

BRAND ACTIVISM FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: A CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE.

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Abstract

Purpose – Brand activism is an emerging concept in academia and a growing phenomenon in marketing practice. When well-executed, evidence suggests that brand activism can create beneficial outcomes for the brand, such as increased sales or positive brand associations, but outcomes for the cause are harder to identify. This study aims to better understand how to create meaningful social change through brand activism. Specifically, this study uses a consumer-focused lens to understand how brand activism campaigns can be best designed to encourage meaningful consumer support responses for the cause to truly affect social change.

Methodology – To achieve the purpose of this study, three focus groups were conducted with a representative consumer sample. Within the context of the Black Lives Matter Movement, consumers’ interpretation of, responses to, and expectations of brand activism were discussed with regards to brand responses following the death of George Floyd in May 2020.

Findings – The results in this study revealed a shift in consumer expectations for brands that take a sociopolitical stand. Consumers are not looking for brands to use any specific campaign elements in their brand activism activity (e.g. a credible spokesperson) because they now look for an authentic internal commitment to support any external messaging at a bare minimum. This shift in consumer expectations was unexpected but highlighted the change in brand activism practice over the past few years. Consumers are less likely to contribute to a social cause on the back of brand activism because they think it is the brand’s responsibility to impact the cause directly.

Originality – This study contributes to the developing body of brand activism literature and provides a necessary early step to understanding the growing phenomena. While brand activism is still developing in the market, this study helps lay the foundation for future consumer research to help further, and ongoing brand activism activities benefit both the brand and the cause to affect social change.

Keywords – Brand Activism, Authentic Brand Activism, Consumer Expectations, Branding, Social Change.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signature: _____

Date: 17/05/2021

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER

This chapter introduces the recently coined term of brand activism, focusing on the growing trend of brands taking a controversial social or political stand. It acknowledges some of the benefits that brands have seen by engaging with brand activism and highlights the difficulty in understanding the impact that such brand actions have on the social or political issues that they support. This chapter introduces the purpose of the research in this study, namely contributing to the body of literature on how to create meaningful social change through brand activism. This chapter outlines the significance and scope of this study, focusing on consumer responses to brand activism as a step toward creating more impactful cause and social outcomes from brand activism activities. Finally, this chapter provides an overview of the thesis structure.

1.2 BACKGROUND

Brands today face unprecedented challenges when trying to connect and engage with their consumers (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Sprout Social, 2017; Sprout Social 2020). Brands operate in a fragmented and cluttered marketplace with many channels and messages competing for consumers' attention (Sprout Social, 2017; Sprout Social 2020). This challenge is heightened with the socially and politically charged movements dominating social media, news headlines and consumer conversation such as marriage equality, Black Lives Matter and climate change, for example (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). But speaking out on social and political issues is something that brands have traditionally avoided due to the risk of losing favour with consumers (Nalick et al., 2016; Vredenburg et al., 2018). Brands' hesitation to engage in social and political conversations is not without reason. There is clear evidence of consumer backlash when campaigns go wrong, such as Pepsi's advertisement depicting Kendall Jenner appearing to bring together protesters and police by offering a police officer a can of Pepsi (Sprout Social, 2017). However, brands such as Nike and Heineken have seen their brand metrics with target consumers increase beyond expectations (Contagious, 2017; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Sprout Social, 2017). After using Black Lives Matter

activist Colin Kaepernick as their spokesperson, Nike enjoyed increased sales and increased share prices, following an initial dip. Similarly, when Heineken brought together strangers with opposing controversial views to talk about their similarities and differences in their ‘Worlds Apart’ video campaign, they delighted customers and achieved 40 million views and 91% positive sentiment (Contagious, 2017).

Brand activism is a recent term coined by Sarkar and Kotler (2018, p. 34), which describes “business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society”. As Sarkar and Kotler (2018) explain, brand activism has naturally evolved from Economic, Social and Governance (ESG) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes. However, Sarkar and Kotler (2018) clarify that brand activism is not driven by corporate or marketing priorities but is driven by society and purpose. This means that brand activism sits separate to the marketing-driven cause-related marketing, cause promotion and corporate social marketing and separate to the corporate-driven socially responsible business practices, corporate philanthropy and workforce volunteering (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Instead, brand activism is values-driven and focuses on justice and fairness in social, environmental, political, business, legal, and economic issues (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

By taking a stand on values-driven issues, which are often politically, socially and emotionally charged, brands enter a controversial territory with the risk of alienating certain consumer groups (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Sprout Social, 2017; Sprout Social, 2020). As Nalick et al. (2016) explain, this once feared alienation is now considered and pursued as a calculated risk. A prime example of this was Nike’s advertisement featuring Colin Kaepernick, a prominent supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement. Nike intentionally alienated their conservative, older and less profitable consumers in favour of building deeper connections with their target market of younger, more progressive and lucrative consumers (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). While the campaign caused outrage in their non-target audience group, Nike’s online sales increased by 31% in the four days following the campaign launch and, though their stock price initially dipped, the Nike stock prices went on to increase to a record high (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). This illustrates the power of a well-executed brand activism campaign for achieving positive brand outcomes. But what does this mean for the cause?

When brands successfully align with an issue that resonates with their target market, consumers are likely to extend their support in various ways, such as offering support on social media, purchasing a brand's products or donating to the cause or issue (George & Leidner, 2019). However, with brand activism being such a new concept, very little is understood about consumer responses to brand activism initiatives and what this means for the cause. From the Nike example, it is clear that some consumers signal their support of brand activism through brand product purchases (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). However, without any financial contribution from the brand, consumers' reaction to purchase the brand's product does not directly affect the cause or issue. Moreover, if the brand activism does not include a consumer call to action (e.g. donate), the activity may not have a tangible effect on the cause itself.

