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**How does Generation Z take a stand
on brands that take a stand?**

*A qualitative study of Generation Z's perceptions of
brand activism*

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Abstract

Today's consumers expect that brands take greater social responsibility and take a stand on sociopolitical issues, such as the MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements. In previous research, the dominant explanation for this is a growing need for consumers to seek out brands with the same values as themselves. At the same time, brands' standpoints are also met by consumer suspicion and skepticism. It creates a complicated paradox that gives rise to a high level of uncertainty about if and how brands should adopt activist behavior. The purpose of this study is to examine Generation Z's perceptions of the concept of branded activism and their views on how brands should take a stand in today's society. The war in Ukraine has rekindled the debate on whether and how companies should act in situations like this. For this reason, perceptions of companies' actions in the Ukraine conflict are also examined to offer an updated perspective on the subject.

From the analysis of qualitative interviews, it is evident that representatives of Generation Z view the concept of brand activism positively when brands engage in it in the right way but achieving this is considered difficult. This is because brand activism is met with skepticism and questioning of genuineness. There is doubt as to whether brands want to achieve societal change or whether they only want to obtain greater profits. Hence, it is important for Generation Z that brands authentically engage in activist behavior, by being consistent, transparent, willing to sacrifice profits, and avoiding involvement in trendy and too highly politicized issues. As for the specific case of the Ukraine war, Generation Z welcomes companies withdrawing from Russia and supporting Ukraine. Brands should think about making concrete actions rather than producing standalone commercials. In sum, the findings of the research have implications for brands that are targeting the segment of Generation Z which primarily informs them that engaging in brand activism requires an evident consistency between cause, brand, and actions.

Keywords: *brand activism, Generation Z, perceptions, brand authenticity, consumer skepticism, Ukraine war*

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1 Introduction

The first part introduces a description and background of the research topic. It continues with a problem discussion where the complexity of the subject is discussed, and a research gap is presented. Naturally, this leads to the aim and research questions of the study. Finally, demarcations and thesis structure are provided to clarify our procedure.

Today, it is inescapable for brands to take a stand on and work with sustainability issues since it is demanded from consumers, employees, investors, and other stakeholders. But what do consumers demand of brands when it comes to other values and positions, for example regarding social and political events?

It can be stated that not only politicians and leaders have a voice in the political and social debate, but also brands. One case where this became clear was when Nike decided to make a campaign with the American football player Colin Kaepernick, which caught a lot of attention (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). The football star kneeled during the American national anthem to support and raise attention to the Black Lives Matter movement. His intention was to protest against racial injustice and police brutality against black people. By collaborating with Kaepernick, Nike took a stand in the societal debate (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). Even though the brand received negative reactions, Nike saw a value in expressing its stand regarding the issue (CNBC, 2018). As with Nike, there are many brands that today take stands and voice their opinions regarding different sociopolitical events, also known as *brand activism*. This research will further explore the topic of brand activism and consumers' perceptions of brands that take a stand.

1.1 Background

The consumer society reflects the society as a whole and as the society constantly changes, so does the consumer society. Today, consumers express their self-identity through consumption while many brands use stories and myths to communicate their values (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holt, 2004). Therefore, brands are viewed as carriers of meaning and through them, consumers can experience belonging and expression of themselves. By consuming specific brands, consumers can implicitly communicate to the world who they are, what they stand for, or whom they strive to be. Moreover, as stated by Cova and Cova (2012), the revolution of digitalization and technical developments have resulted in a progressive,

aware, and informed consumer, which in turn has made them more powerful in their relationships with brands. The consumers of today are co-producing value together with brands and they have more power over their consumption than before (Cova & Cova, 2012). Overall, this creates incentives for brands to understand consumers' values and opinions. Consumers seek to acquire products from brands that they can identify with, and when brands are clear about their standpoints, like-minded consumers can be attracted and targeted.

One generation specifically characterized by wanting to express their identity, opinions, and values through consumption is *Generation Z*, which is a description of people born in the years between 1995 and 2010 (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). In comparison with earlier generations, consumers of Generation Z are more aware and political and have high expectations on brands (Sarkar & Kotler, 2017). According to Mirzaei, Wilkie, and Siuki (2022), it is especially younger consumers that care about and value companies that engage in social issues and support movements. Not only is it an interesting generation to investigate regarding this topic, but it is also the largest generation consisting of 32% of the global population (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Generation Z will continue to have a strong purchasing power in the coming years (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021) and it is, therefore, interesting for marketers, companies, and society to investigate how they think, what they value, and how they act.

On one hand, it seems to be important that companies take a stand on sociopolitical issues, to be able to meet the needs of today's consumers. On the other hand, it seems to be important that brands take a stand in an authentic way. In 2017, Pepsi released a campaign with the supermodel Kendall Jenner. The campaign aimed to show how “people from different social strata come together” (BBC News, 2017). However, the advertisement was perceived in a completely different way and massive criticism was directed at both Pepsi and Jenner. People believed that the company and the model were capitalizing on the Black Lives Matter movement and that it diminished and trivialized what protests are about (BBC News, 2017). Only a few days after being launched, the campaign was retracted due to the storm of criticism that had emerged (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Hence, taking a stand in an ongoing crisis or debate also implies great risks.

1.2 Problematization

Brand activism can be viewed and discussed from different perspectives. In some cases, when brands engage in brand activism their reputation can be damaged (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry & Kemper, 2020). For example, it can be accused of being inauthentic and of *woke washing*, a term used for brands who mislead consumers by falsely claiming to have an engagement in social change. Engaging in such practices is therefore hazardous and not an effective marketing strategy. On the other hand, when the opposite is done, i.e. when a brand's purpose, values, and communication align, great value is often created as well as the trust and equity of the brand increase (Vredenburg et al., 2020). This paradox is reflected in the CMO Survey (Deloitte, 2018). It showed that 22.4% of marketing leaders perceive brands taking a stand on sociopolitical issues as suitable and the most common argument put forward was the importance of showing that brands do not only exist to make profits. However, the larger proportion who were against taking a stand claimed that there are great risks with activism, as they believe it will negatively affect brands' ability to appeal to and retain customers (Deloitte, 2018). The subject becomes further complex when consumer expectations of brands become greater, at the same time as the consumer population becomes increasingly polarized (Klostermann, Hydock & Decker, 2021). Thus, it is inevitable that companies' expressed standpoints will be met by both positive and negative perceptions and reactions. In other words, it can be stated that there is uncertainty and different perceptions among both consumers and brand managers about how effective activism is as it comes with great risks while considerable benefits can be reaped.

Previous research on this topic often discusses different types of brand activism and why it is important in the contemporary consumer society (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). The link between activism and authenticity as well as skepticism are recurring themes in previous research (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Schmidt, Ind, Guzmán & Kennedy, 2022; Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010). In addition, researchers have delved into the evolution from neutral and impartial companies to realizing and taking on greater social responsibility which mostly has been driven by consumer expectations (Lin, 2018). However, there are research gaps in the field of brand activism. There is narrow research that explores different generations' views on the topic. Moreover, it is more rarely researched about how and in what way consumers themselves believe that brands should take a stand.

In addition, with the ongoing war in Ukraine, the subject of companies that take a stand becomes more relevant than ever. Companies all over the world have acted in various ways to protest against the Russian regime and to support the Ukrainian refugees. For example, McDonald's temporarily closed all its Russian restaurants and Apple no longer sells its products on the Russian market (Sozzi & Semenova, 2022; Biron, 2022). Additionally, companies are also showing support to Ukraine by offering aid and donating money (Reuters, 2022). Simultaneously, some brands adopt a more passive strategy with their core business and operations proceeding as usual. Hence, the war has rekindled the debate over whether companies should take a stand or act with restraint. Since it is an ongoing situation, there is barely, if any, research done on this case in regard to brand activism.

1.3 Research Aim

The research paper will study the above mentioned problematization and the topic of brand activism. The research aim is to investigate Generation Z's perceptions of brands that have taken a stand on socially political topics, in general, and focus on some selected cases and brands that have done this regarding the war in Ukraine, in particular. Moreover, the research seeks to gain a deeper understanding of how Generation Z believes that brands should engage in brand activism.

1.4 Research Questions

To be able to fulfill the aim, the research intends to answer the following questions:

- *How does Generation Z perceive sociopolitical brand activism?*
- *How should brands engage in brand activism according to Generation Z?*

1.5 Demarcations

The study is limited to consumers of Generation Z to gain a deeper understanding of one narrower group, instead of attaining a more overall picture of several groups. As stated above, consumers of this generation often share similar progressive values which is why it is interesting to explore their perceptions and feelings about brand activism. Furthermore, consumers of Generation Z have and will continue to have great purchasing power. For this reason, it is vital to scrutinize this generation since it can determine the future significance of brand activism.

With the research aim in mind, the study is concentrated on sociopolitical brand activism that is communicated through marketing efforts. Since the term brand activism is wide, it is vital to establish what aspect of it is going to be addressed. The cases of Nike and Pepsi described above are examples of brands taking a stand on sociopolitical issues in society. Focusing on issues regarding gender, race, and age in interaction with political factors sets a certain direction for the study and facilitates the research process. These demarcations are connected since Generation Z is aware of and engaged in sociopolitical issues and movements. Hence, these aspects are appropriate and applicable to what is set out to be studied.

1.6 Thesis Structure

Theoretical Framework: In this section, the theoretical framework is presented. The concepts presented in this chapter are used to analyze the empirical data. First a description of the postmodern consumer and Generation Z is provided. An overview of previous research on brand activism is also provided, leading to the concept of brand authenticity. Lastly, the concept of skepticism is discussed.

Methodology: The following part will contain the methodological framework and is a description of what, why, and how the research was conducted. Also, it is a motivation of how the methodology supports the aim of the study. Moreover, it presents how the interviews, participant selection, and data analysis were made. To assure the quality of the research, we describe our approach to research ethics and trustworthiness.

