPEA of Fritsche et al. (2018) also includes *collective efficacy*, referring to a person's belief in achieving desired outcomes only as a group (Bandura, 1997, as cited in Fritsche et al., 2018) as a driver of pro-environmental action. Various studies have shown that perceived collective efficacy is positively related to the intention to engage in social or environmental causes (e.g., Besta et al., 2017; Van Zomeren et al., 2010). In addition, *self-efficacy*, which is understood as the perception that one is able to manage a situation to achieve a desired outcome, is considered another factor in the SIMPEA. This can be derived from the TPB (Ajzen, 1991), which proposes *perceived behavioural control* as a construct that influences an individual's behavioural intentions. Yet there is some disagreement about the role of self-efficacy in activism. While some authors have argued that individuals may engage in activism because they feel they are less effective acting alone, i.e., there is no link between self-efficacy and activism (Wallis & Loy, 2021); others have suggested that collective efficacy may strengthen the sense of individual self-efficacy by fostering the perception of individuals that their personal actions are purposeful in a shared collective context (Jugert et al., 2016).

The last motive mentioned in the SIMPEA is anger or *moral outrage* in promoting activism (Fritsche et al., 2018). This may be particularly true in relation to climate policy. Young people

will experience more severe consequences than older people if policies do not curb climate change (De Moor et al., 2020). Furthermore, the intersectionality of environmentalism has been popularised in recent years by climate activists such as Leah Thomas (Jackson & Humphrey, 2022). This refers to the fact that climate change disproportionately affects some groups, such as poor communities or communities of colour, and therefore triggers discussions about other socio-political issues. Thus, climate change is increasingly seen as a general human rights issue, where the intersection with other socio-political issues such as race, gender, class or power inequalities have to be considered along with it (McKinney & Fulkerson, 2015). As mentioned earlier, Gen Z may not only be the queerest generation yet (Jones, 2022), but also the most racially and ethnically diverse (US, The Pew Research Center, 2020). As more and more people of this generation identify as non-white and/or non-heteronormative, it is only logical that many of them perceive the effects of the unequal distribution of power and wealth and feel a greater need to fight it.

The above analysis presents some possible explanations for Gen Z's increased interest in socio-political activism. That the increased interest in making a difference leads to actual political participation can be seen, for example, in the voting behaviour of young or first-time voters in the 2021 German election, where the majority voted for the green party (Bedürftig, 2021). Moreover, as mentioned in the beginning of this section, members of Gen Z not only comprised the majority of Fridays for Futures participants (Wahlström, 2019); they also contributed immensely to the visibility of the #blacklivesmatter protests in 2020 and guided change (e.g., Bellan, 2020).

3.4 Gen Z's Interaction with Brands

Having discussed Gen Z's values and behaviours, this section will examine how brands (should) respond to these expectations. Based on their study findings, Francis & Hoefel (2018) concluded with three managerial implications: consumption is seen as access rather than ownership; the ethics of consumption in general, but also of a brand or product, are increasingly questioned; and consumption is used as a means of self-expression.

Studies of the participation of Gen Z in the sharing economy seem to be scarce, however a lot of research has been done on co-consumption behaviour of Millennials. A study by Ranzini et al. (2017) found that Millennials' motives for participating in the sharing economy are economic benefits, convenience and social interactions. A study carried out in May 2020 with students with an average age of 20,89, which means that Gen Z students were also included in

the sample, supports the aforementioned motives. However, an additional motive often mentioned throughout the study is the aspect of sustainability, as sharing is more resource-efficient than owning (Martínez-González et al., 2021).

Sustainability and ethics seem to play a key role in Gen Z's consumer behaviour, making these important factors when choosing brands or products (First Insights, 2020; Yoon et al., 2020). A study conducted among 1.000 Americans of all generations shows that Gen Z respondents are most willing to pay 10% more for sustainable products and make purchasing decisions based on personal, social and environmental values and principles (First Insights, 2020). That is, although price and quality remain the most important purchasing criteria, Gen Z places additional value on secondary factors such as sustainability, style, and uniqueness (OC&C Strategy Consultants, 2019; Goldring & Azab, 2021).

The demand for ethical consumption has now been recognized by most major brands, leading them to launch sustainable product lines, move money to "justice deposits" or address issues of social injustice in their campaigns (Yoon et al., 2020). However, brand authenticity also seems to be a crucial factor in Gen Z's decision-making (First Insights, 2020). Brands that advertise sustainability or concern for social causes without backing this up therefore run the risk of alienating consumers (Vredenburg et al., 2020). A study by targeted communications consultancy Porter Novelli (2019) found that 90% of Gen Z consumers believe that companies need to take a stand on social and environmental issues, and 75% would investigate whether a company is being honest when taking a stand on an issue. Yet brand authenticity is not only about sincere marketing claims, but also about how authentic the brand personality appears and how much consumers can identify with it. Ismail et al. (2020) emphasised that Gen Z prefers to engage with brands that reflect their actual or aspirational self-concept. Social media enables brands to showcase their personality more easily and therefore serves as a guide for Gen Z to gather brand knowledge, develop brand preferences, and build strong brand relationships that support self-verification (Sprott et al., 2009; Swann, 1983; Tuten & Perotti, 2019). Gen Z expects social media to serve as a reliable source of information for a brand and to offer an authentic brand story (OC&C Strategy Consultants, 2019). Hence, because much of the content Gen Z encounters online is branded or commercially marketed (Goldring & Azab, 2021), they readily skip content they find inauthentic (Munsch, 2021) and show less trust in brands and recognizable marketing communications (Kitchen & Proctor, 2015).

While previous generations may have only consulted a brand's website or own social media channels, Gen Z's list of influence stretches further and is more evenly spread across various mobile apps, friends' social media or influencer's recommendations (OC&C Strategy Consultants, 2019). But even though many different channels are available to make purchasing decisions, the abundance of brand and product choices today can be overwhelming and discourage decision-making. The *paradox of choice* proposed by Schwartz (2004) suggests that eliminating choice increases happiness and reduces anxiety. This implies that Gen Z is more likely to be brand loyal, as the process of constantly evaluating new options is emotionally draining (Taylor, 2018).

Ismail et al. (2020) also explored brand loyalty among Malaysian Gen Z consumers and added the dimension of *brand engagement in the self-concept* to their study. This dimension refers to the general tendency of consumers to use brands for shaping and outwardly expressing their identity. Referring to what has been highlighted before, Gen Z consumers view consumption as a means of self-expression, which is why a positive correlation between a consumer's ability to express their self-image through a brand and their loyalty to that brand can be assumed. This is in line with the findings of Ismail et al. (2020), who showed that Gen Z consumers who see the brand as a reflection of their self-identity can be loyal. The same is true for price-conscious Gen Z consumers, provided they can strengthen their self-concept by engaging with the brand.

Other sources have claimed that information and choice availability as well as reduced switching costs make Gen Z consumers seem less loyal compared to previous generations (Goldring & Azab, 2021; OC&C Strategy Consultants, 2019; Kitchen & Proctor, 2015). Nonetheless, it may still be interesting to explore what brands can do to be seen as a means of self-expression. As mentioned earlier, many Gen Z members seem to identify as activists, so brands may need to do the same to satisfy the demands of Gen Z customers and build a meaningful relationship with them. Bakhtiari (2021) suggested that most Gen Z activists do not blame ordinary consumers for their individual lifestyle choices, but believe that companies should take responsibility for improving their supply chain and changing consumer behaviour, and that they attribute more power to brands than governments when it comes to addressing and solving social problems (Edelman, 2018).

4. Social Activism for Brands

4.1 Increasing Demands on Activist Engagement

As noted earlier, the competitive landscape has intensified in most industries (Gómez-Suárez et al., 2017). Standing out and showing that a brand is committed to activist causes, contributes to fostering close relationships with consumers (Voorn et al., 2018; Amed et al., 2019). While in the past brands may not have expressed a position on socio-political issues for fear of alienating customers, today they willingly participate because it is now often demanded, especially by younger customers (Shetty et al., 2019). The McKinsey Global Fashion Index, an industry benchmark that includes data from over 500 private and publicly traded companies, showed that more than half of the consumers surveyed say they would switch, avoid or boycott brands depending on their position in a socio-political debate (Amed et al., 2019).

Over the years, more and more consumers began to increasingly include socio-political views in their purchase decisions (Amed et al., 2019). Even though climate change concerns are the main issue due to continued overconsumption, many other problems are linked to it. As mentioned before, it is believed that climate justice cannot be achieved without addressing historical and structural inequities (e.g., McKinney & Fulkerson, 2015). With an intersectional approach to activism, brands can make a difference in many socio-political areas, such as advocating for racial justice or supporting LGBTQIA+ rights, while serving the ever-growing diversity of consumers.

4.2 Defining Brand Activism

Brand activism should be differentiated from other beneficial or charitable initiatives, such as *corporate social responsibility* (CSR), *cause-related marketing* or *corporate political activity* (CPA). CSR refers to "company actions that advance social good beyond that which is required by law" (Kang et al., 2016, p. 59) to which, cause-related marketing is sometimes added as an instrument; sometimes it is also considered in a differentiated way. The main difference is that CSR activities concern commonly accepted, non-controversial issues, such as climate change or education, while brand activism addresses controversial or polarising socio-political issues (Kotler & Sarkar 2017; Moorman, 2020). Therefore, with CSR aiming to improve most stakeholder relationships (Mishra & Modi 2016), stakeholder reactions to brand activism vary widely, depending on their socio-political values (Bhattacharya & Elsbach 2002). Unlike CSR

campaigns, which are typically embedded in a company's long-term strategy, brand activism can also be spontaneous or even random (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

Furthermore, brand activism is often confused with CPA. The latter involves company efforts to influence political processes in order to be well positioned through politically based competitive advantages, such as campaign contributions or lobbying (Lux et al., 2011). The main objective is often to gain financial benefits rather than to support a social cause (Hillman et al., 2004). Bhagwat et al. (2020) pointed out that CPA and brand activism can be distinguished by the degree to which the respective activity is publicly promoted. Although the intentions for engaging in brand activism can differ, it is most often publicised as a communication of corporate values (Nalick et al. 2016; Kotler & Sarkar 2017). Contrarily, CPA is most often carried out silently (Lux et al., 2011).

In sum, Bhagwat et al. (2020) referred to *brand activism* as a "firm's public demonstration (statements and/or actions) of support for or opposition to one side of a partisan socio-political issue" (p. 2). Such socio-political issues can be described as "salient unresolved social matters on which societal and institutional opinion is split, thus potentially engendering acrimonious debate among groups" (Nalick et al., 2016, p. 386). Socio-political issues are intersections in relation to time-bound events in politics and culture, which is why the controversy surrounding them can evolve or dissolve over time (Bhagwat et al., 2020). As an example, women's suffrage in Germany was controversial about 100 years ago, but is mostly no longer questioned today (Wolff, 2018).

A definition that differs in some aspects comes from Vredenburg et al. (2020, p. 446–447), which contains four key defining characteristics: 1) Brand activism addresses a controversial, contentious or polarising issue; 2) is purpose- and value-driven; 3) the issue can be progressive or conservative in nature; 4) the company contributes to a socio-political cause through messaging and brand practice. While both definitions contain the key element that the issues discussed are polarising, Bhagwat et al. (2020) dissociate brand activism from conservative issues.

Moorman (2020) defined different perspectives of brand activism, from which brands see themselves, for example, as *educators*, in charge of changing consumer behaviour, or as *legitimate sources of cultural or political power*, which gives them the responsibility to initiate social change. In this case, social change may even be the raison d'être of the company, i.e., its products or services merely serve as instruments for creating change in the world.

4.3 Woke Authenticity

Schmidt et al. (2021) highlighted authenticity as an influencing factor for brand activism, emphasising its underlying importance for positive or negative outcomes. The authors pointed to the necessity of a comprehensive framework that can be implemented to ensure an authentic perception of brand activism moves (Schmidt et al., 2021).

As mentioned above, Vredenburg et al. (2020) highlighted the alignment of intangible and tangible commitments to a socio-political cause as a defining aspect that is crucial for authentic brand activism. That is, brand activism is more than mere advocacy or messaging (Nalick et al., 2016). Rather, the messages should be supported by tangible changes within the organisation involving stakeholders such as employees or customers e.g., through changes in company practices and organisational policies (Kapitan et al., 2019). For example, ice cream maker Ben & Jerry's not only communicates support for the LGBTQIA+ community and marriage equality on social media, but also implemented corporate practices, such as refusing to sell two scoops of the same flavour in Australia until same-sex marriage was allowed (Purdy, 2017; Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). Thus, the alignment of the factors, *purpose, values, messages* and *practice*, forms a holistic system to create authenticity, which in turn influences how relevant, truthful and reliable consumers perceive a brand's position on a socio-political issue to be (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Derived from this, Vredenburg et al. (2020) proposed a two-by-two matrix with four quadrants illustrating four possible combinations of how activist messages may or may not be supported by corporate prosocial practices (see Figure 6).

An *absence of brand activism* is common for brands with a business-to-business focus or monopoly brands, such as public transport. Such brands have yet to develop a prosocial brand purpose or values, use activist messaging and embed socio-political practices in their market presence accordingly. Maintaining their brand legitimacy depends on other aspects but not socio-political engagement (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Silent brand activists consider socio-political debates an integral part of their core business or strategic positioning. However, they are not too explicit in communicating it as such, but rather quietly implement long-term, integrated changes to their corporate practices and organisational strategies (Kapitan et al., 2019). One example is Mastercard, which aims to help its customers control their carbon footprint, improve financial inclusion and achieve gender equality in payments (Theobald, 2021).

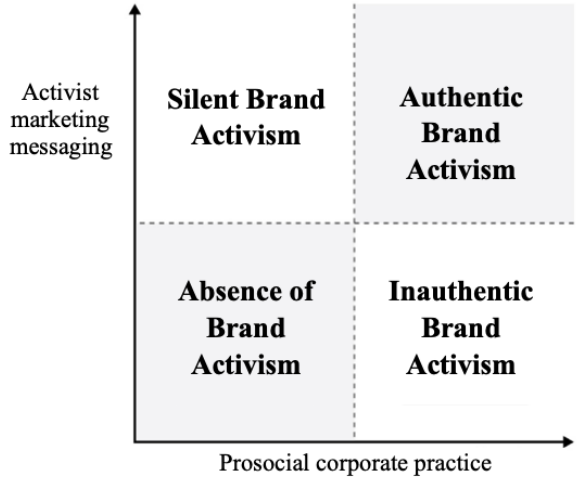

Figure 6. Typology of brand activism (source: Vredenburg et al., 2020).

As mentioned earlier, *authentic brand activism* aligns purpose, values, messages and practices, such as with shoe manufacturer TOMS or outdoor clothing brand Patagonia, whose purpose-driven core missions are supported by activist messages and practices that promote social change (Vredenburg et al., 2020). In this case, authentic brand activism not only serves as a genuine driver to make an impact on society, but also helps to increase brand equity (Moorman, 2020). If a brand signals credibility, e.g., through its willingness and ability to fulfil its activism promises, it can reduce consumers' information costs and perceived risk and thus increase perceived brand or product utility in purchase decision-making (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Being perceived as ethical and values-driven subsequently leads to other positive responses associated with higher brand equity, such as brand loyalty or brand identification (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

In contrast, *inauthentic brand activism* can potentially undermine the positive impact of authentic brand activism. Some brands may not actually deliver on their promises when they engage in socio-political debates driven by a sense of urgency and market reaction (Georgallis, 2017, as cited in Vredenburg et al., 2020), which can lead to accusations of woke washing. *Woke washing* is defined as a brand's attempt to market itself as committed to socio-political causes while failing to provide a clear and legitimate record of practices for the social causes it advocates (Sobande, 2019). Woke washing not only damages consumer trust in the given brand, but also makes authentic brand activism generally less effective, if consumers no longer see it as a legitimate means of promoting social change (Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2018)

The most recent attempt to disentangle the underlying elements of perceived woke authenticity comes from Mirzaei et al. (2022). Based on a content analysis of previous studies that indicated authenticity dimensions including quality commitment, heritage, sincerity (Napoli et al., 2014), brand essence, brand image, realistic plot, credible advertising message (Becker et al., 2019), community link, reliability, commitment, congruence, benevolence, transparency, broad impact (Joo et al., 2019), the authors proposed a new authenticity conceptualisation specifically designed for the analysis of brand activism campaigns which consists of six elements that will be briefly described below (Mirzaei et al., 2022):

Social context independency captures the extent to which a woke campaign is independent of current and trending social issues. Woke campaigns on social issues that are heavily discussed due to current events run the risk of being perceived as inauthentic and opportunistic (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Brands that release an LGBTQIA+ campaign during Pride month in June could be accused of exploiting this social issue for free publicity (Victor, 2017).