At present, it is unclear how different executions of brand activism promotes different forms of consumer responses. When brands align with an issue through brand activism, by definition, they have a desire to incite societal changes. However, without a clear understanding of the type of consumer action that is encouraged, it may be that the brand enjoys the marketing and brand benefits of the campaign without making a meaningful or proportionate impact on the cause.

1.3 CONTEXT

When well-executed, evidence suggests that brand activism can create beneficial outcomes for the brand (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Sprout Social, 2017; Sprout Social, 2020). However, beneficial outcomes for the cause and society are harder to identify. By definition, brand activism aims to impact society. Still, as a relatively new phenomenon, it is difficult to understand the cause and effect of brand activism on the cause and society. There are effectively three parties that can potentially benefit from brand activism; the brand (through increased sales or brand associations, for example), the cause which the brand aligns with (through a donation to support the cause or awareness, for example), and social movement (through social change or stasis). This study aims to uncover *how to create meaningful social change through brand activism*.

This study will focus on consumer responses to brand activism to contribute to understanding how to create meaningful outcomes for the cause. It is understood that focusing on consumer responses to brand activism will not provide a macro-level understanding of societal shifts (e.g. difference in general public opinion). However,

since brand activism campaigns are directed at consumers, it is worth understanding how consumers respond and whether it benefits the cause. At present, it is unclear how different executions of brand activism promote different forms of consumer responses. Moreover, it is also unclear how consumer actions are encouraged (or not encouraged) through brand activism. So, brands may see marketing, brand, or reputational benefits without creating similar benefits for the cause.

1.4 PURPOSE

This research aims to contribute to the body of literature on *how to create meaningful social change through brand activism*. Taking a consumer-focused lens to this aim, the specific aim of this study is to answer the question: *how can brand activism campaigns be best designed to encourage meaningful consumer support responses for the cause?*

To answer this question, the objectives of this study are to understand:

- *How consumers interpret brand activism activities.*
- *How consumers respond to brand activism activities (brand- and cause-directed responses)*
- *What consumers consider impactful outcomes for the cause.*
- *What campaign elements are most effective in encouraging impactful consumer support responses?*

By understanding these objectives, this study aims to identify how brand activism campaigns can be best designed to encourage meaningful consumer support responses for the cause. This knowledge could help brand activism practitioners develop brand activism campaigns that significantly impact the cause and help scholars understand the impact of brand activism campaign design on cause outcomes leading to social change.

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE AND SCOPE

As a relatively new area in marketing literature, there is still much to uncover about brand activism. Most brand activism literature has focused on defining brand activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018), authentic brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020), and brand-directed consumer responses to controversy in brand activism (Hydock et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2020; Shetty et al., 2019). This

research aims to contribute to brand activism literature and focus on cause-directed outcomes from the consumer perspective.

Without an impact on the cause, brand activism could be considered a marketing-driven activity – this goes against the essence of brand activism as being values-driven and focusing on justice and fairness in society. In tandem, literature has also shown that consumers are sceptical of brands taking a sociopolitical stand (Hydock et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020). Without any tangible impact on the cause, consumers are likely to be critical – leading to potential adverse brand outcomes along with unclear cause outcomes. This highlights the need for brand activism to make a meaningful impact on the cause. As the primary audience to brand activism campaigns, consumer responses are a worthwhile place to start in understanding how brand activism campaigns can create a meaningful impact on the cause.

Consumer focus groups are used to understand the nuance of consumer responses to brand activism initiatives. This study aims to uncover how brand activism campaigns can be best designed to encourage meaningful consumer support responses for the cause during the focus groups. The primary topic of discussion was brand activism in response to the support or opposition of the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd. George Floyd died after being arrested by police in Minnesota on 25 May 2020 (BBC, 2020). His death gained widespread public interest after a video was released and proliferated online, which shows a white police officer kneeling on George Floyd's neck while he repeatedly states that he could not breathe. George Floyd was pronounced dead one hour after the footage was recorded. After the arrest video was shared widely on social media, Black Lives Matter protests in Minnesota began the following day (26 May 2020). Soon, Black Lives Matter protests began to spread to other cities across America and later around the world. While the Black Lives Matter movement was not new (founded in 2013), the death of George Floyd acted as a catalyst to rallying more support for the movement and creating a massive wave of activism responses from both individuals and brands (BBC, 2020).

The death of George Floyd significantly increased the number of brands that decided to take a stand on social and political issues and provides a relevant and well-known case. In response to the murder of George Floyd, brand activism activities took very different approaches with subtle messaging, confronting messaging, vague promises, internal targets, donations, and seemingly tokenistic brand activism

behaviours all taking place. This research aims to dissect the different types of brand activism approaches and understand what this means for consumer responses through the focus groups.

1.6 THESIS OUTLINE

This thesis comprises six chapters. Chapter One, the introduction chapter, serves to provide background, context and outline the significance and scope of this study. In addition, the research purpose, aim, question and objectives are outlined. Chapter Two, the literature review, presents an extensive review of related literature streams. In particular, the literature review explores the history, benefits, and risks of brand activism. It draws on both branding and activism literature to suggest success indicators in brand activism campaigns for both the brand and the cause. Chapter Three presents the research design and methodological approach. This includes the research philosophy, strategy, design, data collection and participants. Chapter Four examines the study's findings and lays out the data structure, while Chapter Five, the discussion, further elaborates on the findings and interpretations gleaned from the findings. Chapter Six, the conclusion, revisits the main findings relating specifically to the research objective and question. The conclusion also provides practical, theoretical, and methodological implications, acknowledges the study's limitations, and suggests directions for further research.