Case Descriptions: In this chapter, three marketing activities that were discussed in the interviews are described. Two commercials, one from Gillette and one from Pepsi as well as a marketing decision Arla made, are presented. The cases are portrayed to facilitate the process of understanding the empirical findings and analysis.

Empirical Findings and Analysis: In this section, empirical findings of the interviews are presented, as well as an analysis of them. The results are interpreted with the help of the theoretical framework of the study. Furthermore, the section is structured in emerging themes that were noted when examining the empirical discoveries.

Discussion: What was discovered in the empirical findings and analysis is further discussed in this section. More specifically, a summarizing discussion is made based on the findings of how Generation Z perceives brand activism and how they believe brands should act in this matter. The section highlights terms such as expectations of brands, skepticism, authenticity, and trustworthiness.

Conclusion: The conclusion consists of a concise answer to the research questions of the study. In addition, the implications that the research has on society, the marketing research field, and brand managers, are highlighted here. Lastly, some limitations of the research and suggestions for future research are presented.

2 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework consists of a presentation of concepts that are later used to analyze the empirical data. Since the thesis aims to investigate the perceptions of brand activism from Generation Z's point of view, a description of the postmodern consumer and Generation Z is needed to understand how they think concerning brand activism. Further, previous research and literature on brand activism are presented. In addition, the concept of brand authenticity and consumer skepticism is discussed to create a comprehensive framework to be able to analyze our data.

2.1 The Postmodern Consumer

Consumption plays a large part in consumers' identity work in the postmodern society (Todd, 2012). Products are imbued with meanings that consumers use as a part of creating a sense of identity. In other words, consumers do not only acquire a physical product, but also an expression of certain values (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Brands play a part in forming the symbols and expressions imbued in products, by acting and advertising in a certain way. Choosing between a large amount of buying offerings and opportunities, consumers face an infinite process of constructing an identity. Contemporary consumption is a way to communicate to others who one is and to what groups one belongs to (Todd, 2012).

Increasingly more consumers are aware of important societal issues, which often is reflected in their purchases. By buying products from brands that stand for the same values as oneself, at the same time as refraining from those with conflicting values, consumers think and act beyond the functional attributes of products (Mirzaei et al., 2022). According to Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) brand activism creates opportunities for consumers to discover what brands match their values and morals. The Consumer-Brand Identification Theory describes that when consumers identify themselves with a brand, it is more likely for the brand to achieve customer satisfaction and loyalty (Popp & Woratschek, 2017). This phenomenon points to the importance of brand activism because consumers are actively looking for like-minded companies. Since this study aims to explore the concept from a consumer perspective, it is important to initially gain a greater understanding of how consumers think and act in today's postmodern society.

2.2 Generation Z

Dividing consumer groups into generations can provide useful insights because they often have similar consumer and buying behavior as a result of them growing up in the same period (Solomon, 2019). They share the experience of historical events, social happenings, trends, and values. The reason behind this can be explained by the Generation Cohort Theory which proposes that social and political happenings, experienced in the early period of life, result in the group establishing similar values (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). According to Solomon (2019) age is a great part of an individual's identity and people are generally more like-minded with others that are of a similar age.

According to Djafarova and Bowes (2021), Generation Z is a description of people born in the years between 1995 and 2010. This generation's main characteristic is that they are the first generation to have grown up in a digital age with high exposure to digital advertisements and communication (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Since Generation Z is constantly connected to the internet and social media, it is the generation to be most exposed to and have access to more information than ever (Chaney, Touzani & Slimane, 2017). Further, Generation Z is socially conscious and political and has high expectations of brands (Chaney et al., 2017; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). They want brands to be authentic, preferably transparent, and stand for something (Solomon, 2019). Additionally, it is important for consumers of Generation Z to express their identity, which is done through consumption to a large extent (Francis & Hoefl, 2018). Consequently, they favor brands whose values align with theirs.

2.3 Brand Activism

To understand brand activism, it is vital to investigate different views and the current state of knowledge on this topic. The concept of brand activism has become relevant within the marketing research field since it is more common in brands' marketing strategies today, which potentially can be profitable (Lin, 2018; Mirzaei et al., 2022). Brand activism is defined as companies that engage and take a stand on issues intending to improve society (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Brand activism is often communicated through marketing activities that contain different stances on various issues to affect consumers (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019).

Taking a stand on a divisive issue is a new approach to reaching target consumers at the same time as assuring market relevance over a longer period of time. Lin (2018) explores the different roles of brand activism through the ages. Historically, companies have wanted to avoid interfering with sociopolitical controversies and have taken a rather passive role in society (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Lin, 2018). In contrast to before, companies have taken a new authoritative role that enters the political field which extensively influences society, consumers, and the way of doing business (Lin, 2018). Much of advertising today demonstrates the evident relationship between brands and the political field. Since just presenting product characteristics is not enough in the contemporary competitive market, brands need to stand for something that extends beyond physical traits (Mirzaei et al., 2022).

Sarkar and Kotler (2020) describe brand activism as companies that are driven by the common good instead of being profit-seeking while Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) introduces the topic as companies' right to be heard. Brand activism is an umbrella term that includes different types of directions. There is a consensus between Sarkar and Kotler (2020) and Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) that the types of brand activism entail engaging in issues regarding politics and laws, economy and business, environment as well as social matters. The social aspect has become a larger part of the marketplace, where consumers make more conscious buying decisions and companies take a stand in various matters through marketing (Lin, 2018). Sociopolitical activism deals with equality issues in several aspects, such as gender, race, and age in interaction with political factors. Therefore, it is possible for companies to develop and communicate marketing activities with very different content but still, be considered as engaging in brand activism (Lin, 2018). A common pattern in sociopolitical activist campaigns is that they often advocate values that are aligned with progressive ideas. It is very unusual that companies choose to highlight values that seek to preserve the status quo (Lin, 2018). However, engaging in brand activism also entails being cautious because if a brand's communicated values are not reflected in its actual behavior, there is a risk of being perceived as inauthentic (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Schmidt et al. (2022) emphasize previous research that has shown that brands should refrain from taking a stand on highly politicized matters since they risk alienating and antagonizing potential customers.

The development towards taking a stand is also driven by a change in consumer expectations on brand behavior to not only engage in profit-making activities but also work to improve society as a whole (Lin, 2018). According to Sarkar and Kotler (2020), consumers expect

brands to promote change. Especially, if a brand's target group is progressive and looking for a change, it is of importance that the brand is aligned with these values as well (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). Mirzaei et al. (2022) argue that brand activism has become a practice that is easier to engage in due to new information technology, such as the emergence of social media. These channels offer companies larger opportunities and means to take a stand on contemporary issues that reach millions of users. Social media have also made it possible for consumers to put large pressure on unethical brands (Mirzaei et al., 2022). In other words, companies operate in a riskier market where one bad incident can hurt a brand severely.

An increasing number of brands strive to improve society and to be more than a profit-making company (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). In cases where governments turn their backs on important issues, companies take a stand to mitigate societal injustice. According to Sarkar and Kotler (2020), progressive brands are more forward-thinking and regarded as leaders in their fields. "Woke" is another word that describes proactive brands, meaning that they are alert to societal issues. Brand activism can be regarded as a natural development of Corporate Social Responsibility but implies greater risks meanwhile it can yield potential higher profits (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020).

2.4 Brand Authenticity

Previous research emphasizes the important relationship between authenticity and brand activism, as genuineness is a crucial element that will determine whether brands succeed with activism or not. Schmidt et al. (2022) conclude that authenticity is a fundamental issue for brands that adopt activism behavior. Mirzaei et al. (2022) argue that a lack of authenticity when engaging in brand activism can result in a consumer backlash. Awareness of what elements determine the level of authenticity can contribute to an understanding of how brand activism should be and not be dealt with.

Brand authenticity is a common aspiration within the field of marketing (Södergren, 2022). At the same time as consumers use brands in their identity constructions in the contemporary consumer society, they also face an abundance of information and increased commercialization. To determine what brands are most relevant, consumers often search for those that are genuine and legitimate (Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin & Grohmann, 2015). According to Mirzaei et al. (2022) authenticity has become superior to quality, in

terms of what consumers consider in a purchase decision. When engaging in brand activism in inauthentic ways, there is a risk that the brand is accused of woke washing. As a consequence, consumers may boycott the brand. It is commonly occurring that consumers are distrustful of companies that engage in brand activism, thinking it is a marketing trick (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Achieving brand authenticity is an essential element in preventing consumer distrust and being accused of woke washing. If consumers believe that the brand's intentions are honest and authentic, it is more likely that they buy the brand's products and show support for it (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Authenticity is therefore a critical point for companies that are taking a stand on social issues since it can either make or break the marketing strategy. However, Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink (2008) claim that it is difficult for brands to use mass marketing in an attempt to achieve an authentic image because they are perceived as contradictory. When discussing brand activism, it is fundamental to incorporate authenticity to gain a greater knowledge of how companies can take a stand without being regarded as dishonest.