Inclusion describes the extent to which the woke message is perceived as neutral, that is gender-, race-, age-, and politically neutral (Mirzaei et al., 2022). For example, a campaign about toxic beauty standards for women on social media should also acknowledge that these can also apply to men.

The third dimension *sacrifice* describes the extent to which a brand conveying a woke message is willing to give up profit to support the social cause it is promoting. Brand sacrifice stems from the premise of the *costly signalling theory* (Moratis, 2016) which states that wokeness and virtue signalling require concrete actions to demonstrate that the brand is willing to make a financial commitment to combat the social issue for which it is advocating (Mirzaei et al., 2022).

Practice is defined as the extent to which brands put into practice and act upon the content of the woke message they communicate (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Similar to Vredenburg et al. (2020), Mirzaei et al. (2022) noted that message-practice alignment is a critical element of woke authenticity. For example, a brand that communicates its support for the black community should also be internally mindful of racial diversity among board members (Morrison, 2015). In contrast to the dimension of sacrifice, the dimension of practice is not necessarily linked to potential financial losses, but rather focuses on holistic consistencies between message and practices, both internally as well as communicated externally (Mirzaei et al., 2022).

The *fit* dimension is concerned with the extent to which the message communicated is consistent with the brand's current or past core meaning, image, positioning and/or culture. Alhouti et al. (2016, p. 1244, as cited in Mirzaei et al., 2022) defined fit as "signalling authenticity of a CSR action when the action aligns with what the firm sells" and indicate that the degree of (dis)alignment between the CSR initiative and the core meaning of the brand moderates the perception of authenticity. Therefore, it is perceived as more authentic if a campaign on toxic beauty standards is carried out by a cosmetics brand rather than a food brand.

Motivation, as the sixth dimension of the woke authenticity framework, captures the extent to which the intentions of the brand communicating a woke message are perceived as profit-driven, self-centred or exploitative, as opposed to other-centred or genuine (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Previous research has suggested that when the motivations underlying corporate initiatives are assessed as altruistic and transparent, a positive impact on perceived brand authenticity can be found (Joo et al., 2019). In the field of brand activism, the question of motives and intentions remains one of the biggest obstacles.

The authors also noted that the approach should not be seen as a checklist in which all six dimensions must be perfectly fulfilled in order to be perceived as authentic, but rather as a guide to understanding how different factors contribute to the process of authentication in controversial socio-political debates and how the six dimensions also work interdependently (Mirzaei et al., 2022). For example, looking at how the dimensions of *practice* and *social context independency* interact with each other, one can conclude that the negative impact of the lack of practice may be greater when the social issue is taken up by a fast fashion brand. In this case, the woke campaign could be seen as an opportunistic move, exploiting an attention-grabbing issue. However, if a brand that has never engaged in activism is willing to invest and give up profit, this costly signalling can positively influence the woke authenticity perceptions (Mirzaei et al., 2022).

Considering authenticity in the context of LGBTQIA+-related activism campaigns, which will be the subject of the empirical study later, the term *rainbow washing* emerged. It describes the exploitation of LGBTQIA+ symbols or causes by brands to drive sales and signal support for the LGBTQIA+ community without significantly contributing to positive change for the community (Batey, 2019). Taking the aforementioned dimensions *inclusion* and *motivation* into consideration, brands taking a stand on queer issues should not only look at message-

practice alignment (Vredenburg et al., 2020), but also how the support is communicated. If brands try to craft their LGBTQIA+ campaigns to be palatable and consumable only to a mass heterosexual audience, for example by using heterosexual LGBTQIA+ allies as influencers/spokespeople or by emphasising the heteronormative concept of the nuclear family and gender roles when portraying LGBTQIA+ relationships, they may trivialise queer issues and be perceived as hypocritical and disingenuous (Li, 2022). On the other hand, an approach with diversity appeals that portray the queer community as one of many social groups, or with the inclusion of subcultural, suggestive LGBTQIA+ imagery that is unfamiliar to non-queer consumers in order to play it safe and not risk alienating heterosexual consumers (Tsai, 2004), can also lead to a brand's authenticity being questioned. Li (2022) instead suggested adopting an LGBTQIA+-centric strategy. Given the dimensions of *social context independency* and *practice*, LGBTQIA+-centric campaigns should be embedded throughout the year as an integral part of a brand's marketing and content strategy, as opposed to an appendage to a larger campaign.

4.4 Effects and Perceptions of Brand Activism

For societies to function properly, common norms and standards of behaviour are required (Copp, 2001, as cited in Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2018). The kind of socio-political issues raised by brand activism can be seen as open moral questions on which there is not yet a consensus in society. The *moral foundations theory* assumes that people may arrive at different moral judgements in relation to such issues because of the different emphasis given to the five moral foundations: *care* (versus harm), *fairness* (versus cheating), *loyalty for in-group* (versus betrayal), *authority* (versus subversion) and *purity* (versus degradation) (Graham et al., 2009). A brand's stance on a socio-political issue thus provides an indication of the value it places on these moral foundations. For example, a brand that does not support gender quotas may place more value on *loyalty for in-groups* and *purity*, while a brand that offers corporate childcare values *care* and *fairness* (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2018).

Hence, it is believed that brand activism serves as a baseline to evaluate how similar a consumer is to a particular brand in the context of moral judgements. In other words, brand activism can help to find out whether one's moral values are also supported by a brand. Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) built on the theory of consumer-brand identification and claim that a higher degree of self-brand similarity should lead to stronger identification, which in turn leads to a more positive attitude towards the brand and correspondingly higher purchase intentions and a higher

degree of brand advocacy. Following this theory, it should be expected that if consumers agree with a brand's moral stance, this should boost sales and increase positive brand association, and that in contrast, if consumers disagree or perceive a brand's activist actions as woke washing, the level of consumer identification with the brand will be lower and, subsequently, sales and attitudes towards the brand will decline (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012).

In contrast, Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) found an asymmetric link between consumer-brand identification and consumer attitudes and purchase behaviour in the context of brand activism. Their study proved that consumer disagreement with a brand's moral stand leads to a negative effect on consumer attitudes, intentions and behaviour, whereas in the case of consumer-brand agreement, no significant positive effects were generally found. The authors explained this asymmetry of effects with psychological concepts that if consumers disagree on moral views, they may be disappointed, leading to negative reactions; however, if consumers agree with the brand's stand, they do not reward them for what they consider expected social behaviour with more positive attitudes or higher purchase intentions (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

Vredenburg et al. (2020) argued that the results of an activist campaign depend not only on the self-brand similarity and the consumer-brand identification derived from it, but also on how perfectly the prosocial cause matches the brand's purpose. Unlike Mirzaei et al. (2022) who considered a large overlap between core business and social cause as an authenticity factor, Vredenburg et al. (2020) implied that the most favourable outcomes for brand activism occur when brands choose a socio-political cause that is moderately incongruent with their purposes. Compared to a fully congruent pairing, *optimal incongruence* stimulates consumers to think more and delve deeper, resulting in potentially more intense reactions (Cornwell et al., 2018). This could explain why reactions to an ice cream brand advocating same-sex marriage were generally more supportive than those to a razor blade manufacturer advocating against toxic masculinity (Purdy, 2017). However, it is a fine line to find that optimal level of incongruence between brand and activist cause. While optimal incongruence can produce the most positive results in terms of brand equity, activist messages that do not deviate enough from brand meaning or are seen as only slightly deviating from social norms lead to milder positive responses or, if they deviate too much, to customer outrage (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Hence, absent and inauthentic brand activists are more likely to elicit extreme reactions, whether positive (delight) or negative (outrage). In contrast, brands that have built a positive prosocial reputation for their alignment of corporate practices, messages, purpose and values

(silent or authentic brand activists) are more likely to fall into the category of milder positive reactions, which is partly consistent with the findings of Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020). On the other hand, these brands, known for their authentic activism, are also less likely to fall into the zone of consumer outrage (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Again, an example from Ben & Jerry's can be drawn upon to illustrate this. The ice cream brand, which has long been known for supporting rather non-controversial issues such as climate change or sustainable food systems, has over time expanded its brand activist focus to include more social issues, such as racial justice (Kotler & Sakar, 2017). In response to the #blacklivesmatter movement, they released a strong statement taking a stand that "the murder of George Floyd was the result of inhumane police brutality that is perpetuated by a culture of white supremacy" and calling for, among other things, the reinstatement of the Civil Rights Division in the US Department of Justice or a public statement by President Trump to "disavow white supremacy" (Ben & Jerry's, 2020). In line with theory, this statement was met with predominantly positive reactions (Kowitt, 2020), as it was based on an alignment of brand purpose, values, messages and practice, and the brand is known for its authentic activism and having found the optimal incongruence. However, in many cases when activist messages or actions are deemed disingenuous or the brand's stance on a partisan issue contradicts most consumers' opinions, the brand might face strong negative reactions.

4.5 Dealing with Consumer Backlash

Brands without an explicit brand purpose and/or essential corporate practices to support their activist messaging run the risk of being perceived as inauthentic, insincere or deceptive. Woke washing or a brand's moral views that contradict most consumers' opinions have a negative impact on brand equity through unfavourable brand associations and false signalling (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Yet, the nature of the consumer-brand relationship and other factors play an important role in determining the extent to which responses to brand transgressions will be.

The situational crisis communication theory posits that the interpretation of a crisis and the corresponding evaluation of the company differ between consumers depending on how they have previously interacted with the brand, including the level of brand identification they perceive (Coombs, 2007). Since the nature of non-identifying consumer-brand relationships is primarily based on utilitarian benefits, such relationships provide *buffering effect*s, i.e., they are not really affected by a brand's wrongdoings as long as the functional needs of the

consumer can still be met (Johnson et al., 2011). It is believed that positive, non-identifying relationships between consumers and brands are actually valuable for brands in crisis situations, as they help to mitigate the negative emotional reactions of other consumers (Coombs & Holladay, 2001, as cited in Ma, 2020).

In contrast, buffering effects to identifying consumer-brand relationships are based on the premise that consumers who identify with a brand consider the bond with the brand as part of their extended self and, when the brand is confronted with a negative situation, want to defend this bond in order to protect their extended self (Swann, 1983; Lisjak et al., 2012). Therefore, a strong identifying consumer-brand relationship may also buffer the impact of wrongdoing allegations on consumer attitudes towards the brand (Elbedweihy et al., 2016).

On the other hand, some authors have pointed out that strong identifying consumer-brand relationships can also backfire in crisis situations, as closer relationships often create a stronger sense of betrayal as a response to misconduct or a different than expected response to a crisis (Ma, 2018; Johnson et al., 2011). The expectations of a consumer who is in an identifying consumer-brand relationship derive from the social psychological concept of psychological contracts (Rousseau, 1995). *Psychological contracts* refer to a person's beliefs about the obligations agreed between them and another party (Rousseau, 1995). Applied to the consumer-brand relationship, the consumer might ascribe to the brand the responsibility to protect its defining attribute (Fediuk et al., 2010). When a brand causes a brand transgression that undermines its defining attribute, this expectation is violated and a *love-becomes-hate effect* may occur (Ma, 2020). A study comparing the likelihood of both effects following brand transgressions concluded that the love-becomes-hate effect occurs more frequently for identifying consumer-brand relationships, reinforcing negative emotions such as anger and disappointment and thus influencing consumers' behavioural intentions. The findings suggested that these patterns hold regardless of whether the core meaning of the brand is directly threatened by the crisis or not (Ma, 2020).

Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) argued that the reactions to brand transgressions depend on the availability of alternatives or the source of a brand's moral stance. In cases of consumer-brand disagreement, moral rationalisation may occur. *Moral rationalisation* refers to "an individual's ability to reinterpret [...] immoral actions as, in fact, moral" (Tsang, 2002, p. 1). Building on this definition, an individual is likely to try to rationalise the supposedly (un)moral stance of a brand, depending on how morally relevant the issue is and how high or low one assesses the

cost-benefit ratio of moral action (Tsang, 2002). That is, if one has very strong opinions on issues such as racism or gender equality and/or is personally involved in them, it is difficult to ignore a brand's stance or its moral relevance if it contradicts one's own views (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Moreover, if alternative brands or products are available on the market, which usually means low switching costs, consumers are also less likely to choose to morally rationalise a brand's stance and would rather abandon it (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

Furthermore, the source of the brand's stance may influence the consumer's judgement of the brand and thus possible consequences. It builds on the idea of moral coupling or moral decoupling. *Moral coupling* occurs when the moral judgement of a brand's stance influences the judgement of the brand's performance, such as the product performance or quality (Lee & Kwak, 2016, as cited in Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020), while *moral decoupling* occurs when these two judgements can be separated (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013). If consumers disagree with the brand's stance on a controversial issue, moral coupling negatively affects their attitudes, intentions and behaviour, as they cannot separate the perceived immoral attitude from other components of the brand. In order to avoid cognitive dissonance, consumers prefer consistency between their moral beliefs and purchase decisions (Graham, 2007). Contrarily, moral decoupling encourages consumers to find ways to justify inconsistencies between the two, similar to moral rationalisation (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

While the study by Ma (2020) assigned moral coupling to identifying consumer-brand relationships and moral decoupling to non-identifying relationships, Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) pointed out that the coping strategy depends on whether the brand and the source of the stance are closely connected, e.g., when a statement is published on the brand's official social media account. If the consumer is unable to attribute the attitude to any party other than the brand, a moral coupling strategy is more likely to be used, leading to negative associations or even a boycott of the brand. In other words, the more distant the source of the stance and the brand, the higher the likelihood of employing a moral decoupling strategy which can protect a brand from unfavourable outcomes if consumers disagree with the brand's position or perceived woke washing (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

The process of forming brand attitudes is therefore not exclusively determined by automatic, intuitive, affective reactions to the attitude of the brand, but depends on various moral reasoning strategies that determine whether one punishes a brand for taking a perceived

immoral stand or is able to separate one's judgement of a brand's stance from its performance (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013).

Burger King UK, for example, wanted to point out the lack of female representation in the restaurant industry on the occasion of last year's International Women's Day, but implemented this by posting a tweet saying "women belong in the kitchen." The brand faced an extremely negative reaction, including a call to boycott the "sexist" brand (Dailey, 2021). As the tweet was posted on Burger King UK's official account, consumers were unable to separate the perceived sexist message from the brand. Had it been posted on the private Twitter account of the CMO or a brand ambassador, the subsequent apologies for poor execution but good intentions might have better mitigated the negative impact.

In such cases, the brand may delete the post and thus retract its position or publish another post apologising. However, the results of one study suggested that retracting or apologising for the post in response to consumer backlash is unlikely to reduce the negative reaction (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Those who disapprove of the brand's stance may interpret a retraction or apology as the brand trying to distance itself from its true moral foundations, making the brand appear disingenuous and questioning its intentions to provoke the controversy in the first place. Those who initially agreed with the brand and may have even defended it to other consumers may feel betrayed in the event of a retraction or apology and also find the supposed activist messages and/or practices inauthentic (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

The above findings will help to understand possible consumer responses from the empirical study of the current work and to find explanations for them in the course of the dissertation.

5. Brand Equity and Brand Activism

5.1 Previous Findings on the Impact of Brand Activism on Brand Equity

As mentioned, the concept of brand equity has been widely applied in research to verify and measure the effect of marketing or communication activities (Baalbaki & Guzmán, 2016). A few other studies have examined the impact of brand activism on brand equity, but none of these studies focus exclusively on Gen Z, as far as the author is aware.