1.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter introduces brand activism as an emerging topic in academia and a growing tactic used by brands. Research suggests that brands today can struggle to connect with their customers in a fragmented and cluttered marketplace (Sprout Social, 2017; Sprout Social 2020). By taking a stand on social or political issues, some brands have increased their connection with their customers. However, the impact of this stand on social or political causes remains unclear. Thus, this research aims to uncover how to create social change through brand activism. This thesis will focus on cause-directed consumer responses to brand activism to work toward meaningful outcomes for the cause and, ultimately, social change.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER

This literature review presents current brand activism research and the similarities and differences between brand activism and other types of brand-issue activities such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), corporate political activism and cause-related marketing (CRM). To better understand the different types of brand activism executions and the evolution of brand activism over the last few years, this literature review provides some examples of brand activism to guide discussion and suggest why some approaches may work better than others. It also outlines the current body of knowledge on consumer responses to brand activism. Still, it is noted that existing work on consumer responses to brand activism focuses on the brand-directed responses with little known about consumers' cause-directed responses. In addition, little is known about success indicators for brand activism, so the literature review draws on both brand and activism literature to inform potential success indicators and consumer responses to brand activism. This review helps build the context of what brands and causes may look for in effective brand activism.

2.2 BRAND ACTIVISM

2.2.1 Brand activism definition

Traditionally, companies have largely avoided entering into conversations on divisive social or political issues out of fear of driving away consumers (Hydock et al., 2019; Nalick et al., 2016; Vredenburg et al., 2018). However, there has been an emerging trend in recent years whereby companies increasingly enter into social and political discussions with seemingly minor links to their products or profits (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019). Rather than more traditional means of aligning with issues such as corporate philanthropy, cause-related marketing, or corporate social responsibility, this act of engaging with divisive social and political issues brings forward a new type of brand behaviour coined by Sarkar and Kotler (2018) as brand activism. Sarkar and Kotler (2018, p. 34) describe brand activism as “business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society”. Sarkar and Kotler (2018)

explain that brand activism is not driven by corporate or marketing priorities but is driven by society and purpose.

Vredenburg et al. (2020) expand on this definition of brand activism and highlight that on top of being purpose- and values-driven and aligning with a controversial sociopolitical issue, authentic brand activism requires “both intangible (messaging) and tangible (practice) commitments to a sociopolitical cause” (p.448). The major distinction between the brand activism definition provided by Sarkar and Kotler (2018) and the authentic brand activism definition of Vredenburg et al. (2020) is the inclusion of internal practice to support the cause or issue. Vredenburg et al. (2020) explain that activism messaging without prosocial corporate practice, purpose, and values is inauthentic and deceptive. Thus, when comparing brand activism to other brand-issue activities, authentic brand activism is used as the baseline for comparison.

2.2.2 Brand activism vs other brand-issue activities

Because brand activism is a new phenomenon that has only recently entered academia, it is worth understanding the distinctions between brand activism and other forms of brand-issue structures.

Table 1 highlights the similarities and differences between brand activism and other brand-issue activities, with particular attention given to the controversial nature of the cause, the driving motivation for the activity, the primary audience and the means of cause support.

Table 1. Brand activism vs other brand-issue activities

Activity	Description	Controversial topic/ cause	Purpose- & values-driven	Primary audience	Means of cause support
Brand activism	Companies taking a public stance on a divisive sociopolitical issue (including messaging and practice) and desire to promote or impede improvements in society (Sarkar & Kotler, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020).	Yes	Yes	Consumers	Advocacy Advertising Internal practice
Corporate political advocacy (CPA)	Companies taking a public position on a divisive issue (Hydock et al., 2019).	Yes	Yes	Consumers	Advocacy
Corporate social responsibility (CSR)	Company activity that aims to benefit both society (addressing social or environmental concerns) and create positive associations for the brand (Hydock et al., 2019).	No	No – values and marketing-driven	Consumers	Financial contribution Advertising Internal practice
Corporate social marketing	Marketing activities focused on creating behaviour change within a target group. Activities should contribute to societal improvements and create positive associations for the brand. (Kotler & Lee, 2005).	No	No – marketing-driven	Consumers	Advertising
Cause-related marketing	Donating a specified amount to a cause from the sale of specified products and/or during a specified time (Kotler & Lee, 2005; Varadarajan & Menon, 1988).	No	No – marketing-driven	Consumers	Financial contribution Advertising
Corporate philanthropy	Grants and donations to a charity or cause (Kotler & Lee, 2005).	No	Yes	Cause/ consumers	Financial contribution
Lobbying	Attempts to influence policy, decisions or actions which facilitate profit (Hydock et al., 2019).	Sometimes	No – financially driven	Government/ industry	Advocacy
CEO activism	Corporate leaders taking a sociopolitical stand on causes/topics not directly related to the company's business. (Chatterji & Toffel, 2019).	Yes	No – CEO driven	Consumers/ government/ industry	Advocacy

2.2.3 The evolution of brand activism

The emergence of brand activism in the marketplace has seen different types of brand execution. From some of the least successful brand activism examples, it is clear that consumers can be highly critical of brand activism campaigns and are quick to identify and shame brands that execute brand activism poorly (Al-Muslim, 2019; Sprout Social, 2017; Sprout Social, 2020). There are also examples of brand activism campaigns that have been well received. This section looks at some notable brand activism campaigns and explores the differences in execution between them.