Mirzaei et al. (2022) conclude that several important elements determine the level of brand authenticity when companies take a stand. An essential aspect of authenticity is *social context independency* which focuses on to what degree a company's woke marketing is separate from currently discussed issues (Mirzaei et al., 2022). There is a risk that companies that engage in trendy societal issues are perceived as seizing the opportunity only to gain attention and doing it for the wrong reasons. Hence, companies that only take a stand on recently emerged issues are likely to be accused of "free riding" and regarded as inauthentic. Another aspect is *fit*, which considers the level of alignment between the type of issue that a company engages in and the company's core business, culture, or image (Mirzaei et al., 2022). If there is a fit between these, it is likely that the authenticity is strengthened, while a misfit leads to the opposite. Holt (2004) claims that brands cannot take a stand on issues without offering an insight into how the standpoint can be connected to the core business. It coincides with what Du et al. (2010) conclude; companies that engage in a social cause without a clear alignment to their business should argue why it supports the cause. Making consumers better understand a perhaps otherwise unclear connection between the company and the problem can increase the perception of the fit. *Motivation* is a third aspect to acknowledge when discussing a brand's degree of authenticity which is affected by the intentions and purpose behind taking a stand (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Whether a company's brand activism intentions are perceived as hidden to increase profits or as honest and amicable, is crucial for how authentic the company

is perceived to be. When a brand's advertising mainly focuses on a sociopolitical message rather than on its products or itself, it is more likely that consumers suspect ulterior and egotistic motives (Du et al., 2010). *Sacrifice* considers to what degree a brand is willing to forfeit profit when engaging in societal issues (Mirzaei et al., 2022). To gain authenticity, brands need to take concrete measures to show that they are financially committed to the issues. Schmidt et al. (2022) claim that actions aligning with purpose and values regardless of the costs they may cause could potentially result in a more positive perception of a brand and its activism.

2.5 Consumer Skepticism

At the same time as consumers have expectations about companies and want to know about what actions are taken regarding social responsibility, they also have a suspicious approach towards companies that loudly advocate their brand activism efforts (Du et al., 2010). Du et al. (2010) claim that there are two ways in which consumers usually perceive a company's underlying reasons behind taking a stand: *intrinsic* and *extrinsic*. The former is a description of when consumers regard a company's standpoint as genuine and authentic, which usually results in a positive perception of the brand. The latter is when a brand's activism is perceived as a way of increasing profits, which creates a more negative approach towards the brand (Du et al., 2010). These findings highlight that there are two sides to the perspective of brand activism and engaging in social issues. One where consumers believe that the brand activism efforts are motivated to reach social change and one where the altruistic motive is doubted and is rather motivated by the desire for business profits. Consequently, this gives rise to consumer skepticism (Du et al., 2010).

The paradox that consumers want companies to take a stand on social issues at the same time as they are skeptical about communication of such efforts can be explained by ad skepticism (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001). As stated by Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) a skeptic is a description of "a person who doubts the truth or value of an idea or belief". Further, skeptics are people who distrust the substance of something being communicated (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001). The concept of ad skepticism can be a suitable explanatory model for understanding why consumers are suspicious of advertising and do not trust the claims being made (Obermiller, Spangenberg & MacLachlan, 2005). Consumers usually become skeptical when they doubt the underlying motives of a brand activist claim. The level of skepticism is also connected to

when a company's claim is inconsistent with the actual actions. Moreover, the use of skepticism is a way of protecting oneself from being misled by false marketing efforts (Kim & Lee, 2009). Also, the more a consumer understands the marketing strategy of a brand, the more skeptical they become of the claims being made.

However, it should be noted that skeptical consumers are not completely resistant to advertising and marketing communication. Consumers tend to be less suspicious of new types of marketing practices since it is harder to recognize the underlying motive (Kim & Lee, 2009). Although, as that strategy and the underlying goals become more well known, the more skeptical consumers become (Obermiller et al., 2005). Obermiller et al. (2005) also claim that skeptics respond better to emotional communication rather than informational approaches. Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, and Hill (2006) state that timing is a crucial component when communicating a company's standpoint. Consumers are more skeptical of companies taking stands for ongoing social issues and tend to question whether it has altruistic motives or not (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006).

3 Methodology

The following section is a description of the method used in the study. The research approach as well as its advantages and disadvantages is described. Further, a walkthrough of participant selection, interview structure, and data analysis is provided. The quality of the research is examined by discussing our approach on research ethics and trustworthiness.

3.1 Research Approach

Since the aim of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of Generation Z's perceptions of sociopolitical brand activism, a qualitative research approach was used. The research method focuses on gaining a deeper understanding of the object of study (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The use of methods within the approach aims to reveal perceptions and feelings at the same time as the focus is placed on words and images (Baines, Fill & Rosengren, 2017; Bryman & Bell, 2015).

An advantage of a qualitative research method is that we as researchers can observe and approach research participants in a closer way to see the social world from their perspective (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Hence, a qualitative method helps researchers explore what happens beneath the surface of people. Since the research aim seeks to explore Generation Z's perceptions about brand activism, it is appropriate to apply a qualitative research method. A drawback of a qualitative approach is the risk of subjectivity. That is, collected data is colored by researchers' views and opinions (Bryman & Bell, 2015), which we had to consider carefully when collecting and analyzing the research material. Furthermore, we also considered the relation between theory and research where an inductive research approach was used, which is mostly taken when using qualitative research methods (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The research paper does not intend to make any generalizing conclusions about entire populations, but rather to obtain a deeper understanding of a delimited target group and therefore be able to make theoretical generalizations.

The purpose of the research is exploratory in which we have gained extensive knowledge about a specific problem area, namely brand activism and perceptions of it. According to Patel and Davidson (2011), explorative research entails illuminating a certain problem area comprehensively and from different perspectives. By adopting this approach, Generation Z's perceptions and outlooks on brands taking a stand could be explored (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

3.2 Interviews

To collect empirical material, a series of interviews were conducted. Since the research was conducted from a consumer perspective and aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the interviewees' perceptions of brand activism, qualitative interviewing is an appropriate research method (Bryman & Bell, 2015). A semi-structured interview approach was used which is characterized by flexibility and opened up for adaptation to the interviewees (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This type of interview also implied preparing an interview guide as a direction but also allowed for follow-up questions and questions that emerged at the time (see Appendix 1). Hence, the interview guide aimed to lead the interviews in the right direction, but at the same time allowed for fluctuations.

The advantage of a semi-structured interview approach is that the interview guide offers a direction on what topic should be explored, while also enabling the interviewee to more freely express their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about the topic (Bryman & Bell, 2015), which aligns with our aim. Furthermore, the strength of the semi-structured approach was that we as interviewers were less likely to control the respondent and influence the person with our expectations and perceptions. The approach was a deliberate choice since we wanted to encourage elaboration and discussion that probably would not occur in a more structured interview form. Instead, an unstructured approach made it possible for us as researchers to obtain the authentic worldview of the interviewees (Bryman & Bell, 2015). According to Adams (2015), critique has been directed towards semi-structured interviews for being time and effort consuming. Preparation, execution, and analysis are all part of a long process that places high demands on the interviewers and the interviewees (Adams, 2015). Since our research aim was to explore consumer perceptions, this method was most appropriate and therefore we chose to put a lot of time and energy into the whole interview process to achieve our purpose with both accuracy and precision.

In preparation, a pilot interview was conducted to test our interview guide and ensure a high quality of our research. Thereafter 14 interviews were conducted ranging from 28 minutes to 56 minutes and were made in person to better capture gestures, facial expressions, and other non-verbal clues. According to Bryman and Bell (2015), interviewers need to be observant of the interviewees' body language and what they do. Initially, we informed the participants about the purpose of the interview, and with their consent, the interviews were

audio-recorded to simplify the transcription and analysis process. The recordings were also vital since it is not just interesting what interviewees say, but also how they say it (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The interviews were held in Swedish since it is the native language of the participants, which was a deliberate decision to avoid misunderstandings and language difficulties. In this way, the interviewees could speak more freely in their own language and we could obtain deeper insight into the participants' perceptions and feelings. In other words, we were able to gain deeper and more valuable empirical material. However, Bryman and Bell (2015) claim that there may be problems with translating interview data because it is an interpretive process. Thus, the data retrieved may have been influenced by the translation from Swedish to English.

3.3 Participant Selection

Whereas the research has a qualitative approach, we conducted purposive sampling (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The sampling was made in accordance with the aim of the study, thus people who are representatives of Generation Z. The first interviewees were selected from a convenience point of view, meaning that we interviewed people we are acquainted with (Bryman & Bell, 2015). We asked these interviewees if they had friends and family, which are representatives of Generation Z, who were willing to participate in our research. A snowball sampling was therefore also conducted (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In addition to having representatives from Generation Z, we tried to achieve a mixed selection of gender. In addition to this, all of the interviewees come from Sweden but reside in various cities. To achieve anonymity for the respondents, they have been given a pseudonym (see Table 1).

As the aim of the study is to investigate Generation Z's perceptions and views of social brand activism, the population consists of representatives from this target group. This limitation includes people born between 1995 and 2010. Hence, people that are representatives of other generations are excluded from the research. Generation Z is in general aware of the research topic and has high expectations of companies today, which is why we expected them to be able to debate brand activism and have clear perceptions of it.

Table 1: Participant information

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	City	Interview time
Adam	22	Male	Ystad	41 minutes
Albin	24	Male	Göteborg	32 minutes
Anna	23	Female	Lund	35 minutes
Elin	22	Female	Lund	46 minutes
Elsa	17	Female	Ystad	28 minutes
Emil	24	Male	Göteborg	42 minutes
Filip	27	Male	Uppsala	56 minutes
Josefine	22	Female	Skövde	38 minutes
Julia	27	Female	Uppsala	33 minutes
Malin	24	Female	Göteborg	37 minutes
Oliver	24	Male	Malmö	37 minutes
Olle	25	Male	Göteborg	33 minutes
Sara	26	Female	Göteborg	35 minutes
Simon	26	Male	Göteborg	47 minutes

3.4 Interview Structure

The interviews were initiated with general questions to get the conversation started, where the interviewees had the chance to describe themselves and were asked what was important in their choice of brands. The interviewees were then asked questions regarding their favorite brands and what they stand for, which led to discussions about if they believed companies should do more than selling goods and services. Further, questions that dealt more specifically with brand activism were asked. Interviewees were shown cases that illustrate how the brands Gillette, Pepsi and Arla have chosen to take a stand on various issues, which are explained further in section 4 Case Descriptions. This was made to facilitate for the respondents to talk about the topic and to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of brand activism. We deliberately chose to present cases from familiar Business-to-Consumer brands to make it easier for the respondent in the discussion and to be able to answer without specific prior knowledge.