Du et al. (2010) concluded that a company that invests in social initiatives is not only able to generate favourable attitudes and behaviours among customers but also builds brand image in the long run, strengthens stakeholder-company relationships and improves advocacy behaviour of different stakeholder parties (e.g., customer word of mouth, employer branding, employee organisational commitment, investing in the company). They found that the company's reputation for involvement in social activities, the given industry, communication strategies and stakeholders' social value orientation influence the extent to which social initiatives maximise brand equity. Agreeing on the potential positive impact of brand activism on brand equity, Vredenburg et al. (2020) pointed to the importance of authenticity in social activism campaigns, i.e., an optimal incongruent alignment of activist marketing messages and purpose- and values-driven corporate prosocial practices to achieve the best brand equity outcomes.

A recent study by Bhagwhat et al. (2020) partially contradicted these findings. Based on a study of 293 corporate socio-political activities, the authors concluded that, on average, investors react negatively to brand activism, especially when social activism positions diverge from the prevailing political values of a company's key stakeholders. Further results showed that the effect on financial-based brand equity is also worse when brand activism is delivered in the form of actions (as opposed to statements) or by the CEO (as opposed to another person or entity within the company), no associated business impact is explicitly communicated, and other companies do not also participate in the activism event (Bhagwhat et al., 2020).

As the last study refers more to the financial perspective of brand equity, the larger body of research on consumer-based brand equity seems to point to predominantly positive effects of brand activism.

5.2 Research Question and Hypotheses

Having reviewed the state of research on the issues in question and reflected on this process, the research question derived from the theory will be presented in the following. Given the

relevance of brand activism, which has been shown to be a distinctive and currently much-discussed topic in the context of the major social events of recent years, especially among Gen Z consumers, and given the issue of brand equity which is central to branding, it is considered important to understand the link between these two concepts. Thus, the aim of this dissertation is to review the proven positive impact of brand activism on consumer-based brand equity as proposed by Vredenburg et al. (2020) or Du et al. (2010), but with a focus on a specific target group: Generation Z. The research question that will guide this work is therefore as follows:

RQ: What is the impact of brand activism on brand equity among Gen Z consumers?

Since 1) brand equity consists of many dimensions that are beyond the scope of a Master's dissertation aimed at obtaining a sufficient sample with a low failure rate, and 2) it is not expected that all dimensions will be influenced by the exposure to brand activism, it was decided to focus the empirical study on four of the six dimensions of brand equity. A rationale for this selection and the associated hypothesis will be outlined below.

5.2.1 Brand Salience

Brand salience captures the extent to which consumers are able to recall brand attributes from their memory and associate them with specific associations (Keller, 2001). Since this study is designed with a pre- and post-stimulus test, where the stimulus is a campaign video of a brand, it can be assumed that the degree of brand salience increases after exposure to brand attributes through the video, regardless of the type of content shown, i.e., whether the campaign video shows general brand information or a brand's stance on a social issue. Therefore, this dimension is not addressed in this study.

5.2.2 Brand Performance and Brand Imagery

The second dimension of brand equity that is not covered in this study is brand performance. Brands are selected and evaluated based on their functional and/or emotional benefits (e.g., Hartmann et al., 2005), with brand performance referring to the functional, tangible properties of a brand in terms of the inherent product or service features (Keller, 2001). However, previous studies have shown that brand activism as a branding and communication tool is more related to consumers' perception of the emotional benefits of a brand (Key et al., 2021). This is because a brand taking a stand does not influence tangible product attributes, but rather the emotional, intangible benefits consumers derive from buying or using a brand, i.e., as mentioned above, affirmation of self-concept or sense of belonging (Elbedweihy et al., 2016).

For this reason, brand imagery as a dimension of brand equity suggested by Keller (2001) will be taken into consideration in this study. Considering a brand's stance on a social issue can increase emotional and symbolic benefits of a brand in the eyes of consumers if the consumer identifies with the brand's values and what it is advocating. Although the asymmetric impact of brand activism on brand outcomes has been discussed previously (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020), it has also been suggested that Gen Z consumers in particular are likely to consciously support like-minded brands (Hawkins, 2022; Francis & Hoefel, 2018), which is why positive relationships are assumed for all of the following brand equity dimensions in this study.

H1: Exposure to brand activism will positively influence brand imagery among Gen Z consumers.

5.2.3 Brand Judgements and Brand Feelings

While intrinsic brand attributes, such as actual product quality, are not expected to change as a result of marketing communications, perceived quality can. Previous research has shown a positive relationship between improving consumer perceptions of brand or product quality and different marketing tools, e.g., personalised social media communication (Shanahan et al., 2019), store image (Konuk, 2018), sustainable packaging (Magnier, 2016), and country of origin (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999).

This is based on the psychological premise that, especially in an environment with too many choices, individuals tend to look for cues or mental shortcuts that facilitate decision-making (Park & Lessig, 1981). In marketing, various heuristics are known to lead consumers to think more positively about a brand or product and thus influence their decision to buy that brand or product (Rucker & Petty, 2006). *Affect heuristics* describe the recourse to feelings, positive or negative, experienced in the context of a stimulus. Affect-based evaluations are rapid, automatic and rely on experience-based thoughts that are activated prior to reflective judgements (Slovic et al., 2002). Previous research has found a link between affect heuristics and a range of consumer judgements, including product innovation (King & Slovic, 2014), brand image (e.g., Ravaja et al., 2015) or product price communication (e.g., Slovic et al., 2007). Therefore, affect heuristics offer a possible explanation for why consumers, after learning about a brand's usually emotionally-charged point of view on socio-political issues, think more positively about that brand in case of agreement. Kim et al. (2015) pointed to a similar mechanism when it comes to CSR communication. Furthermore, the authors have shown that CSR communication increases perceptions of quality and thus the willingness to

pay a premium, as a brand's advertising expenditure on campaigns that go beyond product advertising could be perceived as a general signal of superiority (Kim et al., 2015; Su et al., 2016)

Brand judgements in Keller's (2001) framework include perceived brand quality, brand credibility, brand consideration and brand superiority. As mentioned, affect heuristics are likely to influence perceptions of brand quality and superiority. Furthermore, especially in the area of brand activism, perceived authenticity plays a crucial role (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Since brand authenticity and credibility are two concepts that are closely related, a brand activism campaign that is perceived as authentic can be expected to have a positive impact on brand credibility or the overall category of brand judgements.

H2: Exposure to brand activism will positively influence brand judgements among Gen Z consumers.

The same could be applied to brand feelings. Emotionally-charged brand activism campaigns are likely to influence consumers' emotional responses and reactions in relation to the brand. Of the six types of brand-building feelings presented (Keller, 2011), it was decided to include three in this study as these are expected to be most relevant when associated with brand activism. Agreeing with a brand on a controversial issue is expected to increase 1) feelings of warmth, which influence positive brand perceptions (Kervyn et al., 2012). The analysis of the drivers of socio-political engagement of Gen Z consumers carried out in section 3.3.2 revealed that the motives include ingroup identification, social norms and personal norms. Therefore, it is likely that a brand presenting itself as woke may help to authenticate a woke self-concept when consumed publicly for others to see, or when endorsed privately, and therefore increase 2) feelings of social approval and 3) self-respect (e.g., Fritsche et al., 2018; Schouten et al., 2020; Loader et al., 2014).

H3: Exposure to brand activism will positively influence brand feelings among Gen Z consumers.

5.2.4 Brand Resonance

Various studies have indicated a positive relationship between brand loyalty and brand activism depending on certain factors, such as perceived authenticity (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020), optimal incongruence (Vredenburg et al., 2020), consumer-brand fit and source of attitude (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2018). Keller (1993) divides brand resonance into four

sub-categories: behavioural, attitudinal loyalty, sense of community and active engagement. It is to be expected that the proven effects are also valid for Gen Z consumers.

H4: Exposure to brand activism will positively influence brand resonance among Gen Z consumers.

The research question as well as the four hypotheses provide a framework for understanding what is being investigated and the direction in which the empirical part of the current work aims to proceed.

Part II: Empirical Study

6. Methodology

6.1 Study Design

After processing all the information previously collected, given the research question to be addressed – the impact of brand activism on brand equity among Gen Z consumers – it was decided to use a quantitative research method. This methodological approach is used to quantify opinions, attitudes and behaviours and understand how prevalent they are by looking for findings generalisable to a larger population (Creswell, 2009). Considering that 1) this study was conducted according to a hypothetico-deductive logic, i.e., it builds on hypotheses developed after a thorough review of previous findings; that 2) the research question of this study focuses on the relationship between two themes; and that 3) it focuses on a current phenomenon to be validated and evaluated in its generalisability, the quantitative method seems to be an appropriate means to conduct this research.

The quantitative strategy selected for the purpose of this work is an experimental study design. In experimental research, data is collected by applying a stimulus and observing the response to determine whether a specific treatment influences an outcome (Creswell, 2009). As this dissertation aims to test the effects of exposure to brand activism among Gen Z consumers an online experiment was selected as the most effective research method. Due to resource constraints, the study will not use a control group, making it a pre-experimental design (Creswell, 2009).

As outlined in the literature review, both brand equity and brand activism are strongly consumer-driven, which is why this dissertation uses consumer opinion as the basis for measuring the relationship between both themes. In an online survey, participants were asked to give their opinion on two selected brands before and after being exposed to a brand activism campaign of either brand.

In order to provide a broader, more insightful, multidimensional view of the research, it was decided to expose all study participants to two different brands and thus have them experience two different conditions (stimuli), making it a within-group pretest-posttest design (Creswell, 2009). Applying two conditions seeks to increase the generalisability of the effects and to gain a better understanding of the specific factors influencing the effects (Creswell, 2009). In the present study, the use of two brands was considered helpful to determine whether certain

dimensions of brand equity are more resistant to changes due to brand activism than others, or to identify possible explanations for why certain campaign features have stronger effects than others, by comparing measurements from the pretest and posttest separately for each brand. A within-group design appeared to be most effective for testing both conditions because 1) given the resource and time constraints of a Master's dissertation, participants and data collection are more efficient this way, and 2) it helps reduce errors associated with individual differences, making it less likely that a true difference between conditions will go undetected (Sullivan, 2008). It should be noted, however, that a major limitation of this design is carry-over effects, i.e., participants may respond similarly when asked the same questions more than once (Sullivan, 2008).

6.2 Selection of Brands and Controversial Socio-political Theme

When using two or more conditions in an experimental design, it is advisable not to vary the characteristics of the conditions too much, in order to be able to draw conclusions about different effects (Creswell, 2009). In order to limit the interpretation of the results to a few possible factors, the same socio-political topic was chosen for both campaign videos. This way, the socio-political topic itself can be excluded as a factor influencing a different strength or direction of the impact due to exposure to brand activism. *Gay and Lesbian Rights* were chosen as the theme for both campaigns, as it was identified as one of the most relevant social activism issues in recent years (Kotler & Sakar, 2018).

The month of June has long been celebrated as Pride Month – commemorating the Stonewall Riots in 1969 and promoting equality and visibility for the LGBTQIA+ community – but it is only in recent years that it has become common for brands to incorporate campaigns supporting the LGBTQIA+ community into their marketing (Collins, 2018). Not only do studies show increasing interest from brands to engage in Pride month – showing a 29% increase in marketing spend from 2020 to 2021 (Chinery, 2022) – but there is also demand from the consumer side, particularly among Gen Z and Millennials consumers to address LGBTQIA+ issues more and more (YPulse, 2020).

According to an analysis of IPSOS and UN population data, the LGBTQIA+ community is expected to grow to one billion people by 2050 (Baron, 2022). About 21% of all adult Americans in Gen Z identify as belonging to this community, indicating a shift towards a post-heteronormative society or more genderless generations in the future (Baron, 2022). This also

translates into an estimated global purchasing power of $3.9 trillion within the LGBTQIA+ community (LGBT Capital, 2020).

Section 4.3 discussed the six woke authenticity dimensions, particularly relevant in this context are those of *social context independency*, *inclusion*, *practice* and *motivation*, focusing on how an LGBTQIA+-centric campaign approach can avoid accusations of rainbow washing (Li, 2022). In this study, two campaigns by Sprite and Starbucks were compared in terms of their authenticity perceptions and their impact on brand equity among Gen Z consumers.

As mentioned, when comparing multiple stimuli to identify influencing factors, the two conditions should not be too different from each other (Creswell, 2009). Therefore, two brands that have both released an LGBTQIA+ campaign of similar length, release date, video style and target audiences were selected. Both Sprite and Starbucks are low involvement consumer goods, known to target a younger segment (Moorhouse, 2021; Fromm, 2014, as cited in Haskova, 2015) and released a LGBTQIA+-themed video campaign in winter 2019/20, which are about 1:50 minutes long and are similar in the campaign features used, such as emotional storytelling, queer characters as protagonists, no talking characters or voice-over, only musical accompaniment.

In order to better assess the campaigns of the two brands, e.g., in terms of woke authenticity, here is a brief description of Sprite's and Starbucks' core business, and past and current engagement with socio-political issues.

6.2.1 Sprite

Sprite is the second-largest brand of The Coca-Cola Company with sales of $20 billion (The Coca Cola Company, 2022a). The brand's main and best-known product is a lemon-lime flavoured carbonated drink, which is also available in other (limited edition, sugar-free) flavours. The brand describes its target market as young adults and cites the emotional benefit as "[sparking] your true self" (The Coca Cola Company, 2017).

With its recent campaigns, Sprite has focused on increasing its brand awareness among young consumers, creating campaigns specifically to appeal to Gen Z (Moorhouse, 2021). Its 2021 campaign, 'Let's be clear', aimed to evoke associations of transparency, individuality and authenticity, with the message of gaining clarity and encouraging the mindset of taking time to reset (Moorhouse, 2021). In summer 2022, the brand launched a new advertising campaign called 'Heat Happens', featuring a new global visual identity system, including a new

packaging design and logo. Again, the new identity is supposed to attract a younger audience as it "is bold and embraces the audacity of self-expression by being dynamic, distinctive, and modern" (Abreu, 2022, as cited in Sanchez, 2022).

In line with the brand's focus on increasing its appeal to Gen Z consumers, Sprite has published a few brand activism campaigns that are usually targeted to one regional market and are not carried out globally. In 2019, Sprite Switzerland published a campaign 'I love you hater', featuring local protagonists who shared their experiences of cyber bullying, promoting tolerance and individuality (Knöpfli, 2019). A year later, as a reaction to the murder of George Floyd, Sprite announced a $500.000 donation to the Black Lives Matter Global Network and partnered with influential hip-hop artists to support the black community through various channels. When many brands were questioned about their intentions in the #blacklivesmatter movement (Vredenburg et al., 2020), Sprite justified its actions with its long history and heritage of promoting a platform for young black people to tell their stories and make a name for themselves, especially through hip-hop culture since 1986 (The Coca Cola Company, 2020).

The campaign used in the empirical study for this dissertation was released in November 2019 and shows different members of the LGBTQIA+ community being supported by their friends and family as they prepare for Pride celebrations. With the final slogan that reads: "Pride: what you feel when someone you love chooses to be happy," the campaign aims to promote tolerance and respect for queer people among family members (Santobuenosaires, 2019). The campaign video of Sprite can be found here.

A brief examination of Sprite's digital channels revealed that there is no information about brand activism or corporate social responsibility on the brand's international homepage, but only product information and promotion for the ongoing branding campaign (Sprite, 2022a). However, the brand's international Instagram account shows a large amount of educational content alongside promotional posts that align with the other brand's activism communications presented above (Sprite, 2022b). The brand often features a variety of faces sharing their stories on topics such as racism, feminism and hate speech. However, a look at the brand's site showed that in relation to the theme of the campaign chosen for this dissertation, no evidence was found of any mention of LGBTQIA+ issues throughout the year or during Pride Month in June.