Pepsi: Live for Now

The 2017 PepsiCo brand activism campaign was one of the first major brand activism campaigns of note and was greatly criticised for being inauthentic. PepsiCo created a campaign for its brand, Pepsi, which aligned with the Black Lives Matter social movement in an attempt to connect with its youth consumers (Kim et al., 2020; Sprout Social, 2017). PepsiCo employed the model and reality television personality, Kendall Jenner, to lead the campaign. The campaign was heavily criticised for making light of the Black Lives Matter movement, with Kendall Jenner shown to turn a street protest into a party by handing a police officer a can of Pepsi. The lack of connection that Kendall Jenner had to the Black Lives Matter Movement, Pepsi's lack of history with social or political issues, and the unrealistic storyline in the advertisement combined to create an ad that was almost universally disliked online for being inauthentic (Kim et al., 2020).

Nike: Dream Crazy

As part of Nike's 2018 'Dream Crazy' campaign, a Nike advertisement featuring Colin Kaepernick (a prominent supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement) created notable consumer support. Nike intentionally alienated their conservative, older and less profitable consumers in favour of building deeper connections with their target market of younger, more progressive and lucrative consumers (Kim et al., 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Nike used an endorser who authentically cared about the cause and aligned their advertisement messaging "stand for something even if it means losing everything" to support his existing activity. While the campaign caused outrage in their non-target audience group along with an initial dip in the stock price, the campaign led

to a significant increase in both online sales and stock price (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Nike's campaign illustrates the power of a well-executed brand activism campaign for achieving positive brand outcomes and has acted as a catalyst for other brands to participate in brand activism activities (Kim et al., 2020). However, the impact on the Black Lives Matter movement was unclear. It could be argued that Nike's campaign drove awareness for the movement. Still, it is unclear whether the Black Lives Matter movement's level of support or progress received similar benefits to the brand.

Gillette: The Best Men Can Be & First Shave, The Story of Samson

Proctor & Gamble's 2019 Gillette brand campaign 'The Best Men Can Be' generated a considerable amount of consumer response and backlash as it joined the conversation on toxic masculinity. In a short film, released January 2019, entitled 'We Believe: The Best Men Can Be', Gillette targeted toxic masculinity behaviours, including sexism, sexual misconduct and bullying. While some complimented the brand for taking a stand and engaging their audience in a discussion about toxic masculinity, many criticised the short film and Gillette's involvement in the conversation on toxic masculinity (Al-Muslim, 2019). The short film received a large amount of negative feedback, with the video receiving twice as many dislikes as likes on YouTube. While Gillette pledged to donate \$1 million USD per year for three years to non-profit organisations that aim to help men be their best, the brand was still described as alienating its target audience and emasculating men (Al-Muslim, 2019). Since the rocky campaign in early 2019, Gillette has continued to enter divisive conversations with another video released in May 2019, entitled 'First Shave, the Story of Samson', depicting a father teaching his transgender teenager how to shave for the first time. The teenager, Samson Bonkeabantu Brown, is a transgender activist. Unlike the first short film, this advertisement generated much more favourable reactions, including support from transgender men who related to the experience (Durkin, 2019).

When comparing the two Gillette campaigns, there are apparent differences in the messenger, delivery and relevance to the brand. Gillette's 'The Best Men Can Be' advertisement uses multiple actors, voice-over narration and a large production to communicate the anti-toxic masculinity narrative (Abitol, 2019). In contrast, 'First Shave the Story of Samson' uses a real person with a history of advocacy for transgender rights, telling their own story in an intimate and seemingly unscripted situation. Moreover, while both advertisements touch on masculinity, 'First Shave the

Story of Samson' ties this into the Gillette razor product to form a more natural connection between the narrative and brand (Watson, 2019).

Stayfree: Project Free Period

Johnson & Johnsons' feminine hygiene brand, Stayfree, entered the conversation on two taboo topics in India; periods and prostitution. Stayfree identifies that while many women do not look forward to their period, for sex workers, their periods meant the only days they could have off (WARC, 2018). While many Indian sex workers wanted to move into other vocations, poverty and fear of ostracism kept them in the sex work trade. Stayfree identified this and leveraged the downtime that periods created by developing free three-day vocational courses that sex workers could take part in (Stayfree, 2018). In this example of brand activism, there are clear-cut outcomes for both the brand and the cause involved. 200+ sex workers enrolled in the courses, 67,384 trainers volunteered to deliver courses, increased revenue for the brand estimated at \$100,000 NZD, a total reach of 1.7 billion and a 40% increase in brand equity in India (DDB, 2018). The clear-cut outcomes for the cause in this Stayfree campaign are not as clear to see in other examples of brand activism but suggest how brand activism activities could potentially measure both brand and cause outcomes.

Stuff: Our Truth, Tā Mātou Pono

In 2020, the New Zealand media outlet, Stuff undertook an internal investigation and identified that they were guilty of marginalising, stereotyping and shaping social stigma against Māori (New Zealand indigenous ethnic group) (Stevens, 2020). Mark Stevens, Editorial Director of Stuff, acknowledged the racist and unfair representation of Māori and apologised for the wrongdoing. Stevens also made an ongoing commitment to improve the representation of Māori. Internal commitments include: a partnership with Māori Television to increase Māori representation and Māori issues in the media, translation of some articles into Te Reo Māori, the creation of new roles focused on Māori representation, a commitment to increase the number of Māori journalists, the development of a new website section dedicated to Māori issues, and a commitment to continuous review (Stevens, 2020). This brand activism execution was an internally driven activity that moved away from the marketing campaign structure used by other brands. There was a clear internal commitment, and external communication focused on transparency and a commitment to change.