The interviews also placed great focus on the respondents' views on companies taking a stand in conjunction with the war in Ukraine, which is part of the research aim. In the context of Russia invading Ukraine, many companies have chosen to take, and not take, certain measures. For example, some companies have stopped selling their products or stopped production in Russia. In this section, the respondents were asked to discuss the issue and express their opinion about how they believe that companies should act. For example, it was presented that Apple, Nike, and Netflix pulled out of Russia at a relatively early stage (Sozzi & Semenova, 2022). McDonald's and Coca-Cola withdrew after mounting pressure from consumers meanwhile Hilton's and Mondelez's core business remains in the country (Biron, 2022). After gaining insight into the subject with the help of the cases, questions were asked about the respondents' perception of whether companies should take a position or not and, if so, in what way. Finally, we asked if there was anything the respondents wanted to add and then thanked them for the interview.

3.5 Data Analysis

According to Bryman and Bell (2015), the data analysis stage includes several components, such as transcription and coding. All interviews were transcribed quickly after they were conducted to ensure that everything was included to facilitate analysis of the empirical material. Bryman and Bell (2015) claim that transcribing interviews can be very time consuming, but it was done in our research because it facilitated the data analysis. Just after all the interviews were transcribed, they were translated into English. The transcripts formed the basis of the material used in the data analysis, which then was coded. Coding the data implicates scrutinizing and categorizing the material into different labels and themes. This was done for the purpose of finding recurring patterns within and between transcripts to make sense of the retrieved data (Bryman & Bell, 2015). As a result, our empirical material was reduced and turned into being more manageable and approachable.

3.6 Research Ethics

According to Patel and Davidson (2011), there are high demands on research to be conducted credibly and to maintain high quality. To ensure that the collection of data took place in an ethically secure manner, some measures and research ethics aspects were taken into consideration. Patel and Davidson (2011) establish four main ethical requirements for research regarding *information*, *consent*, *confidentiality*, and *use*, which we strived to fulfill.

Firstly, we informed the respondents about the purpose of the research and what the information they contributed would be used for. We also reminded the respondents that the interview participation is optional and thereafter asked them for consent before recording the interviews, which was done to facilitate the transcription work. Furthermore, to fulfill the confidentiality requirement we informed and assured the respondents that their contributions to the study were anonymous. Hence, other names are used in the research paper. To satisfy the requirement of use, it was of importance for us to inform the interviewees that the retrieved material will be used for research purposes only.

3.7 Trustworthiness

Validity and reliability are important aspects to consider in research but are usually linked to a quantitative approach. The two concepts may be relevant in a qualitative method but must be applied differently. However, as they are deeply rooted in the quantitative part of the research, the use of these terms can be considered inappropriate in a qualitative approach. Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose that the alternative criteria of *trustworthiness* should be used when evaluating qualitative research. Furthermore, there are four aspects of trustworthiness: *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*.

The credibility aspect aims to assure congruence between the respondents' views and how they are reflected in the research study (Bryman & Bell, 2015). It is an important aspect that ensures that we as researchers have interpreted the social world and the respondents' perceptions correctly. One approach to achieving credibility is the practice of respondent validation. We handled this criterion by letting two of the respondents read the essay and asking them if we have grasped their perceptions correctly. For two additional respondents, we showed how we had presented their answers and quotes in section 5 Empirical Findings and Analysis and let them accept or adjust them. We explained our findings verbally to additional two respondents. Furthermore, since semi-structured interviews were conducted, it enabled more open answers about the topic where the respondents had the chance to explore what they wanted within the boundaries of the subject. Hence, the respondents could discuss issues that they found relevant and substantial (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In addition, the respondents answered anonymously which further opened up for genuine and truthful responses. Therefore, the credibility is strengthened since the interviewees' expressed views probably reflect the social reality which thus facilitates our interpretation of it.

Transferability is also a vital aspect to consider since qualitative research is based on studies on smaller groups or individuals with specific traits (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In this case, the study aimed towards exploring the perceptions of consumers belonging to Generation Z. Moreover, a qualitative approach and its findings are affected by a study's context. Lincoln and Guba (1985) claim that there is an empirical issue if a study's findings do not hold in other contexts. In our research, the respondents were shown concrete examples of brands taking a stand, which could affect the transferability negatively since we cannot ensure that our findings are transferable and applicable to all brands that engage in brand activism. However, the aim of this study is not to make generalizations, but to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions and thoughts members of Generation Z have on brand activism. We want to emphasize that it is not possible to generalize our findings of the representatives of Generation Z to the whole generation, nor is it possible to generalize the findings to other generations. This is further discussed in section 7.2 Limitations and Future Research.

The dependability aspect considers if the findings would be constant if the study was replicated (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Therefore, the study needs clear accounts of the research process and how the researchers have proceeded, which are thoroughly presented in this methodology chapter. Furthermore, since we experienced a high level of saturation in the interviews the dependability aspect is met.

Lastly, we have taken the aspect of confirmability into account, meaning that we as researchers have had an objective approach when conducting and interpreting the interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2015). We have endeavored to not let our values and beliefs be expressed, either in the performance of the interviews or interpretation of the findings. The interviews were executed in good faith and we asked open questions and encouraged the respondent to explore their own thoughts and ideas.

4 Case Descriptions

In the interviews, three different marketing activities were shown to the interviewees. The purpose was to illustrate how different sociopolitical brand activism actions can look like and obtain a deeper understanding of the interviewees' perceptions about these. The upcoming section describes the marketing activities, aiming to provide a greater understanding of these before the results and analysis are presented.

4.1 Gillette

In 2019, the razor and personal care brand Gillette launched a short film with the title “We Believe: The Best Men Can Be” (Gillette, 2019). The title was a way of playing with the brand’s thirty-year-old tagline of “The Best A Man Can Get” (Gillette, n.d.). The campaign takes a stand in the MeToo movement where Gillette aims to break today's image of masculinity and the “boys will be boys” mentality. Further, the brand seeks to portray a positive and inclusive image of men that will challenge the stereotypes and expectations that exist on men today. The commercial begins with four men of different ages looking at themselves in a mirror and in the background, there are several audio sounds saying “Bullying”, “The MeToo movement against sexual harassment” and “Toxic masculinity”. Then, the narrator asks: “Is this the best a man can get?” (Gillette, 2019). Thereafter different scenes and situations of bullying and sexual harassment are shown while the phrase “boys will be boys” is repeated. Suddenly, the story changes and the narrator says: “But something finally changed... And there will be no going back” in conjunction with several news reporting clips of the MeToo movement being displayed. Thenceforth, clips, where men confront each other in situations of bullying, fights and sexual harassment of women, are displayed. At the end of the film, the narrator says: “Because the boys watching today will be the men of tomorrow” (Gillette, 2019).

4.2 Pepsi

The commercial “Live for now” starring the supermodel Kendall Jenner, was launched by the brand Pepsi in 2017. The campaign aimed to show how “people from different social strata come together” (BBC News, 2017). The commercial follows different individuals that eventually meet up in a demonstration with people holding signs saying: “Join the conversation” and “Love” (Yadav, 2017). Later on, there is a scene illustrating a photoshoot with the supermodel Kendall Jenner. People in the demonstration are happy, dancing, playing

music, and showing the peace sign with their hands. Some of them also drink from Pepsi products. When Jenner notices the demonstration, she takes off her blonde wig and leaves the photoshoot to join the demonstration. She then grabs a can of Pepsi and walks up to a policeman and hands over the can, which he opens and takes a sip of. Everyone in the demonstration and the policemen look happy and cheerful. The commercial ends with the text “Live Bolder”, “Live Louder” and then the tagline “Live for Now” together with the Pepsi logo (Yadav, 2017).

4.3 Arla

In conjunction with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the dairy brand Arla chose to stop selling their product “Kefir”, a sour milk product, temporarily. On the packaging the Red Square in Moscow, Russia is illustrated (see Figure 1). Below the illustration, there is a text saying: “The Russian sour milk culture” (Via TT, 2021). Arla’s communication manager claimed that the decision was based on the fact that the brand did not want to be associated with Russia and the Russian regime (Berisha, 2022).



Figure 1: Arla (Via TT, 2021)

5 Empirical Findings & Analysis

This section is a presentation of the empirical findings from the interviews and an analysis of them. Equal to the aim of the research, understanding of the findings highlights respondents' perceptions of brands taking a stand on sociopolitical issues and how they believe brands should operate regarding the subject. Further, respondents' insights and opinions about companies taking a stand on the Ukraine war are analyzed. The empirical findings and analysis of them will be presented in themes that emerged when analyzing the results based on the theoretical framework.

5.1 Expectations of Brands

When asking the respondents about what brands and companies should do beyond just producing, selling and promoting their products and services, different sociopolitical standpoints is not the first thing they mention. Rather, it is mainly emphasized by the respondents that they believe that companies have large responsibilities regarding their value chain and what happens in the business internally. Simon states that companies should have responsibility for their value and supply chain, meaning that the operations should be sustainable and have net-zero in its resource commitment and that companies should have fair terms for their employees. Some respondents highlight the fact that brands today need to promote societal change and not just aim toward making profits (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020; Lin, 2018). Josefine believes that it is self-evident to work with the environment and social sustainability. These statements correspond to what Chaney et al. (2017) state about Generation Z and that they are socially conscious and have high expectations of brands. Olle is on a similar train of thought and states the following when he is asked about what he believes companies and brands should do besides producing, selling, and promoting their products and services:

They are responsible for taking care of their chain all the way, from production to final product. They are responsible for doing advertising and marketing that is fair and does not harass or insult anyone. But they have no responsibility perhaps to do something further if they do not include it in their branding in any way. Of course, they also have a big role in society to act well or to set a good example, but that is also like, you have to be that today anyway, otherwise no one chooses them.