Since Sprite is part of the Coca-Cola Company, the corporation should also be briefly mentioned. In recent decades, the Coca-Cola Company has often been associated with ethical

misconduct, such as the poor health and safety of its products, unlawful competitive practices, racism and intimidation of employees, unfair treatment of distributors, and the pollution and pillaging of natural resources (Logan & Tindall, 2014). When the corporation released a series of activist advertising campaigns promoting diversity and fairness in recent years, their authenticity was often questioned (Logan & Tindall, 2014).

6.2.2 Starbucks

Starbucks Corporation is an American multinational coffee house and roastery chain with over 17.000 shops worldwide and revenues that tripled over the past decade to $33.8 billion in 2021 (Starbucks Corporation, 2021). The company is often associated with revolutionising coffee shop culture and maintaining an ongoing hype around its products as a lifestyle good with various emotional benefits (Thompson & Arsel, 2004). Their main target group is between 25 and 40 years old, has a high income and until recently mainly belonged to the Millennial generation (Fromm, 2014, as cited in Haskova, 2015). However, as there are various TikTok trends with Starbucks products, the target group seems to be rejuvenating and now includes upper-middle class Gen Z consumers (Wang et al., 2022).

Starbucks markets itself as a place that is about more than just selling coffee, but about "creating an environment of warmth and belonging, connecting with transparency, dignity and respect, and challenging the status quo" (Starbucks Corporation, 2022). The 'Inclusion & Diversity' section on the brand's homepage shows which educational programmes are offered to their partners – how Starbucks refers to its employees –, the quotas of female and BIPOC employees (although without specifying the respective company level) and information about additional projects such as 'The Starbucks Community Resilience Fund', which supports small businesses and community development projects in BIPOC communities in the USA (Starbuck Corporation, 2022).

Their CEO Howard Schultz is known for getting involved in controversial issues, driving social change and raising awareness of various controversial issues such as racism, equality and AIDS education within the company. While some believe that his CEO activism oversteps limits, as corporations already have too much influence on the political system and by raising political issues, they enact even more power while only further eroding democracy, others encourage CEO activism as a good way to exert political influence in an unusually transparent and framed way (Chatterji & Toffel, 2015).

In terms of the LGBTQIA+ theme as it was selected for the present study, the Starbucks website also features much LGBTQIA+-related content, such as a timeline of the brand's practices showing donations to LGBTQIA+ non-profit organisations and contributions to projects over the years, as well as the founding of the Starbucks Pride Alliance Network in 2007 (Peiper, 2022).

The campaign used in the empirical study that was released in 2020 by Starbucks UK raises awareness of what it can mean for some transgender and gender non-conforming people to use their new name in public. The video follows a transgender man in various situations where his dead name, i.e., the name the person used before transitioning (Brito, 2018), has been used, all the way to the Starbucks shop where he can finally introduce himself with his new name when asked what name to write on the coffee (Starbucks UK, 2020). According to the brand, the campaign was "inspired by real life experiences of people who were transitioning [...] as they found Starbucks stores to be a safe space, where their new name was accepted, and they could be recognised as who they are" (Starbucks Corporation, 2019). The campaign video of Starbucks can be found here.

6.3 Measures

One of the most important considerations directly related to the quality of research is the construction of the survey. The structure of the questions asked to the participants can determine the quality of the results and allow relevant conclusions to be drawn regarding the research question, while on the contrary, an inconsistent set of questions can lead to results with limited empirical basis and consequently with little academic relevance (Creswell, 2009). To ensure a quality standard for this research and to provide it with validated research parameters recognised by the academic community, a pre-existing scale was used to measure the brand equity of both brands in the pretest and posttest. As mentioned in the literature review, Keller's (1993, 2001) conceptualisation of brand equity is considered one of the most comprehensible (Vukasovič, 2015; Kuhn et al., 2008). In order to create a survey that reflects the aforementioned premises of brand equity from the consumer's perspective, the items to be used were drawn from a measurement scale developed by the same author in a paper entitled "Building Customer-Based Brand Equity: A Blueprint for Creating Strong Brands" (Keller, 2001). As far as could be determined, this paper has been cited over 3.000 times (Google Scholar, 2022). Other academic papers from renowned marketing or communication science journals have also used this scale to test their research questions (e.g., Faircloth & Alford, 2001;

Spry et al., 2011; Foroudi et al., 2018), which is why this scale was also recognised as an effective way to obtain empirically sound results for the present work.

Keller's (2001) proposed set of items for measuring customer-related brand equity was used to obtain high quality measures of the brand equity of Sprite and Starbuck before and after the application of the stimulus (i.e., a brand activism campaign). It includes 72 items reflecting his proposed six dimensions of brand equity: brand salience, brand performance, brand imagery, brand judgement, brand feelings and brand resonance. As outlined in section 5.2, the dimensions of brand salience and brand performance were not considered in this dissertation, as they lack relevance to the issue under investigation and for reasons of survey design. Accordingly, no questions were asked in either the pretest or posttest to determine participants' attitudes towards these two dimensions for either brand. Since the hypotheses of this dissertation only relate to the other four dimensions, only the items from Keller's (2001) scale that are used to measure these dimensions were adopted.

If the dimensions of brand salience and brand performance are disregarded, 55 items remain to measure the other four dimensions. However, the applicability of such a large number of questions, especially given the survey design of this work, which included a pretest and a posttest for two brands, so that participants had to answer all questions four times (twice for each brand), was considered excessive and potentially ineffective. Several studies have addressed the ideal survey length and pointed out that, especially in online surveys, data quality can be compromised in terms of a higher proportion of response bias (see 6.4) and higher dropout rates (Deutskens et al., 2004, as cited in Revilla & Ochoa, 2017) if the survey is too long. Revilla & Ochoa (2017) conclude that a survey should not take longer than 10–12 minutes on average, especially if no incentives are offered. As no monetary incentives were offered in the present study and repeated questions have also been shown to lead to higher dropout rates, attention was paid to not exceed the 12-minute limit when designing the survey. For this reason, it was necessary to adjust the original measurement scale so that the length of the survey would not impair the number of responses collected. The adaptation process for each dimension was carried out as described below.

Brand imagery was originally measured with nine items (Keller, 2001). All items that originally had a question format were translated into statements in order to achieve a uniform format with the items of the other dimensions. Keller (2001) distinguished between four different sub-categories of brand imagery: user profiles, personality and values, purchase and

usage situation; history, heritage and experiences. Since the latter sub-categories were not addressed in the review of literature on the impact of brand activism on brand equity (Du et al., 2010; Vredenburg et al., 2020) and thus it can be assumed that participants' opinions on these sub-dimensions would not be strongly influenced by the stimuli of the study, they were omitted. To measure each brand's personality and values, Keller's (2001) original scale asks to rate each brand on nine characteristics derived from Aaker's (1997) Dimensions of Brand Personality. This list was also adapted to include only the characteristics applicable to the context.

The *brand judgement* scale consists of 19 items and is divided into four sub-categories: brand quality, brand credibility, brand consideration, and brand superiority (Keller, 2001). Since the focus of this dimension is on brand credibility, a concept closely related to brand authenticity, which is of particular importance for brand activism (Mohart et al., 2015; Vredenburg et al., 2020), only the most important item of each of the three other sub-dimensions was selected. For brand credibility, all but four items were omitted as they were considered redundant to other items in other dimensions or too specific. For this dimension, again, all items were converted from questions to statements in order to achieve a more fluid interpretation between the dimensions addressed and the available response options.

Brand feelings are measured in the original scale by rating six feelings: warmth, fun, excitement, security, social approval, and self-respect. Again, the scale was adapted to limit the survey to a reasonable length for the scope of a Master's dissertation by selecting the three most relevant feelings for brand activism, on the basis of the literature reviewed (Fritsche et al., 2008; Kervyn et al., 2012; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2018). As with the other two dimensions, all items were transformed and presented in the form of statements.

*Brand resonanc*e is again made up of further sub-categories: brand loyalty, brand attachment, brand engagement, and brand community. Since all four subcategories were considered relevant to the research question (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2018), but considering all items would again have exceeded a reasonable length of the survey, two items per subcategory were selected, with the exception of the brand loyalty measure. Since this scale contains a reverse-coded item and these items are helpful in detecting response bias (Creswell, 2009), and effects of brand activism on brand loyalty are among the most observed in existing literature, it was deemed appropriate to measure brand loyalty with three items.

The adapted measures were included in the survey, using a Likert scale, a widely used psychometric tool in social science research to measure attitudes or opinions (Joshi et al., 2015). The Likert scale is a valid and reliable method for measuring subjectively preferred thoughts, feelings and actions (Creswell, 2009), consisting of a series of statements or items offered for a real or hypothetical situation, with participants indicating their level of agreement with each statement (Joshi et al., 2015). Typically, this scale is used with five, seven or even nine response options, with a neutral point in the middle (McLeod, 2008). For this survey, the 5-point Likert scale (1 – "strongly disagree"; 2 – "disagree"; 3 – "neither nor"; 4 – "agree"; 5 – "strongly agree") was chosen.

From the above, a survey including 22 items resulted to measure the four brand equity dimensions of Sprite and Starbucks at two different time points – before and after the application of the stimulus (see Appendix A). The items were each presented in a random order, as this is a recommended method to avoid remembering answers when items are asked more than once (Bogner & Landrock, 2016).

During the pretest, participants were given the following instruction: "On a scale of 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, please indicate how you agree with the following statements when you think of the brand (Sprite/Starbucks)." For the posttest, the instructions were slightly adjusted so as not to confuse participants by asking the same questions again: "After watching the campaign video, please give your input on the brand (Sprite/Starbucks) once again. On a scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, please indicate how much you agree with the following statements when you think of the brand (Sprite/Starbucks)."

Before viewing the campaign videos, participants had to indicate their agreement with two items measuring brand activism. Since the author did not find any previous measurement scales to assess participants' overall attitudes towards brand activism, a scale was adapted to measure consumer perceptions towards cause-related marketing. The original scale is from Ross et al. (1992) and was used in their study after a stimulus. Since the purpose of this survey was to determine participants' unbiased opinions of brand activism before a stimulus was applied, not all items were useful. Therefore, two items were selected and transformed from questions to statements. One of them was also transformed into a reverse-coded item to check whether participants were still paying attention after the first part of the survey. Both items were scored on the same 5-point Likert scale (see Appendix B).

Together with the 88 items measuring the brand equity dimensions of both brands in the pretest and posttest (22 items per brand and time point), the two items measuring participants' general opinion on brand activism and two optional open-ended questions asking participants to share their thoughts after viewing the campaign of the respective brand, the entire survey consisted of 92 items/questions. Two demographic questions were added at the end asking for the gender of the participants and – to assign them to Gen Z or not – whether they were born in 1995 or before (non-Gen Z) or 1996 or after (Gen Z), making it 94 items in total.

6.4 Sample and Data Collection

The study was conducted in a period from May to June 2022. The majority of responses was achieved by posting the survey in surveycircle.com, a research platform where users earn points for each completed survey in order to make their own study more visible in the ranking to attract participants themselves (SurveyCircle, 2022). As this platform is mainly used by other students, it is more of a convenient sample, as most participants probably have an academic background.

The population size of German Gen Z, for example, is about 13 million people (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2022). About 350 study participants should take part in order to achieve a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%. The survey was closed when 358 responses were reached. The data set of 358 responses was then thoroughly checked for invalid responses, i.e., all responses were checked for response time, response biases and consistency of reverse-coded items. In case of doubt, the answers given in the open-ended question were checked to decide whether the response data should be excluded from the sample. The criteria used to exclude invalid responses will be described below.

The *response time* was set at a minimum of eight minutes, as this is the minimum time needed to watch both campaign videos (Sprite: 1:36 minutes and Starbucks: 1:29 minutes) and thoroughly answer all 92 items, excluding the two optional open-ended questions. All responses that were completed in under 8 minutes were excluded. No maximum time limit was set at which responses would have been excluded.

Response biases describe a wide range of tendencies of participants to answer questions inaccurately or incorrectly (Bogner & Landrock, 2016). These biases are common in research involving participant self-report, such as surveys, and can be extremely detrimental to the validity and reliability of the results (Creswell, 2009). There are a number of recommendations for avoiding response bias, which were taken into account. It has been found that *socially*

desirable responding is not very common in anonymous online surveys (Bogner & Landrock, 2016). For this reason, it was emphasised that the survey was conducted anonymously and that no inferences could be made about individuals at the beginning of the survey. In addition, the topic of the study was not revealed before the participants had completed the survey, in order to avoid biased responses when they knew what was being measured and could have systematically changed their attitude accordingly.

Another common type of response bias in self-reported surveys is *acquiescence*, which describes a participant's tendency to agree with items regardless of their content (Bogner & Landrock, 2016) A common way to avoid such bias is to include reverse-coded items (Creswell, 2009). This was taken into account by including one reverse-coded item for each brand in the pretest and posttest to measure brand loyalty and to capture attitudes towards brand activism in general between pretest and posttest.

Further types of response bias that have been assessed as a potential threat to the validity of the present work are *moderacy response bias*, i.e., the tendency to select a response option in the middle of the scale, and *extreme response bias*, i.e., the tendency to select extreme options in rating scales regardless of the content of the question (Bogner & Landrock, 2016) These types of response bias may not be truly avoidable within survey design, but a series of data analyses can be conducted to rule out responses where the same answer was given conspicuously often, especially with regard to reverse-coded items. It should be noted that the present work is based on existing scales that contain some extreme wording to measure participants' attitudes, and brand evaluation is not usually a subject on which people have very extreme opinions; hence a high number of moderate or extreme responses is not necessarily a sign of systematic bias. It was therefore decided to exclude all responses in which more than 90% of all items were rated the same, i.e., exactly the same rating option was chosen for at least 81 out of 90 Likert-scale items, assuming that these participants just randomly clicked through the survey. For all responses where the same answer score was given for more than 80%, the author individually checked the consistency with the reverse-coded items and the answers given in the open-ended question to decide whether to exclude the response or keep it in the dataset.

Table 2. Dataset validation steps.

	Number of interviews before the check	Number of excluded interviews
Response time	358	43
Moderacy response bias	315	12
Extreme response bias	303	26
Valid responses	277	

After conducting all validity checks, 277 responses remained (see Table 2). However, since this work focuses on Gen Z consumers, the responses were further filtered by the year of birth indicated. Accordingly, a dataset of 194 valid responses of Gen Z participants was mainly used for this work. Table 3 shows the frequencies and percentages of the participants' demographic characteristics. Among Gen Z participants, 137 participants (70,6%) identify as female, 56 (28,9%) as male and one participant (0,5%) as non-binary.

Table 3. Sample overview.

	Frequency	Percentage
Generation		
Gen Z (born in 1996 or after)	194	70%
Non-Gen Z (born in 1995 or before)	83	30%
Gender		
Female	187	67,5%
Male	88	31,8%
Non-binary	1	0,4%
Prefer not to respond	1	0,4%

6.5 Procedure

An online survey was carried out consisting of six parts. First, an introductory text invited participants to take part in the survey as part of obtaining a Master's degree, indicated the expected average response time and informed about voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality of data use. After agreeing to the terms, participants were directed to the second page, where they were asked to indicate their level of agreement with 22 items measuring the four dimensions of brand equity for each brand. Participants were then asked for their general opinion on brand activism on the third page. The fourth page of the online survey contained both stimuli. Participants were asked to watch one campaign video from each brand thoroughly and to share some thoughts on what they had seen for each brand in a voluntary, open-ended

question. They were given as much time as they needed to watch both campaign videos. After being exposed to both conditions, on page five participants had to indicate their opinion of both brands by answering the same 22 items. Finally, participants were asked to indicate their gender and year of birth in order to classify them as Gen Z or not. As mentioned, throughout the study, the research question was not mentioned to avoid biased answers, as participants might think that they had to change their opinion about the brands after watching the campaign videos. At the end, participants were fully debriefed and thanked for participating in the study.