Emerging trends from the evolution of brand activism

Over the past four years, brands have both succeeded beyond expectations and faced overwhelming consumer backlash to brand activism activities. While each brand approaches brand activism in its own way, by looking at the similarities and differences between these examples, some consumer response trends emerge and show how brand activism has evolved over the years.

The first trend is the preference for an authentic spokesperson – someone with a history with the cause. This worked well with Nike’s use of Colin Kaepernick in their ‘Dream Crazy’ campaign and likewise with Gillette’s use of Samson Bonkeabantu Brown in ‘First Shave the Story of Samson’. Both Kaepernick and Brown had a history of standing up for Black Lives Matter and transgender rights, respectively, so when they acted as a spokesperson for the brand to take a stand on the issues, it felt natural. In contrast, Kendall Jenner brought no previous history with Black Lives Matter advocacy to the Pepsi ‘Live for Now’ work and so came across as inauthentic.

The next trend that has worked well is a strong alignment between the brand’s core product offering and the issue/cause that they take a stand on. This worked well with Gillette’s ‘First Shave, The Story of Samson’ and Stayfree’s ‘Project Free Period’. Both campaigns have a clear link between the core product offering of razors and sanitary products, respectively. In the case of ‘First Shave, The Story of Samson’, the narrative is based around the first time shaving with the Gillette razor products as an essential part of the narrative. This then provides a launchpad to introduce the topic of transgender masculinity. Similarly, ‘Project Free Period’ is based on an insight that sex workers look forward to their period as the only days they could have off. Once again, the connection between periods and by association sanitary products, provides a launchpad to talk about sex work issues. In contrast, in the Pepsi ‘Live for Now’ campaign, it is difficult to understand the connection between the Pepsi product and the Black Lives Matter issue. The advertisement focuses on the Black Lives Matter movement in a light way and then introduces the Pepsi product as the solution to a very serious issue. This appears disjointed and inauthentic by the consumers.

Finally, one of the major trends in brand activism activity is a shift in the overall brand activism approach. In the first three examples from Pepsi, Nike, and Gillette, the brands used brand activism as part of major advertising campaigns. While each brand uses brand activism differently, each of these brand activism activities involves

touching on a controversial topic through a traditional advertising structure and traditional advertising channels. When brand activism started, brands were applauded for raising awareness and starting conversations on controversial topics. However, the rhetoric has quickly moved on from here. Now brands such as Stuff are taking an internal-first approach and using marketing or advertising channels as a means to communicate internal commitments rather than only raise awareness, start conversations or take a stand. While in the examples provided above, Stuff is the only brand to take this approach, later in this thesis, it is clear that consumers support this approach and are now looking for brands to directly impact the cause through internal commitments.

2.3 CONSUMER RESPONSES TO BRAND ACTIVISM

As Sprout Social (2020) highlights, brands are keen to cut through the clutter to connect with their consumers in a fragmented marketplace authentically. Consumers want brands to participate in social and political conversations, with 70% of respondents agreeing that it is important for brands to take a stand on issues like race relations, human rights and immigration (Sprout Social, 2020). Brand activism conveys the values and morals that a brand prioritises and allows consumers the unique opportunity to evaluate the degree of self-brand connection and similarity according to their values and morals (Graeff, 1996). According to consumer brand identification theory, higher self-brand alignment should result in more positive attitudes toward the brand and other brand benefits, such as increased levels of brand advocacy and purchase intentions (Escallas, 2004; Graeff, 1996, Sirgy et al., 2008). Research suggests that consumers reward or punish brands based on perceived social responsibility or irresponsibility (Hydock et al., 2019; Sturdivant & Miller, 1977). However, scholars agree that a negativity bias exists whereby consumers punishment response is stronger than their reward response (Hydock et al., 2019; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). The question for brands then becomes whether the potential reward outweighs the risk of consumer punishment (Hydock et al., 2020).

When brands successfully and authentically align with an issue that resonates with their target market, consumers are likely to offer their support (George & Leidner, 2019). Brand-directed consumer support responses may include positive word of mouth (Kim et al., 2020), boycotts or product purchase (Hydock et al., 2020), improved brand associations (Nalick et al., 2016), switching to the brand (Hydock et

al., 2020) and increased market share (Hydock et al., 2020). Hydock et al. (2020) found that brands with a small market share have the most to gain from taking a sociopolitical stance because they have fewer customers to lose and many more to gain.

On the other side of the spectrum, consumers that oppose a brand activism campaign are likely to punish the brand (Hydock et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020). Brand activism research has found that consumers are likely to display disproportionately stronger negative reactions to brand activism campaigns that create low self-brand connections (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Shetty et al., 2019). Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) highlight that people tend to believe that their moral beliefs are superior to the opposition and are unlikely to change a moral view based on a brand's declaration of position on an issue. Thus, brands are more likely to lose customers over a misaligned sociopolitical stance than gain customers over an aligned sociopolitical stance (Hydock et al., 2020). Moreover, Hydock et al. (2020) show that consumer punishment does not only stem from disagreement with the brand's sociopolitical stance but also a perceived lack of authenticity with a brand's stance (even if consumers agree with said stance). Studies show that consumer punishment can lead to negative word of mouth (Kim et al., 2020) along with a substantial decrease in brand attitude (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020), purchase intentions (Hydock et al., 2020), and purchases (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020) in consumers that assess low self-brand connection. In contrast, there was no significant effect on brand attitude, purchase intentions and purchases with those consumers that assess high self-brand connection (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). This asymmetry in brand-directed consumer responses demonstrates the rationale for brand's reluctance to enter into divisive social and political issues.