Further, the respondents are in a constant search for brands that align with their values, in which the search process is facilitated when brands take a stand (Francis & Hoefl, 2018). Oliver claims that when companies take a stand on an important issue, he often re-evaluates his perception of the brand to investigate whether he shares the company's values or not. Anna agrees with this by claiming: "So I think to a large extent I am looking for brands that have similar values as I do." This aligns with Mirzaei et al. (2022), who argue that consumers look beyond the physical product to search for values instead. However, many of the respondents do not base their choice of brand solely on values. For example, Julia often prioritizes brands with proper values, but she also considers price and quality when choosing a product and brand.

5.2 Perceptions of Brand Activism

Most respondents express positive views on brand activism because they believe it is a valid concept in which brands should take larger social responsibility. Adam expresses it as companies taking a stand can contribute to spreading a larger awareness of societal issues. Sara claims that all companies should have an ethical thought behind their core business at the same time as Elin states that it adds value to companies' products and services when they engage in brand activism. This statement aligns with Mirzaei et al. (2022) who argue that younger generations care about brands that engage in social issues and movements. Many of the respondents also believe that large and well-established brands have a greater social responsibility. Filip claims:

Companies have the absolute best communication with the everyday consumer. They also have a really big and solid platform to use to express their values. I think that all companies should be free to take a stand and show their values, which can guide consumers forward toward a better society.

This emphasizes the important relationship between companies and consumers. They have a constant important dialogue where companies have a potentially great impact on consumers. The statement also shows that Filip believes that companies should express their values, which is consistent with previous research on brand activism and what is required of brands today (Lin, 2018; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020).

At the same time, some interviewees share the opinion that companies should be careful when adopting a brand activism behavior. The majority considered the aspect of brands exploiting societal problems for their gain. Du et al. (2010) claim that such distrust results in a higher level of consumer skepticism towards the brand and its activism. Filip is one of the respondents that expresses hesitation towards brand activism since companies' main aim is to earn profits by selling their products. Hence, he regards marketing activities that include taking a stand as deceitful and unreliable. Filip also believes that it is wrong that companies take advantage of serious matters "and turn it into an advertising gimmick". In accordance with Du et al. (2010), this is a case of when a consumer views a brand's activist actions as extrinsic, which creates a negative approach towards the company. He uses Pepsi's commercial as an example of this and claims that the commercial affected his perception of the brand Pepsi negatively. Filip stresses that it is positive if Pepsi wants to support the movement but that it has been done in the wrong way because of the trivialization. He is aware of the large criticism Pepsi faced on social media after launching the commercial. It reveals the fact that companies operate in a risky market when they enter into brand activism, as one misstep can negatively affect the brand, which aligns with what Mirzaei et al. (2022) conclude.

However, Anna can see potential in brand activism despite its flaws and refers to the case of Pepsi. In a way, she perceives it as an effective commercial since it is provoking reactions and conversations which calls for continued discussion on important problems in society. Emil also believes that Pepsi's commercial has created a valuable debate and has helped spread a large awareness of racial injustice. Sara agrees with this reasoning, and at the same time as she argues that Pepsi's commercial was rather tone deaf, she also claims:

Pepsi created something bad and received criticism, then you have to deal with the criticism and the next time you choose to do or not do it, then maybe you do it in a better way. Somehow, it's a bit of learning by doing, I think. [...] So then I think it's better to take a stand and try to do something right even if it turns out bad anyway.

Overall, it can be determined that brand activism is a complex topic that evokes mixed feelings. There are several cases where the respondents can identify and agree with the message of the brand activism action but do not approve of the way the messages were

expressed. An example of this is Filip's statement: "Because even if it does not feel so genuine with what they really want, it is still a good message. Their goals may be a bit sketchy but their paths to get there are good."

5.3 Authenticity & Skepticism

In the respondents' assessment of brand activism, it becomes clear that a common perception is the absence of authenticity and the presence of skepticism when taking a stand. This discussion often arises when the respondents see that the position taken is not in line with a brand's business. Furthermore, authenticity becomes a recurring topic when it comes to contemporary and trendy issues that result in the respondents questioning whether brands care about the issue.

A frequent response, when asking the respondents about their perceptions of the marketing cases, is that they believe that it is a marketing ploy. It strengthens the argument made by Mirzaei et al. (2022), which is that consumers often are critical of companies that take a stand on various issues because it is suspected to be a marketing trick. As an example, when discussing the Gillette commercial, Simon states that he likes the commercial and is impressed with the advertising agency who created it, rather than Gillette as the messenger. Further, he states the following about the commercial:

I think that the final clip should have led to something in the advertisement. Now it was just "Go to this website and join the change" which feels a bit fuzzy. It feels more that they have done an action that they can then include in their CSR report: "We have done this activity this year, developed this fantastic campaign". It feels like they use the MeToo movement. I think they would rather use it than do actual work for it.

This statement aligns with what Mirzaei et al. (2022) describe as woke washing. It occurs when a brand takes a stand in a way that is perceived as unfounded and inauthentic. Consumers do not trust that the brand works for the message they are trying to convey and therefore believe it to be a marketing trick (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Similar arguing is found when Malin explains her thought after watching Gillette's commercial:

Honestly, I am getting a little tired of this type of video. Because it does not feel like the right action. Why do they make a video like this when the girl razors that they make cost about ten kroner more? It bothers me a little. I have that feeling, I'm not convinced.

Malin has the perception that the message Gillette tries to convey in the commercial is unsupported by the actions that the brand actually makes. That the brand addresses the equality issue while the prices between the brand's male and female products differ, indicates that there is a discrepancy between message and actual action. Malin's doubtfulness towards Gillette's commercial can be explained by consumer skepticism, which is why she does not trust the claims being made (Kim & Lee, 2009).

It is a recurring pattern for the respondents to discuss authenticity and genuineness as they reason about how they perceive brand activism. It is often questioned how genuine it feels for a certain brand to get involved in certain issues. For example, Emil claims that the Gillette commercial "feels so out of place, because when a company takes a stand that sometimes has nothing to do with the business, it does not feel genuine at all". In this case, he questions why a razor company is involved in the MeToo-movement. It seems like the authenticity is negatively affected when companies' core business does not correspond to the issue companies take a stand on. Albin is reasoning in the same way regarding the Gillette commercial, where he believes that it is a good commercial with a nice message, but is also questioning the connection between razors and social change:

It was well done. Maybe I think it is a bit ridiculous that their razors are going to make men better people. I do not see the connection there. I believe that it is right what they say in the commercial and they are very right in that. But I do not see how razors have anything to do with it.

Based on this, it seems to be important that when engaging in brand activism, the issues that a brand engages in, should align with the core business of the company, to achieve authenticity. Mirzaei et al. (2022) refer to this as "fit" and describe it as to what extent brand engagement and core business, culture or image of the company are consistent. Sara states that brands should engage in brand activism only when it is genuine, and not just for the sake of it. She further uses an example to illustrate when it is appropriate for brands to take a stand:

If it is in line with what they stand for otherwise. But why should they take a stand on things they have nothing to do with? For example, Nike made this campaign with Colin Kaepernick and take a knee. And that is in line with the fact that they [Nike] have a lot to do with sports and everyone's equal value. They have many black athletes who represent them, then it would have been strange not to stand up for their rights. [...] But they may not have to stand up for animal activism. Take things that concern your area.

Furthermore, Albin says that companies should avoid engaging in brand activism just because it is a trendy opinion or issue. He argues that many brands capitalize on feminism, meaning that they communicate that they care about feminism, when in fact Albin thinks that they do not. When discussing the Gillette commercial, Sara believes that the fact that the commercial was launched in conjunction with the MeToo movement and not before or now, a few years later, made it less trustworthy. She explains that the brand approached something trendy and questions why the brand has not continued working with issues regarding female injustice. Becker-Olsen et al. (2006) claim that timing is a crucial component when taking a stand and that consumers are more skeptical of companies taking a stand on ongoing issues. Elin is reasoning in a similar way regarding the topic and states the following:

It is important that firms do not capitalize on every issue that is raised, but that they choose their core values that are important to them and what they want to work with and then continue to work with that. Because otherwise, it might not be so credible if you jump on every trend.

What is stated above can be viewed as an example of what Mirzaei et al. (2022) refer to as “social context independency”. The aspect is a description of when brands engage in sociopolitical issues that are current and trendy, which makes consumers question if the company engages in the issue for the right, authentic reasons or just wants to seize an opportunity to gain attention. Consequently, taking a stand on ongoing issues can be risky since consumers can perceive that action as inauthentic.

Many of the respondents believe that a brand’s authenticity is reliant on what the intentions are behind taking a stand. It is similar to the aspect of “motivation” (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Elsa believes that a large number of companies take advantage of societal issues by taking a

stand to gain larger profits. Simon claims that it is more likely to be perceived as authentic if the decision to take a stand is based on empathy, rather than having a financial motive. He also believes that brand activism is something deeper than "just producing a commercial". The most important thing is that companies genuinely want to do good and look beyond pursuing profits. Sara is hesitant about Gillette's intentions behind the commercial. The brand may have put up a "fake show" where she is unsure whether Gillette actually cares or not. Filip is suspicious of Gillette's sudden step towards trying to reduce female injustices and considers it as "an attempt to override Gillette's previous commercials that happily highlighted this particular male stereotype and image".

It becomes clear that brand authenticity also is determined by "sacrifice", which is a brand's willingness to prioritize societal issues over profits, as Mirzaei et al. (2022) conclude. Emil discusses the relation between authenticity and forfeiting profits by claiming:

I think companies are genuine when they take a stand and somehow lose money. Because a company is money, right? So that's probably the only way they can actually show that they genuinely care about the issue and prioritize it over profits. So it is to say: "We do not care what we are [a company], because we want to act". Then I think it is authentic and genuine.