6.6 Ethical Consideration

Ethical aspects were considered throughout the data collection and analysis. At the beginning of the survey, participants were asked for their consent, explained the purpose of the study, that their participation was entirely voluntary, that they could decline or withdraw at any time, and that the data collection would be kept confidential and used for academic purposes only. Only if the participants had given their consent were they allowed to complete the survey. At the end of the survey, participants were given the researcher's contact details for further questions or to be informed about the results of the study. All data was collected and analysed anonymously without recording any personal, identity-revealing information or contact associations.

7. Data Analysis

7.1 Overview of Data Analysis

The data obtained through the survey was processed using the statistical analysis software SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Once all data had been cleaned according to the steps described in 6.4 and a valid sample was available, the second phase of the analysis of the results focused on statistical inference, which provides insights into the research question and hypotheses.

As a first measure, the internal consistency of the questions on the four brand equity dimensions and the two brand activism questions was checked by applying Cronbach's alpha coefficient (see Table 4), which helps to estimate the reliability of the scale used (Voss et al., 2000). The value of Cronbach's alpha can vary on a scale from 0 to 1, with values below 0,6 being completely unacceptable and values above 0,9 indicating excellent consistency between items (Zeller, 2005).

Table 4. Cronbach's alpha analysis (N=277).

Brand Equity Dimensions	**Items**	**Pretest**		**Posttest**	
		Sprite	Starbucks	Sprite	Starbucks
Brand Imagery	BI1	0,79	0,71	0,81	0,84
	BI2				
	BI3				
Brand Judgements	QU	0,83	0,81	0,91	0,92
	CR1				
	CR2				
	CR3				
	CR4				
	SUP				
	CO				
Brand Feelings	FE1	0,77	0,82	0,91	0,92
	FE2				
	FE3				
Brand Resonance	BL1	0,9	0,93	0,93	0,96
	BL2				
	BL3 (R)				
	BA1				
	BA2				

	ENG1				
	ENG2				
	COM1				
	COM2				
Brand Activism	BAC1 (R)	0,79			
	BAC2				

The evaluation of Cronbach's alpha indicates an overall good to very good internal consistency, which is a positive aspect regarding the data and ensures the reliability of the questions asked. As can be seen, the scores for the posttest scales are slightly better, which could be explained by either a higher familiarity with the items or brands or an alignment of opinions post-stimulus.

To test the four hypotheses, a descriptive analysis was conducted, supplemented by a t-test to determine the statistical significance of the results. To gain further insights, other data obtained through the survey was also used to examine general opinion of brand activism and the authenticity of advertising campaigns as influencing factors for the relationship between brand equity and brand activism, and to control for generational effects by also using data from non-Gen Z participants. Apart from the latter, where the attitudes of all participants were taken into account (N=277), the other analysis steps were only carried out for the Gen Z sample (N=194).

7.2 Hypotheses Testing

7.2.1 Results

In testing all four hypotheses, it was deemed useful to proceed with a descriptive analysis of all brand equity items to better summarise the information gathered. Table 5 contains an evaluation, comparing the pretest and posttest measurements of maximum, minimum, average and standard deviation of the responses per sub-category and dimension for the brand Sprite, which is covered first. It allows first relevant conclusions to be drawn about the attitude of the Gen Z participants towards the brand Sprite, especially when interpreting the figures from the mean values of the individual dimensions or sub-categories. It becomes clear that the participants perceive the brand overall rather negatively to neutrally. Looking at the mean values of the individual sub-categories, *brand quality* and *brand consideration* are the most positive compared to other more emotionally charged sub-categories such as *brand imagery* or *brand loyalty*. This could indicate that participants probably do not really dislike Sprite as a brand, but just feel very indifferent towards it and therefore negate overly positively formulated

statements, i.e., they do not share any particular values with the brand, feel particularly loyal towards it or connected to other users.

Table 5. Descriptive analysis of Sprite's measurements (N=194, Gen Z participants).

	Brand Imagery		**Brand Judgements (total)**		Brand Quality		Brand Credibility		Brand Superiority		Brand Consideration	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
N	194	194	194	194	194	194	194	194	194	194	194	194
Minimum	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Maximum	4,67	4,67	4,43	4,71	5,00	5,00	4,50	5,00	5,00	5,00	5,00	5,00
Mean	2,76	2,82	2,72	2,90	3,38	3,07	2,44	2,82	2,59	2,78	3,30	3,19
SD	0,80	0,93	0,74	0,92	1,05	1,11	0,80	1,02	1,19	1,11	1,04	1,12

	Brand Feelings		**Brand Resonance (overall)**		Brand Loyalty		Brand Attachment		Brand Engagement		Brand Community	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
N	194	194	194	194	194	194	194	194	194	194	194	194
Minimum	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Maximum	4,33	4,67	4,78	4,44	4,67	4,67	5,00	4,50	5,00	4,50	5,00	5,00
Mean	2,29	2,76	2,23	2,39	2,42	2,48	2,29	2,44	2,03	2,28	2,11	2,32
SD	0,87	1,06	0,84	0,92	1,07	1,02	0,89	1,06	0,92	1,01	0,96	1,07

Comparing the mean scores for the pretest and posttest measures, a slight increase of 0,2 on average can be seen for most sub-categories. The strongest increase in mean scores from the pretest to the posttest can be seen for the dimension of *brand feelings* and the sub-category *brand credibility*. In fact, the only sub-categories that scored lower were *brand quality* and *brand consideration*, suggesting a general levelling of ratings across categories.

Since mean values only provide limited statically significant information (Benjamin et al., 2018), the significance of the differences and effect size was calculated using a t-test for each dimension and sub-category. Table 6 shows again that a positive increase was observed for most dimensions regarding the brand Sprite, except for *brand quality* and *consideration*, explaining the negative value. The statistical significance of the path coefficients was judged at the 0,05 level. Assuming a significance level of 95% (one-tailed), a significant difference for most dimensions and sub-categories, with the exception of *brand imagery* and *brand loyalty* can be found. The last column of the table indicates the effect size. Cohen's d is an indice that

compares how substantial the difference is between two means. Cohen suggested that d = 0,2 is considered a "small" effect size, 0,5 a "medium" effect size and 0,8 a "large" effect size (Becker, 2000). For most sub-categories, Cohen's d points to a medium to large effect size, supporting the conclusions made based on the descriptive analysis above.

Table 6. T-test results of Sprite's measurements (N=194, Gen Z participants).

	Mean		**Difference Post vs. Pre**	**Significance**		**Effect Size**
	Pre	Post		T (df)	p (one-tailed)	Cohen's d
Brand Imagery	2,76	2,82	0,06	1,11 (193)	0,13	0,71
Brand Judgements	2,72	2,90	0,18	4,98 (193)	<,001	0,52
Brand Credibility	2,44	2,82	0,38	7,25 (193)	<,001	0,73
Brand Quality	3,38	3,07	-0,31	-4,86 (193)	<,001	0,89
Brand Consideration	3,30	3,19	-0,12	-2,04 (193)	0,02	0,81
Brand Superiority	2,59	2,78	0,19	2,68 (193)	0,05	0,99
Brand Feelings	2,29	2,76	0,47	8,27 (193)	<,001	0,79
Brand Resonance	2,23	2,39	0,15	4,49 (193)	<,001	0,47
Brand Attachment	2,29	2,44	0,14	3,11 (193)	0,05	0,65
Brand Loyalty	2,42	2,48	0,06	1,18 (193)	0,12	0,69
Brand Engagement	2,03	2,28	0,24	4,85 (193)	<,001	0,70
Brand Community	2,11	2,32	0,21	3,50 (193)	<,001	0,84

Taking a look at the descriptive analysis for the brand Starbucks (see Table 7), it seems that participants have a slightly better attitude compared to Sprite, ranging from neutral to slightly positive. This is supported by the calculated maximum of 5 (the best response option: "strongly agree") for most dimensions and sub-categories, compared to Sprite, where only in the post-test more participants provided the highest rating for several dimensions. For this brand, the dimensions or sub-categories that represent emotional benefits such as *brand feelings, brand superiority, brand loyalty* or *brand attachment* are among the most positively rated.

Comparing the mean values for the posttest measures, a slight increase is noticeable again, but it is even lower compared to Sprite, with an increase of 0,1 on average. The strongest increase in mean values from the pretest to the posttest can be observed in the sub-category *brand quality*. This suggests that participants do not necessarily like Starbucks because of its brand or product quality, as it seems to be the most malleable sub-category, but rather like the brand because of intangible, symbolic attributes of the brand, such as that a certain self-concept is strengthened by using the brand, or the values shared with other brand users.

Table 7. Descriptive analysis of Starbucks' measurements (N=194, Gen Z participants).

	Brand Imagery		**Brand Judgements (total)**		Brand Quality		Brand Credibility		Brand Superiority		Brand Consideration	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
N	194	194	194	194	194	194	194	194	194	194	194	194
Minimum	1,67	1,67	1,29	1,14	1,00	1,00	1,75	1,25	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Maximum	4,67	4,67	4,86	4,86	5,00	5,00	4,75	4,75	5,00	5,00	5,00	5,00
Mean	3,17	3,33	3,15	3,28	3,36	3,57	2,89	3,07	3,69	3,69	3,45	3,42
SD	0,66	0,66	0,56	0,74	1,07	0,99	0,59	0,72	0,98	1,01	0,82	0,96

	Brand Feelings		**Brand Resonance (overall)**		Brand Loyalty		Brand Attachment		Brand Engagement		Brand Community	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
N	194	194	194	194	194	194	194	194	194	194	194	194
Minimum	1,00	1,00	1,56	1,22	2,33	1,00	2,00	1,00	1,50	1,00	2,50	1,00
Maximum	5,00	5,00	4,67	4,67	5,00	5,00	5,00	5,00	5,00	5,00	5,00	5,00
Mean	3,42	3,47	3,39	3,44	3,43	3,42	3,55	3,64	3,41	3,47	3,14	3,24
SD	0,64	0,73	0,52	0,76	0,72	0,83	0,68	0,84	0,72	0,92	0,66	0,84

Considering the t-test conducted to validate the significance of the differences in the brand equity evaluation of Starbucks before and after exposure to the stimulus, the number of significantly different dimensions and sub-categories is slightly lower (see Table 8). For the dimension of *brand feelings* and *brand resonance* and the sub-categories of *brand consideration, brand superiority* and *brand loyalty*, no significant differences could be detected. Looking at the effect size for most dimensions or sub-categories, it is only small to medium, which might be related to the smaller attitude changes between the pretest and posttest measurements compared to Sprite.

Table 8. T-test results of Starbucks' measurements (N=194, Gen Z participants).

	Mean		**Difference Post vs. Pre**	**Significance**		**Effect Size**
	Pre	Post		T (df)	p (one-tailed)	Cohen's d
Brand Imagery	3,17	3,33	0,16	5,58 (193)	<,001	0,40
Brand Judgements	3,15	3,28	0,13	3,98 (193)	<,001	0,45
Brand Credibility	2,89	3,07	0,18	5,94 (193)	<,001	0,43
Brand Quality	3,36	3,57	0,21	4,41 (193)	<,001	0,65
Brand Consideration	3,45	3,42	-0,03	-0,51 (193)	0,31	0,85

Brand Superiority	3,69	3,69	-0,01	-0,08 (193)	0,47	0,96
Brand Feelings	3,42	3,47	0,05	1,55 (193)	0,06	0,46
Brand Resonance	3,39	3,44	0,05	1,16 (193)	0,12	0,62
Brand Attachment	3,55	3,64	0,09	1,71 (193)	0,05	0,69
Brand Loyalty	3,43	3,42	-0,01	-0,11 (193)	0,46	0,64
Brand Engagement	3,41	3,47	0,06	1,03 (193)	0,04	0,80
Brand Community	3,14	3,24	0,10	1,64 (193)	0,05	0,81

7.2.2 Analysis

Looking at the mean values of the measurements before and after the treatment (brand activism campaigns) for each dimension, there is an increase in the average post-attitudes for both brands with regard to all dimensions - *brand imagery, brand judgements, brand feelings* and *brand resonance*. Hence, an alignment of all dimensions towards a slightly better brand equity evaluation can be assumed. In the following, the results for each dimension will be summarised and it will be concluded whether the hypotheses were supported based on these results.

7.2.2.1 *Brand Imagery*. H1 posited that the emotional and symbolic benefits of a brand in the eyes of Gen Z consumers who value social engagement will increase when they are confronted with the brand's stance on a social issue that matches their own stance on that issue. While there was a significant increase from the pretest to posttest measure of the *brand imagery* dimension for the brand Starbucks (t (193) = 5,58, p = <,001), there was no significant difference for the brand Sprite (t (193) = 1,11, p = 0,13). Therefore, H1, that exposure to brand activism positively influences how brand imagery is perceived by Gen Z consumers is partially supported.

7.2.2.2 *Brand Judgement.* H2 predicted that learning about a brand's attitude would increase *brand credibility*, and affect heuristics were expected to improve *brand quality, superiority* and *consideration*. Indeed, the sub-category of *brand credibility* was one of the most improved dimensions for Sprite and Starbucks in the posttest, suggesting that the slightly improved brand attitude for both brands may be related to a generally more authentic perception through their brand activism campaigns. In addition, the sub-category *brand quality* increased significantly for both brands, while the sub-categories *brand superiority* and *brand consideration* increased significantly only for the brand Sprite. Nevertheless, for the overall dimension of *brand judgements*, a positive and significant difference was found between pretest and posttest measures for both, Sprite (t (193) = 4,98, p = <,001) and Starbucks (t (193) = 3,98, p = <,001),

which is why H2, that Gen Z consumers' brand judgements are positively influenced by exposure to brand activism, receives full support.

7.2.2.3 *Brand Feelings*. H3 postulated that feelings of warmth, social approval and self-respect would improve, as both campaigns dealt with an emotionally charged issue and aimed to evoke compassion towards the protagonists. While brand feelings in the case of Sprite did significantly improve (t (193) = 8,27, p = <,001), they did not with significance for the brand Starbucks (t (193) = 1,55, p = 0,06), partially supporting H3, that exposure to brand activism positively influences Gen Z consumers' brand feelings.

7.2.2.4 *Brand Resonance*. H4 posited that exposure to brand activism would have a positive impact on behavioural aspects. For both brands, the sub-categories *brand attachment, brand engagement* and *brand community* showed a significant difference between pretest to posttest measures, while the sub-category *brand loyalty* showed no significant difference for either brand. Overall, however, the dimension of *brand resonance* was found to have a significant difference only for the brand Sprite (t (193) = 4,49, p = <,001) and not for Starbucks (t (193) = 1,16, p = 0,12). Given this, H4, that exposure to brand activism has a positive impact on Gen Z consumers' brand resonance, also receives partial support.

7.3 Influencing Factors

In this section, the data obtained will be further explored to improve the understanding of potential influencing factors on the relationship between brand activism and brand equity dimensions.

7.3.1 General Attitude of Brand Activism

Having concluded that many dimensions and sub-categories did improve with statistical significance from pretest to posttest, a closer look should be taken at whether these changes in attitudes can be attributed to a general positive opinion on brand activism, regardless of the specific campaigns used.

Table 9 gives an overview of the absolute and relative frequencies of the participants' opinions on brand activism. For this purpose, item BAC1 (see Appendix B) was recoded and the mean values of both items were calculated. Recoding the items allows for checking for response bias and exclusion of any responses that were suspected of not having expressed their opinion truthfully (Bogner & Landrock, 2016). With this in mind, it can be assumed that the level of agreement on brand activism reflects the true opinion of the participants. It is clear that the vast

majority of Gen Z participants indicated a high level of agreement with the two items that asked whether brands should address socio-political issues and whether taking a stand as a brand is a good way to draw attention to socio-political issues. In order to investigate how different levels of agreement with brand activism influence the brand equity results, participants were divided into groups according to their attitude towards brand activism. For this purpose, a new variable was added in which all participants with a mean value of the two brand activism items of 2,99 and below were classified as against brand activism, with a mean of 3,0 as neutral and with a mean of 3,01 and above as in favour (see Table 9).

Table 9. Attitudes towards brand activism (N=194, Gen Z participants).

