



# DOES IT **PAY OFF** TO **SPEAK UP?**

*A qualitative study of how the Danish millennials perceive brand activism and how it influences their brand attitude and purchase intention*

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## Abstrakt

Undersøgelser har vist, at forbrugerne i dag har en forventning om at brands promoverer positive forandringer i samfundet. Dette har medført at flere brands italesætter kontroversielle samfundsmæssige problematikker gennem deres markedsføring. Forskning har vist, at brandaktivisme er associeret med en høj risiko, da brands i højere grad risikerer at miste kunder, frem for at tiltrække nye. Dette kandidatspeciale vil undersøge dette fremspirende markedsføringsfænomen for at opnå mere indsigt i, hvad der forårsager denne tendens i forbrugernes adfærd. Problemformuleringen lyder derfor: Hvordan opfatter danske millennials brandaktivisme, og hvordan påvirker emneidentificering, grad af kontrovers samt opfattelsen af autenticitet forbrugernes holdning til et brand og deres købsintention.

For at udforske det ovenstående problemfelt blev der anvendt en retroduktiv metodetilgang. Undersøgelsen startede med udgangspunkt i litteraturen hvor der blevet opnået indblik i den empiriske data omkring hvordan brandaktivisme påvirker forbrugernes adfærd. På baggrund af litteraturen blev der udformet tre hypoteser om hvordan tre variabler påvirker forbrugernes adfærd. Den første hypotese lød på, at emneidentifikation havde en indflydelse, på forbrugerens holdning til et brand og købsadfærd, men at denne effekt er asymmetrisk fordi forbrugerene har en tilbøjelighed til at reagere mere negativt end positivt. I den anden hypotese blev der antaget, at graden af kontrovers havde en effekt på forbrugernes adfærd, og meget kontroversielle emner ville skabe kraftigere reaktioner sammenlignet med mindre kontroversielle emner. Afslutningsvis lød den tredje hypotese på, at opfattelsen af autenticitet ville have en positiv effekt på forbrugerens opfattelse af et brand og købsintentioner, hvorimod hvis forbrugeren ikke opfattede et standpunkt som autentisk, ville dette skabe en negativ effekt. Disse hypoteser blev udforsket gennem 14 interviews med danske millennials, for at opnå indblik i deres generelle opfattelse til brandaktivisme og undersøge hvordan de tre variabler påvirkede deres holdning og adfærd.

De kvalitative resultater viste, at de danske millennials har en positiv opfattelse af brandaktivisme. Forbrugerne gav udtryk for, at det er vigtigt at virksomhederne deltager i den offentlige debat omkring samfundsproblematikkerne, da de har evnen og ressourcerne til, at medvirke til at skabe positiv forandring. Resultaterne viste dog, at en del af forbrugerne var kritiske omkring denne type markedsføring, fordi de opfattede brandaktivisme som værende kommercielt og betvivlede virksomhedernes intentioner. Resultaterne fra undersøgelsen viste at de tre kontekstuelle variabler havde en indflydelse på forbrugernes holdning til et brand og købsintention. De tre hypoteser blev dermed helt eller delvist bekræftet. Den første hypotese blev delvis bekræftet, da den asymmetriske

effekt kun blev identificeret på de meget kontroversielle emner. De kvalitative resultater bekræftede også kun delvist den anden hypotese, da de meget kontroversielle emner skabte kraftigere negative reaktioner, men ikke kraftigere positive reaktioner. Den tredje hypotese blev bekræftet, i og med at resultaterne viste, at opfattelsen af autenticitet havde en positiv effekt på forbrugernes holdning til et brand og købsintention. Hvis forbrugerne derimod opfattede et brands standpunkt som utroværdigt, ville det have en negativ effekt.

På baggrund af de kvalitative resultater, er der opnået dybere indsigt i variablernes effekt på forbrugernes adfærd, som bidrager til litteraturen omkring brandaktivisme. Undersøgelsen har også dannet grundlag for udformning af en række anbefalinger omkring hvordan virksomheder kan anvende resultaterne i praksis og hvilke overvejelser der går forud for udøvelse af brandaktivisme.

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## Introduction

A global research from 2020 showed that 80% of the respondents want brands to be a force of change and solve society's issues (Edelman, 2020). Furthermore, in 2021 66% believed that CEOs should be proactive and lead the change rather than wait for the government to impose it (Edelman, N.D.). The data shows that consumers to a greater extent expect companies to act. Especially the young generations have high expectations and interest in brands addressing issues for the common good (Mirzaei et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020). Millennials, born in 1981-1995, and generation Z, born in 1996-2010 (Seemiller & Grace, 2019) were raised during a time when air pollution, crime, and injustice became a concern to the general public. These issues are presumed to cause an increase in the consumers' expectations for brands to drive positive societal change (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021). Previously brands have strived to stay neutral and avoid moving into the political sphere, to minimize the risk of alienating potential customers. Today several brands engage in polarizing societal issues, as a response to the changes in the marketplace (Key et al., 2021; Hydock et al., 2020). This phenomenon is also known as *Brand Activism*.

In recent years various brands have been practicing brand activism and reacting to contemporary societal issues. The phenomenon differs from other prosocial corporate practices by addressing polarizing and controversial issues, such as Immigration, racial injustice, LGBTQ+ rights, and gun reforms (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Eilert & Cherup, 2020). Recently, the number of brands taking a stance and publicly addressing polarizing societal issues has increased, and thereby has the phenomenon received a lot of attention in the academic field. Various studies have explored how brand activism influence firm value (Hydock et al., 2020; Bhagwat et al., 2020) whereas other have explored how perceived authenticity (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Key et al., 2021; Mirzaei et al., 2021) and topic identification influences the consumers' responses (Hydock et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Studies of the effect on the consumers' behavior have shown that alignment between a brand's and consumer's stance can create favorable brand attitudes (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020), a stronger emotional connection (Korschun & Rafieian, 2016; Schmidt et al., 2021), and loyalty (Schmidt et al., 2021). However, despite the consumers' calls for prosocial brand actions, the current academic findings show a tendency for brands to face a greater level of risk than reward when involved in brand activism. Studies have shown that misalignment on urgent societal issues is associated with different types of risk, such as alienating existing consumers (Hydock et al., 2020), passionate negative responses (Mirzaei et al.,

2021), and boycotts (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Bhagwat et al., 2020). In addition, various studies show that brand activism is more inclined to cause a significant negative effect on the consumers' response than a positive (e.g. Hydock et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

The current academic findings do not seem to correlate with the consumers' demand and expectations for brands to take a stance and be a force of change on urgent societal issues. Thus various researchers call for further research regarding the effect of brand activism on for instance consumers' brand attitude and behavior (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Schmidt et al., 2021; JCR Call for Papers, 2019). Thus this master's thesis aims to explore this relatively new marketing practice and examine how brand activism influences the consumers' responses.

## **Field of research**

Brand activism has become an emerging marketing practice throughout recent years and is expected to be a significant point of difference in the future (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021; Moorman, 2020). As brand activism is associated with a high level of risk, it is crucial to gain more insights into how this marketing practice influences the consumers' affective and behavioral responses. To explore if it pays off for brands to stand out, the effect on the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intentions is going to be examined. These two types of consumer responses are interrelated as the brand attitude forms the basis for the consumers' brand choice (Keller et al., 2016). Therefore it is essential to obtain more insight into how brand activism influences the consumers' attitudes, as this influences their behavioral responses.

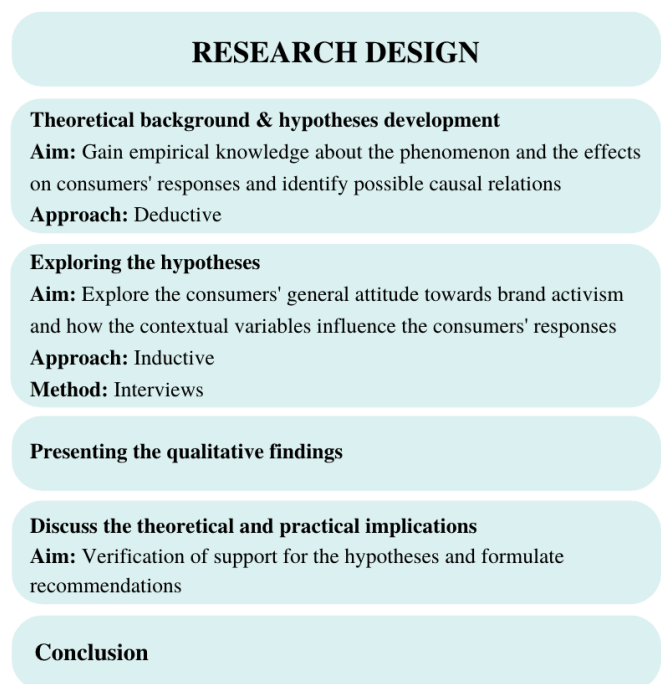
There exist different contextual variables that influence how brand activism influences the consumers' responses. In this study, the effect of brand activism on the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention will be examined together with three contextual variables. First, topic identification is included because the consumer's agreement or disagreement with the brand's stance on a topic is shown to have a significant effect on their response (Hydock et al., 2020). Second, brands can address both sociocultural and sociopolitical issues (Key et al., 2021), which implies that there are different levels of controversy related to these issues. Brand activism is known for articulating highly controversial issues, which entail high risk, however, the question is whether brands can benefit from promoting less controversial issues while reducing the risk. The effect of the level of topic controversy on the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intentions has not yet been explored. Still, it is assumed relevant to examine if the level of controversy causes different effects on the consumers' affective and behavioral responses. Lastly, woke washing has become a well-known term when it comes to brand activism. The term occurs when there is a misalignment

between a brand's action and message (Vredenburg et al., 2020). According to Hydock et al. (2020) low perceived authenticity mitigates the positive effects of activism on identification and choice. This emphasizes the importance of brands being perceived as being authentic, which composes the last contextual variable.

Various researchers state that the increase in consumer expectations and demands, origins from the younger generations (e.g. Sarkar & Kotler, 2021; Schmidt et al., 2021). Thus this study will employ Danish millennials as the consumer segment to gain further insight into how this generation responds to the prosocial marketing approach. Brand activism is considered an emerging marketing practice globally but is currently not highly represented in the Danish market. Consequently this research aims to explore the consumers' attitude towards the practice and how the contextual variables influence the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intentions. Thus the research question is as follows:

*What are the Danish millennials' attitudes towards brand activism and how do topic identification, level of topic controversy, and perceived authenticity influence the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention?*

The purpose of this master's thesis is to explore the Danish millennials' expectations of and experience with brand activism and examine the effect of the three contextual variables on consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intentions. A retroductive approach will be applied which combines the inductive and deductive approaches. This approach is often used to understand and explore underlying structures and mechanisms in a phenomenon (Fuglsang et al., 2014). The purpose of using the retroductive approach is to gain insight into the mechanisms that affect the consumers' response to brand activism to offer theoretical and practical implications. Figure 1 illustrates the research design that consists of four steps. The first step is to dive



*Figure 1 - Research design*



into the literature to obtain a theoretical understanding of the phenomenon and explore what has already been observed about the effect of brand activism on the consumers' affective and behavioral responses. These observations will form the basis for formulating the hypotheses of the possible effects of the contextual variables on the consumers' responses. The second step revolves around exploring these hypotheses through a qualitative research approach. The majority of the current literature explores how consumers react to brand activism with the use of quantitative data (e.g. Korschun & Rafieian, 2016; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). This study applies qualitative data to obtain a new perspective on the effect of the variables because social science is dynamically changing and there does not exist an absolute truth (Fuglsang et al., 2014). Furthermore, interviews offer direct access to the consumers' opinions and experiences (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017), which makes it an applicable method to explore the consumers' attitudes toward the phenomenon and how their affective and behavioral responses are affected by the contextual variables. When the data is gathered the third step consists of processing, analyzing, and presenting the qualitative data. The final step of the research consists of discussing the theoretical implications and determining if the qualitative data shows support for the hypotheses. Furthermore, the practical implications will also be discussed along with recommendations on how to employ brand activism and minimize the risks associated.

In the following section, the theoretical background will be presented. As brand activism represents a relatively small area within the marketing practice, the first section revolves around defining the phenomenon and presenting how it differentiates from other prosocial practices. In the second section, the consumers' affective and behavioral responses will be defined and lastly, the current academic findings of the effects on the consumers' responses will be presented which forms the basis for the development of hypotheses.

## Theoretical background

### Brand activism

#### *Defining brand activism*

Concurrently with the increase in consumer expectations and actual brand execution, the phenomenon has received a lot of attention in the academic field. In the literature, various terms have been applied to describe the phenomenon of companies taking a stance on polarizing societal issues. Some of these terms are presented in figure 2

Definitions of woke activism	
Corporate Sociopolitical Activism	<i>"(...) a firm's public demonstration (statements and/or actions) of support for or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue."</i> (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1).
Corporate Social Advocacy	<i>"(...) an organization making a public statement or taking a public stance on social-political issues."</i> (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 5)
Corporate Activism	<i>"(...) a company's willingness to take a stand on social, political, economic, and environmental issues to create societal change by influencing the attitudes and behaviors of actors in its institutional environment."</i> (Eilert & Cherup, 2020, p. 463)
Brand Political Activism	<i>"(...) public speech or actions focused on partisan issues made by or on behalf of a company using its corporate or individual brand name."</i> (Moorman, 2020, p. 388-389)
Brand Activism	<i>"(...) business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society."</i> (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021, p. 24)

together with the definitions. *Figure 2 - Definitions of woke activism*

Despite the use of different terms

the essence of these definitions seems to be quite similar. First, activism is the act of publicly showing support or taking a stance on a societal issue. According to Moorman (2020), both corporate and individual brands can publicly demonstrate their stand on a partisan issue. For instance, Procter & Gamble is a corporate brand with a large brand portfolio. The corporation has made activism a part of its strategy by taking a stance on for example racial inequality (Kelly, 2021). Some of the brands within their portfolio also address sociopolitical issues, such as Always promoting gender inequality (Kirkpatrick, 2017) and Gillette articulated toxic masculinity during the #MeToo movement (Adams, 2019).

The majority of the definitions emphasize that the issues are sociopolitical which means that these are controversial by nature. Immigration, racial injustice, LGBTQ+ rights, and the American gun reforms are examples of partisan sociopolitical issues that have been articulated by different organizations (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Eilert & Cherup, 2020). Hence brand activism is considered controversial, because addressing contemporary sociopolitical issues tends to divide the general public (Mirzaei et al., 2021) and generate passionate responses (Vredenburg et

al., 2020). However, according to Key et al. (2021) brand activism ranges from re-defining cultural or social norms (e.g. gender) to divisive sociopolitical issues (e.g. immigration and racial equality). This implies that brands can seek to enable change on a cultural or institutional level by articulating for example gender inequality indirectly through women empowerment or directly by taking a stand on for instance legalizing same-sex marriages. This suggests that brand activism does not only articulate sociopolitical issues but also sociocultural issues. However, the common element is that the issues to some extent are considered controversial.

#### *The evolution of brand activism and its main characteristics*

Despite the growing academic interest, brand activism is not a new phenomenon as it evolves from corporate social responsibility (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). However, there are significant differences between the two practices. First, the level of controversy and partisanship related to the articulated topic is one of the most distinct contrasts. Corporate social responsibility represents explicit policies and practices regarding the business's responsibility to society and the common good (Matten & Moon, 2008). Hunger, homelessness, and children's education are common examples of corporate social responsibility issues (Korschun & Rafieian, 2016), which represent non-controversial issues of public interest (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Mirzaei et al., 2021). Brand activism, on the other hand, is described as the act of taking a stance or promoting polarized issues, such as racial injustice, abortion rights, and gun control (Tomar, N.D.). Consequently, brand activism is associated with a higher level of risk, as the issues cause more passionate and partisan responses (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

Second, corporate social responsibility practices are more focused on issues associated with the industry in which the company operates (Vredenburg et al., 2020), whereas woke activism is not necessarily directly related to the business (Dodd & Supa, 2014). To illustrate this, take for example H&M which is an international corporation operating in the fashion industry. The company is committed to reducing its negative impact, and together with other brands in the industry, they have set a new standard for the use of water in production (H&M, N.D.). This can be considered an example of corporate social responsibility that relates directly to the industry. Conversely, back in 2012 the CEO of Starbucks publicly supported the legalization of same-sex marriages (Smith, 2013). Despite being a long-time supporter of LGBTQ+ inclusion (Peiper, 2019) this is not directly linked to their industry or core business. Fighting for equal rights can also be perceived as a corporate social responsibility practice, however, the main difference is that the issues articulated in

brand activism are considered controversial and are not necessarily related to a brand's business operations but rather urgent societal issues.