While brand activism research has begun to explore consumer responses to brand activism, at present, this research has focused on brand-directed consumer responses (Hydock et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Shetty et al., 2019). However, these studies fail to explore consumers' cause-directed responses. At the core of brand activism is the "desire to promote or impede improvements in society" (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018, p. 34). However, it is unclear whether consumers' responses contribute to the brand activism goal of social change (or stasis). The following section outlines potential success indicators for brand activism; this includes

success for the brand and the cause, along with the role that consumer responses may play.

2.4 POTENTIAL SUCCESS INDICATORS IN BRAND ACTIVISM

As a relatively new concept in academic literature, there is very little research on what to look for in successful brand activism activities. Based on the brand activism definition, brand activism should either promote or impede improvements in society (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). While specific societal outcomes will vary from cause to cause, activism success literature may be used as a proxy to frame and suggest success indicators for the cause in brand activism activities. While the definition of brand activism does not specify desired brand improvements or outcomes, brands are likely to consider the impact that taking a sociopolitical stand will have on their brand. Thus, brand success indicators are used as a proxy to understand how brands may assess brand success through brand activism activities. This section reviews the current literature on both success indicators for the brand and the cause to suggest potential brand activism success indicators.

2.4.1 Success indicators for the brand

The American Marketing Association (2021) define a brand as a “name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller’s goods or service as distinct from those of other sellers”. Taking a branding theory approach, brands and brand attributes are considered networks of cognitively linked associations (Collins & Luftus, 1975) and, as Keller et al. (2002) explain, brands aim to acquire a point of differentiation to build brand equity. Over the past two decades, scholars have taken different approaches to measure brand success and effectiveness (Molinillo et al., 2019). Given the level of scholarly and managerial interest and input into the measurement of brand success and effectiveness, there is a need to assess and quantify the outcomes of brand activity. Though finding a widely accepted model to evaluate brand success or effectiveness is difficult, this section will compare the major brand success assessment models currently used.

In the first major study to define brand success criteria, de Chernatony et al. (1998) state that brand success is multidimensional and includes both business- and consumer-based success criteria. Business-based criteria are short-term measures of success and include profitability (return on investment), shareholder equity (share and

stock prices) and market share. Consumer-based criteria are typically longer-term measures of success. They include brand associations (including brand awareness, brand image, brand identity, brand personality and brand relationship), perceived differential advantage (reputation and positive image) and added values (associations that allow a price premium or are difficult to copy). de Chernatony et al. (1998) identify that both business- and consumer-based criteria are essential and interrelated. For instance, consumer responses, such as brand association, will influence market share and profitability. Further, the authors identify that the weighting of business-based and consumer-based criteria will vary and be dependent on the context of the assessment. For instance, some managers may place greater importance on short-term financial (business-based) success to meet revenue targets.

The use of both business- and consumer-based metrics by de Chernatony et al. (1998) has carried across into other models and systems of assessing brand success and effectiveness (Dunn & Davis 2003; Munoz & Kumar, 2004). In a slightly different categorisation, Munoz and Kumar (2004) consider perception, performance and financial metrics to assess brand success. Perception metrics include brand awareness, familiarity, and consideration in the consumer's eyes and, is thus, a consumer-based metric (Munoz & Kumar, 2004). Performance metrics include consumer loyalty (a consumer-based metric) and purchase decisions which could be considered both a business- and consumer-based metric of success since the factors that lead to purchase (i.e. preference, satisfaction, repeat purchasing) would be a consumer-based metric, but the results highlighted (i.e. return on investment and cost savings) that come from consumer decision is a business-based metric. Finally, financial metrics (i.e. market share and revenue) are natural business-based metrics. Dunn & Davis (2003) take another view of evaluating brand success and explain two types of metrics; tactical metrics and strategic metrics. Tactical metrics consider the customer experience at brand touchpoints; these include brand awareness, comprehension, reliability, satisfaction, recommendation and influence on purchase decisions. Dunn & Davis' (2003) tactical metrics are clear consumer-based metrics, but factors such as purchase decisions will impact business-based metrics. Dunn & Davis' (2003) strategic metrics consider both business- and consumer-based metrics, including consumer loyalty, added value allowing a price premium (consumer-based metric) along with purchases and customer acquisition (business-based metrics). While both Dunn & Davis (2003)

and Munoz and Kumar (2004) use different classification systems to de Chernatony et al. (1998), it is clear that there is a considerable cross-over between these scholars' brand success assessment models.

In contrast to including both business- and consumer-based metrics, both Lehmann et al. (2008) and Molinillo et al. (2019) focus on only consumer-based metrics to measure brand performance. Lehmann et al. (2008) approached their research intending to standardise consumer-based surveys that brands use to measure brand performance. Because their study focuses only on the kinds of responses available from consumers, business-related metrics are not present but are instead considered a by-product of consumer activity. Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting that Lehmann et al. (2008) suggest six dimensions to be considered in assessing brand performance: comprehension (brand awareness, understanding and recall), comparative advantage (favourable reputation and differentiation), interpersonal relations (favourable interactions with the brand), history (past experience with the brand), preference (attitudes toward the brand), and attachment (the level of connection with the brand). Molinillo et al. (2019) use brand loyalty as the most crucial factor in determining a brand's success and see brand equity, brand satisfaction and brand trust as significant factors leading to brand loyalty.