Emil questions how genuine brand activism can be since a company's fundamental purpose is to make profits. He believes that Gillette and Pepsi only wish to tell the world how good they are, but in reality, they do not seem to care about the problem genuinely. Du et al. (2010) describe this as consumers being suspicious of the underlying motives when brands' commercials display taking a stand rather than on their products, because it is difficult to overlook the real purpose of companies, which is to increase sales and profits. This is reinforced when Filip states the following: "I think Gillette cares about the problem, but if they had to choose between making a lot of money or showing these views, I think they would choose the former." Hence, a willingness to lose money is a clear indication of brand authenticity.

5.4 How to Engage in Brand Activism

Solomon (2019) states that members of Generation Z want brands to be authentic and transparent, which also is one of our findings. In discussions about brand activism, there is a desire that brands must first and foremost be transparent in their activities. Elsa values brand transparency, which should indicate what brands do and not do in sociopolitical issues. She claims it can help consumers in their consumption choices. Albin believes that transparency can legitimize a brand taking a stand because it can possibly reduce consumer skepticism and create understanding of the brand's true intention. Clarity also seems to be an important element for the respondents. Adam thinks that companies “can take a stand when consumers understand the very position that is taken”, which he believed Pepsi did not succeed with. This aligns with how Josefine reasons. She believes that Pepsi does not dare to “go all the way” since they wish to please both sides of the debate without taking a real and clear position. The message, the plot and the stance seem to be rather unclear, which results in confused respondents.

Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) stresses the risk of being perceived as inauthentic when the brand values are not reflected in the brand's actual behavior. This reasoning can be applied to some of the respondents' ways of thinking of the importance of action, who argue that many brands' actions do not correspond with their expressed values. For example, Emil values companies that take a stand by acting concretely and he claims that actions weigh more than words, “which many companies should learn from”. Emil claims that producing commercials is not enough, but brands have to act consistently with their standpoint. Malin also believes that Gillette should have shown how the brand works with female injustices and male stereotypes, for example making a documentary instead of a commercial. Julia perceives commercials that include taking a stand as something fake when she claims: “It can be a bit for show. It is better to maybe donate money and take concrete measures than to just ‘flash’ with it and pretend that you care about the problems in commercials.” This statement can be explained by the concept of ad skepticism, meaning that consumers believe that companies should take a stand and act on social change, yet are suspicious of the claims being made in a commercial regarding the issue (Obermiller et al., 2005). In addition, this can also be connected to woke washing, where brands focus on appearing good externally instead of taking effective action (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Julia feels that companies like to display what they do when they are not really doing anything.

Many respondents have the opinion that they do not want brands to become too political or take stands on too specific issues. They rather want brands to focus on broader sociopolitical issues that concern human rights and equality. For example, Oliver says that big, global brands should take stands on sociopolitical issues since they are so powerful and can express opinions on issues that regard the whole world. Continuously, Anna claims that it is positive that brands support sociopolitical movements like MeToo and Black Lives Matter, but that brands should not engage in too complicated and political issues since it could harm the brand. Schmidt et al. (2022) state that it is a risk for brands to engage in highly politicized issues and should thus be avoided. Elin argues similarly, saying:

But going too deep into the political debate is negative, I think. After all, consumers themselves can choose and investigate those topics whether they want it. I think it is nice with companies that stand up for human rights and pride.

Reviewing the interviews, it can be noted that a pattern appears between the respondents' feelings and opinions about the marketing cases. When the respondents are affected emotionally, they often appreciate and are receptive towards the commercial or marketing decision. On the contrary, when they claim that no feelings emerge viewing the marketing activity, they do not believe the brand to be sincere about the message it tried to convey. As an example, all of the respondents, except for two of them, do not believe that the Pepsi commercial evokes any feelings. They are rather confused with the message and the content. Hence, they do not believe the commercial to be trustworthy. Olle, on the other hand, likes Pepsi's commercial and states that he enjoyed the "vibe" of the commercial. Consequently, he believes that the commercial is trustworthy. Similarly, Anna also likes the Pepsi commercial since she thinks that it is happy and captivating. Moreover, she also thinks that the commercial is trustworthy. Similar findings can be found when reviewing the responses about Gillette's commercial. Olle enjoys the commercial and is touched by the message and believes it to be trustworthy. Further, he states that Gillette "got bigger, they lifted themselves. They went from being a razor brand to being something bigger". Josefine states that she became teary-eyed watching the film and expresses it in the following way:

You still get quite strong feelings, partly for the brand for that slogan they have always had and play with the words. This perspective on it makes you still

think that this is how they value the issue. It becomes very clear when they use their own slogan. It was a very strong message. It clearly shows the brand's values.

Getting emotional seems to result in Josefine believing in the message and the values of the brand. These results align with what Obermiller et al. (2005) conclude; consumers become less skeptical and respond better to emotional communication.

5.5 The Special Case of the Ukraine War

The ongoing war in Ukraine has rekindled the debate on brand activism and how it should be executed. Besides, earlier research has focused on cases of social political issues in the form of movements against social injustices and not on cases like this. Therefore, we have chosen to study the Ukraine war, in conjunction with brand activism, as a specific case which is why it will be presented and analyzed separately.

5.5.1 An Insignificant Action?

The respondents are in general very divided in the case of Arla and its withdrawal of Kefir. On one hand, the respondents see a value in that Arla is taking a stand and showing an understanding of why the brand does not want to be associated with a warring country. Josefine reasons that in a time when most companies are trying to show solidarity with Ukraine, this is a way for Arla to do this as well. Because even though it is not an effective measure that strikes against Russia, Arla nevertheless takes a clear position. Anna suggests that taking a stand, despite the level of impact, is the most important thing in this case. It is especially important since “Russia right now is probably the most charged word in the whole world”, as Malin chooses to express herself. Since most of the respondents explicitly express a disapproval of war and conflict, they can identify more with Arla as a brand. Oliver even realizes that his trust for the brand has grown stronger. Many of the respondents appreciated the way Arla decided to act by withdrawing a product they risk losing profits on, instead of just expressing “empty words”. Emil, for example, argues that Arla reaches beyond taking a stand through traditional advertising, but rather that consumers can witness actual action which results in a better perception of Arla as a brand. This finding is in line with what Schmidt et al. (2022) point to, namely that an alignment between actions and values no matter the costs can have a positive impact on the perception of the brand.

On the other hand, some of the respondents regard Arla's decision as rather unnecessary because it does not make any real difference. Anna argues that consumers' purchases of Kefir in Sweden will not affect Russia or the outcome of the war at all. Elsa claims that it may have been better for Arla to take other more concrete measures that can make a bigger difference, such as donating money to support Ukraine, instead of just removing a product. Adam suspects that there is a preventive purpose behind this action so that Arla does not receive criticism for not having done something about highlighting Russian associations on the product. This can be connected back to the dimension of "motivation" (Mirzaei et al., 2022), where Arla's real intention behind the action can be questioned and result in a perceived lack of authenticity as well as consumer skepticism. Many of the respondents share Adam's opinion, where they believe Arla's action was based on avoiding the risk of being "canceled", which would adversely affect the brand. Olle also questions the trustworthiness behind the decision where he believes that Arla only takes such action to appear as a "good company". He also considers the company to be "riding the wave" that only engages in a trendy issue, which is reminiscent of the aspect of "social context independency" (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Furthermore, Josefine, Sara, Adam, Anna, and Elsa argue that it is a necessity to draw a reasonable line between the war and old Russian culture (which includes Kefir). Hence, they believe that it may be an exaggeration to remove everything Russian that is not relevant in this situation.

There seem to be mixed emotions regarding Arla's decision, where the respondents can understand and argue for both sides. It becomes clear when Adam states:

I now realize that I understand both sides, both Arla's reason and the criticism directed at it. It is difficult to say what is right and wrong, but I think companies should take a stand when it can actually make a difference.

5.5.2 A Significant Action?

Simon is skeptical of both the Gillette and Pepsi commercial and is questioning the genuineness behind them. On the contrary, asking about when, if and how companies should withdraw from Russia, Simon states that it is a situation where companies and brands should take a stand and that it will have an actual effect. He motivates it as follows:

Then you can actually make a direct difference. Then you want to pull out. [...] And the earlier you pull out, the more credible it feels. Because if you are late, it may feel like you do it because it gives a good image. That it is just a matter of it being a business decision that is good financially. It increases credibility if you do it, even though you may lose money on it. That it is a decision that is based entirely on empathy or socially instead of purely financial.

Elin is reasoning in the same way stating that she appreciates that several brands have withdrawn their businesses from Russia to take a stand. Despite risking a capital loss due to this, they still choose to exit the Russian market, which according to Elin is a sign of authenticity. Similarly, Olle says that he believes that the ones who boycotted Russia in an earlier stage were more right, even though he can understand the companies pulling out a bit later. However, he continues to explain that companies that are now still keeping operations in the country are immoral because they choose profits over human lives. Again, it becomes evident that brands should be willing to make sacrifices and lose financial resources when engaging in social issues to achieve authenticity (Mirzaei et al., 2022).

Furthermore, respondents ask themselves if brands withdraw from the warring country due to authentic concern or simply that everyone else does it. It strengthens the fact that the authenticity dimension of “social context independency” is crucial, where a brand’s authenticity can be negatively affected if it solely engages in trendy issues (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Julia believes that several brands have “felt pressure from the outside world to withdraw from the country and they probably just jumped on a ‘trend train’”.

Contrastingly, in this particular case, all respondents do not care about the meaning behind the action, as long as brands actually withdraw their operations from Russia. For example, Oliver states:

Taking a stand is the most important thing in situations like this. Even though other companies laid low for a while at first, they have now taken a stand. Whether they made the decision due to genuine values or pressure from actors and consumers is no more important than that they made the decision to withdraw from Russia.