Mean Value	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulated percent	Attitude Group	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulated percent
1,5	1	0,5%	0,5%	opposing brand activism	7	3,6%	3,6%
2,0	3	1,5%	2,1%				
2,5	3	1,5%	3,6%				
3,0	11	5,7%	9,3%	neutral	11	5,7%	9,3%
3,5	29	14,9%	24,2%	supporting brand activism	176	90,7%	100%
4,0	79	40,7%	64,9%				
4,5	41	21,1%	86,1%				
5,0	27	13,9%	100%				

Figure 7 and 8 show a graphical representation of the mean values of posttest measures per brand equity dimension per attitude group.

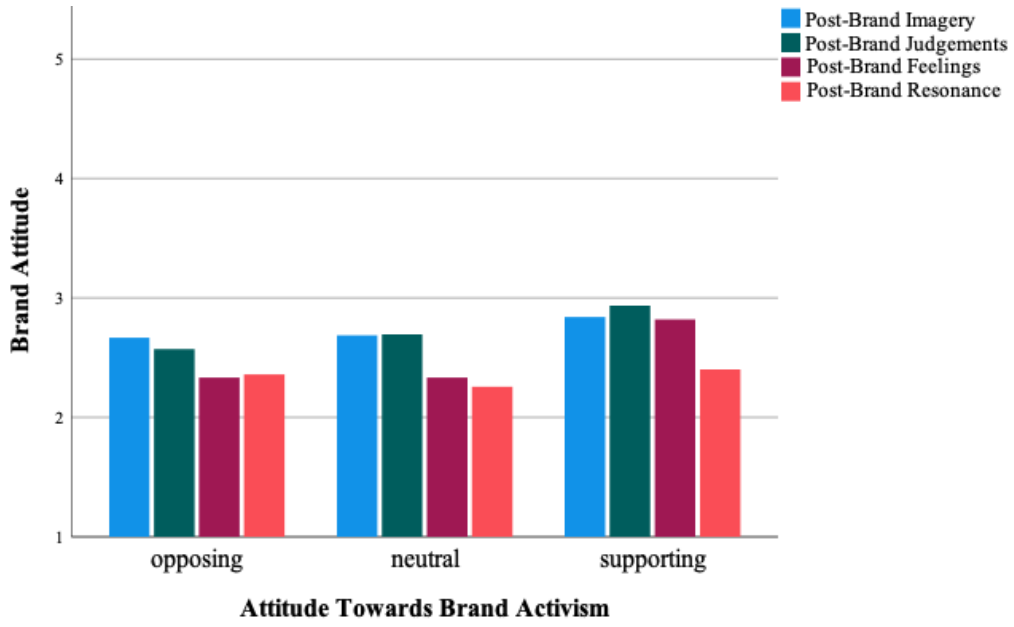

Figure 7. Posttest measurements of Sprite per attitude group (N=194, Gen Z participants).

For the brand Sprite (see Figure 7), there is a slight difference between the groups in terms of their brand equity evaluation after exposure to the brand activism campaign. It seems that those who are in favour of brand activism have a slightly better opinion of Sprite in all dimensions than those who feel indifferent or oppose brand activism.

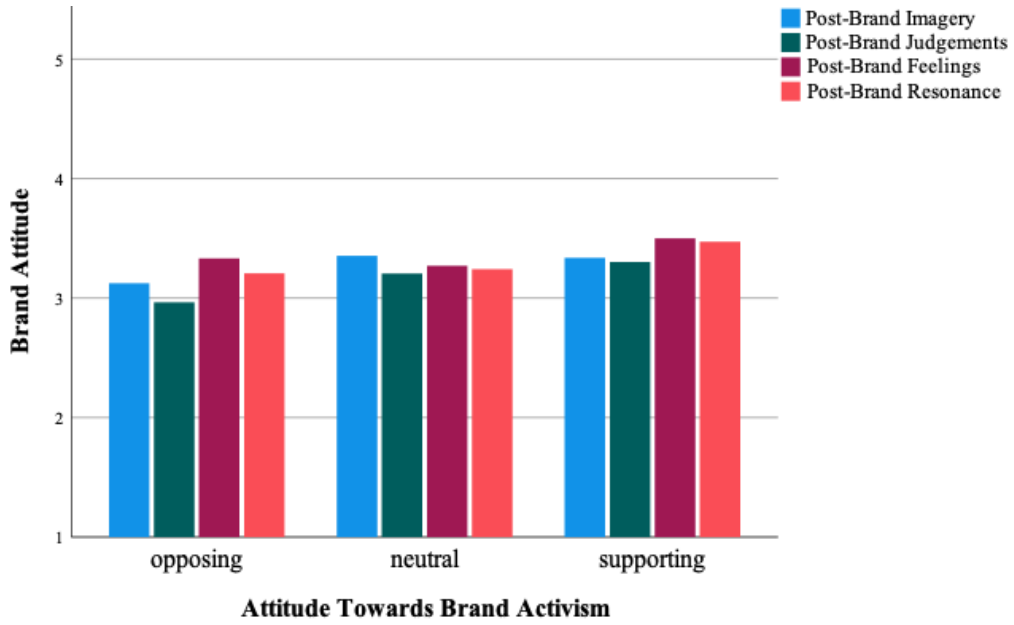

Figure 8. Posttest measurements of Starbucks per attitude group (N=194, Gen Z participants).

The observation that participants' general opinion of brand activism might be reflected through how they evaluate a brand communicating an activist message is not as strong for Starbucks. Figure 8 shows that comparing posttest measures of all dimensions are at a rather similar level across the three groups.

Although the two figures suggest that participants' general attitude towards brand activism may influence their perceptions of the brand after exposure to the activist campaigns, no substantial differences could be demonstrated for this. An ANOVA with general opinion on brand activism as a between-subjects factor and all four brand equity dimensions as a within-subjects factor did not yield statistical significance (see Appendix C).

The correlations between the posttest measures of all four dimensions and the general attitude towards brand activism were also checked. Table 10 and 11 shows that Pearson indice also finds no statistically significant correlation between the posttest brand equity scores and participants' attitudes towards brand activism. However, a high statistically significant correlation between the four dimensions was identified, which supports the internal consistency of the scale.

Table 10. Correlation analysis of Sprite's measurements (N=194, Gen Z participants).

		Post-Brand Imagery	Post-Brand Judgements	Post-Brand Feelings	Post-Brand Resonance	Activism Attitude
Brand Imagery	Pearson Correlation	1	0,85	0,78	0,77	0,01
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<,001	<,001	<,001	0,88
	N	194	194	194	194	194
Brand Judgements	Pearson Correlation	0,85	1	0,81	0,79	0,02
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001		<,001	<,001	0,77
	N	194	194	194	194	194
Brand Feelings	Pearson Correlation	0,78	0,81	1	0,80	0,08
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	<,001		<,001	0,27
	N	194	194	194	194	194
Brand Resonance	Pearson Correlation	0,77	0,79	0,80	1	0,01
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	<,001	<,001		0,94
	N	194	194	194	194	194

Table 11. Correlation analysis of Starbucks' measurements (N=194, Gen Z participants).

		Post-Brand Imagery	Post-Brand Judgements	Post-Brand Feelings	Post-Brand Resonance	Activism Attitude
Brand Imagery	Pearson Correlation	1	0,76	0,71	0,73	0,03
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<,001	<,001	<,001	0,64
	N	194	194	194	194	194
Brand Judgements	Pearson Correlation	0,76	1	0,74	0,85	0,01
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001		<,001	<,001	0,88
	N	194	194	194	194	194
Brand Feelings	Pearson Correlation	0,71	0,74	1	0,81	0,02
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	<,001		<,001	0,81
	N	194	194	194	194	194
Brand Resonance	Pearson Correlation	0,73	0,85	0,81	1	0,04
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	<,001	<,001		0,56
	N	194	194	194	194	194

The above results suggest that generally positive attitudes towards brand activism can positively influence the overall evaluation of brands that engage in brand activism. However, as no statistical significance was found for this assumption, two other possibilities can be assumed: 1) Although participants support brand activism in general, this will not change their opinion of the brand, as other selection criteria are still more important to them, or 2) although participants support brand activism in general, they might perceive the brand's execution as

poor, i.e., not authentic, and therefore might rate the brand not better or even worse in the posttest.

7.3.2 Campaign Authenticity

In section 4.3, a framework was presented that can be used to evaluate brand activism in terms of its perceived authenticity. The following seeks to evaluate Sprite's and Starbucks' LGBTQIA+-themed campaign using the six dimensions of woke authenticity proposed by Mirzaei et al. (2022) to investigate a possible link between the posttest data and the perceived authenticity of the campaigns. To complement this analysis, responses to the open-ended question ("Please share below some thoughts on the Sprite/Starbucks campaign that you have just seen.") asked after each campaign were included.

To this end, the first step was to scan the participants' responses and identify common keywords, using an inductive approach. In inductive coding of qualitative data, there are no predefined codes, but the codes are developed in the course of analysing the data set (Thomas, 2006). In the second stage, after the key concepts were explored, each response was analysed to determine which of the six authenticity dimensions were addressed.

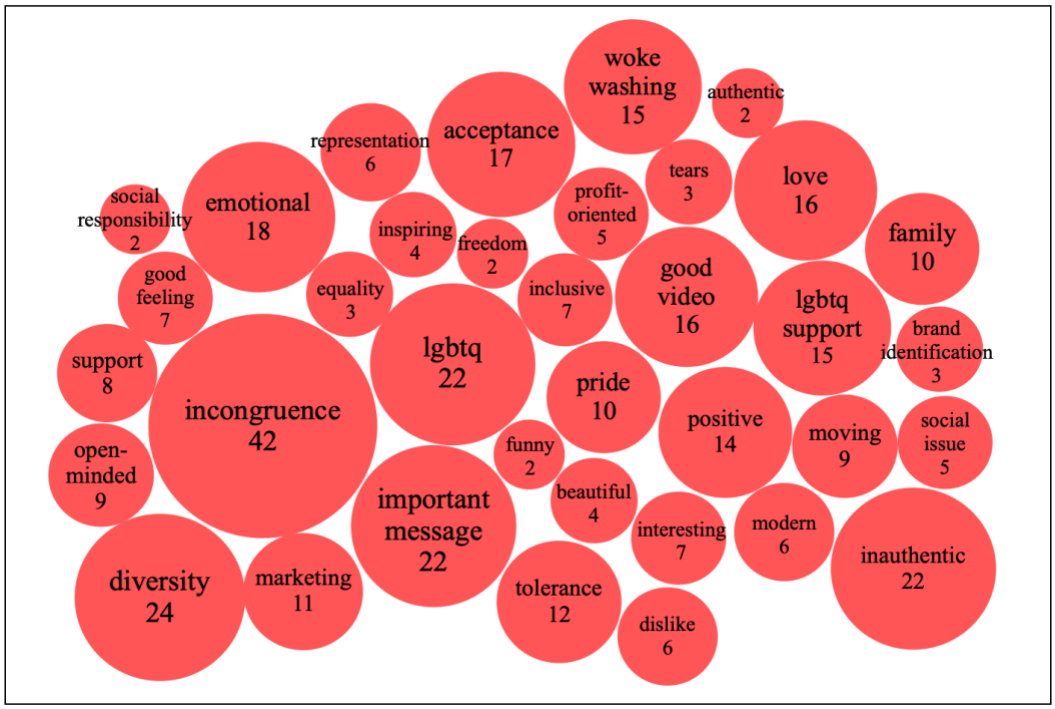

Figure 9. Concept map of the Sprite campaign.

For the Sprite campaign, 176 responses to the open-ended question were received from Gen Z participants. Figure 9 visually represents the most frequently mentioned keywords in participants' comments. The first stage of the analysis revealed an overall negative perception

of the campaign with key concepts emerging such as *incongruence, diversity, lgbtq, inauthentic, important message, emotional, acceptance, woke washing.* The predominant theme was the participants' criticism of the lack of connection between Sprite as a brand and the social issue raised, resulting in perceptions of insincerity and woke washing.

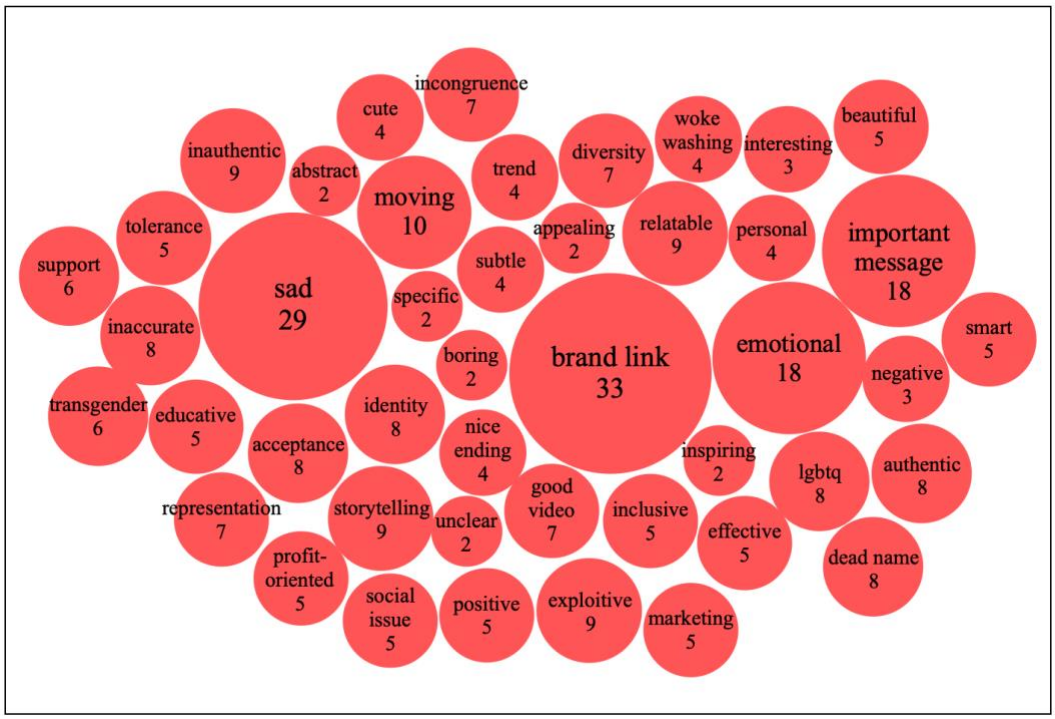

Figure 10. Concept map of the Starbucks campaign.

With regard to the Starbucks campaign, 171 responses were received, although these were somewhat less elaborate compared to the opinions on the Sprite campaign, possibly due to the fact that this was the second campaign shown to the participants and they were therefore somewhat less motivated to give a second detailed opinion. However, overall, the participants' perceptions were more positive and authentic, especially as many participants compared the second video to the Sprite campaign. In contrast to the Sprite campaign, many participants pointed out the better connection to the brand by incorporating Starbucks' unique selling proposition (USP, i.e., writing the customer's name on the coffee cup) into the core message of the video. The visual mapping also shows greater heterogeneity of key concepts compared to the Sprite campaign, where the same keywords were mentioned more frequently (see Figure 10). The predominant concepts here included *brand link*, *sad,* similar to Sprite, *emotional* and *important message*.

In the following, both campaigns will be analysed in more detail with regard to the six dimensions of woke authenticity (Mirzaei et al., 2022), supported by participants' comments.

7.3.2.1 *Social Context Independency*. As mentioned earlier, when brands publish campaigns or statements on highly debated social issues due to current events, they run the risk of being perceived as inauthentic and opportunistic (Mirzaei et al., 2022). In terms of LGBTQIA+-related content, brands that publish such content in June, Pride month, are often accused of being exploitative and only jumping on the bandwagon because they believe it is expected of them in that month. Considering the release date of the campaigns, in November 2019 and January 2020 respectively, and also that no other major events related to the LGBTQIA+ community took place in the winter of 2019/2020, as far as could be determined, this suggests activity independent of time and social context. However, for both brands, it was seemingly their first LGBTQIA+-related video campaign, so some pressure to release such a campaign equal to the competition could also be possible. In terms of participant comments, the majority felt that the Sprite campaign was more opportunistic and the Starbucks campaign was more authentic.