Lastly, according to Sarkar & Kotler (2021), the difference between corporate social responsibility and brand activism is what drives the companies. As corporate social responsibility has become a point of parity for businesses today this practice is mainly marketing- and corporate-driven, which means that it is perceived as common practice by businesses. Whereas brand activism is value- and societal-driven which means that it is driven by a genuine concern about the issues society is facing (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021). Ultimately, by taking a stance on sociopolitical issues brand activism offers a point of difference in the marketplace (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2021).

## **Consumer responses**

This research aims to examine how brand activism influences the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention. The terms will be presented and clarified in the following sections.

### *Brand attitude*

Attitudes are a product of different experiences and evaluations of attributes related to a specific object. These favorable or unfavorable evaluations cause different affective or behavioral responses (Keller et al., 2016). The consumers' brand attitude expresses their overall evaluation of a brand and its attributes (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). The brand attitude is used to describe the term customer-based brand equity, which is defined as “(...) *the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand.*” (p. 2). The notion is that brands achieve positive customer-based brand equity when consumers respond more favorably to a market product because of the specific brand. Therefore, it is the consumers' perception of the brand and the attached value, which drives customer-based brand equity (Keller, 1993).

Brand knowledge composes customer-based brand equity and consists of brand awareness and brand image. The assumption is that consumers must be able to recall or recognize a brand to create a differential effect. Furthermore, the brand image is the consumers' perception of the brand based on various associations held in the consumers' memory (Keller, 1993). There are three types of brand associations. *Brand attributes* refer to the descriptive features which can be both product-related (e.g. ingredients) or non-product-related (e.g. price, packaging, user imagery). The *brand benefits* are more abstract as it is linked to the values and emotions consumers attach to the products or services provided by a specific brand. Lastly, *brand attitudes* are defined by Wilkie (1986) as “*consumers' overall evaluations of a brand*” (Keller, 1993, p. 4). The brand attitude emerges from

the consumers' internal evaluation of the brand attributes and benefits which eventually forms the basis for brand choice (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019).

#### *Purchase intention*

Marketers strive to create a high level of brand awareness and favorable brand associations to gain financial outcomes. Various studies have explored how marketing activities influence the consumers' behavioral responses, such as purchase intentions, which refers to the consumers' willingness to buy a product or from a specific brand (Dodd & Supa, 2011). Although the purchase intention does not necessarily reflect actual behavior, earlier studies have shown that those consumers who intend to purchase are more likely to convert to actual buyers (Brown et al., 2003; Berkman and Gilson, 1978). Thus purchase intention is a useful indicator of the consumers' actual behavior. Furthermore, the attitude towards the behavior or object (i.e. brand) is a significant antecedent (Keller et al., 2016). According to Park et al. (2010), attitude ranges from strong to weak and positive to negative. A strong positive attitude predicts favorable consumer behavior (e.g. purchase intention) or conversely an unfavorable behavior (e.g. purchase avoidance). This is supported by the findings of Sen & Bhattacharya (2001), which showed that when consumers have strong beliefs or opinions regarding companies' corporate social responsibility actions this has a direct influence on their purchase intention.

### **The effect on consumer responses and hypotheses development**

The following sections will present some of the current empirical findings on consumers' responses to brand activism. These will form the bases for developing hypotheses, which are going to be explored and examined with the use of qualitative data.

#### *Topic identification*

According to Bhattacharya & Sen (2003), congruence between consumers' self-identity and the non-product-related aspects of a brand can be a source of self-identification. Values and social responsibility efforts influence the consumer-brand relationship and alignment between the brand identity and consumers' self-identity is shown to be a significant factor to build a strong consumer-brand relationship. Tajfel et al. (1979) describe self-identity as the individual's self-image that originates from social groups and causes a feeling of belonging. These social groups or categories systematize the social world and thereby define an individual's place within it (Tajfel et al., 1979). The self-identity theory suggests that brand activism can create a strong emotional connection in case of congruence between the brand's and the consumer's stance. In addition, brands can achieve

economical benefits from topic identification, as consumers are more likely to choose a brand when there is congruence between their values and stance (Hydock et al., 2020). Furthermore, the study by Bhagwat et al. (2020) showed that the brand could thereby expect an increase in sales in the following quarter or year. Conversely, brand activism is also associated with a risk of alienating consumers who do not share the same ideology (Hydock et al., 2020; Dodd & Supa, 2014; Moorman, 2020). This alienation occurs because individuals distance themselves from a social group when they do not experience the feeling of belonging (Tajfel et al., 1979). As brand activism is value-driven there is a risk of damaging current consumer-brand relationships when the brands and consumers' values and standpoint on a specific issue are incongruent. Studies have shown that topic misidentification makes the consumers less likely to choose the brand (Hydock et al., 2020) and causes a feeling of betrayal, annoyance, or anger (Mirzaei et al., 2021). This misalignment can lead the consumers to avoid or distance themselves from the brand (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Schmidt et al., 2021) or ultimately boycott (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Bhagwat et al.).

The self-identity theory suggests that the effect of topic identification on the consumers' responses is a simple cause-effect relation, but the literature shows the effect of topic identification is asymmetric. The study by Hydock et al. (2020) showed that *"(...) both the large- and small-share brands were more likely to lose an existing misaligned customer than to gain a new aligned customer."* (p. 1144) and the study by Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) showed that the negative effects on the brand attitude in case of disagreement were more significant than the positive effect when the consumers' agrees with the stance. This is caused by a negativity bias, which suggests that negative information (i.e. misidentification) tends to create a stronger reaction than positive information (Baumeister et al., 2001). According to Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020), this asymmetric effect occurs because consumers, in general, expect brands to behave morally, and when their behavior is perceived as immoral this is more likely to cause a stronger response.

The self-identity theory implies that topic identification is a simple cause-effect relation, but the empirical findings show the consumers' responses if influenced by a negativity bias which causes an asymmetric effect. The current findings show that the effect of topic identification is asymmetric, as the consumers are more likely to respond negatively in case of misidentification than positive when they identify with a brand's stance. As the attitude is an antecedent for the individual's behavior, it is assumed that the effect on purchase intentions follows the same notion. Thus the first hypothesis proposes:

H1 Topic identification has an asymmetric effect on the consumer's brand attitude and purchase intention, which means that topic misidentification causes a more significant effect than topic identification.

#### *The level of topic controversy*

The majority of the definitions in the literature emphasize the polarizing nature of brand activism, but it is acknowledged that there are different levels of topic controversy. According to Key et al. (2021), the level of controversy related to the issue ranges from highly controversial to less controversial depending on whether it is a sociopolitical or sociocultural issue. Consumers expect brands to take action and enable societal changes (Edelman, 2020), but the question is if the level of controversy causes different effects on the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention. According to Cambridge Dictionary, the word controversy means "*a lot of disagreement or argument about something, usually because it affects or is important to many people.*" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). Based on this definition sociopolitical issues could be perceived as highly controversial because it has an impact on the majority of society and entails a political aspect that could cause a lot of disagreement. Conversely, sociocultural issues could be perceived as less controversial because it revolves around cultural norms and does not entail a political aspect. This notion implies that the more controversial the issue is, the more passionate responses it will cause, as the level of disagreement increases. It is assumed that the two levels of controversy have an impact on the consumers' responses, as consumers expect brands to take a stand and be a force of change. However, the effect of this contextual variable has not yet been explored concerning the consumers' response to brand activism, but it is relevant to explore if the level of topic controversy causes differential effects on the consumers' affective and behavioral responses. Currently, brand activism is associated with a high level of risk because the literature has focused on brands articulating highly controversial issues, but it seems necessary to explore if brands can benefit from taking a stance on less controversial issues while avoiding the associated risks. Exploring this variable will provide additional insight into the consumers' response to the phenomenon. Thus the second hypothesis proposes:

H2 The level of topic controversy influences the consumer's brand attitude and purchase intention and highly controversial issues will cause a stronger positive and negative effect on the consumers' responses compared to less controversial issues.



### *Perceived authenticity*

To achieve financial and relational benefits brands must ensure that their actions are perceived as authentic, as this is the key to successful brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Schmidt et al., 2021). Authentic brand activism is when there is a clear alignment between the brand's manifested purpose and values and the prosocial messages and actions. If the brand's messages and actions are perceived as inauthentic, the brand can be labeled as woke washing, which can cause brand equity write-off due to the negative brand association (Vredenburg et al., 2020). The study by Hydock et al. (2020) showed that insincere brand activism also reduces the positive effect of topic identification.

The current academic findings show that perceived authenticity is crucial to enable positive consumer responses, as inauthenticity mitigates the positive effect of brand activism. Consequently perceived authenticity has a significant effect on the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intentions. Thus, the third hypothesis proposes:

H3 Perceived authenticity has a positive influence and perceived inauthenticity has a negative influence on the consumer's brand attitude and purchase intention.

### **Conceptualization of the theoretical framework**

Three hypotheses have been developed based on current findings in the literature. These are illustrated in figure 3, which shows the relation between brand activism, the three moderators, and the two consumer responses. The figure shows that the three variables influence the consumers' brand attitude and thereby indirectly the purchase intention.

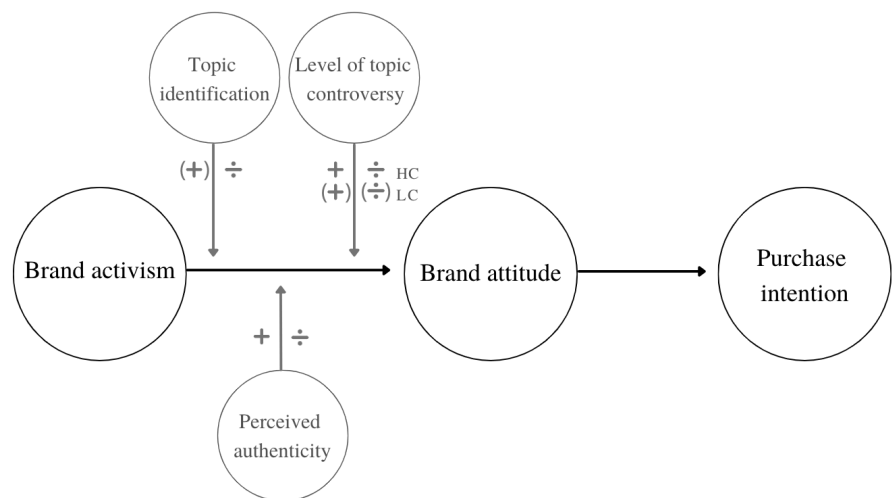


Figure 3 - Conceptualization

The empirical findings show that topic identification is a pivotal moderator and has an asymmetric effect on the consumers' responses. The level of topic controversy represents an unexplored contextual variable but the assumption is that highly controversial issues cause strong



consumer responses. Perceived authenticity is also considered a key moderator in the literature as it is shown to have a direct effect. Lastly, the figure shows the two consumer responses and illustrates the effect on the brand attitude antecedent to the consumers' purchase intentions. This conceptualization illustrates the proposed cause-effect relation, which will be explored with the use of qualitative data.

In the following section, the philosophy of science and methodological reflection will be presented. The first section revolves around the philosophy of science and how the field of research is interpreted, followed by a description of the operative paradigm and the applied methods for exploring the formulated hypotheses.

## **Methodology**

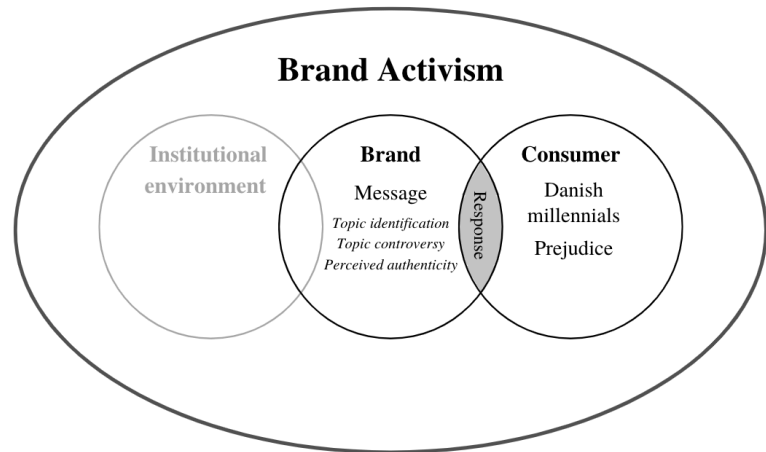
### **Philosophy of science**

This research has been conducted based on the principles of the critical realistic paradigm. There are two basic assumptions about reality in this paradigm. First, reality exists independently of our knowledge of it, and secondly, the reality is not directly observable. The main purpose when working within this paradigm is to gain access to reality, which can be done indirectly by exploring the mechanisms that cause the observable events (Danermark et al., 2001). Exploring how the three contextual variables influence the consumers' affective and behavioral responses provides access to the unobservable part of reality and provides insight into how the mechanism causes events in reality.

### *Ontology*

The ontological questions revolve around what exists within the field of research. It is an essential task to describe reality to define how to examine the study area and develop a methodological approach (Fuglsang et al., 2014). In the critical realistic paradigm, the reality is constantly changing and structured into three ontological domains. The empirical domain is where the individual directly or indirectly observes different experiences. The actual domain is where events happen independently of our knowledge of it. These events might be different from the observed experiences, as reality is not directly observable. Lastly, the real domain is where the mechanisms exist and produce the events (Danermark et al., 2001). Thus the objective when working within the critical realistic paradigm is to understand the connection between three ontological domains to explain how the observations, events, and mechanisms are interrelated (Fuglsang et al., 2014).

Figure 4 illustrates the field of research that consists of four elements. Brand activism represents the overall viewpoint of this research, as the purpose is to explore the attitude of the Danish millennial towards the phenomenon and how it causes different consumer responses.



*Figure 4 - Field of research*

According to Eilert & Cherup (2020), brand activism involves

the brand, the consumers, and the institutions, because brands through activism seek to influence the consumers and the institutional environment to enable change. This notion is illustrated in the figure, but it is the relation between the brand and the consumers that are within the field of research. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that brand activism builds on a hybrid logic, which combines both market and social logic. This means that brand activism involves seeking economic benefits (i.e. profit maximization) and prosocial objectives (i.e. societal improvements) (Spry et al., 2021). In this study, the main objective is to gain a better understanding of how brand activism can enable economic benefits, which excludes the effect on society and the institutional level. It is assumed that exploring the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intentions will provide insight into how brand activism can enable economic benefits, as the brand attitude is an antecedent for the behavioral response.

There are three highlighted elements in figure 4, namely the brand, the consumers, and the response. In the center of the figure is the brand, which conveys the prosocial message. Brand activism differs from other marketing practices by articulating societal issues and the message is therefore considered a crucial element to explore how consumers respond to brand activism. Furthermore, the three contextual variables are also related to the message, because it encompasses a topic that can be perceived as either highly or less controversial and authentic or inauthentic. It is important to emphasize that it is the prosocial message, and not the messenger, that composes the center element field of research, as the purpose is to explore how the Danish millennials respond to the marketing practice and not to a specific brand's message. The right side of the figure represents the consumers who receive the message. The consumer segment is defined as Danish millennials

because the millennials are recognized to have high expectations of brands taking a stance and being a force of change in the literature (Mirzaei et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020). As brand activism involves promoting or taking a stance on controversial issues, it is assumed necessary to gain access to the consumer's prejudice, as these presumably have an impact on how they interpret the message. First, the consumer's perceptions and expectations about favorable brand behavior form their general attitude towards the phenomenon, which forms the basis for their response. Second, topic identification expresses if the consumers agree or disagree with a brand's stance, which is influenced by their moral reasoning. Third, it is assumed that the level of topic controversy and perceived inauthenticity is influenced by the consumer's prejudice about the phenomenon and trustworthy brand behavior. Thus it is critical to gain access to these prejudgments to obtain insight into how these contextual variables have an impact on the consumers' affective and behavioral responses.

### *Epistemology*

When the characteristics of the study area have been described the next step is to evaluate how to obtain valid knowledge about the field of research. The ontological characteristics are essential, as the field of research determines what methods and theories should be applied (Fuglsang et al., 2014).

As previously mentioned, the field of research will be explored based on a retroductive research approach, which combines the deductive and inductive approaches. The reason for applying this approach is because the purpose is to explore the underlying structures and mechanisms that produce the consumer responses and explain how these mechanisms cause different effects on the affective and behavioral responses. The first step of the research applied a deductive approach, which refers to using general knowledge on a single event (Darmer et al., 2010). The research started by gaining a theoretical understanding of brand activism and identifying contextual variables. These variables are perceived as mechanisms that influence the consumers' responses to the prosocial message. Based on the empirical knowledge three hypotheses were developed which describes how the variables influence the consumers' responses. These hypotheses will be examined in the second step of the research through qualitative data. Interviews are a unique tool to gain access to subjects' experiences, opinions, or how they perceive given situations or phenomena (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017). Thus the interviews will provide access to how the consumers' affective and behavioral responses are influenced by the contextual variables. During the interviews, the subjects will be presented with different types of prosocial messages. The purpose of

using examples is to stimulate the consumers and to explore how they experience the messages and what causes them to react in a certain way. As illustrated in figure 4, the variables are related to the message conveyed, thus it is assumed necessary to present different types of brand activism to examine the proposed effects. The observations on the variables' effect on the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention will determine the verification of the hypotheses. This step of the research represents an inductive approach as the individual observations produce general knowledge about a phenomenon (Darmer et al., 2010).