When considering the types of metrics that can be considered to assess brand success, it is clear that there is no universal metric set that will work for all brands (Dunn & Davis, 2003; de Chernatony et al., 1998; Lehmann et al., 2008; Munoz & Kumar, 2004; Sherrington, 2003). The value placed on different metrics is likely to differ between industry, brand, internal structure and management styles (Dunn & Davis, 2003; de Chernatony et al., 1998; Lehmann et al., 2008). However, with the aid of previous literature, some broad metrics can be applied to assess brand activities. The de Chernatony et al. (1998) classification system is a valuable tool to understand types of brand metrics. Many scholars agree that both types of metrics are needed to assess brand success (Dunn & Davis, 2003; de Chernatony et al., 1998; Munoz & Kumar, 2004). Some scholars (Lehmann et al., 2008; Molinillo et al., 2019) focus on only consumer-based metrics of success, but these are heavily interrelated with business-based metrics. Further, in marketing practice, there is regular reporting of business-based metrics (WARC, 2020a; Busignani, 2021). Regular features of campaign reports include sales lift or return on investment to assess branding and

campaign effectiveness and varied use of consumer-based metrics (WARC, 2020a; Busignani, 2021). This inconsistency of success metrics is messy and make it hard to compare activities between brands, but it reflects the differing priorities of brands. To compare the relative success of branding activities between brands, it would be most helpful to look at a broad success metric structure like that of de Chernatony et al. (1998) and consider the brand's context and priorities.

Table 2. Summary of success metrics from brand evaluation models based on the de Chernatony et al. (1998) criteria of brand success.

Business-based metrics of brand success		Consumer-based metrics of brand success	
Profitability/return on investment/revenue	de Chernatony et al. (1998); Munoz and Kumar (2004)	Brand associations (including brand awareness, brand image, brand identity, brand personality, familiarity, brand consideration and brand relationship)	Dunn and Davis (2003); de Chernatony et al. (1998); Lehmann et al. (2008); Molinillo et al. (2019); Munoz and Kumar (2004)
Shareholder equity/share prices/stock prices	de Chernatony et al. (1998); Munoz and Kumar (2004)	Perceived differential advantage (favourable reputation and differentiation)	Dunn and Davis (2003); de Chernatony et al. (1998); Lehmann et al. (2008); Molinillo et al. (2019); Munoz and Kumar (2004)
Market share	de Chernatony et al. (1998); Munoz and Kumar (2004)	Added value (brand equity that allows a price premium or is difficult to copy)	de Chernatony et al. (1998); Lehmann et al. (2008); Molinillo et al. (2019)

2.4.2 Success indicators for the cause

Before considering the success metrics for the cause, it is worth considering the context of cause activism. While there is no universally accepted definition, activism researchers generally contextualise activism efforts by considering activism participants (e.g. student activism), tactics (e.g. activism through voting), tools (e.g. digital activism, hacktivism) and causes (e.g. environmental activism) (DeLuca, 2005; Herzog, 2010; Rude & Meilke, 2004). Smith and Ferguson (2010), along with Bakke (1996) highlight, that activism objects a current status quo or a potential future status quo. This has parallels with the Sarkar and Kotler (2018) conceptualisation of brand activism being either progressive or regressive. However, activism is context-dependent, and the activities that constitute activism vary depending on the context (Smith & Ferguson, 2010).

Further, there are four types of activism efforts within the activism literature in ascending order of scale; individual action (where an individual takes action alone), collective tactics (where a group of individuals take action together), campaigns (where a group of tactics work together), and social movements (where groups of campaigns work together) (Ganz, 2006; Tilly, 2004; Valenzuela, 2013). Social movements are the most substantial type of activism effort as each type of activism is nested within a social movement (Lakey, 2011). Indeed, as Lakely (2011) points out, social movements require several campaigns, made up of several tactics, made up of a significant number of individuals taking action. The latter half of the twentieth century saw many social movements occurring in civil rights, labour movements, the environment, and women's rights (Lipsky, 1968; Olson, 1965; Tilly & Tarrow, 2006). In tandem, the research of social movements dominated the activism literature during and sees social movements continue to be the most studied type of activism (Tilly & Tarrow, 2006; Valenzuela, 2013). Social movements are large, visible, and is the type of activism that brands have aligned with (Sarkar and Kotler, 2018; Valenzuela, 2013). When considering social movements and the role that they play in brand activism, Tilly (2006) offers some conceptualisation of the tactics that constitute social movements and how to measure the success of this type of activism.

Since the 1970's Charles Tilly, argued to be one of the most influential scholars in the field of social movements, has developed a theoretical approach to deal with protest or activism features and influence (Tilly, 1978; Tilly, 2004; Tilly, 2006; Wouters & Welgrave, 2017). Tilly's (2006) research offers guidelines for characterising a successful social movement activity. Tilly (2006) explains that successful traditional social movements should be made up of three components; firstly, a campaign in which a social movement cause is identified; secondly, repertoires of the movement which explain the tools and methods of a social movement organisation; and thirdly, worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment (WUNC). As Tilly (2006) explains, worthiness refers to how the cause is perceived by the public, including the professionalism and credibility of the cause. Unity is the degree to which members of a social movement agree about the cause and the message conveyed. Numbers refer to the number of people involved in a social movement with more members exerting more influence on their cause. Commitment refers to the effect and resource level that members of a social movement are willing to sacrifice for the cause.