Sprite's campaign:

> *"I really liked the campaign. It's important that brands nowadays identify with the values of the consumers."*
>
> *"I feel like there is too much attention on this theme and brands are just using it to 'ride the hype'."*
>
> *"It does give me a sense of a somewhat pushed agenda, that's literally everywhere right now, there are some nice, pretty moments, about the acceptance of the loved ones, however I'm tired of seeing the same kind of campaigns from different brands that it seems that it's all not sincere, instead it's more like following the mainstream and trying to make bank on the topic that's getting viral everywhere."*

Starbucks' campaign:

> *"Important to shed light on the reality of trans people but Starbucks' success and profit is built on the violation of human rights. So, they rather use LGBTQ for their own good than being really innovative and leading social change, even when it's uncomfortable. Pride is just a trend for them that they use for their own purpose."*
>
> *"Same as above, seems to be instrumentalizing the 'trend' of showing solidarity with the queer community, to push their own business."*

7.3.2.2 *Inclusion*. As far as the dimension of inclusion is concerned, a big difference can be noticed between the two campaigns. While the Sprite campaign portrays various queer

characters, from a gay couple to a Drag queen or a transgender character, the Starbucks campaign only shows one story of a transgender character and therefore does not encompass the diversity of the queer community. Overall, however, participants' opinions on this dimension were quite positive and many were in favour of the brands' campaigns not only resonating with heteronormative customers. Considering what has been said before in terms of LGBTQIA+-advertising, both brands have managed to make their campaigns LGBTQIA+-centric by foregrounding queer characters and their issues, rather than just presenting them as a side character in a heteronormative family structure or as one of many social (minority) groups (Kiss, 2022).

Sprite's campaign:

> *"Innovative, funny, inclusive, [and loving]."*
>
> *"I like that they make LGBTQ People feel welcome. It seems really diverse."*
>
> *"Strong emphasis on inclusion and diversity. However, [it is] unclear how it relates to brand / product."*

Starbucks' campaign:

> *"[...]. I love that Starbucks is using their USP (name on the cup) to make their store a safe place for everyone without feeling judged. [...]."*
>
> *"[N]o prejudices, include everyone, everyone can be who they want to be at Starbucks."*
>
> *"Clearer connection to the brand than the other but less inclusive, still touching."*

7.3.2.3 *Sacrifice.* Both campaigns were not directly related to the dimension of the sacrifice, as they did not really show how they contribute to fighting discrimination and creating tolerance. While some respondents criticised that instead of spending money on an advertising campaign, brands could simply donate a significant portion of their profits, others were positive that both campaigns were not too aggressively linked to product advertising, but only showed their products in the background. As mentioned above, Starbucks has been contributing to its own Starbucks Pride Alliance Network since 2007 (Peiper, 2022). For Sprite, no records of donations or other contributions to the LGBTQIA+ community could be found directly from the brand, but its main company Coca Cola has some records of fundraising campaigns. Most recently, 136 unique digital collectibles were produced, the proceeds of which will be donated by Coca Cola to an LGBTQIA+ charity called OUT LGBT Well-Being, which serves the LGBTQIA+ community (The Coca Cola Company, 2022b).

Sprite's campaign:

> *"I was not expecting Sprite to be concerned with LGBTQ+ problematics, but the ad is pleasant to watch, understandable and clear. I also like Sprite not showing their product but really supporting the idea and bringing up the message of being free!"*
>
> *"On the one hand, it's nice that Sprite does support queer rights but then again it kind of seems like making profit on the back of minority groups. I would support this more if Sprite would actually do something to support those groups (i.e., a donation per bottle, awareness programs), instead of just using them for sale."*

Starbucks' campaign:

> *"It's nice, but I bet in real life they are not that interested in the life and problems of LGBTQ+ people."*
>
> *"I like that they didn't try to sell their product directly but rather show support for the LGBTQ movement."*

7.3.2.4 *Practice*. Linked in some way to the previous dimension is the dimension of practice. While the sacrifice aspect is more monetary, the dimension of practice is about the actual activities the brand does to support the cause (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Coca Cola Germany, for example, promotes the Rainbow Network, a network of employees who are committed to diversity and tolerance and against homophobia, founded in 2014 (Coca Cola Germany, 2022). They are also part of the German corporate initiative Charta der Vielfalt (charter of diversity) to promote and respect diversity in companies and institutions (Charta der Vielfalt, 2017). However, it seems that Coca Cola's diversity ambitions vary greatly by region and country. Starbucks, on the other hand, seems to roll out its LGBTQIA+ support programmes for employees more internationally, for example with its annual "I Am" ("Eu Sou") project, which provides free legal support to transgender employees who want to change their name and gender on their birth certificate (Peiper, 2022). Some respondents said that both campaigns seemed like woke washing and cast doubt on the internal processes of both brands compared to what they were promoting in their campaigns.

Sprite's campaign:

> *"It is good, that they use diverse models and represent different people (queer, older, younger etc.). But unless they are diverse in their company too, it's just 'woke-washing' and good marketing."*
>
> *"Beautiful video but a little long. I think it's good that Sprite created a campaign dedicated to the LGBTQ+ community, but it's still not 100% credible, because you don't see in which way they actually support it apart from creating this video."*

"In general, it is nice that brands show solidarity with marginalized groups or people, but it also seems to be an instrumentalization of the queer community, which is not consistently followed by the brand."

Starbucks' campaign:

"It's good for young queer people to see this kind of representation, even if it's just marketing. [...]. I just hope that the company's policies also reflect that."

"Starbucks does a lot of questionable things like avoiding taxes, exploiting coffee producers, and has been criticised for discriminating employees. I really don't believe they care about any social issues so this ad seems hypocritical to me. The ad itself is well-made, though."

7.3.2.5 *Fit*. In this dimension, respondents' opinions about the two brands differed the most. While the clear majority could not see a link between Sprite's core business and the message promoted, many preferred the way Starbucks linked its USP to the content of their campaign, making it more authentic and congruent with the brand's core business.

Sprite's campaign:

"Didn't know what it has to do with sprite but I like that they draw attention to such an important topic, particularly nowadays."

"The topic addressed was unexpected for me. In general, I appreciate brands taking their social responsibility seriously - but simultaneously I struggle with the missing connection between the claim of advertisements like this and the original product. Both don't seem connected for me."

Starbucks' campaign:

"Storytelling relates to customer experience and a situation familiar to most customers of the brand. [...] It fits Starbucks business model and addresses LGBT''s needs effectively."

"I thought it was quite emotional and nice, I did however have a slight problem with the way they used what's essentially a deadname so much, as well as the fact that I again think this is rainbow capitalism-however better done and a little more in tune with my perception of the brand."

7.3.2.6 *Motivation*. The last dimension concerns the intentions of the two brands behind creating and publishing their campaigns (Mirzaei et al., 2022). While it is true that both campaigns did not primarily promote their product in the videos, but likely sought to express their values and to educate on how to support a queer family member in the case of Sprite's campaign or show the everyday struggle of a transgender person through Starbucks' campaign, the woke washing accusations raised above cannot be completely dismissed either.

Sprite's campaign:

> *"I loved it, it gave me warm feelings and made me tear up a little bit. It's great to see lgbtq+ representation und support!"*
>
> *"Modern, stresses diversity, but [in my opinion] exploits the pride movement for marketing reasons."*
>
> *"Nice commercial, cutesy and emotional, however I think it is quite pretentious and rainbow-capitalism-like for brands to make ads like this targeting queer people, when all they actually want is more consumers."*

Starbucks' campaign:

> *"The starbucks campaign made a more serious attempt to address the acceptance of lgbtq+ people and depicted how people must feel when they are dead named."*
>
> *"I like this one better because it portrays one individual person and their struggles + a specific problem. That might actually make people think about the issue and be more empathetic toward it. Also it's very well connected with (the per se weird) Starbucks-name asking thing."*
>
> *"Ridiculous. I think it is inappropriate to use such a personal problem for advertising."*
>
> *"It's a touching movie, but I feel like the intention behind it is to gain more customers and be [politically correct], instead of actually standing behind the cause."*

After analysing each dimension and taking into account the opinions of the participants, Starbucks' campaign seems to have been perceived as more authentic than Sprite's. Not only does the brand show a better record of LGBTQIA+ related practices and monetary contributions in the past (Peiper, 2022), the ad is also better connected to the brand's core business, making it seem more thought out and less generic.

As the brand equity for both brands improved after their campaigns, for Sprite even slightly more (see 7.2.1), it is difficult to draw a connection between these results and the authenticity level of the campaigns. As respondents were not directly asked to rate each dimension, e.g., using a Likert scale, and only their qualitative comments were used to get an approximate picture of opinion, the data is not sufficient to make a clear statement about the effect of the authenticity level of a campaign on the brand's post-evaluation.

7.3.3 Generational Effects

Since data was also available from participants who were not part of Gen Z, it was considered worthwhile to take a look at generational effects. The overarching assumption of this work is that Gen Z consumers, in particular, value brand social engagement and incorporate it into their

consumer behaviour. A look at the general attitudes of both groups towards brand activism shows a significant difference (t (274) = -2,73, p = <,001) in the mean scores, with Gen Z participants agreeing with brand activism on a 5-point Likert scale with an average of 4,05 and non-Gen Z participants agreeing with it with 3,88 (see Appendix D). However, it is not possible to know the exact ages, e.g., whether the non-Gen Z participants are Baby Boomers or Millennials, as this was not asked.

Table 12 and 13 show the mean scores comparing both generational groups for each dimension. Although it can be seen that most scores also improved for the non-Gen Z participants in the posttest (not tested for statistical significance), they are still below the mean scores of the Gen Z participants. Another ANOVA comparing the pretest scores of Gen Z and non-Gen Z participants per category also shows statistical significance in each dimension (see Appendix E), indicating a real difference in how the two brands are rated by the different generations, regardless of exposure to brand activism.

Table 12. Generational comparison of Sprite's pretest and posttest mean values.

		Brand Imagery		**Brand Judgements**		**Brand Feelings**		**Brand Resonance**	
	N	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Gen Z	194	2,76	2,82	2,72	2,90	2,29	2,76	2,23	2,39
Non-Gen Z	83	2,45	2,38	2,49	2,54	2,04	2,45	2,00	2,13

Table 13. Generational comparison of Starbucks' pretest and posttest mean values.

		Brand Imagery		**Brand Judgements**		**Brand Feelings**		**Brand Resonance**	
	N	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Gen Z	194	3,17	3,33	3,15	3,28	3,42	3,47	3,39	3,44
Non-Gen Z	83	2,44	2,43	2,47	2,62	2,21	2,37	1,88	2,06

The above results suggest that the generational effect is supported in two ways. First, a significant difference was found between Gen Z and non-Gen Z attitudes towards brand activism, suggesting that Gen Z places a greater value on brand activism compared to the older participants in this study. Second, the different generations also appear to assess brands differently, valuing different dimensions of brand equity and being influenced by brand activism campaigns in different ways in their post-assessment of brand equity, as partially evidenced by the ANOVA analysis.

7.4 Discussion

This section follows on from the last insight and seeks to link all the findings presented above together.

After concluding that Gen Z does indeed value brand activism, with ANOVA indicating a significant difference between Gen Z and non-Gen Z respondents in terms of supporting or rejecting brand activism, it was examined whether their positive attitude towards it automatically improves brand equity when brands take a stance on socio-political issues. However, it was not possible to find a significant correlation between a general positive attitude towards brand activism and improving levels across all brand equity dimensions in the post-evaluation. Instead, it seems that the effect of brand activism depends on the specific campaign and varies between dimensions. While the empirical study found exposure to brand activism to positively influence *brand judgements* of both brands significantly (supporting H2), the same effect was not found for both brands equally for *brand imagery* (partially supporting H1), *brand feelings* (partially supporting H3) and *brand resonance* (partially supporting H4).

This could possibly be explained by the different emotional charge of the four dimensions. While the dimension of *brand judgement* is about more rational brand evaluations that could be better changed by the content conveyed in the campaigns, the dimensions of *brand imagery, brand feelings* and *brand resonance* concern more abstract concepts, for which more emotions may need to be evoked in order to induce an attitude change. As expected, the brand activism campaigns may have served as an affect heuristic, which is known to automatically and rapidly lead consumers to judge brands more positively (Slovic et al., 2002; Rucker & Petty, 2006). For example, as some participants noted, they were not aware of the activist engagement of Sprite or Starbucks, and a campaign aimed at communicating these values could make the brand more trustworthy and superior to other soft drink/coffee brands, i.e., significantly change *brand judgements*. However, such communication may not need to make people change their minds too much on the more emotional dimensions, as both brands belong to low-involvement product categories anyway.

Looking at the different magnitudes of attitude change, it was expected that the pretest to posttest attitude change to be greater for Starbucks, as Starbucks' products were thought to offer greater emotional benefits in promoting a certain lifestyle and self-image (Thompson & Arsel, 2004), and – given that drivers of social engagement among young consumers include ingroup identification, social and personal norms (Fritsche et al., 2018) – this could have

explained why Gen Z values Starbucks' activism more than Sprite. However, the opposite was observed, and greater differences and effect sizes in pretest to posttest mean scores were found for Sprite compared to Starbucks for most dimensions.

Considering the present results, this indicates support for Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) theory of the asymmetric effect of brand activism. Meaning, as long as the brand's stance does not go against what most consumers think about a particular controversial issue, and based on the literature review it can be assume that most Gen Z participants support LGBTQIA+ related issues – as portrayed in both campaigns – it is not reliably effective in changing brand equity, especially for those dimensions based on more emotional thought processing. However, had either brand opposed diversity and LGBTQIA+ support, a negative attitude shift may have been evident.

The asymmetric effect of brand activism can also be drawn upon to explain the difference in the extent of attitude change between the two brands in the study. As for Starbucks, brand equity levels were already a bit higher in the pretest compared to Sprite, indicating an overall more favourable attitude towards Starbucks. With pre-existing positive attitudes and attachment to a brand, consumers also tend to have higher expectations of the brand's social behaviour, in this case its activist engagement, and see consumer-brand agreement of a certain social issue as "expected or 'ought to' social behaviour," so they do not reward a brand for it, i.e., improve their attitudes, intentions or behaviour (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 774). In the case of Sprite, with a rather negative brand attitude in the pretest and lower emotional attachment, consumers might be positively surprised by their consumer-brand agreement of a certain social issue and therefore rate the brand relatively better.

Another approach to explaining the different intensity of attitude change is the idea of optimal incongruence proposed by Vredenburg et al. (2020). According to this, brand activism results are most favourable when brands choose a socio-political issue that is moderately incongruent with their brand purpose, as was the case with the Sprite campaign, while Starbucks' campaign was more in line with their core business, as participants' comments suggested. However, it should be noted that the lack of brand fit, i.e., optimal incongruence, was perceived by participants as negative rather than making the campaign more interesting, making this explanation seem rather less conclusive.

Further findings from the analysis of the qualitative data will now be discussed. It was revealed that the changes due to the stimulus not only vary between the different dimensions of brand

equity, but seem to also depend on the perceived authenticity of the brand activism campaigns. In exploring the influencing effect of woke authenticity on brand equity levels, especially the dimensions of woke authenticity (Mirzaei et al., 2022) – *social context independency, practice* and *motivation* – seem to be decisive factors for a positive perception of activism campaigns.

Social context independency can amplify the backlash or support a brand receives for addressing controversial issues. The majority of comments questioned the authenticity of Sprite and Starbucks, as they were unaware that both brands had engaged in activist activities in the past and perceived their campaigns as opportunistic. The dimension of social context independency has a further impact on consumers' perception of brand fit. When comparing the Sprite and Starbucks campaigns, many commentators addressed the lack of brand fit in the case of Sprite and preferred the link to Starbucks' USP in their campaign. The combination of low social context independency and low fit (between woke issues and brand image/positioning) can easily lead to the perception of insincere intentions, which negatively impacts brand equity. However, even if a brand takes up a current frequently discussed woke topic, but there is also a large overlap with the brand's image/positioning, this can buffer the perception of authenticity, as was partly visible in the perception of participants in the Starbucks campaign.