In the following section, the practical approach for exploring the proposed hypotheses in the second step of the research will be presented. The section starts by presenting how the interviews have been designed, and how the examples have been selected. This is followed by a description of the participants and the section will end by presenting the method for analyzing the qualitative data.

## **Qualitative method**

### *Preparing & designing*

The first step in designing the qualitative research approach is to conduct an interview guide, which is a script that structures the interview. Designing an interview guide is an interactive process, which goes back and forth between the overall research questions and the interview questions to ensure congruence between the purpose and the actual approach (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017).

The English and Danish interview guides is available in appendix 1 and 2 and is structured as follows. The interview started with a short briefing about the purpose of the interview and some practical information about the use of recording, anonymity, and how the data will be utilized. The purpose was to make sure that the interviewees were informed and felt comfortable about participating in the interview. After the briefing, the phenomenon was presented to the interviewee, because it is assumed that the consumers were not highly aware of brand activism, as it is not a common practice in Denmark. The introduction was followed by three sections, which revolve around the two levels of topic controversy and perceived authenticity. The purpose of the two sections regarding topic controversy was to explore how topic identification and the two levels of controversy influence the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention. Topic controversy and topic identification was perceived as being interrelated, as these both relate to the issue articulated in the prosocial message. Thus it was assumed favorable to explore these variables together, whereas perceived authenticity was explored separately, as it represents the consumers' evaluation

of the sincerity of the message. The interview ended with a debriefing where the interviewees were able to add their final opinions or thoughts about the subject.

#### *Selecting examples for stimulation*

Appendix 3 and 4 have been applied as a script during the interviews to ensure a consistent interpretation of the phenomenon. It was necessary to have a homogeneous approach to the interviews to increase the reliability of the findings and the method for gathering the data. A total of eight examples have been selected which illustrate four less controversial issues and four highly controversial issues. To select the examples four criteria were applied. First, the brand had to be the communicator, which excludes examples where the CEO or other brand representatives take a stance on societal issues. The study by Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) showed that consumers apply different decoupling strategies depending on the messenger. Thus it was necessary that the brand was the communicator of the message, as the aim is to explore how the message influences the brand attitude and purchase intention. Second, the examples had to be consumer brands, to ensure that the consumers were the anticipated receiver of the message. Third, the brand has to be international to ensure that the Danish consumers have already established brand knowledge. This would ensure that the examples were relatable and the consumers were able to reflect on how the message could change their affective and behavioral responses. Fourth, the examples had to represent two different levels of topic controversy to explore if the level of controversy has an impact on the consumers' responses. Based on the previous notion (p. 10) the level of controversy has been determined based on the following definition: *A highly controversial topic influences the majority of society or entails a political aspect, whereas a less controversial topic influences the minorities or challenges cultural norms and beliefs.*

#### *Design modifications*

A total of 14 interviews have been conducted, but the interviews were divided into two rounds because the interview guide and introduction script were adjusted midway. During the first round of interviews, it was acknowledged that there was a need to reformulate a few questions because the questions needed to be more specific. A few questions were reformulated or divided into two separate questions to make it easier for the interviewees to understand and answer the questions. The reformulating of the questions was done in regard to ensuring that the meaning of the question was consistent and the same use of words was applied to ensure that the data would be comparable during the analysis. Furthermore, in the second round of interviews, there was added a few

questions about the consumers' response to a brand's non-stand, as it was assumed necessary to further explore the importance of brand activism for the Danish millennials and if a brand's neutral stand on societal issues have an influence on the brand attitude and intention. Despite the modification, the data will be comparable, because the main adjustment was in regards to specifying the questions, which did not conflict with the current questions. However, the data regarding non-stand on less and highly controversial issues will only be present for the second round of interviews. The modified interview guide, which was applied in the second round of interviews, is available in appendix 5 and 6.

In addition, it was considered necessary to modify the introduction to the phenomenon, as the first round of interviews showed it would be beneficial to introduce basic examples of the different levels of controversy to clarify the differences. Furthermore, the order of the examples of highly controversial issues was adjusted, as the first round of interviews showed a great interest in specific issues, which ended up directing the interviews. Thus it was necessary to change the order of the interviews to avoid the issue becoming the topic of conversation. These adjustments will not conflict with the data from the first round of interviews, as the content has not been adjusted. The modified script used for the second round of interviews is available in appendix 7 and 8.

### *The participants*

According to Brinkmann & Kvale (2017), a representative sample size in qualitative research is less indefinite compared to a quantitative. The purpose of the research is a significant factor in determining the number of subjects. If the aim is to predict behavior it is necessary to have a large sample in order to generalize the predictions, whereas if the aim is to explore the subject's behavior and experiences a smaller sample would be accepted. On average a qualitative study would compose of  $\pm 10-15$  interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017).

It was acknowledged that exploring the attitude of the Danish millennial towards brand activism and how the contextual variables influence their responses requires a relatively large sample size. Furthermore, it was assumed crucial to include both men and women with different backgrounds

Interviews			
First round			
	Gender	Age	Occupation
1	Male	28	Social worker
2	Female	30	Marketing assistant
3	Female	26	Student teacher
4	Female	26	University student
5	Male	27	Public school teacher
6	Male	34	Master student
7	Female	29	Unemployed
Second round			
8	Female	28	Pedagogue
9	Male	39	Jurist consultant
10	Female	27	Bank advisor
11	Male	32	Technical college student
12	Female	28	On maternity leave
13	Male	31	Fulltime artist
14	Male	33	Residential social worker

*Figure 5 - Description of the interviewees*

to ensure a broad representation of the generation. A total of 14 interviews were conducted which lasted for 40 minutes on average. The participants were recruited through social media and the interviews were conducted both physically and online, because the interviewees were from Aalborg, Aarhus, Copenhagen, or different province cities. Figure 5 shows a description of the participants based on gender, age, and occupation.

### *Processing the data*

There are various modes for analyzing interviews, depending on whether the focus is on meaning or linguistics. One of the methods is meaning condensation, which refers to compressing longer statements into a brief text that represents the essence of the meaning expressed by the interviewee. The analysis consists of five steps; reading the interview and making sense of the whole, determining the meaning units, deriving the essence of the meaning unit and rephrasing it into a short text, ensuring the units are related to the purpose of the study, and lastly, tying the statements together (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017). Meaning condensation was chosen as the method for analyzing the data because the purpose was to derive the consumers' opinions about brand activism and how they would respond, from the interviews. Thus the analysis consisted of compressing the meaning units into short text, which represented the attitude or effect of the variables.

To accommodate the field of research a few methodological adjustments were necessary. The first step of the meaning condensation analysis was to read the interview, which required converting the oral dialog into a written form (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017). Instead of transcribing the whole interview, the transcription was delimited to the subject's statements. In some cases, the interview questions were transcribed if it was crucial for understanding the context of the subject's answer. This methodological adjustment was applied because the research was executed in Denmark and the majority of the interview was conducted in the native language. Thus transcribing and translating was a time-consuming process, and it was assumed more crucial to capture the meaning of the interviewee's statement than the conversation dynamic. In closing, the transcription was written in a more formal style to make it more convenient to read. This means that frequent repetition or mumbling was excluded (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017). The translated transcriptions are attached as an additional appendix and consist of 102 pages.

Following the transcription was the determination of which meaning units were going to be analyzed. The selection of meaning units was based on whether the statement expressed the consumer's general attitude or the effect on the brand attitude or purchase intention. Those units that deviated from the subject were excluded. Furthermore, during the interview, follow-up or



clarifying questions were used to get more insight into the consumers' responses and thereby resulted in similar statements. Thus if two statements were comparable, the statement which was most evident and comprehensive was included. To ensure transparency and reliability in the analysis of the qualitative data, the meaning condensations of the 14 interviews are available in an additional appendix and follow the same structure as the interview guide.

The final step of the analysis is to conduct a coherent description of the interviewees' statements, which provide an overall perception of how the interviewee perceives a given phenomenon or their opinion about a specific situation (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017). In this research, the purpose of the interviews was to examine the formulated hypotheses and explore how the Danish millennials responded to brand activism. Therefore, instead of conducting a coherent description of how the interviewees individually, the description of the consumers' responses will be intertwined. As the purpose is to explore how the contextual variables influence the consumers' responses the structure of the findings will be variable-based and quotes will be applied to illustrate the essence. The quotes will include a reference that shows which meaning condensation the citation has been derived. By conducting a coherent description based on the variables it will be possible to derive how the variables influence the consumers' responses and define the level of intersubjective agreement. According to Brinkmann & Kvale (2017), arithmetical intersubjectivity can be used to express the level of agreement among the independent observations, and express the reliability of the findings. Hence the consistency of the observed effect of the variables on the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention will determine whether the hypotheses will be supported by the qualitative findings.

In the following sections, the findings of the 14 interviews will be presented and follow the structure illustrated in figure 6.

Presentation of the findings
<b>General attitude</b> <i>General attitude towards brands articulating sociocultural and sociopolitical issues</i>
<b>Topic identification and the level of controversy</b> <i>Topic identification</i> <i>The effect of less controversial issues on the consumers' responses</i> <i>The effect of highly controversial issues on the consumers' responses</i> <i>Topic misidentification</i> <i>The effect of less controversial issues on the consumers' responses</i> <i>The effect of highly controversial issues on the consumers' responses</i> <i>Comparison of the effect of topic identification and the two levels of topic controversy</i>
<b>Perceived authenticity</b> <i>General perception of authenticity</i> <i>The effect of perceived authenticity on the consumers' responses</i> <i>The effect of perceived inauthenticity on the consumers' responses</i> <i>Comparison of the effect of perceived authenticity on the consumers' response</i>

Figure 6 - Structure of the presentation section



## Findings

### General attitude

Almost all Danish consumers express a positive attitude towards brand activism and think that brands taking a stand on societal issues are a positive development. The findings show that many consumers are not familiar with the phenomenon and are not aware of brands being involved in activism on both a sociocultural and sociopolitical level. Furthermore, the consumers express that it is favorable that brands participate in the public discussion and the majority state that it is important that brands take a stance on societal issues.

*I think that it is important that they create awareness about these things. There are many who look up to the big brands and they are like influencers on those things. So I think that it is important that they do it, that they create, like, something new to talk about and push the boundaries a bit sometimes. (MC12)*

*For me personally, I like that brand's take a stand. So it sort of collides or it corresponds with the fact that I myself also have become more active. So seeing that reflected in brands appeals to me. (MC9)*

Many of the Danish millennials believe it is important for brands to act in a prosocial manner because of their resources and ability to influence a large number of people. Therefore, the consumers believe that brands have a responsibility to be prosocial advocates. In some cases, these expectations primarily target the bigger brands due to their resources and societal impact. Others state that they appreciate brands taking a stance on societal issues, but express that brands should still be concerned about the issues related to the business operations. Thus the consumers believe that it is to some extent continuously important to articulate issues that are related to the brand's industry, activities, or products.

*I would say that it depends very much on the brand and the reach the brand has. I think that it is very important that the big brands take some responsibility, both in the debate, in their workplace and their products. Like kind of take a perspective that contributes to making it sustainable for both the employees and consumers. (MC1)*

*I feel like they have a responsibility. We often talk about the power of people and who might be a powerful person in the media, and then with that power comes responsibility. But I believe the same to be for brands. Brands have such an impact, and a brand is also power. So for them to use it in, you can say as an activism is very important, especially because they have an impact. (MC9)*

*(...) But there are so many other areas within, now we are talking about the cosmetics industry, but like within the cosmetics industry, that is so important to focus on. So it just seems a bit silly for them to focus on something that is so far away from what they are doing when they have millions of issues lying just outside their front door. (MC4)*

Even though the majority of the consumers have a positive attitude toward brand activism they also express that they are skeptical about the brands' intentions. First, a few consumers show concerns about ethical issues that might arise when brands tap into societal issues. The consumers acknowledge that the brands have a lot of power when it comes to influencing their customers, and thereby it also becomes a question of ethics and whether brands with a huge impact on society should be able to participate in political discussions. Second, the consumers perceive brand activism as a positive development, but they also express concerns about the intentions and actions behind the brand's prosocial stand. Some consumers find it difficult to determine whether the brands are promoting societal issues to favor their self-interest or to enable actual changes in society.

*(...) I would become skeptical about what is their selling point, what is their end game. Because a brand is commercial, so wherever they can find the most money, that is the direction they will go. (MC6)*

*(...) I did not know that it was already happening, but I think it is a good thing that it is happening. But then obviously not, because you also talked about that pink washing and greenwashing. Then I would also automatically really become, like, super suspicious. (MC13)*

Figure 7 highlights the main findings on the Danish millennials' general attitude towards brand activism. Despite some of the consumers are not familiar with the phenomenon, the majority of the consumers have a positive attitude towards the fact that brands to a larger extent participate in improving societal issues. They appreciate that brands take some responsibility and utilize their platform to be a part of making favorable

General attitude
<b>93% express positive attitude towards brand activism</b> M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M7, M8, M9, M10, M11, M12, M13, M14
<b>79% state brand activism is important</b> M1, M4, (M5), M7, (M8), M9, M10, (M11), (M13), M12, M14 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reach M1, (M8), M9, M10, M12, (M13)</li> <li>• Responsibility M1, M4, M5, (M6), M9, M12, M14</li> <li>• Resources M4, M9, M12</li> <li>• Related to business M4, M8, M9, M10</li> <li>• Expectations for big brands M1, M4</li> </ul>
<b>50% are skeptical about brand activism</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Based on populism M6, M14</li> <li>• Woke washing M2, M5, M11, M13</li> <li>• Ethics M8, M2</li> </ul>

Figure 7 - General attitude

changes in society and within their industry. However, others are still skeptical about the brand's intentions and worry about whether there is substance behind the words or if the aim is to maximize the brand's self-interest.

*The general attitude towards brands articulating sociocultural or sociopolitical issues*

One of the contextual variables is the level of topic controversy, and to explore the differential effect on the consumers' responses, it is necessary to present the consumers' attitude towards brands taking a stance on both sociocultural and sociopolitical issues. Overall the majority of the consumers have a positive reaction when brands articulate sociocultural and sociopolitical issues because they believe that brands have the ability to create awareness and influence both the consumers and the institutional environment. In regards to enabling changes, the findings suggest consumers believe that taking a stance on highly controversial issues will to a greater extent cause actual changes in society.

Less controversial issues	Highly controversial issues
<i>I think it is a good thing, and I believe it is important. It is not all of the things that I have heard about before now, but I think it is important that brands take a stand. I of course like that brands take a stand related to what they actually concern themselves with. Adidas is talking about athletes and Gillette addresses men in that way. That I think is actually a good thing. (MC1)</i>	<i>Personally I am all for it. I love the fact that big international brands join in on the discussion on both equal rights and gun control and some of the other, the sort of national monuments of whatever you were mentioning. So I see it as a positive that even brands that obviously in itself have nothing to do with the statement. They take a stand because they understand they have a platform that they can reach. (MC9)</i>

Despite the general favorable perception, the consumers are also skeptical about brands tapping into urgent societal issues. The general skepticism revolves around the brands' intentions behind taking a stance because various consumers perceive it as based on populism. The skepticism mainly targets less controversial issues as many consumers acknowledge that brand activism on highly controversial issues are associated with a higher level of risk. This implies that articulating less controversial issues to a great extent has been commercialized, as it is perceived as an attempt to attract customers compared to highly controversial issues.

Less controversial issues	Highly controversial issues
<p><i>(... ) They have a lot of influence on how we think and how we perceive things, so I think it is a very healthy and good direction that they are going in. But I also think that at least today I am a bit more suspicious if they are actually right about it or if there is actually some power behind it or if it is just words. Cause it seems like nowadays many brands can tap into LGBT+ friendly but maybe they are not at all when it comes to it. (...) (MC2)</i></p>	<p><i>I always keep wondering, like, do they really do that because they are such good people and they really want to make the world a better place, or is it just purely selfish because they want to keep surviving themselves and they do not know what other ways to find to be able to do so. (...) So they advertise beautiful messages, which in a way is a nice thing that they do that because it is important. But at the same time it is the biggest reason why they do it is probably still for their own profit. (MC13)</i></p>

In the second round of interviews, the consumers' attitudes towards a neutral stand on both less and highly controversial issues were explored. The purpose of exploring the effect of non-stand was to understand the expectations and importance of brands taking a stance. The majority of the consumers state that not taking a stance on less controversial issues could potentially have a negative effect on the brand attitude and purchase intentions because it could be perceived as an attempt to avoid risk. However, a non-stand on highly controversial issues does not have an immediate negative impact, as the consumers do not expect brands to participate in sociopolitical discussions. The findings imply that the effect of non-stand on societal issues depends on if it is frequently discussed in the media, the importance of the issue, if the brand was directly asked to take a stance or if the brand had previously been outspoken and suddenly became silent. The findings imply that although consumers believe it is important for brands to take a stance, currently a non-stand on societal issues does not have a significant effect on the brand attitude and purchase intentions.