At the same time, some respondents are divided on the issue. For example, Sara, Emil and Julia are not quite sure about what they believe is the right action to take in the situation. While they believe that it could be right to withdraw from the country to not support the Russian regime, they also have the Russian people in consideration, feeling that they should not be affected by something they are not responsible for. At first, Filip has a hard time answering the question, to then explaining his thoughts on the matter:

I think you should end your business in Russia to put pressure on the Russian regime and people. But on the other hand, I do not think you can set a time limit on it because there are still people who are on the other side. In that case, a company must be one hundred percent transparent in how it works with the issue so that consumers understand how the brand reasons about the problem.

While Oliver does not think that the reason behind withdrawing from Russia matters, Filip claims that it is important to him that companies are transparent about their reasons. It proves once again that transparency and clarity are important elements for the respondents, which aligns with the conclusion of Solomon (2019) that Generation Z seeks transparent and straightforward companies.

Lastly, when asking Malin if brands, in general, should take a stand on sociopolitical issues she answers that she believes it should be done when it is relevant and that the issue can be connected to the core business. Further, she explains that the Pepsi commercial, the product Pepsi and Black Lives Matter was an odd connection with no meaning. Whereas, she believes that the Russian conflict is relevant for all companies to take a stand on. Malin states that:

Not taking a stand is to take a stand. And you have to ask yourself what values you want to associate your brand with. And I agree with that. In this case, I would not have wanted to have business in Russia at all.

6 Discussion

The following section is a discussion of the empirical findings and analysis. Concepts such as expectations, authenticity and consumer skepticism are considered. We repeat the aim to emphasize the analytical structure of the thesis: “The research aim is to investigate Generation Z’s perceptions of brands that have taken a stand on socially political topics, in general, and focus on some selected cases and companies that have done this regarding the war in Ukraine, in particular. Moreover, the research seeks to gain a deeper understanding of how Generation Z believes that brands should engage in brand activism.”

We can identify different findings that can offer a deeper understanding of how consumers of Generation Z perceive brand activism and in what ways they believe brands should act in this matter. Based on all the interviews with representatives of Generation Z, the theory of them being a value driven and conscious generation (Chaney et al., 2017) agrees well with how they have chosen to express themselves. In addition, it is true that they have high expectations of brands and want them to take stands on various social and political issues, yet only if it is done in the right way. It is clear that it is not enough for a brand to just take a stand for Generation Z to believe it to be an action that creates value for the brand. The respondents of Generation Z are very analytical of the actions being presented to them and of brands taking a stand on sociopolitical issues. They often have long reasoning of what, how, and when brands should take a stand, nevertheless when they should not take a stand. Further, it is noted that Generation Z believes that brands should take a stand on broader sociopolitical issues which have to do with human rights and equality. To clarify, brands should not take a stand on highly politicized issues.

Our second finding indicates that it is important that brands’ standpoints and actions are in alignment with one another. Respondents experience that brands tend to display their engagement in social causes in commercials, but do not act accordingly in their business. This often results in consumer disbelief and skepticism, which also Manfredi-Sanchez (2019) claims. The perception of a brand can be negatively affected since it is believed that the brand is only engaging in brand activism to gain profits and to be perceived as good outwardly. In other words, a common perception of brands that engage in brand activism by expressing empty words is that it is a marketing ploy. This also shows that respondents of Generation Z are skeptical about the underlying reason behind when brands take a stand and question

whether they care about the problem at hand or are in pursuit of profits. Hence, respondents are negative towards brand activism when they experience that brands are capitalizing on a social issue. It has become clear that it is insufficient for brands to communicate their standpoints in commercials. In other words, taking a stand without action is perceived as unreliable and the brand is believed to be having hidden intentions. Brands need to consider what issues they engage in and support. They are also perceived as inauthentic and taking advantage of serious matters when they only engage in trendy issues. It is a common perception that brand activism works as a new tool to deceive consumers where brands pretend to care about contemporary issues when it in fact is a marketing ploy. One way to possibly overcome consumer skepticism is by being clear and transparent of the brand activism actions since it creates a greater understanding of brands' true intentions.

Another finding is that brand activism is perceived to be dependable and beneficial when brands are inclined to sacrifice profits to prioritize their work for the common good and a better society. The respondents claim that brands who are willing to sacrifice profits are more reliable and authentic, which demonstrates that brands should take a stand when they care for a social cause to the extent of being open to forfeiting profits. Doing this, it can potentially alleviate the obvious conflict between doing good and making money. The conflict is described by Du et al. (2010) who claim that consumer skepticism often arises due to suspicion of the brand's real intentions behind the engagement in brand activism. It can be determined that a lack of willingness to sacrifice, results in a perception that some brands only are involved in brand activism for financial purposes. When the perceived motivation behind a brand's activism is to increase sales, a possible consequence is lowered consumer trust and identification with the brand and its marketing efforts. Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) and Popp and Woratschek (2017) claim that brand activism can facilitate consumers to discover brands' standpoints and determine if they are in alignment with the consumers' identity. In this case, consumer identification with a brand can be mitigated if the respondents perceive taking a stand as a marketing ploy. Contrariwise, a brand's sacrifice to support a social cause is perceived as an indication of genuineness. Consequently, the respondents' perception of the brand taking a stand as well as brand activism is improved when brands show sincerity by going against their original purpose, which is to obtain profits.

For respondents of Generation Z to believe that a company's brand activism is trustworthy and genuine, they claim that brands should engage in and take a stand for issues that are

connected to their core business and appearance. To exemplify what that means in concrete terms, one respondent mentioned that Nike's campaign with Colin Kaepernick was trustworthy since the brand usually sponsors sports and black athletes. It would have been peculiar if the brand would not have stood up for black people's rights. On the contrary, another respondent liked the Gillette commercial and the message of the commercial, but questioned what razors have to do with MeToo and changing the expectations society has of men. Furthermore, it can be noted that the authenticity of brand activism is more questioned when brands expose and promote their products along with expressing a stand on a sociopolitical issue. A company should not make a commercial where they take a stand, together with promoting their products, since a commercial product itself usually has little to do with it being the solution to a social political issue or injustice. Further, an additional finding is that respondents seem to be less skeptical about brand activism actions when they are emotionally affected.

In the special case of the Ukraine war, the overall opinion is that brands should engage in brand activism in a way where they take actions that have an effect. In previous cases, respondents argue that brands should get involved in issues that have to do with their core business. In comparison with the case of the Ukraine war in conjunction with brand activism, respondents believe that all companies in the world can, in one way or another, take a stand on the issue, regardless of their core business. This issue is relevant to everyone worldwide. Further, there are two sides to the Arla case. Some believe that brands should avoid being associated with a warring country, regardless of the actual effect on the issue. Whereas some of the respondents did not believe that the action had an actual effect and was therefore unnecessary. If companies should withdraw their business from Russia, some respondents agreed that they should withdraw when it results in an actual effect. However, there are differences of opinion as to whether it matters when brands choose to withdraw from the country, as some were quick to act while others chose to wait to see how the situation proceeds. Some respondents also have the Russian people in mind and are more unsure of what is the right course of action. In sum, in the special case of Ukraine, it is about partly doing an action that makes a difference, but also that brands do not directly make any profit from the decision or action. According to respondents of Generation Z, companies should engage in brand activism that is altruistic and transparent.

7 Conclusion

In the final section we will answer the research questions: “How does Generation Z perceive sociopolitical brand activism?” and “How should brands engage in brand activism according to Generation Z?”. Further, a presentation and discussion are made on the implication that the empirical findings and analysis have on brands, brand managers, and the research field. Lastly, limitations of the study are provided which eventuate suggestions for future research.

Firstly, we will provide a concluding answer to the study’s research question: *“How does Generation Z perceive sociopolitical brand activism?”*. On one hand, brand activism is perceived to be meaningful since it can spread a large awareness of important issues. Brands have a potentially large impact on consumers and have to use their power to improve society. On the other hand, the concept of brand activism is also perceived as a new deceitful practice that exploits severe issues. It enables brands without genuine interest to showcase a facade to make profits. Therefore, it can be concluded that brands that authentically engage in brand activism are perceived more positively in comparison to those who are believed to take a stand due to wrong reasons. Hence, the perceptions of brand activism are mainly positive when brands approach it in authentic ways. However, it can be said that activism, regardless of the underlying purposes, raises important societal discussions that otherwise may have fallen into oblivion. To conclude, Generation Z believes that it is not brand activism in itself that creates a positive perception of the brand. It is rather about what kind of measures are being made that determine if the action adds value for the brand or if it hurts the brand equity.

In the specific case of the Ukraine war, Generation Z perceives brands that take action in a better way than those that do not. It is especially appreciated when companies withdraw from the country as it shows a willingness to lose profits to do the right thing. However, there is a certain skepticism towards this situation also because it is questioned whether brands withdraw due to their values or whether it is a matter of doing as everyone else in the fear of being canceled.

Secondly, we will provide a concluding answer to the research question: *“How should brands engage in brand activism according to Generation Z?”*. It seems to be important that brands show genuine interest in the social cause they support and not just engage in the new and

trendy issues to be part of the discussion. Brands need to be consistent, transparent, and clear about their activism actions to attain a better brand perception. Generation Z does not think that brands should engage in issues that are highly politicized but rather broader issues focusing on human rights and equality. It also seems that when a brand's action evokes feelings, the more likely it is that Generation Z believes the engagement to be trustworthy. Based on the findings, Generation Z has the perception that companies have a social responsibility and that they should take stands on issues that concern their business. However, this should necessarily not be done through a commercial. Generation Z seems to be very critical and skeptical about brands taking a stand via traditional marketing, especially when there is no underlying substance or other measures taken for the cause. It is rather other actions that are perceived as trustworthy and value adding, such as donating money or taking a marketing decision for a social cause that does not generate profits for the company. This also applies to the special case of the Ukraine war.