Another dimension that many participants commented on was *practice*. It seems that brands that do not have a long history of brand activism can still be perceived as sincere in their intentions if their practices are consistent with their woke communication. Thus, the comments of the current study also support the typology of Vredenburg et al. (2020), according to which authentic brand activists are those brands that also act on what they communicate in their activism campaign, e.g., by donating to the cause (which in turn is related to the dimension of sacrifice), reflecting their acknowledgement of inequalities in their internal organisation or engaging in programmes to fight the cause.

Building on what has been said before, the *motivations* of both brands were questioned due to the low independence from the social context and the lack of (or knowledge about) brand fit and practice. Brands that launch, for instance, an LGBTQIA+ campaign during Pride month that has nothing to do with their image/positioning and with no record of aligned practices run the risk of being accused of profit-driven motives, which, as mentioned earlier, will not have a positive impact on brand equity.

Finally, however, it must be noted that another possible reason for the improvement in brand attitudes in the post-evaluation, which has nothing to do with participants' overall attitudes

towards brand activism or their perceptions of the specific campaigns, is the *mere exposure effect* (Zajonc, 1968, cited in Stafford, & Grimes, 2012). This effect describes the effect of brief, repeated exposure to an audience with low attention and involvement that increases the likelihood of preference (Stafford, & Grimes, 2012). This means that it cannot be completely ruled out that a generic brand campaign, i.e., a campaign addressing a non-controversial issue, would have achieved similar results. Suggestions on how a possible mere exposure effect could have been avoided to make this study more conclusive can be found in 8.2.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Summary and Practical Implications

The conclusion of this dissertation begins with a brief outline of the main findings from the literature review and highlights the guiding principle that was followed throughout the chapters, thus providing a more holistic view of the entire dissertation.

With increasing competition due to new technologies and lower barriers to entry, the view on the value of a brand has evolved from a mainly financial view to a consumer-oriented view (Rodrigues & Borges, 2020). While the financial value of most brands has increased over the last decade, this has mostly been associated with an increased symbolic and emotional importance of a brand to the customer (Kotler et al., 2021). One concept that captures the value of a brand to a consumer and has been used as the main framework for this dissertation is customer-based brand equity. It was chosen as the variable for investigation in this dissertation because it covers a multitude of dimensions and provides a comprehensible link between how tangible and intangible characteristics of a brand can affect marketing and thus financial success (Davcik et al., 2015). Keller's (2001) brand equity pyramid was chosen as the most comprehensive framework and the following chapters followed the author's outline of the six brand building blocks. It was discussed how brand salience, i.e. the linking to a brand with a particular product category or customer need, serves as the basis for brand building, but these associations are only influential if meaning is attached to them, either through a functional and/or an emotional value, for example identification with a brand, which leads consumers to want to respond to the brand and ultimately create a deep relationship with it, which in turn translates into sustained financial success (Keller, 1993).

To generate more specifiable research results, it was decided to focus on one certain target group. With increasing purchasing power as a majority enters working life and a differing consumer profile that places special value on engagement with social change and value congruence (Francis & Hoefel, 2018), Gen Z was deemed the most relevant demographic in this context.

One trend that has emerged over the last five years and has often been discussed as a way to stand out and compete with emotional brand attributes rather than cheap prices or good quality is brand activism. While some brands truly embrace their social responsibility as market players, others may have disingenuous intentions when taking a stand on social issues.

Especially when targeting Gen Z, who are expected to have higher expectations in this regard (Bakhtiari, 2021), a desire for self-expression through their consumption (Francis & Hoefel, 2018), and more diverse needs compared to other generations (Jones, 2022), one might think it is essential for brands to include topics such racism or sexism in their communication in order to create emotional values, enhance brand responses and resonance to maintain or increase brand equity.

In investigating the relationship between brand activism and brand equity from the perspective of Gen Z consumers, an experimental pretest-posttest design with the application of research parameters that were already validated and recognised by the academic community (Keller, 2001) was employed. The results of this study are as follows:

First, it was possible to demonstrate a generational effect in terms of favouring or disagreeing with brand activism. The ANOVA indicated a significant difference between the agreement levels of brand activism of Gen Z and non-Gen Z participants. Similar to previous research findings, Gen Z respondents appeared to have a greater interest in brands that advocate for social issues and support social movements. However, their positive attitude towards it did not reliably predict positive brand equity outcomes but seemed to vary between brand equity dimensions and depends on perceived authenticity of brand activism campaigns.

Second, the difference in significance and effect size between brand equity dimensions and the differential extent of attitude change between the two brands used in the present study support the asymmetric effect in relation to brand activism proposed by Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020). Brand activism provides consumers with a unique opportunity to assess whether the brand's moral foundations are consistent with their own, i.e., to assess the degree of consumer-brand agreement in the area of moral judgements. Previous research on brand identification has generally asserted and empirically demonstrated a positive relationship between consumer-brand agreement and positive marketing outcomes (e.g., Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). In particular, with regard to Gen Z, placing particular value on social engagement, it was expected that they would be especially supportive of brands that speak out on socio-political issues. However, the results of the empirical study provided only full support for the positive relationship between exposure to brand activism and the brand equity dimension of *brand judgements*, while there was only partial support for the positive relationship between exposure to brand activism and the brand equity dimensions of *brand imagery, brand feelings* and *brand resonance*. Based on this result, it is likely to assume the

asymmetric effect suggested by Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020), i.e., Gen Z consumers take it for granted that brands use their platform to educate about social issues and do not give brands additional credit for doing so. Emerging from the empirical results, brand activism seems to be more effective in 1) improving dimensions of brand equity whose evaluation is based on more rational thought processes, such as *brand judgements*, than more emotional dimensions, such as *brand imagery, brand feelings* and *brand resonance*, and 2) improving brand equity levels across all dimensions when they are at low levels prior to exposure.

While these findings suggest that brand activism is only partially effective as a short-term marketing strategy, given market developments it is very likely that brands that want to maintain or increase their brand equity in the long term cannot be ignorant about brand activism either. Whereas in the past brands were expected to remain apolitical (Shetty et al., 2019), today brands that focus only on low prices, for example, may encounter unfavourable consumers' evaluation of their *brand imagery* or *brand credibility* in the face of increasing awareness of social inequalities and/or environmental damage, putting consumer-oriented brand equity at risk. This is also related to the financial perspective of brand equity, as has been shown with brands discredited in the past for politically incorrect behaviour (Vredenburg et al., 2020); therefore, it can be assumed that investors will also place higher value on a brand's woke communication in the future to assess its long-term viability.

Third, although no statistically significant correlation to brand equity could be demonstrated, the data nevertheless suggest that woke authenticity plays an important role in brand activism. When analysing the responses to the open question, it became clear that the question of a brand's authenticity and intentions behind its activism campaign was indeed a salient and recurring theme. The analysis revealed that the three dimensions in particular – s*ocial context independency, practice* and *motivation* – seem to be crucial to achieve the best possible short-term results for brand equity, such as the formation of positive brand associations or increased engagement that can eventually translate into long-term favourable brand equity results.

This last consideration contributes to the holistic understanding of the effectiveness and success factors of brand activism that should be taken into account when developing a strategy for communicating brand activism to Gen Z, which was the goal of this work.

Since brand equity is a marketing model that reflects a more long-term strategic perspective, it might have been irrational to expect significant improvements in brand equity within a 10-minute study. Overall, however, this dissertation comes to the conclusion that brand activism

is indeed a valuable and nowadays necessary brand asset to maintain and/or increase brand equity in the long run, especially in the eyes of certain consumer groups. Therefore, the research question of what influence brand activism has on brand equity among Gen Z consumers is answered as follows: If brand activism is pursued with dishonest intentions, it is likely to damage brand equity and jeopardise the positive effects of authentic brand activism. However, authentic brand activism that is 1) built independent of the social context, i.e., specific events or trends, 2) consistent with a brand's image and positioning, and 3) underpinned by practice has the potential to significantly increase Gen Z consumers' perception of some brand equity dimensions. When done correctly, brand activism can serve as a strategic long-term branding measure as it provides value to the customer, fosters sustainable consumer-brand relationships and thus offers a competitive advantage in today's brand landscape, where emotional benefits are becoming increasingly prominent.

8.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

It is possible that different results or a more sound support for the asymmetric effect could have been achieved by a different selection of brands and/or campaigns. First, the choice of brand in the current study raises several interesting possibilities for further research. To better validate the importance of brand activism history on perceptions of authenticity (Mirzaei et al., 2022), a brand with a long and publicly known history of brand activism, such as Ben & Jerry's or Patagonia, could have been selected over a brand with no history. In the current study, two brands with little-known campaigns on brand activism were deliberately chosen to examine the immediate change in brand attitudes due to the one campaign shown and to avoid bias due to pre-existing positive or negative attitudes towards their social engagement with previous campaigns. In addition, future research could explore other categorisations of brands and thus other moderating factors in how brand equity is affected by exposure to brand activism. This research could have been extended by testing a high-involvement luxury good against a low-involvement consumer good, or a publicly consumed product against a privately consumed product, to examine the role of product involvement or conspicuous consumption (e.g., Johnson et al., 2018) in brand activism and brand equity change.

Second, when asking participants about their general attitude towards brand activism, a six-point Likert scale could have been used to better divide participants into two groups that either support or oppose brand activism, instead of creating a third "neutral" group. This way, the analysis of the correlation between brand equity and general attitudes towards brand activism

would have been more representative with only two groups and thus a higher absolute and relative number of participants.

Thrid, different content of the campaigns shown could have provided more evidence for the asymmetric effect. Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) tested the effects of brand activism on attitudes, intentions and behaviour by using a generic (non-controversial) campaign and a brand activism (controversial) campaign. This could have been applied to the current study, exposing a control group to a generic campaign and another group to an activist campaign, in order to exclude the improvement in mean scores as a result of the mere exposure effect. Also, instead of two campaigns supporting the LGBTQIA+ community, an A/B test could have been conducted, exposing half of the participants to a campaign supporting the issue and the other half to a campaign opposing it. By then also asking participants their opinion on the given issues, it would have been possible to measure whether there was a differential effect in brand equity change, comparing consumer-brand agreement versus disagreement. Due to resource constraints, this was not applied in this study, instead most participants were expected to agree with the brand's stance, resulting in a lack of data that could have further supported or refuted the asymmetric effect.

Fourth, as mentioned earlier, participants could have been asked directly to indicate their perceptions of each authenticity dimension on a Likert scale, rather than relying on an analysis of qualitative data to assess the level of authenticity for each campaign. This would have provided more quantitative data for statistical tests of correlations or causal relationships to further validate and generalise the moderating nature of authenticity on changes in brand equity due to exposure to brand activism.

Finally, for a better statement about the generational effect, it would have made more sense to ask for the year of birth and then divide the participants into a group of Gen Z and non-Gen Z, instead of just giving two options that automatically divided participants into the respective generation. This way, it was not possible to determine whether the non-Gen Z participants were much older or only a few years older than the suggested Gen Z year frame.

Incorporating these recommendations into future research will further enhance understanding of brand activism outcomes, factors influencing brand equity improvement and the role of generational differences.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Adjusted survey items to measure brand equity

Brand Equity Dimension		5-point Likert scale				
H1: Brand Imagery						
BI1	The word “honest” describes this brand.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
BI2	The word “reliable” describes this brand.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
BI3	People who I respect and admire use this brand.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
H2: Brand Judgements						
QU	I consider the product quality offered by the brand as very good.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
CR1	Those responsible for this brand have my interests in mind.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
CR2	Those responsible for this brand are innovative.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
CR3	Those responsible for this brand care about my opinions.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
CR4	I trust those responsible for this brand.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
CO	I would recommend this brand.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
SUP	This brand offers advantages that other brands in the same category cannot.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
H3: Brand Feelings						
FE1	This brand gives me a sense of warmth.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
FE2	This brand gives me a sense of self-respect.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
FE3	This brand gives me a sense of social approval.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
H4: Brand Resonance						
BL1	I consider myself loyal to this brand.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
BL2	I would make an effort to use this brand.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
BL3	If this brand was not available, it would make	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree

	little difference to me if I had to use another brand. (R)					
BA1	I really love this brand.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
BA2	This brand is more than a product to me.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
ENG1	I am proud to have others know I use this brand.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
ENG2	I would be interested in merchandise with this brand's name on it.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
COM1	I really identify with people who use this brand.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
COM2	I feel a deep connection with others who use this brand.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree

Appendix B: Survey items to measure attitude towards brand activism

Brand Activism		5-point Likert scale				
BAC1	Brands should avoid addressing socio-political issues. (R)	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree
BAC2	Taking a stand as a brand is a good way to draw attention to socio-political issues.	strongly disagree	disagree	neither nor	agree	strongly agree

Appendix C: ANOVA to measure the relationship between attitude towards brand activism and brand equity dimensions (N=194)

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Sprite: Brand Imagery	Within-Subject	1,47	2	0,74	0,85	0,43
	Between-Subject	166,33	19	0,87		
	Total	167,81	193			
Sprite: Brand Judgements	Within-Subject	2,20	2	1,10	1,29	0,28
	Between-Subject	162,49	191	0,85		
	Total	164,68	193			
Sprite: Brand Feelings	Within-Subject	5,01	2	2,50	2,25	0,11
	Between-Subject	212,48	191	1,11		
	Total	217,49	193			
Sprite: Brand Resonance	Within-Subject	1,23	2	0,62	0,72	0,49
	Between-Subject	162,80	191	0,85		
	Total	164,03	193			
Starbucks: Brand Imagery	Within-Subject	0,45	2	0,22	0,36	0,70
	Between-Subject	119,77	191	0,63		
	Total	120,22	193			
Starbucks: Brand Judgements	Within-Subject	0,17	2	0,09	0,16	0,86
	Between-Subject	104,42	191	0,55		
	Total	104,59	193			
Starbucks: Brand Feelings	Within-Subject	0,47	2	0,24	0,44	0,64
	Between-Subject	102,12	191	0,54		
	Total	102,59	193			
Starbucks: Brand Resonance	Within-Subject	0,48	2	0,24	0,41	0,66
	Between-Subject	110,95	191	0,58		
	Total	111,43	193			

Appendix D: T-test comparing attitudes towards brand activism between generations

	Generation	N	Mean (SD)	Mean Difference	T (df)	Sig.
Attitudes towards brand activism	**Gen Z**	194	4,05 (0,65)	-0,17	-2,73 (274)	<,001
	Non-Gen Z	83	3,88 (1,03)			

Appendix E: ANOVA comparing pretest measurement per brand equity dimension between generations (N=277)

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Sprite: Brand Imagery	Within-Subject	5,76	1	5,76	9,31	0,00
	Between-Subject	170,12	275	0,62		
	Total	175,89	276			
Sprite: Brand Judgements	Within-Subject	2,99	1	2,99	5,49	0,02
	Between-Subject	149,64	275	0,54		
	Total	152,63	276			
Sprite: Brand Feelings	Within-Subject	3,64	1	3,64	4,93	0,03
	Between-Subject	203,18	275	0,74		
	Total	206,81	276			
Sprite: Brand Resonance	Within-Subject	3,13	1	3,13	4,70	0,03
	Between-Subject	183,30	275	0,67		
	Total	186,44	276			
Starbucks: Brand Imagery	Within-Subject	31,18	1	31,18	62,21	<,001
	Between-Subject	137,82	275	0,50		
	Total	168,99	276			
Starbucks: Brand Judgements	Within-Subject	26,89	1	26,89	70,04	<,001
	Between-Subject	105,57	275	0,38		
	Total	132,45	276			
Starbucks: Brand Feelings	Within-Subject	85,65	1	85,65	147,47	<,001
	Between-Subject	159,72	275	0,58		
	Total	245,37	276			
Starbucks: Brand Resonance	Within-Subject	132,73	1	132,73	332,40	<,001
	Between-Subject	109,81	275	0,40		
	Total	242,55	276			