Less controversial issues	Highly controversial issues
<p><i>It would make me feel less about the brand if I know that they just decide not to participate in either a campaign or a discussion on a topic. So if they actively decide not to, meaning I guess what you are saying, being neutral. I would probably find that a bit annoying because I would say 'why hesitate and why would a brand sort of try and hide themselves from a discussion'. But then again I think I will at some point forget it and then go back and then maybe buy the brand. (MC9)</i></p>	<p><i>No, like I do not think that I would, well unless it is a company that previously has been very loud about something that relates to the topic and then suddenly does not have an opinion about it. (...) But if they had not been out screaming or yelling about something and they usually do not take a stand, then I would not think about it. I also think that I would not make them responsible for not being a part of it. (MC12)</i></p>

Figure 8 highlights the findings regarding the Danish millennials' attitude towards brands articulating sociocultural and sociopolitical issues. Overall the consumers have a positive perception of brand activism on both a sociocultural and sociopolitical level. Participating in the public discussion is perceived as important, but it is acknowledged that brands are able to make actual changes when they take a stance on

General attitude	
Sociocultural issues	Sociopolitical issues
<b>79% express positive attitude</b> M1, M2, M3, M5, (M8), M9, M10, M11, M12, M13, M14	<b>79% express positive attitude</b> M1, M2, M3, (M4), M5, M7, (M8), M9, M11, M12, M14
<b>36% believe taken a stand is important</b> M1, M2, M3, (M7), M12 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In relation to core business M1, M5</li> <li>For bigger brands M2, M12</li> </ul>	<b>36% believe taken a stand is important</b> M1, M2, M3, M5, M11 <p><b>50% believe brands have the power to enable actual changes</b>  M1, M2, M5, M7, M9, M12, M14</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reach M2, M9, M12, M14</li> <li>Economical resources M1, M12</li> </ul>
<b>29% is skeptical when brand articulate these issues</b> M2, M6, M7, M11 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Action behind words M2</li> <li>Populism M6, M7</li> <li>Imposed a stand M11</li> </ul>	<b>14% is skeptical when brand articulate these issues</b> M6, M13 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intentions M13</li> <li>Populism M6</li> </ul> <p><b>21% acknowledged the risk of a stance in these issues</b>  M1, M12, M14</p>
<b>57% state that non-stand could cause a negative effect on brand attitude</b> (M8), M9, M11, M12	<b>57% state that non-stand will not cause immediate effect on brand attitude</b> (M9), M8, M12, M14

*Figure 8 - Attitude towards brands articulating sociocultural and sociopolitical issues*

highly controversial issues. As previously mentioned, the consumers are skeptical about brand activism, however, this is mainly when brands promote less controversial issues. Sociopolitical issues are affiliated with a higher level of risk, which makes the consumers less suspicious about the brands' intentions. The findings show that the effect of a neutral stand depends on the urgency of the issue, the topic, and the brand's previous actions. However, a neutral stand on less controversial issues could have a negative effect on the consumers' responses, whereas this was not present on highly controversial issues. This implies that the Danish millennials to a greater extent expect brands to participate in the sociocultural discussion because the sociopolitical is perceived as riskier.

#### *Topic identification & level of topic controversy*

The effect of topic identification and level of topic controversy has been explored together, as these variables are perceived as interrelated. The findings of how the two variables influence the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention will be presented together. The following section starts by presenting the findings of topic identification and the two levels of controversy followed by the effect of topic misidentification. At the end of the two sections, the main differences will be presented.

## Topic identification

### *The effect of less controversial issues on the consumers' responses*

In general, the consumers believe it is important that brands participate in the discussion on sociocultural issues, as they have the ability to reach a large number of people. This is also reflected in the findings as identification with the brand's stance on a less controversial issue has a positive effect on the brand attitude. When there is an alignment between the stances it causes a feeling of affirmation, as the consumers can reflect their own beliefs in the brand's stance. This causes a more favorable perception of the brand and multiple consumers express that it would increase their brand loyalty and enable a stronger emotional connection.

*You cannot agree with everything that a brand does or stands for, but you see it would always give me, like, a warm feeling, and a better buying experience. Then I would clap myself on the shoulders because 'uh then I also keep my own common thread in what I care about and stand for'. (MC7)*

*Well, if I agree with it, then I would definitely feel that I was seen in their marketing or branding in some way and I would be able to reflect myself in some of it and think 'this has a positive effect on me. That does something good to me. I get the urge to go out and buy from this brand' (...). (MC8)*

This shows that topic identification on less controversial issues has a positive influence on the brand attitude as it strengthens the consumers' self-image and creates or reinforces a connection to the brand. Even though identification on less controversial issues has a positive effect on the brand attitude, this does not necessarily have a direct impact on the behavioral responses.

*Well if they go out with a message, which you clearly can see is a societal issue today. (...) I definitely would think more positively about the brand. Yes. I think that it has an influence, maybe not on me as a consumer about what I would buy, but my perception about the brand. Definitely. (MC3)*

*I think for me as a consumer, I applauded and I am happy to see a more positive branding. It does not necessarily mean that I am gonna buy the brand. So for me as a consumer it would not necessarily persuade me to buy it. (MC9)*

The findings suggest that identification on less controversial issues does not have a direct effect on the purchase intention. However, the majority of the consumers express that they would be more likely to choose a brand in case of topic identification on these types of issues. Meaning brands can benefit from articulating such issues, as it has a positive effect on the affective and behavioral

response. Some consumers express that if there is a match between the product and their needs, topic identification on less controversial issues has a more direct impact on their purchase intentions.

*I personally always, whenever I have my period, I go look at the store shelves and I am always looking at Always cause I remember they had this commercial with females, young girls, and they were like “run like a girl” and they were like running silly, and they were not running normally. But they made that, you know, as a campaign as well to be like women can do running as well if they have their period. And it just stands really clear, so I think when it comes to brand recognition and, like, prioritizing a brand over another it is something that is really important to me. (MC2)*

*I think if it came down to, like, that was the only difference that there was, that this brand had taken this standpoint on something important and the other brand had not. Then I would choose the one who had, because I want to support and celebrate that. (MC4)*

Topic identification on less controversial issues does not have a direct effect on the consumers' purchase intention, but it offers a point of difference for the consumers during their decision-making process. The findings show that topic identification on less controversial issues does have a positive impact on the brand attitude, and thereby the brand can potentially benefit from this in the long term, as this drives the consumers' behavioral responses.

#### *The effect of highly controversial issues on the consumers' responses*

Topic identification on highly controversial issues has a positive effect on the consumers' brand attitude. As previously mentioned, the consumers have a positive perception of brand activism on sociopolitical issues and believe that brands are able to make actual changes because of their economic resources and ability to reach a large number of people. When brands dare to take a stance on controversial issues the consumers perceive them as powerful and responsible which causes a favorable brand attitude. Furthermore, the alignment between the beliefs and values can reinforce the emotional connection, which causes a more favorable attitude towards the brand.

*It does make it, like, more trustworthy to some extent. You would have more trust towards them doing the right thing, when they also promote these ethical things. Then it would create more trust from the consumers, and that is, like, also why you have more tendency to buy from them, because you think ‘Oh yeah, they were the ones that made the Black Lives Matters campaign’ or whatever it could be. (MC5)*



*Well, they take responsibility and they are brave. (...) But that is something that splits the crowd in the US. It actually cost something, like customers. And therefore it would also make me think 'then I have to support it'. If I can see that it is something that splits the crowd, then I think that it is brave and then it also makes me interested, and then I want to support it and buy the products. (MC14)*

As the quotes above also illustrate, topic identification on highly controversial issues has a positive effect on the consumers' purchase intention. Some consumers state that a brand's stance on these issues would make them want to support the brand through consumption. This behavioral response is caused by the consumers' desire to showcase their own stance, support the issue, and the brand which they acknowledge could be facing a lot of risks. Furthermore, the majority of the consumers express that they would be more likely to choose the brand based on their stance on highly controversial issues in case of topic identification.

*Well it is like I am saying, it would just be awesome, more awesome! Well then I would choose to shop there, just also to make a statement. Then I would not shop anywhere else, because they do these extra things. (MC7)*

*I think that in this case then I would be more disposed to buy from a specific brand, when it brings so huge differences. Then again it has something to do with how much you agree with the messages, but again here we face some where I either do not have a stand or agree with the message. Again it is like some brands that I already know off and have a sense of belonging too, which I would probably be more inclined to keep on using. (MC1)*

The findings suggest that topic identification on highly controversial issues has a more immediate impact on the consumers' willingness to purchase as they feel the urge to support the issue and brand through their consumption. It is acknowledged that the effect on the behavioral response depends on the consumers' needs, but the findings show that some of the consumers would be more inclined to support the stand through impulsive consumption when the issue is perceived as highly controversial. Others express that in order for topic identification on highly controversial issues to have a direct effect on the consumers' purchase intentions, the actual purchase should support the specific issue. This will increase the encouragement to purchase as the consumer feels like the purchase makes an actual difference.

*But for instance if they said 'the profit from this specific shoes or ice cream collection goes to some sort of project' that may be related to some of these topics. THEN you might want to go and support that product. I might want to do that, if you feel like you made a difference or you supported it. (MC12)*



(...) And Black Lives Matters for that matter. I have actually supported that myself by buying shirts, t-shirts, and hoodies because if I felt like those 250 crowns I spent on a shirt or 500 crowns when I bought a hoodie could be used to support the case, then that would be awesome. (MC5)

The results show that topic identification on highly controversial issues has a positive influence on the Danish millennials' brand attitude and purchase intention. Consumers appreciate that brands take a stand on sociopolitical issues, as they believe it has a great impact on society. Topic identification on these issues causes a favorable brand attitude. Furthermore, the findings show that topic identification would make the consumers more likely to purchase. In addition, as the issues are related to the individuals' ideologies and perceived as more important, it has a more immediate effect on the consumers' purchase intentions. The findings show a tendency of the consumers to be more inclined to support compared to identification on less controversial issues.

#### *Comparison of the effect of topic identification and the levels of controversy*

The findings show that topic identification regardless of the level of controversy will have a positive effect on the consumers' attitude towards the brand. In both situations, this will cause a feeling of affirmation, as the consumers are able to reflect their own values and beliefs in the brand's stance. When brands articulate both less and highly controversial societal issues it also has a positive effect on the consumers' purchase intention, as they would be more likely to choose the brand. Multiple consumers express that a brand's stance on less controversial issues would be perceived as a point of difference during their decision-making process, as purchasing from a brand with similar values would strengthen their self-identity. On the other hand, highly controversial issues would to a greater extent cause impulsive purchases, as they want to support the brand and issue

while demonstrating their own stance through consumption. Figure 9 highlights the main findings of the effect of topic identification on the different levels of controversy.

Topic identification	Low controversy		High controversy	
	Brand attitude	Purchase intention	Brand attitude	Purchase intention
	86% express positive effect M1 M2 M3 M4 M5 M7 M8 M9 M10 M12 M13 M14	64% express positive effect M2 M3 M4 M5 M7 M8 M10 M12 M13	79% express positive effect M1 M3 M2 M4 M5 M7 M8 M9 M10 M11 M14	57% express positive effect M1 M3 M4 M5 M7 M8 M11 M14
	Affirmation M1 M3 M7 M8 M10 M12	More likely to choose brand M2 M3 M4 M5 M7 M8 M10 M12 M13  Less likely to change brand M1 M12	Affirmation M1 M3 M5	More likely to choose brand M3 M4 M7 M8 M11  Purchase to support or make statement M1 M5 M14

Figure 9 - Comparison of topic identification and the two levels of controversy

## Topic misidentification

### *The effect of less controversial issues on the consumers' responses*

More than a third of the consumers express that taking a stance on sociocultural issues is important, as brands have the ability to influence society indirectly through their consumers. When the consumers experience a misalignment between their own and the brand's stance it has a negative impact on the brand attitude. The majority states that misidentification on less controversial topics would change their attitude towards the brand and some express the feeling of annoyance or disappointment and supporting a brand stance through consumption would cause a sense of discomfort. The misalignment on less controversial issues has a negative impact on the brand attitude, as the consumers are not able to identify with the brand's stance.

*(...) if I have a perception about a brand 'this is what they stand for, this is the material they use' and then they promote something, where I think that I am deeply disagreeing with, then I would probably think afterwards 'then you do not live up to the expectations that I have to you' and then I would be disappointed about the brand or whatever word you might use. So in that way it could I guess also change my perception about them. (MC8)*

*(...) Well it should fit my person or else I would not feel good buying it. (MC7)*

*If someone says it is fine to test on puppies in the cosmetics industry. I do not think that is fine and it would make me feel bad and almost sick if I found out that the brand I used to love did that. I do not want to support a brand like that. So I would opt for a dupe of the product that I was using from that company. (MC4)*

The negative effects on the brand attitude also influence the consumers' intent to purchase. Misidentification on less controversial issues makes the consumers less likely to purchase from a brand, and would in most cases lead to deselection, but none states that it would lead to boycotting a brand. Various consumers express that the negative effect on their purchase intention depends on the product, the importance of the issues, and the level of disagreement. Thus in some cases, the consumers ignore the brand's stance in order to keep using and purchasing their products. The findings suggest that the effect on the consumers' purchase intention does not only depend on topic identification but also the product attributes, the level of importance, and disagreement.

*Then I might find someplace else to buy my stuff. But you are still a consumer who knows that you can get your products right THERE. So I do not know if it would have that much effect.*

*So in that way they have the power to say and do a lot, because they might still have a great product which makes people buy it anyway even though they do not agree on what they are saying. So I actually think that the consumer sees the product, like they want the product regardless. (MC12)*

*Well, there is no doubt that if a brand promotes something, where I am fundamentally disagreeing with what they are promoting, then I would be able to totally deselect them, but I think that it requires a lot to get there. (...) But I guess if it is something personal that I deeply disagree with, then I of course believe that I would be able to say 'then I do not want to purchase anything from that brand'. (MC8)*

The majority of the consumers express that misalignment would have a negative impact on the behavioral intentions, but other consumers state that the effect of misidentification on these types of issues depends on the context. This implies that in some cases brands are able to avoid the negative consequences depending on the product attributes, the importance of the issue, or the level of disagreement. However, misidentification on less controversial issues is still associated with a significant risk of causing a negative effect on the brand attitude and purchase intention.

#### *The effect of topic misidentification and highly controversial issues on the consumers' responses*

The majority of the consumers state that misidentification on highly controversial issues will have a negative impact on their brand attitude. The realization of the misalignment will cause strong emotions such as anger and annoyance, which is caused by becoming aware that the brand has the opposite beliefs and publicly promotes it. Others state that the conflict between the consumer's and brands' stance causes a great deal of frustration, as the consumers have to decide whether to compromise their own values or their functional needs.

*It would definitely make the contrast between liking the brand or disliking the brand even bigger. Because that just goes to something more principle, beliefs or how you think the whole world should be, how we should treat each other and stuff like that. Then it is something where I would distance myself a lot, just like I would to any person in my life who would have a belief that I would not agree with for example. (MC2)*

*I buy Ultraboost because I have a bad knee and are flat-footed, right? That would not change it in the same way, I think. Of course they can go out and say that, and then I would think 'Wow those idiots'. I really think that brands should really cross the line before you actually change. But it is just FRUSTRATING, again it is just frustrating, if you have to change things because you feel like your everyday life is just better when you wear these shoes and these soles. It is also because it is something specific in relation to your body, flat-footed, knee or bad hip, whatever it could be. (MC5)*

The negative effect caused by the misidentification on the brand attitude also influences the consumers' intent to purchase. Misidentification on highly controversial issues causes the consumers to take a clear distance and dissociate from the brand. Consequently the consumers will be less likely to purchase from the brand, as they do not want to support the brand through consumption. Some consumers express that they will distinctly dissociate which means actively disconnecting themselves from the brand. Thus the findings show that the effect on the behavioral responses is more decided compared to less controversial issues.