This research has shed light on the complex topic of brand activism. It is a forward-thinking concept whose benefits can lead to a better society and spread awareness, while at the same time there is suspicion against the companies' real intentions. Is it the profits or social change that is most important? Brands need to overcome consumer skepticism to be perceived as authentic, which can be done by addressing the apparent conflict that initially gives rise to skepticism. Showing that brands prioritize actual change over profits can potentially mitigate skepticism towards brand activism in general and brands in particular. In conclusion, engaging in brand activism is not a straightforward practice for which there is a simple solution. In fact, there are several components that together determine if brand activism is perceived as successful or not.

7.1 Implications

Our findings have several theoretical and practical implications. This research has contributed to a deeper understanding of how Generation Z perceive brands should engage in brand activism. Previous research has mainly focused on the concept's meaning as well as why it is forward thinking and of importance in today's society, but not as much in what ways and from a generation perspective. In combination with covering how brands should act, brand activism is explored in conjunction with the Ukraine war. At the time of writing, the war is ongoing, and companies are making new marketing decisions daily due to the situation.

Therefore, there is very little, if any, brand activism research done on this specific and unique situation. Investigating a new historical occurrence and applying the theory of brand activism to it, provides new insights into the research in the field. An updated perspective in connection with new situations results in research being developed and driven forward. In addition to research, our results also have implications for brands because the study is about what ways brands should act. Knowledge of this is more important now than ever in connection with the war where brands are beginning to realize their responsibility while they are unsure of how to proceed. The research gaps that previously have been presented can thus be considered filled in the field of research.

Generation Z consumers set high standards on and have high expectations of companies today, as stated by Chaney et al. (2017) as well as Sarkar and Kotler (2020). For example, they expect companies to stand for something and favor the ones that have similar values as themselves. Since it is predicted that Generation Z will continue to have a strong purchasing power (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021), it may be self-evident that brands want to and will engage in brand activism. At first glance, taking a stand seems to be a beneficial and desirable solution as both current and future consumers place ever higher demands on companies and their social responsibility. However, our findings propose that brands should act cautiously about taking a stand and not enter the area without careful consideration. Consumers are skeptical of brands that advertise their support for social causes since they often believe it to be a marketing ploy to increase sales and profits. Instead of perceiving the concept as something forward-looking and good, it is seen rather as a new way of deceiving consumers. Brands need to consider how they can be perceived as authentic since this seems to be a major obstacle when it comes to brand activism. It clearly shows that there is a strong relationship between brand activism and authenticity, which Mirzaei et al. (2022) also conclude. We raise and develop this issue in connection with the Ukraine war where the results show that authenticity is also an important factor in this case.

The implications for brands and brand managers that are targeting the segment of Generation Z are multiple. Engaging in brand activism requires an evident consistency between cause, brand and actions. It is important to make sure that consumers understand the relationship between a brand's core business and its standpoint, especially when the relationship is not obvious. Furthermore, once a brand has taken a stand, it is crucial for the brand authenticity that the continued activities are in line with them. It is not sufficient to take a stand in

commercials, but it must also be expressed in future corporate actions. Brand managers also need to remember that Generation Z does not appreciate when the position is taken in connection with trendy and talked about problems. Since we live in a society where new debates and problems arise daily, it is important to be restrained in what positions brands take and to consider the consequences of it.

7.2 Limitations & Future Research

There are some limitations to this research. First of all, it only contains an investigation of the perceptions of representatives of Generation Z. Hence, to achieve a broader understanding of the subject other generations should be studied and even compared. Future research should explore if the findings in this research are specifically typical for Generation Z, or if it is a reasoning that is applicable to other generations living in 2022. Further, on the subject, it should be explored if brands are segmenting specific target groups and generations by engaging in brand activism. On that occasion, future research should investigate if it would be more successful for more niche brands to engage in brand activism than it would be for mass-market brands.

Secondly, the study had a qualitative approach to explore a deeper understanding of consumers' perceptions of brands taking a stand on sociopolitical issues. However, this research did not allow for making any generalizations about the opinions on the topic. The conclusion we make can only be drawn from the fourteen people that were included in our interview study. Neither did it present any result on what effect brand activism has on consumers. Therefore, it would be interesting to conduct quantitative research and collect data through surveys. It would also be interesting to make observations of consumers to examine their buying behavior in conjunction with brand activism and if it has any effect.

Thirdly, the study had a consumer perspective on the issue of brand activism. Just as consumers of Generation Z are powerful actors on the market in their role of being consumers, they are likewise powerful actors when acting on behalf of other roles. For instance, in their role of being employees. In the postmodern society, it is vital that companies are attractive to current and future employees to retain talent. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate the issue of brand activism from an employer branding perspective.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 – Interview guide

Opening question:

- You are welcome to start describing yourself.
Du får gärna börja med att presentera dig själv.
- What factors are important to you when choosing which brand you will consume?
Vilka faktorer är viktiga för dig när du väljer vilket varumärke du ska konsumera?

Brands and their responsibilities

- What are your favorite brands and why?
Vilka är dina favoritmärken och varför?
- What do you believe companies and brands are and should be doing in addition to selling their products and services?
Vad tycker du att företag/varumärken ska göra utöver att sälja deras produkter och tjänster?

Marketing activity cases

Before showing the brand activity case:

- What do you think about this brand?
Vad tycker du om det här varumärket?

After showing the brand activity case:

- What was your first impression of the advertisement/activity?
Vad var ditt första intryck av reklamen/aktiviteten?
- What feelings emerged?
Vilka känslor uppkom?
- What is your perception of the brand after you have seen the advertisement/activity?
Vad är din uppfattning om varumärket efter du sett aktiviteten?
- Do you think that the commercial/market activity is believable?
Tyckte du att reklamen/marknadsaktiviteten kändes trovärdig?

According to the brand itself, the purpose of the marketing activity was to...

Varumärkets syfte med marknadsaktiviteten var enligt varumärket själva att...

- **Gillette:**

...promote a positive and inclusive image of men that will challenge the stereotypes and expectations that exist on men today. Gillette thus wants to break today's image of masculinity and the "boys will be boys" mentality.

Do you believe that they succeeded with this?

...främja en positiv och inkluderande bild av män som ska utmana de stereotyper och förväntningar som finns på män idag. Gillette vill alltså bryta dagens bild av maskulinitet och "boys will be boys"-mentaliteten.

Tycker du att den gjorde det?

- **Pepsi:**

"This is a global ad that reflects people from different walks of life coming together in a spirit of harmony, and we think that's an important message to convey".

Do you believe that they succeeded with this?

"Detta är en global kampanj som reflekterar hur människor från olika livsområden samlas i andan av harmoni, och vi tycker att det är ett viktigt budskap att förmedla".

Tycker du att den gjorde det?

- **Arla:**

"As the situation is right now, we do not want to be associated with Russia and the Russian regime. We believe that the illustration makes you think about it and that does not feel good" said the communication manager of Arla Caroline Starck to SVT Kulturnyheterna.

What do you think about that?

"Som läget är just nu vill vi inte förknippas med Ryssland och den ryska regimen. Vi tycker att just den illustrationen för tankarna ditåt och det känns inte bra" sa Arlas kommunikationschef Caroline Starck till SVT Kulturnyheterna.

Vad tycker du om det?

Criticism

- **Gillette:**

The advertisement was both praised and criticized. Many believed that it raised false assumptions and gross generalization about men. It was also speculated whether the company really cared about the social issue or not.

What do you think about the public response?

Reklamen blev både hyllad och kritiserad. Många menade att den lyfte falska antaganden och grov generalisering om män. Det spekulerades också om företag egentligen brydde sig om problemet eller inte.

Vad tycker du om responsen?

- **Pepsi:**

The ad was criticized on social media and accused of capitalizing on the Black Lives Matter movement. And that the brand does not have a history of promoting social justice issues.

What do you think about the public response?

Reklamen blev kritiserad på sociala medier och anklagad för att kapitalisera på Black Lives Matter rörelsen. Och att varumärket inte har en historia av att tidigare promota frågor om social rättvisa.

Vad tycker du om responsen?

- **Arla:**

The act received criticism for not distinguishing between what Putin, his regime and Kremlin does and the Russian people. "Deleting everything that is Russian, is the wrong way to go and do not strike against Putin".

Handlingen fick kritik för att inte kunna skilja på vad Putin, hans regim och Kremlin gör och det ryska folket. "Att radera allt ryskt, är fel väg att gå och att detta inte slår mot Putin".

Ukraine War

- In the context of that Russia invaded Ukraine many companies have chosen to take, and not take, certain measures. For example, some companies have chosen to stop selling their products or stop production in Russia. Apple, Nike and Netflix pulled out

of Russia at a relatively early stage. McDonalds and Coca-Cola pulled out after a while and Hilton and Mondelez core business remains in the country.

How do you believe that one should act?

I kontexten av att Ryssland invaderade Ukraina så har många företag valt att göra och inte göra vissa åtgärder. Till exempel så har vissa företag valt att sluta sälja sina produkter samt stanna upp produktionen i Ryssland. Apple, Nike och Netflix drog sig ur Ryssland relativt tidigt i konfliktens skede. McDonalds och Coca-Cola drog sig ur efter ett tag och Hiltons och Mondelez kärnverksamhet finns kvar.

Hur borde man agera tycker du?

- After seeing these examples, do you think that companies should take a stand in socio-political issues?

Efter att fått se dessa exempel, tycker du att företag borde ta ställning i sociopolitiska frågor?

Brand activism

- Do you believe that there's situations where companies should take a stand vs situations where companies should not take a stand?

Finns det fall när du tycker att företag ska ta ställning vs fall när företag inte ska ta ställning?

- Have you experienced a situation in the past where you boycotted or thought about boycotting a brand because of them engaging in socio political issues?

Har du upplevt en situation då du bojkottat ett varumärke eller funderat på att bojkotta ett varumärke på grund av att de tar ställning i socio politiska frågor?

- Have you bought from a brand because of their brand activism?

Har du handlat av ett varumärke på grund av deras varumärkes aktivism/brand activism?