*If it is the opposite then I could end up boycotting the brand because I believe that it is something that has a great influence on my and my fellow human beings everyday life. (MC1)*

*Definitely! Immediately I think and I even think to an extent where if I owned something from a brand that suddenly came out with a campaign with beliefs that were totally different to my belief I would sell out my stuff, throwing it away, you know, be more active in my distancing. (MC2)*

*THAT would have an effect. That I would remember. So if it is a brand that I already use and there is a negative. It will have an impact and then I am not going to continue using that brand and then I think I would actively look towards other brands, because I can not stand with a negative campaign. (MC9)*

The findings show that topic misidentification on highly controversial issues have a negative effect on the brand attitude and purchase intentions. The consumers believe that it is important for brands to participate in sociopolitical discussions because they are able to create actual changes in society. When the consumers become aware of the misalignment between their own and a brand's beliefs it causes strong negative responses. This results in a negative brand association and the consumer would to a greater extent dissociate from the brand due to the misalignment in the moral beliefs.

#### *Comparison of the effect of topic misidentification and the levels of controversy*

The findings show that topic misidentification would, regardless of the level of controversy, have a negative effect on the consumers' affective and behavioral responses. The realization of misalignment between the beliefs has a negative effect on the brand attitude. Misidentification causes a range of different emotions such as annoyance, disappointment, anger, and frustration, which influences the consumers' intent to purchase from a brand. Misidentification on less controversial issues will lead to deselection depending on the importance of the issue, the product, and the level of disagreement. The findings suggest that the effect of topic misidentification on less

controversial issues is influenced by other contextual variables. Conversely, if the consumers recognized a misalignment on highly controversial issues this will cause the consumers to take a clear distance, disassociate, or in a few cases boycott. The behavioral responses are shown to be more distinct, which is presumably because highly controversial issues are rooted in the individual's ideology. The findings are summarized in figure 10 and the main difference between the two levels of controversy was identified in relation to the consumers' purchase intention.

	Low controversy		High controversy	
	Brand attitude	Purchase intention	Brand attitude	Purchase intention
	79% express negative effect M2 M3 M4 M5 M7 M8 M9 M10 M11 M12 M14	71% express negative effect M1 M2 M3 M5 M7 M8 M9 M10 M12 M13	92% express negative effect M1 M2 M3 M4 M5 M6 M7 M8 M9 M10 M11 M12 M14	79% express negative effect M1 M2 M3 M4 M5 M7 M8 M9 M11 M12 M14
Topic misidentification	Annoyance M9 M12 Discomfort M4 M7 Disappointment M2 M8	Deselecting M1 M2 M3 M5 M7 M8 M9 M10 M12 M13 Depending on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Product M4 M12</li> <li>Issue importance M4 M8</li> <li>Level of disagreement M4 M12 M14</li> </ul>	Anger or annoyance M2 M3 M7 Frustration M5 M13	Distancing M3 M4 M7 M8 M11 Disassociating M2 M8 M9 M14 More likely to boycott M1 M12 Depending on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Product M5</li> <li>Issue importance M12</li> <li>Level of disagreement M14</li> </ul>

Figure 10 - Comparison of topic misidentification and the two levels of controversy

## Perceived authenticity

After discussing the different types of brand activism, the consumers were asked why they believed brands take a stand on both highly and less controversial issues. In general, the consumers perceive brand activism as a marketing tool brands utilize to attract and connect to their customers. The aim of the prosocial actions was acknowledged to gain profit and to obtain goodwill from the general public. However, some consumers also believe that in some cases brand activism is to make actual societal improvements and they hope that the desire for change is the main driver. The findings show that the Danish millennials are skeptical about the intentions behind brand activism, and the expectations for actual changes are relatively low.

*Well no, like often I would suspect them to market it to gain a profit, but within myself I also believe that some of them do it because of their core values. But yes, I suspect it, and I actually do deeply believe that it most of the time is about profit. (MC14)*

*So I guess I think and hope that the companies to some extent believe in the change they are trying to make. But somewhere deep down I also know that it has something to do with gaining customers. (MC10)*

*Well, first of all, I think it is very much in the spirit of the century and I think that people are getting more and more enlightened about things and issues (...). So in order to make a world that they as a company would like to operate in, and they as people within the organization and the company would like to live in, they feel like they have a responsibility to do something. (MC4)*

The consumers perceive brand activism as a marketing practice to primarily achieve economic benefits and the actual improvement is perceived as a less essential objective. This perception is assumed to be caused by the general perception of brands seeking to maximize their economical needs, as this has been a common practice for decades. However, this might be because the consumers find it difficult to identify the reason brands takes a prosocial stand without it being an attempt to attract consumers. A few of the consumers express that they mainly recognize brand activism as a marketing tool because they find it difficult to evaluate the sincerity behind the brand's message and actions. The consumers will like more transparency and clarity regarding how the brand's actions enable actual changes in society. In addition, when the brand faces a great deal of risk due to its stance, it is perceived as more authentic, because then it is driven by a core value rather than revenue.

*But I think that it can be difficult to figure out, because there are many commercials on the television and on social media, but what are the actions behind them? (...) But at any rate it is not my experience that they tell what changes it actually does to these issues that they have chosen to promote in this way. So in some way it feels like it is also because brands today have to take a stand on these things. (MC8)*

*When you put something at stake, then I think that it becomes clear, that you desire change and that you are clear about what you are dissatisfied with and whom you are dissatisfied with. (MC1)*

Figure 11 highlights the main findings of the consumers' perception of the sincerity of brand activism. In general, the consumers recognize brand activism as a commercial initiative because they primarily believe that brands are acting in a prosocial manner to obtain economical benefits and the desire for actual change comes in second. Various consumers believe that brand activism is populististic

Perception of authenticity	
<b>64% perceives brand activism as a marketing tool</b>	M2 M3 M7 M8 M9 M10 M11 M12 M14
<b>21% believes brand activism is a desire for actual changes</b>	M4 (M10) (M14)
<b>29% find it difficult to see-through the sincerity of the brands message or actions</b>	M8 M11 M5 M3

*Figure 11 - Perception of authenticity*



which presumably is why consumers perceive a brand's stance as authentic when it is associated with taking a risk. A few of the consumers express that it is difficult to gain insight into the sincerity behind the brands' actions, which implies that brands can benefit from being transparent about how they seek to enable actual changes in regards to the societal issues they are promoting.

#### *The effect of perceived authenticity on the consumers' responses*

The findings show that perceived authenticity has a positive influence on the brand attitude. When the consumers experience consistent alignment between the brand's action and message it increases the trustworthiness and causes a positive perception of the brand. More than half of the consumers express that perceived authenticity has a positive effect on the brand attitude. Only a few consumers stated that perceived authenticity does not have an immediate positive effect because they simply anticipate that there is an alignment between the brand's message, actions, and values. In regards to the consumers' general attitude, half of the consumers expressed skepticism about brand activism, which might be why perceived authenticity has a positive effect on the consumers' brand attitude. Thus the recognition of consistency and genuine concern for a specific issue would have a positive effect on the consumers' affective responses.

*Well I guess that if you can see through a brand and see that it is something genuine. Then I think that I would be affected in a positive way, if it is something that I agree with of course. Then I would want to buy more products from that brand. There is no doubt about that. But the interesting thing is if you are able to see through the sincerity from the brand's side in those things that they choose to promote or focus on. (MC8)*

*I think that personally I just assume that what the brand promotes is true and a thing that they care deeply about otherwise they would not spend massive amounts of money on marketing that specific topic. So I think that would not change it as much, as if I found out that they were not doing what they were saying they were. So I think if I again agreed with the message and I liked the product, then I would be more persuaded to buy it, but if I found out that the company actually did care about the topic, then I would still buy it. (MC4)*

As shown in the quotes above, perceived authenticity also has a positive effect on the consumers' behavioral responses. A few of the consumers expressed that the recognition of authenticity has a positive influence on the brand attitude because it increases brand trust. This has a positive effect on the consumers' intent to purchase, as the consumers would be more likely to choose and repurchase the brand.

*Yes, clearly. The more I believe it, the more I would also consider it. It might take some time before I do it, but I would consider it and I would also be more inclined to use it at some point. (MC10)*

*Yes of course it would, then you trust them. It actually affects everything. If you believe what they are saying about what they stand for, then you also believe the product. Why should they lie about one thing? So yes then the product must also be good. It just gives a much better overall experience I think. (MC7)*

The findings emphasize the importance of perceived authenticity as it has a positive impact on the brand attitude and purchase intention. The Danish millennials are generally skeptical about the brand's intentions when articulating societal issues and therefore it is significant to ensure alignment between the message and actions and be consistent, as it has a positive effect on the consumers' responses.

#### *The effect of perceived inauthenticity on the consumers' responses*

Despite the consumers acknowledging that brand activism is driven by market logic, the majority of the consumers state that perceived inauthenticity would have a negative impact on their brand attitude. Annoyance, disappointment, and frustration were some of the emotions that arise from the violation of the consumers' trust. When the consumers discover the insincerity they feel betrayed because the brand has exploited the issues and the consumers' emotions. So even though the consumers anticipate opportunistic behavior from brands, it has a negative influence on the brand attitude.

*Then I would just plain think that the brand was liars and preying on people's best intentions and I do not like that. I am not a whole fan of this cancel culture thing but I get it. Like, if you say one thing and do the exact opposite, then why should we support you? (...) It just does not match up, you know, like, if you lie about one thing, then I do not see why you should not be lying about everything else as well. (MC4)*

*It is because then I can see that it is just a money maker and then it has nothing to do with the people. Then it is actually only about numbers. So when it is just numbers, then I do not think that it makes sense. Of course it makes sense for them as a company, but if they use, like, human empathy and devices to improve their revenue, then I do not think that it is trustworthy. Then the commercial could just as well have been something that they have done, because they see a trend that has been the last few years. (MC5)*

The negative effect of perceived inauthenticity on the brand attitude also influences the consumers' willingness to purchase. The feeling of exploitation of the issue and the consumer's trust will lead



them to deselect the brand and be more likely to find alternatives that are perceived as more genuine. Various consumers express that they will not tolerate or support a brand that utilizes urgent societal issues to maximize their own benefits. Only a few consumers state that the effect on the purchase intention depends on the product or the importance of the issue, which implies that perceived authenticity has a significant effect on the consumers' responses.

*Well there is no doubt that I would be disappointed and think that then you have a brand that does not live up to what they are promoting and saying. And depending what kind of brands it is, then it would definitely be something where you think 'then there is no reason to say buying their products or putting your money into that business' if they go around and falsely promote themselves on something, which they do not actually concern about or stand for. (MC8)*

*I think just by saying it and if you do not do it, then all my trust towards the brands falls away and I would definitely perceive them as non-authentic and not trustable and not a brand that I would like to put my money at. (MC2)*

The findings emphasize that authenticity is key in brand activism, as perceived inauthenticity has a negative effect on both the brand attitude and purchase intention. The violations of the consumers' trust will make the brands seem opportunistic and thereby unreliable. The negative effect on the brand attitude seems to have a direct influence on the purchase intention, as this will lead the consumers to deselect the brand.

#### *Comparison of the effect of perceived authenticity*

Figure 12 highlights the main findings of the effect of perceived authenticity on the consumers' affective and behavioral responses. This emphasizes the importance of consistent alignment between the brand's message

and actions, as the brand can benefit from being transparent and genuine. Furthermore, perceived inauthenticity will cause more consumers to have a negative brand attitude and be less likely to purchase from the brand. This implies

Perceived authenticity	Perceived inauthenticity
<b>57% express positive effect on brand attitude</b> M5 M7 M8 M9 M10 M11 M12 M14 <b>57% is more likely to purchase</b> M5 M7 M8 (M9) M10 M11 M12 M14	<b>71% express negative effect on brand attitude</b> M3 M4 M5 M7 M8 M9 M10 M11 M12 M14 <b>71% is less likely to purchase</b> (M1) M2 M4 M5 M7 M8 M9 M10 M11 M14
Increased trust M5 M7	Violation of trust M2 M4 M5 M7 M8 M12 Annoyance M1 (M9) M11 Depending on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Product M3 M12 M13</li> <li>Issues importance M12 M13</li> </ul>

*Figure 12 - Comparison of perceived authenticity and inauthenticity*

that the effect of perceived authenticity is asymmetric, which means that the brand potentially can lose more than it could gain.

## Discussion

The following section starts by discussing the theoretical implications and determining if the qualitative findings support the three hypotheses. Afterward, the additional findings will be discussed in relation to the literature. Furthermore, based on the findings various practical recommendations can be formulated and will be presented in the practical implications sections. In closing, the research limitations and directions for further research will be presented.

### Theoretical implications

Figure 13 summarizes the main findings and shows how the qualitative findings support, partly supports or does not supports the proposed hypotheses. The verification of the hypotheses will be discussed in the following sections.

Hypotheses	Findings	Verification
<b>H1</b>	Less controversial issues - Asymmetric effect identified on the purchase intention but not on the brand attitude	Partly supports
	Highly controversial issues - Asymmetric effect identified on the brand attitude and purchase intention	Supports
<b>H2</b>	The positive effect on less controversial issues was greater than the positive effect on highly controversial issues	Does not support
	The negative effect on highly controversial issues was greater than the negative effect on less controversial issues	Supports
<b>H3</b>	Perceived authenticity causes positive effect on brand attitude and purchase intention	Supports
	Perceived inauthenticity causes negative effect on brand attitude and purchase intention	Supports

Figure 13 - Verification of the hypotheses

### Topic identification

Various studies have explored the effect of topic identification on the consumers' responses to brand activism and it has been shown to have a significant impact (e.g. Hydock et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). However, the effect of topic identification was shown to be asymmetric as the consumers' negativity bias causes them to have a stronger negative response to misalignment than positive in the case of alignment. Therefore, the first hypothesis proposed that *topic identification has an asymmetric effect on the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention, which means that topic misidentification, causes a more significant effect than topic identification.*

The findings of this study show partial support for this hypothesis. Figure 14 (p. 39) summarizes the effect of topic identification and the level of topic controversy. These contextual variables were assumed interrelated as they both related to the issue articulated and were therefore explored together. First, the findings show that the effect of topic identification on less controversial issues is not truly asymmetric. The number of consumers who expressed that topic identification would have a positive effect on the brand attitude was greater than the amount that stated a negative effect. This does not support the hypotheses, however, the amount who expressed that topic misidentification would have a negative effect on their behavioral responses was greater than the amount who expressed a positive effect. Thus there is only partial support for the hypotheses, as the asymmetric effect is only identified in the behavioral responses. Second, the findings show that when brands take a stance on highly controversial issues, misidentification would cause a larger number of consumers to have a negative effect than a positive effect when identifying with the stance. This shows support for the first hypothesis as the findings suggest that the negative reaction is greater than the positive.

The findings imply that brands face a high risk when involved in brand activism because the consumers to a large extent are influenced by the negativity bias. The asymmetric effect of topic identification is distinct on the behavioral responses, as it shows that more consumers would deselect a brand due to misidentification than they would choose a brand due to topic identification. Furthermore, the distribution in figure 14 also shows that the effect of topic misidentification on the brand attitude and purchase intention is more correlated compared to the effect of topic identification. According to Keller (1993), the brand attitude is composed of the consumer's evaluation of both the brand attributes and benefits, but the effect of topic identification only seems to influence the brand benefits. Thus misidentification would be more likely to cause negative responses, because if the consumers do not find the brand's attributes favorable, then they will not hesitate to deselect the brand in case of stance misalignment. However, if the consumer finds the brand attributes unique, but does not find the brand benefits favorable due to misalignment, then the self-identity theory suggests that the consumers would deselect because of the lack of identification. On the other hand, identification with the brand's stance causes favorable brand benefits but does not change the consumers' perception of the brand attributes. This means that if the consumer does not find the brand's product unique, brand activism will have an immediate positive effect on the purchase intentions. Thus the effect of topic identification on the purchase intentions depends to a

greater extent on the consumers' perception of the brand attributes, which is why the effect of topic identification on the consumers' attitude and purchase intention is not correlated.

		<b>H1</b>			
		<b>Less controversial issues</b>		<b>Highly controversial issues</b>	
		Brand attitude	Purchase intention	Brand attitude	Purchase intention
<b>H2</b>	<b>Topic Identification</b>	86% showed positive effect	64% showed negative effect	79% showed positive effect	57% showed positive effect
	<b>Topic misidentification</b>	79% showed negative effect	71% showed negative effect	93% showed negative effect	79% showed negative effect

Figure 14 - The effect of topic identification and the level of controversy

#### *The level of topic controversy*

Various definitions of brand activism emphasize the polarizing nature of the phenomenon (e.g. Bhagwat et al., 2020 & Moorman, 2020), however it was acknowledged that the level of topic controversy ranges from highly too less controversial. Highly controversial issues were interpreted to have an impact on the major part of society and often involve a political or institutional aspect. Less controversial topic refers to issues on a sociocultural level that influences smaller groups of individuals. The purpose of defining two levels of controversy was to explore if these cause different effects on the consumers brand attitude and purchase intention. Thus the second hypothesis proposes that *the level of topic controversy influences the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention and highly controversial issues will cause a stronger positive and negative effect on the consumers' responses compared to less controversial issues.*

The findings showed partly support for the proposed hypotheses. First, as shown in figure 14, topic identification on less controversial issues showed a greater positive effect on both the brand attitude and purchase intention compared to topic identification on highly controversial issues. These findings do not support the hypothesis as it suggests that identification on less controversial issues would cause more consumers to have a positive brand attitude and purchase intention. Second, in case of topic misidentification the effect of level controversy supports the hypothesis, because misalignment on highly controversial issues causes more consumers to respond negatively compared to less controversial issues.

The findings suggest that articulating less controversial issues has a positive effect on a larger number of consumers compared to highly controversial issues. The reason for these results could be found in the self-identity theory. Less controversial issues refers to sociocultural issues that influence the minority in society, such as the LGBT+ community, women empowerment or body positivity. According to Bhattacharya & Sen (2003), alignment between the brand identity and consumers' self-identity is a significant factor to create a strong emotional connection. Thus when the consumers feel seen and represented in the brand's stance it causes more favorable responses than the validation of once moral beliefs. This is also shown in figure 9 (p. 28), which illustrates that less controversial issues cause more people to have a sense of belonging, compared to highly controversial issues.

The findings on the effect of topic controversy shows that misidentification on sociopolitical issues would cause more consumers to have a negative effect on their brand attitude and purchase intention. Furthermore, the findings in figure 10 (p. 32), illustrates that not only does misidentification on highly controversial issues cause more consumers to have a negative brand attitude and purchase intention, but it also causes differential behavioral responses. The findings show that misidentification on less controversial issues would lead to deselection whereas misidentification on highly controversial issues would cause the consumers to disassociate themselves from the brand by disposing of their current products. These findings illustrate the differential effect on the behavioral responses and imply that the negative effect of highly controversial issues on the purchase intentions is more significant. The reason for the differences in the behavioral responses could be found in the study by Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020), which showed that when the brand action is perceived as immoral it causes stronger consumer responses. Highly controversial issues are related to the consumers' core moral beliefs that determine what is considered right and wrong. Thus it causes a more significant effect when the consumers perceive a brand to act unethically compared to disagreeing on sociocultural issues.

In closing, there seems to be conflicting findings in relation to the effect of the level of topic controversy. On one hand, the findings in figure 13 shows that it is only in case of misidentification that the effect of highly controversial issues on the brand attitude and purchase intention is greater than the effect on less controversial issues. On the other hand, 57% of the consumers stated that the effect on the brand attitude and purchase intentions would be more significant when brands take a stance on highly controversial issues<sup>1</sup>. The reason is because the consumers believe that these issues

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<sup>1</sup> M1, M2, M4, M7, M8, M11, M12, M14

are more important as they have a greater impact on society. Furthermore, the consumers were more skeptical about brand's taking a stance on less controversial issues because it seemed more populist. However, this is not reflected in the current data on the effect of the level of topic controversy on the consumers' responses, which could be caused by the lack of national examples. Thus it would be necessary to further investigate how the effect of topic controversy influences the consumers responses as the findings form the basis for proposing new hypotheses regarding the effect of the level of topic controversy.

### *Perceived authenticity*

Various studies have shown that authenticity is key in brand activism, as inauthenticity causes negative brand associations (Vredenburg et al., 2020) and mitigates the positive effect of topic identification (Hydock et al. 2020). Thus the third hypothesis proposed that *perceived authenticity has a positive influence and perceived inauthenticity has a negative influence on the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention.*

Perceived authenticity	Perceived inauthenticity
57% expressed positive effect on brand attitude	71% expressed negative effect on brand attitude
57% expressed positive effect on purchase intention	71% expressed negative effect on purchase intention

*Figure 15 - The effect of perceived authenticity*

The findings support the hypotheses, as there is identified a direct cause-effect between the effect of perceived authenticity on the consumers' affective and behavioral responses. As shown in figure 15, perceived authenticity had a positive effect on the brand attitude and purchase intention. Conversely, perceived inauthenticity had a negative effect on both the brand attitude and purchase intentions. This shows support for the proposed hypotheses, as the positive and negative effects on the affective and behavioral responses correlated.

The consumers were skeptical about the intentions behind brand activism and more than half perceived brand activism as a marketing tool. It is assumed that the consumers' prejudice and general skepticism had an impact on the positive effect. The notion is that if the consumer becomes aware that there is a clear alignment between the words and actions, it decays the negative prejudice and increases the brand trust. The positive effect on the brand attitude influences the purchase intentions as the consumers are more likely to purchase from the brand because of the increased credibility. On the other hand, even though the majority of the consumers expect opportunistic brand behavior, perceived inauthenticity causes the feeling of betrayal because the consumers feel

exploited. The validation of their prejudice about the brands' behavior and the violation of trust causes a negative brand attitude which has an immediate effect on the consumers' behavioral responses and will cause deselection and avoidance. These findings show there is a connection between the perception of authenticity and the effect on the affective and behavioral response. Thus the findings support the third hypothesis, but the findings indicate that the effect of perceived authenticity could be influenced by the negativity bias because the amount of negative responses is greater than the positive effect. Unconsciously consumers expect brands to act morally, thus the positive effect is not as significant as the negative effect (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). The negativity bias seems reflected in the current findings because even though the findings show a relation between the prejudice and the effect on the consumers' responses, the number of consumers experiencing a negative effect is greater than the amount of positive. However, this calls for further research to explore if the effect of perceived authenticity is asymmetric.

#### *Additional theoretical implications*

##### *The effect of topic identification on the consumer-brand relationship*

The self-identity theory suggests that consumers use a brand's non-product-related aspect to reflect their self-identity (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003) and alignment between values and beliefs causes a sense of belonging, which helps them navigate in the marketplace (Tajfel et al., 1979). The findings of this study were in line with the self-identity theory as it showed that brand activism created additional brand meaning and was a source of self-identification. 57% of the consumers expressed that brand activism made it possible for them to reflect their own values and beliefs that caused the feeling of affiliation and sense of approval of their self-identity and brand choice<sup>2</sup>.

*It can maybe glance off me, if it is a brand that I can not see myself use. But if it is a brand that affects me and a brand that I use in my everyday life, then I really like it. Well, it makes good sense to me, because it then also strengthens my own beliefs, that a brand that I have chosen might be the right one. (MC10)*

*Well I like it. It makes me more prone to choose products like that and I tap more into certain images and certain vision with it. And it also makes it clear for me what to choose and what not to choose. So whenever in doubt to buy a product it is something I look towards if it is something that is aligned with my personality and my ideas and beliefs as a person. So it is definitely something I like and I like that brands are more active towards that and not just being a product as per se. (MC2)*

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<sup>2</sup> M1, M2, M3, M7, M8, M9, M10



The additional findings showed that topic identification does not only influence the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention but also strengthens their emotional connection. Topic identification causes a feeling of acceptance and attachment, which according to the self-identity theory is key to enabling a strong emotional consumer-brand relationship. This suggests that brand activism does not only have a short-term effect but is also an approach to building strong consumer-brand relationships in the long term. Furthermore, multiple expressed that they appreciated brands taking a stance as this helped them navigate in the marketplace and had an impact on their brand choice. Thus the qualitative findings showed support for brand activism can offer a point of difference in the marketplace and can be used by brands to differentiate from their competitors (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021; Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). On the other hand, the findings also emphasized the risk, as misidentification could damage the consumer-brand relationships when the consumers discovered that there was a misalignment. In line with the current research, the findings showed that topic misidentification causes the feeling of betrayal, anger, and annoyance (Mirzaei et al., 2021) and make the consumers more likely to avoid or distance themselves from the brand (Schmidt et al., 2021; Bhagwat et al., 2020).

*The effect of topic identification or topic misidentification depends on the importance of the issues and the level of disagreement*

The qualitative findings showed that topic identification had an impact on the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention. In addition, the findings imply that the effect is not independent as various consumers expressed that the effect of topic misidentification depends on the personal connection to the issues and the level of disagreement<sup>3</sup>.

*So if it was something that I just do not really care about, like, if they said something that was kind of controversial and something that I did not really agree with but did not really care about and I really love the product then maybe I would buy it. Yeah. But if it was something that I strongly disagree with and it was really against every moral bone in my body, then I would not. I would not buy the product. (MC4)*

*So in that way it depends on where your own boundaries are or what issues make your blood pump and are important for you, right? But if it was something where I might be partly disagreeing or agreeing then I do not think that it would have an effect on how I perceive a brand or my buying behavior. (MC12)*

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<sup>3</sup> M4, M5, M8, M12, M14

This implies that the effect of topic identification on the consumers' affective and behavioral responses depends on another contextual variable and topic identification could be perceived as a scale. First, brands should consider how important the issue is for their target segment, as the qualitative findings imply that when the consumer has a personal connection to the issue the effect of topic identification is stronger. Second, in the literature topic identification is considered partisan, because it is a question of whether the consumers agree or disagree with the stance taken by the brand. However, the findings of this study suggest that topic identification could be considered as a scale describing the level of agreement or disagreement. This is in line with the study by Park et al. (2010), which suggests that attitudes range from strong positive or negative, to weak positive or negative. Figure 16 illustrates the interpreted notion and shows that the effect of topic identification could be explained by four conditions. The more the consumer identifies with the brand's stance and the specific issue, the more significant is the positive effect on their affective and behavioral responses and vice versa.

Furthermore, it is assumed that if the consumer does not have an emotional connection to the issues, the level of agreement or disagreement will have a less significant effect on the brand attitude or purchase intention. The figure shows four conditions but could also be interpreted as a system of coordinates, as the variables are a scale that expresses the level of importance and identification. Although various

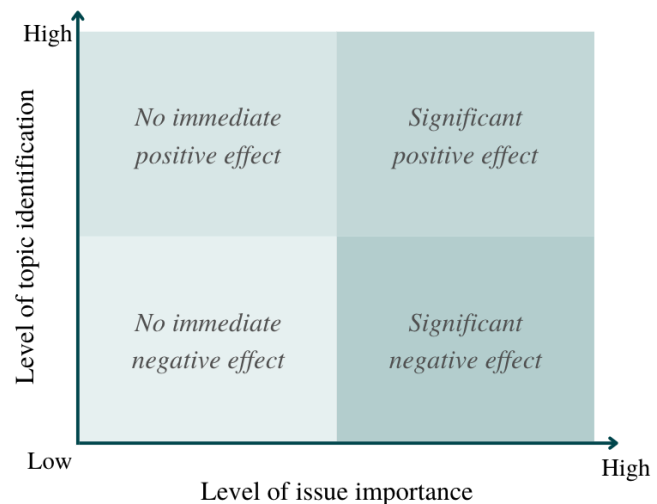


Figure 16 - The effect of the level of topic identification and issue importance

studies state that the effect of the consumers' topic identification is one-sided, the findings of this qualitative study suggest that the effect of topic identification is more complex as it depends on the level of importance and identification. Thus these findings offer theoretical implications by suggesting that the effect of topic identification is not independent and calls for further research of the proposed dependencies and the effect on the consumers' responses.

## Practical implications

There were two main purposes of this study. First, to provide theoretical implications on the effect of the contextual variables on the consumers' responses, and second, to explore the attitude of the

Danish millennials towards brand activism to provide practical implications for how to employ brand activism to attract the segment while reducing the associated risks.

Brand activism is not a well-known phenomenon amongst the Danish millennials, and multiple has not been exposed to the prosocial marketing practices. However, the findings showed that 93% of the Danish millennials had positive perceptions about brand activism and believed that it was a positive development that brands had started to take a stance on urgent societal issues. The consumers did not explicitly state that they expect brands to take a stance, but 79% stated that it was important that brands participate in the discussion, and brands have to some extent a responsibility due to their ability to reach and influence a large number of people. However, the current findings show that currently, the Danish millennials do not expect brands to take a stance on urgent societal issues, but less than half stated that not taking a stance could potentially have a negative impact on their brand attitude and purchase intentions depending on the brand's previous behavior, the urgency, and importance of the issue. From a practical point of view, this implies that brands can stay neutral without it having any significant negative effect. On the other hand, the findings also show that brand activism can offer a point of difference as it can strengthen the emotional connection and enable consumer-brand relationships.

In line with prior research, topic identification is acknowledged to be a significant factor in enabling positive consumer responses. Therefore, managers should investigate their target segment's stance on a specific issue. The Danish millennials have a positive perception when it comes to brands articulating sociocultural and sociopolitical issues, but the findings show that topic identification on less controversial issues causes more consumers to have a positive effect on their brand attitude and purchase intentions compared to highly controversial issues. Thus managers who are new to brand activism could potentially start by articulating sociocultural issues. Furthermore, the negative effect of topic misidentification on less controversial issues causes fewer consumers to respond to negativity compared to highly controversial issues. This does not mean that there is not a risk of articulating less controversial issues, but that the negative effect is less significant. In addition, managers are advised to tap into issues that correspond to their business or product, as almost a third of the consumers believed it was important that the stance was related to the core business. The perception is that there are still relevant issues within the industries, which brands need to improve and therefore starting within the brand's operation would be favorable. This will presumably also make the stance seem more authentic, as it is related to the core business.

In line with the literature, the findings of this research show that brands regardless of the level of controversy face a risk of negative brand association and deselection in case of topic misidentification. Currently, managers should avoid participating in the discussion on highly controversial topics, as the effect of topic identification in these issues is asymmetric. Thus the brands face a higher level of risk because consumers tend to have a stronger negative than positive response. Furthermore, the findings show that the level of controversy causes different effects on the consumers' behavioral responses, as misidentification on sociocultural causes the consumers to deselect, whereas disassociation and distancing are more prevalent in the case of misidentification on sociopolitical issues. As aforementioned, managers must get insights into their target segment's opinion on specific issues to avoid causing negative brand association and deselection but also to cause favorable responses. In line with prior research, the additional findings of this research show that brand activism offers additional brand meaning, as the consumers can reflect their values and beliefs in the brand's stance. This was highly present in the case of topic identification on sociocultural issues as it caused the feeling of affirmation. Thereby brands can create a point of difference by being engaged in prosocial action, as the findings imply that it has an impact on the consumers' decision-making process and strengthens the emotional connection to the brand. This means that if managers succeed with brand activism, they can potentially achieve long-term benefits in terms of consumer-brand relationships.

Despite the overall positive attitude towards brand activism, the findings show that the majority of the Danish millennials recognize brand activism as a marketing tool and half of the consumer segment is skeptical about the prosocial brand actions. The skepticism mainly revolves around whether the brand jumped on the bandwagon to appear socially conscious or if there was any substance behind the brand's stance. These findings are in line with prior studies that suggest that the key to successful brand activism is authenticity. Managers must put their words into action, as perceived inauthenticity would have a negative effect on the brand attitude and make the consumers less likely to choose the brand. When consumers discover incongruence between the brand's actions and the message it is perceived as a violation of trust and causes passionate responses. Conversely, perceived authenticity will increase the brand's credibility and have a positive effect on both the attitude towards the brand and the purchase intentions. The findings imply that perceived inauthenticity is more likely to cause negative responses than perceived authenticity is to cause favorable responses. Thus managers are advised to start by defining their stance on a specific issue and evaluate how it is aligned with their current and past corporate

actions. If the assessment does not identify a clear congruence, then managers should not engage. Ensuring alignment and authenticity is key to avoiding being perceived as populist, and this step should be accomplished before evaluating if the consumers identify with the stance. Lastly, almost a third of the consumers think it is difficult to see through the sincerity behind the actions and how it makes a difference in society. Therefore, managers need to be explicit regarding what they seek to change and how they will enable it. The transparency will make it easier for the consumers to evaluate the level of sincerity and will presumably make it seem more authentic and trustworthy.

### **Limitations and directions for further research**

The majority of the current literature on consumers' responses to brand activism has been based on quantitative data, but this study has applied a qualitative approach to gain further insights into the phenomenon and to achieve qualitative validation of the current academic research. The findings of this study show that three contextual variables have an impact on the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intentions. The current data express if the variables would have a positive or negative impact on the consumers' responses and what reaction the variables cause. However, the data does not explicitly describe the strength of the variables' effect on the consumers' brand attitudes or purchase intentions. To explore the significance of the effect on the consumers' responses in future qualitative research, scale questions could be applied to be able to compare and quantify the effect of the variables.

The research on brand activism is mainly conducted in a foreign setting, such as the US and UK (e.g. Schmidt et al., 2021; Hydock et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). This study was conducted in Denmark and the aim was to explore how the Danish millennials respond to this emerging marketing practice. As brand activism is currently not a common approach in Denmark, examples were used for stimulation during the interviews. These examples demonstrated international brands' stance in either a global or foreign local setting. The lack of brand activism in the domestic market is perceived as a limitation for this research because the effect on the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention could be influenced by the topic context. To eliminate this limitation it requires that more Danish brands employ this prosocial marketing practice, to be able to replicate the research with the use of domestic examples. Then it would be possible to preclude the limitation and validate the current findings.

In the theoretical implications sections, two directions for further research were proposed. First, the findings on the effect of the level of topic controversy showed that highly controversial issues caused more negative responses than positive ones, which only partially supported the hypotheses.

However, various consumers expressed that their positive and negative responses would be more significant on highly controversial issues compared to less controversial issues. Thus future research could explore how the level of topic controversy influences the consumers' responses and verify if the level of controversy causes different effects on the affective and behavioral responses. Second, the findings on the effect of perceived authenticity supported the hypotheses, but the data implied that it could be influenced by the consumers' negativity bias. Perceived inauthenticity was more likely to cause negative consumer responses than the reverse, and this observation can form the basis for future hypotheses. In closing, the additional findings imply that the effect of topic identification could depend on the level of issue importance and the level of disagreement. Thus the qualitative approach could have provided insight into new potential structure and mechanisms that influences the effect of topic identification on the consumers' responses. Future research could examine this notion to explore if the effect of the variable is influenced by other contextual variables.

## **Conclusion**

Brand activism has been acknowledged as an emerging marketing practice that arises from increasing expectations in the marketplace. Researchers have shown that consumers to a greater extent expect brands to be a force of change, but academic studies have shown that brands face a higher level of risk than benefits when involved in prosocial activism. Thus the purpose of this research was to further investigate how brand activism influences the consumers' affective and behavioral responses through a qualitative research approach. The research questions consist of two parts. First, to examine the Danish millennials' attitude towards the prosocial marketing practice to explore the consumers' opinions and expectations, and second, to obtain qualitative insight into how topic identification, the level of topic controversy, and perceived authenticity influence the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intentions. The findings are based on 14 semi-structured interviews with Danish millennials.

This research has shown that the majority of the consumers have a positive attitude towards brand activism. The majority believed that it was important that brands promote, participate and take a stance on urgent societal issues because brands have significant influential power and thereby have a responsibility of being an active part of enabling changes on a sociocultural and sociopolitical level. The findings of the second round of interviews showed that more than half of the consumers

expressed that not taking a stance on sociocultural issues could have a negative effect on their brand attitude and purchase intentions. The negative effect was not present on highly controversial issues, because the consumers did not expect brands to take a stance on sociopolitical issues, as these are associated with a high risk. Despite the overall positive attitude towards brand activism, the research showed that half of the Danish millennials were skeptical about the prosocial practice. The skepticism stemmed from a concern about whether brand activism was based on populism and if there was any substance behind the message. When it came to authenticity, more than half of the consumers perceived brand activism as a marketing tool to connect and attract customers. Despite brand activism being defined as a prosocial marketing practice, only a few believed that brands are driven by a desire to enable actual changes in society. The skepticism regarding the sincerity behind brands' activism was assumed to be due to the lack of transparency, as around a third of the consumers expressed that they find it difficult to evaluate the genuineness behind the prosocial actions.

To explore the effect of the contextual variables, three hypotheses were proposed based on a review of the current literature on consumers' responses to brand activism. The first hypothesis proposed that topic identification had an asymmetric effect on the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention. This suggests that topic misidentification would cause a more significant effect than topic identification because this would be affected by consumers' negativity bias. The qualitative findings showed partly support for the proposed asymmetric effect. First, the findings showed that the topic misidentification on less controversial issues only caused an asymmetric effect on the purchase intentions. This supported the hypothesis, as misidentification on sociocultural issues would cause a larger number of consumers to deselect a brand than topic identification would create an increase in the purchase intentions. However, topic identification on sociocultural issues would cause more favorable brand attitudes than negative brand attitudes in case of misidentification, which did not support the hypothesis. Second, the effect on sociopolitical issues supported the hypothesis, as the findings showed that topic misidentification on these issues would cause more consumers to have a negative brand attitude and purchase intentions, than positive in the case of topic identification. Thus the first hypothesis was only partially supported as the asymmetric effect is not present in all four conditions. This suggests that brands can benefit from taking a stance on sociocultural issues because it was more likely to cause favorable brand attitudes than negative ones. Conversely, the findings emphasized the risk of articulating sociopolitical issues, as this was more likely to cause more consumers to respond negatively than positively.



The second hypothesis proposed that the level of topic controversy influenced the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention and highly controversial issues would cause a stronger positive and negative effect on the consumers' responses compared to less controversial issues. The assumption was only partly supported because the research showed that topic identification on less controversial issues would cause more consumers to have a positive attitude and purchase intention compared to topic identification on highly controversial issues. This implies that the consumers respond more positively to sociocultural issues than to sociopolitical issues in the case of topic identification, which did not support the hypothesis. However, the effect of topic misidentification did not follow the same notion. The findings show that misalignment on highly controversial issues would cause more consumers to have negative affective and behavioral responses compared to less controversial issues. This supported the second hypothesis as the consumers responded more negatively to sociopolitical issues compared to sociocultural. This supports the current literature by emphasizing that when taking a stance on highly controversial issues, brands are more likely to face a high level of risk than benefits. Furthermore, these findings add to the literature by showing that brands can benefit from taking a stance on less controversial issues, as it would cause a positive effect on the brand attitude and purchase intention while decreasing the risk compared to sociopolitical issues.

The last hypothesis proposed that perceived authenticity has a positive influence and perceived inauthenticity has a negative influence on the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention. This hypothesis was supported because perceived authenticity caused a positive effect on both the brand attitude and purchase intention, and conversely perceived inauthenticity caused a negative effect. Furthermore, the findings showed a clear cause-effect relation, as perceived authenticity would affect the brand attitude, which causes an immediate effect on purchase intentions. However, the number of consumers expressing a negative effect of perceived inauthenticity was greater than the number of consumers stating that perceived authenticity would cause a positive effect. This implies that the effect of perceived authenticity is influenced by the consumers' negativity bias, as more respond negatively than positively. In line with current literature, the findings emphasize the importance of authenticity, as there is a clear relationship between the effect of perceived authenticity on the consumers' affective and behavioral responses.

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## Appendix 1 - Interview guide (ENG)

Briefing	<p>Purpose: Explore how millennials respond to brand activism</p> <p>Additional information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The interview is recorded</li> <li>• Anonymous - Description based on age, gender, and occupation</li> <li>• Interested in the consumers' meaning No right and wrong answers</li> </ul> <p>Structure:</p> <p>Short discussion about the phenomenon, examples of activism and finally a short discussion about authenticity</p> <p>Estimated time: 25-35 minutes</p> <p>Any questions?</p>
Introduction	<p>(GA) What do you think about brand activism?</p> <p>(GA) How important do you think it is that brands take a stance or promote these types of issues?</p>
Low controversy - Introducing examples	<p>(GA) What do you think about brands that promote these types of issues?</p> <p>(TI) If you see a brand promoting or taking a stance on such topics. How would you react or think if you agree and if you disagree with the brand's message?</p> <p>(BA) How would your agreement or disagreement with a brand's stance affect your perception of the brand?</p> <p>(PI) How does this type of brand activism influence your willingness to purchase from the brand?</p> <p>(PI) Would agreeing with the brand stance make you choose the brand above others, and likewise, would disagreeing lead you to avoiding purchasing from the brand?</p>
Highly controversy - Introducing examples	<p>(GA) What do you think about brands that promote these types of issues?</p> <p>(TI) If you see a brand promoting or taking a stance on such topics. How would you react or think if you agree and if you disagree with the brand's message?</p> <p>(BA) How would your agreement or disagreement with a brand's stance</p>

	<p>affect your perception of the brand?</p> <p>(PI) How does this type of brand activism influence your willingness to purchase from the brand?</p> <p>(PI) Would agreeing with the brand stance make you choose the brand above others, and likewise, would disagreeing lead you to avoiding purchasing from the brand?</p>
Comparison	<p>(GA) What are your thoughts about these two types of brand activism?</p> <p>(BA+PI) How do the two different types of activism influence your perception of the brand and your intentions to purchase from a brand?</p>
Perceived authenticity	<p>(GA) Why do you think brands take a stand or promote these types of issues?</p> <p>(PA) When you see brands promote these highly controversial or less controversial issues, do you think it is sincere?</p> <p>(PA) How would you react or think if you did not see the brand's message as sincere?</p> <p>(BA) Would your perception of authenticity or inauthenticity change your perception of the brand?</p> <p>(PI) How would your perception of the authenticity or inauthenticity of a brand's activism influence your willingness to purchase from a brand?</p>
Debriefing	Anything to add?

## Appendix 2 - Interview guide (DK)

Briefing	<p>Formål: Undersøge hvordan millennium generationen reagerer på brand aktivisme</p> <p>Øvrig information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview bliver optaget</li> <li>• Anonymt - Beskrivelse baseret på alder, køn og arbejdsfunktion</li> <li>• Interesseret i forbrugerenes mening Intet rigtigt eller forkert svar</li> </ul> <p>Strukturen: Kort snak om fænomenet, eksempler på aktivisme og til slut en snak om autenticitet</p> <p>Estimeret tid: 25-35 minutter</p> <p>Nogle spørgsmål?</p>
Introduktion	<p>(GA) Hvad tænker du om brand aktivisme?</p> <p>(GA) Hvor vigtigt synes du at det er, at brand taget et standpunkt og promovere denne type problematikker?</p>
Mindre kontroversielt - Introducere eksempler	<p>(GA) Hvad tænker du om brand der promovere denne typer problematikker?</p> <p>(TI) Hvis du ser et brand promovere eller tage et standpunkt på sådanne emner. Hvordan ville du reagere eller tænke hvis du var enig eller uenig med brandets budskab?</p> <p>(BA) Hvordan ville din enighed eller uenighed med et brands standpunkt påvirke din opfattelse af brandet?</p> <p>(PI) Hvordan ville denne type brand aktivisme påvirke din tilbøjelighed til at købe fra brandet?</p> <p>(PI) Hvis du var enig med et brands synspunkt ville du vælge dette brand frem for andre, og omvendt, hvis du var uenig ville du fravælge dem?</p>
Meget kontroversielt - introducere eksempler	<p>(GA) Hvad tænker du om brand der promovere denne typer problematikker?</p> <p>(TI) Hvis du ser et brand promovere eller tage et standpunkt på sådanne emner. Hvordan ville du reagere eller tænke hvis du var enig eller uenig med brandets</p>

	<p>budskab?</p> <p>(BA) Hvordan ville din enighed eller uenighed med et brands standpunkt påvirke din opfattelse af brandet?</p> <p>(PI) Hvordan ville denne type brand aktivisme påvirke din tilbøjelighed til at købe fra brandet?</p> <p>(PI) Hvis du var enig med et brands synspunkt ville du vælge dette brand frem for andre, og omvendt, hvis du var uenig ville du fravælge dem?</p>
Sammenligning	<p>Vi har snakket om to forskellige typer af brand aktivisme...</p> <p>(GA) Hvad er dine tanker omkring de to typer af brand aktivisme?</p> <p>(BA+PI) Hvilken påvirkning de to forskellige typer af aktivisme din holdning til brandet eller tilbøjelighed til at købe fra et brand?</p>
Opfattet troværdighed	<p>(GA) Hvorfor tror du at brands taget et standpunkt eller promovere disse forskellige problematikker?</p> <p>(PA) Når du ser brand promovere både meget kontroversielle og mindre kontroversielle problematikker synes du at det er oprigtigt?</p> <p>(PA) Hvordan ville du reagere eller tænke hvis du ikke opfattede et brands budskab som værende oprigtigt?</p> <p>(BA) Ville din opfattelse af oprigtighed eller uoprigtighed ændre din holdning til et brand?</p> <p>(PI) Hvordan ville din opfattelse af troværdig eller utroværdig af brandets aktivisme påvirke din tilbøjelighed til at købe fra et brand?</p>
Efter brefing	Noget at tilføje?

## **Appendix 3 - Script and examples for the interview (ENG)**

### **Presentation of the phenomenon**

Brand activism is a term that describes how brands take actions or promote changes in society. These changes can be on a sociocultural level where the brand seeks to change norms (e.g. beauty standards) or on a sociopolitical level by seeking to make political or institutional changes (e.g. equal rights).

### **Examples of less controversial brand activism**

In 2020 Zalando had a 'Zerotypes' campaign where they stated that they wanted to say goodbye to outdated stereotypes. The message of the campaign was that stereotypes are one of the largest obstacles when it comes to self expression and therefore the brand seeks to promote changes to these old cultural stereotypes and thereby take a stance for diversity (Trofimova, 2020).

In 2020 Adidas released their spring/summer collection with the message that they wanted to reimage and challenge the old stereotypes in the sport industry (Adidas, 2020). The brand sought to promote that all women can be an athlete and has in 2022 released the "I'm Possible" campaign showing different women that challenges the stereotypes with the message that nothing is impossible (Adidas, N.D.).

In 2019 the razor brand Gillette launched their commercial "The Best Men Can Be" showing men bullying other men, violence between boys and men insulting women. The purpose of the campaign was to start a conversation about "is this the best men can be?" and drive change in toxic masculinity and encourage their audience to be the best version of themselves (Topping et al., 2019).

In 2021 NYX Professional Makeup launched their "Pride Equality For All" campaign which promotes ballroom culture to celebrate and support the LGBTQIA+ community. The message behind the campaign was that everyone should be able to express themselves, be supported and proud of who they are (NYX Cosmetics, N.D.).

### **Examples of highly controversial brand activism**

In 2020 during the Black Lives Matters movement Nike released a small film on their social media accounts with the message "For Once Don't Do It". The purpose of the film was to take a stand, show support and promote that it is time to take action and create change regarding racial injustice (Nike, 2020).

In 2017 Ben & Jerry's made a bane on same-flavored scoops in Australia because same-sex marriages was illegal. The purpose of this campaign was to promote marriage inequality in Australia and to encourage their customers to put pressure on the parliament to enable legal changes (Kocay, 2017).

In 2017 the outdoor brand Patagonia launched a campaign called "The President Stole Your Land" which was a reaction to the allegedly illegal reduction of two national nature monuments in the United States. The purpose of the campaign by Patagoina was to promote political injustice and the importance of the public's vote in the elections to enable change in America (Sheehy, N.D.).

In 2018 various American businesses took a stance on gun violence. For example Walmart announced in 2018 that they would not sell weapons to anyone under 21 and banned the sale of specific types of rifles. Furthermore, Bank of America stated the same year that they would no longer lend money to manufacturers who produce and sell military-styled guns to civilians (Everytown, 2022).

## Appendix 4 - Script and examples for the interview (DK)

### Præsentation af fænomenet

Brand activism er et begreb som beskriver hvordan brands handler eller promovere forandringer i samfundet. Disse forandringer kan være på et sociokulturelt niveau, hvor brands søger at ændre normer (fx. Skønhedsidealiser) eller på et sociopolitisk niveau ved at forsøge at skabe politiske eller institutionelle forandringer (fx. Lige rettigheder).

### Eksempler på mindre kontroversiell brand aktivisme

I 2020 havde Zalando en “Zero types” kampagne hvor de udtalte at de ønskede at sige farvel til forældede stereotyper. Budskabet i kampagne var at stereotyper er en af de største udfordringer når de kommer til at udtrykke sig selv, og derfor ønsker brandet at promovere forandringer i forhold til disse gamle kulturelle stereotyper og derved slå et slag for diversitet (Trofimova, 2020).

I 2020 annoncerede Adidas deres forår/sommer kollektion med budskabet om at de ønskede at ændre og udfordre gamle stereotyper inden for sports industrien (Adidas, 2020). Brandet ønskede at promovere at alle kvinder kan være atleter og i 2022 udgav de “I’m Possible” kampagnen som viste forskellige kvinder som udfordrer stereotyperne med budskabet om at “nothing is impossible” (Adidas, N.D.).

I 2019 lancerede barberblads brandet Gillette deres reklame “The Best Men Can Be” som viste mænd som mobber andre mænd, vold mellem drenge og mænd som krænker kvinder. Formålet med kampagnen var at starte en diskussion omkring “Is this the best men can be?” og skabe forandring i forhold til “toxic masculinity” og opfordrer deres målgruppe til at være den bedste version af dem selv (Topping et al., 2019).

I 2021 lancerede NYX Professional Makeup deres “Pride Equality For All” kampagne som promovere ballroom kulturen for at fejre og støtte LGBTQIA+ fællesskabet. Budskabet i kampagnen var at alle skal have muligheden for at udtrykke dem selv, blive støttet og være stolte af dem selv (NYX Cosmetics, N.D.).

### Eksempler på meget kontroversiell brand aktivisme

I 2020 under Black Lives Matters bevægelsen udgav Nike en kort film på deres social media konti med budskabet “For Once Don’t Do It”. Formålet med filmen var at tage et standpunkt, støtte og promovere at det er på tide at handle og skabe forandringer angående race uretfærdigheder (Nike, 2020).

I 2017 lavede Ben & Jerry’s et forbud mod at få to ens iskugler i Australien fordi at ægteskab mellem samme køn var ulovligt. Formålet med kampagnen var at promovere ulighed mellem ægteskabsrettigheder i Australien og opfordrer deres forbrugere til at sætte parlamentet under press og skabe retslige forandringer (Kocay, 2017).

I 2017 lancerede udendørs/friluft brandet Patagonia en kampagne ved navn “The president Stole Your land” som en reaction på de angivelige ulovlige reducere af to nationale naturreservater. Formålet med kampagnen af Patagonia var at sætte fokus på den politiske uretfærdighed og vigtigheden af at borgerne stemmer til valgene for at skabe forandringer i USA (Sheehy, N.D.).



I 2018 valgte flere amerikanske virksomheder at tage et standpunkt i forhold til våben. For eksempel Walmart annoncerede i 2018 at de ikke længere ville sælge våben til folk under 21 og de forbød salget af visse typer af rifler. Endvidere, udtalte Bank of America samme år at de ikke længere ville låne penge til de fremstillingsvirksomheder som producerer og sælger militær lignende våben til civile (Everytown, 2022).

## Appendix 5 - Interview guide - Modified (ENG)

Briefing	<p>Purpose: Explore how millennials respond to brand activism</p> <p>Additional information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The interview is recorded</li> <li>• Anonymous - Description based on age, gender, and occupation</li> <li>• Interested in the consumers' meaning No right and wrong answers</li> </ul> <p>Structure: Short discussion about the phenomenon, examples of activism and finally a short discussion about authenticity</p> <p>Estimated time: 25-35 minutes</p> <p>Any questions?</p>
Introduction	<p>(GA) What do you think about brand activism and about brands articulating societal issues?</p> <p>(GA) How important do you think it is that brands take a stance or promote these types of issues?</p>
<p>Low controversy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introducing examples</li> </ul>	<p>(GA) What do you think about brands that promote these types of issues?</p> <p><b>Agreement</b></p> <p>(TI) If you see a brand promoting or taking a stance on such topics. How would you react or think if you agree?</p> <p>(BA) How would your agreement with a brand's stance affect your perception of the brand?</p> <p>(PI) If you agreed with the stand, would that have an influence on your willingness to purchase from the brand?</p> <p><b>Non-stand</b></p> <p>(BA) If a brand does not take a stance on these types of issues, does that have an effect on how you perceive the brand?</p> <p>(PI) Would you rather choose a brand that articulates these types of issues then a brand that does not?</p> <p><b>Disagreement</b></p> <p>(BA) If you see a brand promoting or taking a stance on such topics that you disagree with, how would you react or think?</p> <p>(BA) How would your disagreement with a brand's stance affect your perception of the brand?</p>

	<p>(PI) How would disagreeing with the brand's stance or message affect your willingness to purchase from the brand?</p>
<p>Highly controversy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introducing examples</li> </ul>	<p>(GA) What do you think about brands that promote these types of issues?</p> <p><b>Agreement</b></p> <p>(TI) If you see a brand promoting or taking a stance on such topics. How would you react or think if you agree?</p> <p>(BA) How would your agreement with a brand's stance affect your perception of the brand?</p> <p>(PI) How would this type of message influence your willingness to purchase from the brand?</p> <p><b>Non-stand</b></p> <p>(BA) If a brand does not take a stance on these types of issues, does that have an effect on how you perceive the brand?</p> <p>(PI) Would you choose a brand that articulates these types of issues above a brand that does not?</p> <p><b>Disagreement</b></p> <p>(BA) If you see a brand promoting or taking a stance on such topics that you disagree with, how would you react or think?</p> <p>(BA) How would your disagreement with a brand's stance affect your perception of the brand?</p> <p>(PI) How would disagreeing with the brand's stance or message affect your willingness to purchase from the brand?</p>
Comparison	<p>(BA) Do you think that there is a difference in your reaction and perception of the brand whether brands articulate the first issues versus the issue last mentioned?</p> <p>(PI) Do you think that there is a difference in your willingness to purchase whether brands articulate the first issues versus the issue last mentioned?</p>
Perceived authenticity	<p>(GA) Why do you think brands take a stand or promote these types of issues and do you believe that it is because the brand wants to make actual changes?</p> <p>(PA) When you see brands promote these less controversial or highly controversial issues, do you think it is sincere?</p> <p><b>Authentic</b></p> <p>(BA) If you perceive the stand taken by the brand as authentic, what would you think and does that have an effect on your perception of the brand?</p> <p>(PI) If you perceive the stand as authentic, does that have an effect on your</p>

	<p>willingness to purchase from the brand?</p> <p><b>Inauthentic</b></p> <p>(BA) If you perceive the stand taken by the brand as inauthentic, what would you think and does that have an effect on your perception of the brand?</p> <p>(PI) If you perceive the stand as inauthentic, does that have an effect on your willingness to purchase from the brand?</p>
Debriefing	Anything to add?

## Appendix 6 - Interview guide - Modified (DK)

<p>Briefing</p>	<p>Formål: Undersøge hvordan millennium generationen reagerer på brand aktivisme</p> <p>Øvrig information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview bliver optaget</li> <li>• Anonymt - Beskrivelse baseret på alder, køn og arbejdsfunktion</li> <li>• Interesseret i forbrugerens mening Intet rigtigt eller forkert svar</li> </ul> <p>Strukturen:</p> <p>Kort snak om fænomenet, eksempler på aktivisme og til slut en snak om autenticitet</p> <p>Estimeret tid: 35 minutter</p> <p>Nogle spørgsmål?</p>
<p>Introduktion</p>	<p>(GA) Hvad tænker du om brand aktivisme og om at brands italesætte samfundsmæssige problematikker?</p> <p>(GA) Hvor vigtigt synes du at det er, at brand tager et standpunkt og promovere denne type problematikker?</p>
<p>Mindre kontroversielt</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introducerer eksempler</li> </ul>	<p>(GA) Hvad tænker du om brand der promovere denne typer problematikker?</p> <p><b>Enighed</b> (BA) Hvis du ser et brand promovere eller tager et standpunkt på sådanne emner. Hvordan ville du reagere eller tænke hvis du var enig?</p> <p>(BA) Hvordan ville din enighed med brandets standpunkt have en indflydelse på din opfattelse af brandet?</p> <p>(PI) Hvis du var enig i budskabet, ville det have en indflydelse på om din tilbøjelighed til at købe fra et brand?</p> <p><b>Intet standpunkt</b> (BA) Hvis et brand ikke tager et standpunkt på denne type problematikker, har det en betydning for hvordan du opfatter brandet?</p> <p>(PI) Ville du være mere tilbøjelig til at vælge et brand som italesætte denne type problematikker end et brand som ikke gør?</p> <p><b>Uenighed</b> (BA) Hvis du ser et brand promovere eller tager et standpunkt på sådanne</p>

	<p>emner, som du var uenig i. Hvordan ville du reagere eller tænke hvis du var enig?</p> <p>(BA) Hvordan ville din uenighed med brandets standpunkt have en indflydelse på din opfattelse af brandet?</p> <p>(PI) Hvordan ville din uenighed med brandets budskab eller standpunkt have en indflydelse på din tilbøjelighed til at købe fra et brand?</p>
<p>Meget kontroversielt</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>introducerer eksempler</li> </ul>	<p>(GA) Hvad tænker du om brand der promovere denne typer problematikker?</p> <p><b>Enighed</b></p> <p>(BA) Hvis du ser et brand promovere eller tager et standpunkt på sådanne emner. Hvordan ville du reagere eller tænke hvis du var enig?</p> <p>(BA) Hvordan ville din enighed med brandets standpunkt have en indflydelse på din opfattelse af brandet?</p> <p>(PI) Hvis du var enig i budskabet, ville det have en indflydelse på om din tilbøjelighed til at købe fra et brand?</p> <p><b>Intet standpunkt</b></p> <p>(BA) Hvis et brand ikke tager et standpunkt på denne type problematikker, har det en betydning for hvordan du opfatter brandet?</p> <p>(PI) Ville du være mere tilbøjelig til at vælge et brand som italesætte denne type problematikker end et brand som ikke gør?</p> <p><b>Uenighed</b></p> <p>(BA) Hvis du ser et brand promovere eller tager et standpunkt på sådanne emner, som du var uenig i. Hvordan ville du reagere eller tænke hvis du var enig?</p> <p>(BA) Hvordan ville din uenighed med brandets standpunkt have en indflydelse på din opfattelse af brandet?</p> <p>(PI) Hvordan ville din uenighed med brandets budskab eller standpunkt have en indflydelse på din tilbøjelighed til at købe fra et brand?</p>
Sammenligning	<p>(BA) Tror du, at der er en forskel mellem din reaktion eller opfattelse af et brand i forhold til om de italesætte de første problematikker kontra de sidstnævnte problematikker?</p> <p>(PI) Tror du, at der er en forskel mellem din tilbøjelighed til at købe fra et brand i forhold til om de italesætte de første problematikker kontra de sidstnævnte problematikker?</p>
Opfattet troværdighed	<p>(GA) Hvorfor tror du at brands taget et standpunkt eller promovere disse forskellige problematikker og tror du at det er fordi at brandet ønsker en reelt forandring?</p>

	<p>(PA) Når du ser brands promovere enten mindre kontroversielle eller meget kontroversielle emner, tænker du at det er oprigtigt?</p> <p><b>Autentisk</b></p> <p>(BA) Hvis du opfatter et brands standpunkt som oprigtigt/autentisk, hvad vil du tænke og har det en indflydelse på din opfattelse af et brand?</p> <p>(PI) Hvis du opfatter et brands standpunkt som autentisk, har det en indflydelse på om du vil købe fra brandet?</p> <p><b>Ikke autentisk</b></p> <p>(BA) Hvis du opfatter et brands standpunkt som ikke oprigtigt/autentisk, hvad vil du tænke og har det en indflydelse på din opfattelse af et brand?</p> <p>(PI) Hvis du opfatter et brands standpunkt som ikke autentisk, har det en indflydelse på om du vil købe fra brandet?</p>
Efter brefig	Noget at tilføje?

## **Appendix 7 - Script and examples for the interview - Modified (ENG)**

### **Presentation of the phenomenon**

Brand activism is a term that describes how brands take actions or promote changes in society. These changes can be on a sociocultural level where the brand seeks to change norms (e.g. Create more realistic beauty standards or change stereotypical gender norms) or on a sociopolitical level by seeking to make political or institutional changes (e.g. Marriage rights or civil rights).

### **Examples of less controversial brand activism**

In 2020 Zalando had a 'Zerotypes' campaign where they stated that they wanted to say goodbye to outdated stereotypes. The message of the campaign was that stereotypes are one of the largest obstacles when it comes to self expression and therefore the brand seeks to promote changes to these old cultural stereotypes and thereby take a stance for diversity (Trofimova, 2020).

In 2020 Adidas released their spring/summer collection with the message that they wanted to reimage and challenge the old stereotypes in the sport industry (Adidas, 2020). The brand sought to promote that all women can be an athlete and has in 2022 released the "I'm Possible" campaign showing different women that challenges the stereotypes with the message that nothing is impossible (Adidas, N.D.).

In 2019 the razor brand Gillette launched their commercial "The Best Men Can Be" showing men bullying other men, violence between boys and men insulting women. The purpose of the campaign was to start a conversation about "is this the best men can be?" and drive change in toxic masculinity and encourage their audience to be the best version of themselves (Topping et al., 2019).

In 2021 NYX Professional Makeup launched their "Pride Equality For All" campaign which promotes ballroom culture to celebrate and support the LGBTQIA+ community. The message behind the campaign was that everyone should be able to express themselves, be supported and proud of who they are (NYX Cosmetics, N.D.).

### **Examples of highly controversial brand activism**

In 2018 various American businesses took a stance on gun violence. For example Walmart announced in 2018 that they would not sell weapons to anyone under 21 and banned the sale of specific types of rifles. Furthermore, Bank of America stated the same year that they would no longer lend money to manufacturers who produce and sell military-styled guns to civilians (Everytown, 2022).

In 2017 the outdoor brand Patagonia launched a campaign called "The President Stole Your Land" which was a reaction to the allegedly illegal reduction of two national nature monuments in the United States. The purpose of the campaign by Patagonia was to promote political injustice and the importance of the public's vote in the elections to enable change in America (Sheehy, N.D.).

In 2020 during the Black Lives Matters movement Nike released a small film on their social media accounts with the message "For Once Don't Do It". The purpose of the film was to take a stand, show support and promote that it is time to take action and create change regarding racial injustice (Nike, 2020).



In 2017 Ben & Jerry's made a bane on same-flavored scoops in Australia because same-sex marriages was illegal. The purpose of this campaign was to promote marriage inequality in Australia and to encourage their customers to put pressure on the parliament to enable legal changes (Kocay, 2017).

## **Appendix 8 - Script and examples for the interview - Modified (DK)**

### **Præsentation af fænomenet**

Brand activism er et begreb som beskriver hvordan brands handler eller promovere forandringer i samfundet. Disse forandringer kan være på et sociokulturelt niveau, hvor brands søger at ændre normer (fx. Skabe mere realistiske skønhedsidealer or ændre stereotypiske kønsnormer) eller på et sociopolitisk niveau ved at forsøge at skabe politiske eller institutionelle forandringer (fx. Borgerrettigheder eller ægteskabs rettigheder).

### **Eksempler på mindre kontroversiell brand aktivisme**

I 2020 havde Zalando en “Zero-types” kampagne hvor de udtalte at de ønskede at sige farvel til forældede stereotyper. Budskabet i kampagne var at stereotyper er en af de største udfordringer når de kommer til at udtrykke sig selv, og derfor ønsker brandet at promovere forandringer i forhold til disse gamle kulturelle stereotyper og derved slå et slag for diversitet (Trofimova, 2020).

I 2020 annoncerede Adidas deres forår/sommer kollektion med budskabet om at de ønskede at ændre og udfordre gamle stereotyper inden for sports industrien (Adidas, 2020). Brandet ønskede at promovere at alle kvinder kan være atleter og i 2022 udgav de “I’m Possible” kampagnen som viste forskellige kvinder som udfordrer stereotyperne med budskabet om at “nothing is impossible” (Adidas, N.D.).

I 2019 lancerede barberblads brandet Gillette deres reklame “The Best Men Can Be” som viste mænd som mobber andre mænd, vold mellem drenge og mænd som krænker kvinder. Formålet med kampagnen var at starte en diskussion omkring “Is this the best men can be?” og skabe forandring i forhold til “toxic masculinity” og opfordrer deres målgruppe til at være den bedste version of dem selv (Topping et al., 2019).

I 2021 lancerede NYX Professional Makeup deres “Pride Equality For All” kampagne som promovere ballroom kulturen for at fejre og støtte LGBTQIA+ fællesskabet. Budskabet i kampagnen var at alle skal have muligheden for at udtrykke dem selv, blive støttet og være stolte af dem selv (NYX Cosmetics, N.D.).

### **Eksempler på meget kontroversiell brand aktivisme**

I 2018 valgte flere amerikanske virksomheder at taget et standpunkt i forhold til våben. For eksempel Walmart annoncerede i 2018 at de ikke længere ville sælge våben til folk under 21 og de forbød salget af visse typer af rifler. Endvidere, udtalte Bank of America samme år at de ikke længere ville låne penge til de fremstillingsvirksomheder som producerer og sælger militærlignende våben til civile (Everytown, 2022).

I 2017 lancerede udendørs/friluftss brandet Patagonia en kampagne ved navn “The President Stole Your land” som en reaction på de angivelige ulovlige reducere af to nationale naturreservater. Formålet med kampagnen af Patagonia var at sætte fokus på den politiske uretfærdighed og vigtigheden af at borgerne stemmer til valgene for at skabe forandringer i USA (Sheehy, N.D.).

I 2020 under Black Lives Matters bevægelsen udgav Nike en kort film på deres social media konti med budskabet “For Once Don’t Do It”. Formålet med filmen var at tage et standpunkt, støtte og promovere at det er på tide at handle og skabe forandringer angående race uretfærdigheder (Nike, 2020).

I 2017 lavede Ben & Jerry's et forbud mod at få to ens iskugler i Australien fordi at ægteskab mellem samme køn var ulovligt. Formålet med kampagnen var at promovere ulighed mellem ægteskabsrettigheder i Australien og opfordrer deres forbrugere til at sætte parlamentet under press og skabe retslige forandringer (Kocay, 2017).