The base of Tilly's (2006) argument is that those social movements that have greater WUNC are more likely to achieve their social goal. Simply, Tilly (2006) states "W x U x N x C = Impact" (p.291). While the WUNC model proves to be a potentially powerful set of criteria that could help us understand the level of success in activism and social movements, it is worth noting, as Wouters & Welgrave (2017) point out, that the WUNC model has not been widely used in empirical or theoretical studies due to difficulty in quantifying some of the components.

As alluded to by the WUNC language (Tilly, 2006), there is a reluctance in social movement and activism literature to use the term 'success'. Instead, as Tilly (2006) demonstrates, terms such as 'impact' (Tilly, 2006; Luders, 2010), 'outcome' (Giugni, 1998), 'effect' (Salmon & Murray-Jones, 2013), and 'consequence' (Kolb, 2007) are used. While all terms highlight an interest in understanding the result of a social movement of activism activity, they highlight the difficulty in putting a box around whether an activism activity may be considered a success or worthwhile. Indeed, this difficulty in defining success is likely to translate from other forms of activism to brand activism and should be considered when moving forward with brand activism research.

From a consumer perspective, it is worth looking to social-, political-, and consumer-activism literature to consider general responses to brand activism. Within the political science literature, Milbrath (1965) explains the hierarchy of political participation. Milbrath (1965) classified three types of political participation (spectator, transitional and gladiatorial activities) dictated by the increasing intensity of political participation and impact, and the decreasing volume of participants involved at each level.

Spectator activities are a high volume of people with relatively low intensity of participation; this could look like demonstrating allegiance to a sociopolitical activity by wearing a button or sharing their stance with others (Milbrath, 1965). In a brand activism context, the framework could be used to identify high volume-low intensity behaviours such as social media 'likes' or 'shares' as a spectator activity. Transitional activities refer to a moderate volume of people with a moderate intensity of participation; this may be demonstrated by making donations to a sociopolitical activity or attending rallies (Milbrath, 1965). Moderate volume and moderate intensity behaviours such as boycotts, buycotts, donations, or signing petitions could be considered transitional activities in a brand activism context. Gladiatorial activities

involve few people, but those involved have a high intensity of participation; this may involve becoming a political candidate, fundraising for political funds or contributing a great deal of time to a political campaign (Milbrath, 1965). Low volume-high intensity extreme behaviours such as hacktivism or lobbying could be considered gladiatorial activities in a brand activism context.

2.5 USING EXISTING LITERATURE TO INFORM ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

As an emerging area in marketing literature, we are working with a limited amount of scholarly brand activism work to draw on for the analysis and interpretation to come in the following sections of this research. The majority of brand activism literature has focused on defining brand activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018), the place of brand activism (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020; Swaminathan et al., 2020), authentic brand activism (Sibai et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020), and brand-directed consumer responses to controversy in brand activism (Hydock et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Shetty et al., 2019). However, as the components of brand activism share similarities with other more traditional or well-researched fields such as branding, activism, and types of CSR activities, literature in these areas can be used to inform and interpret the findings of this research. While there are likely to be differences and disparities between existing bodies of literature, such as branding and activism, they can provide a grounding point for further analysis.

2.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter presented the current body of knowledge on brand activism and related areas that can be drawn on to understand brand activism better. As an emerging topic of academia, there is still much to understand about brand activism; however, it is worth understanding the similarities and differences between brand activism and other cause/issue related activities that brands engage in to understand better where brand activism fits. By looking at examples of brand activism activities, an understanding is built about the types of approaches and executions that can lead to better reception. In addition, past brand activism examples provide an insight into changing consumer expectations. A shift from raising awareness for causes through advertising campaigns to making an internal change to support a cause directly is highlighted. While little is known about consumers' cause-directed responses to brand

activism, it is noted can see that consumers are likely to offer support for brand activism activities that resonate with them through product purchase or word-of-mouth (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). However, if consumers oppose brand activism activities, they are likely to exert much stronger opposition responses, such as boycotts and negative word of mouth (Hydock et al., 2019; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Thus, the question for brands becomes whether the potential reward outweighs the risk of consumer punishment (Hydock et al., 2020). This chapter ends by suggesting potential success indicators in brand activism based on both brand and activism literature. This literature review posits that successful brand activism activities should benefit both the brand (including business-based metrics and consumer-based metrics) and the cause (including building worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment). This literature forms the basis for further analysis and interpretation for the rest of this thesis.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER

This chapter will outline the methodology for this study, including the guiding research philosophy, strategy, and approach. This leads to a detailed explanation of the research design. To address the research aim of ‘*how to create meaningful social change through brand activism*’ and looking at this through a consumer lens, a focus group methodology was selected. Focus groups allow for the exploration of different consumer responses to various forms of brand activism and the reasons for such responses. This study employed various focus group techniques to generate rich consumer insights through different approaches. This study focused on brand activism in response to the support or opposition of the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. Focusing on this specific context allows the study to delve deep into the different brand activism executions, and consumers could consider their responses to and preferences for different types of brand activism. The focus groups were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2013) thematic analysis and structured according to Gioia et al.’s (2013) data structure, which includes first order concepts, second order themes, and main themes.

3.2 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

A research philosophy explains the system of beliefs and assumptions about developing knowledge (Saunders et al., 2019). Throughout the research process, these beliefs and assumptions impact how data is gathered, analysed and used to understand a phenomenon and are essential in developing the research strategy and design (Saunders et al., 2019). The main categories of beliefs and assumptions relate to; the way that reality is viewed (ontological assumptions), human knowledge and what is considered valid knowledge (epistemological assumptions), and how personal values can influence the research process and ethics (axiological assumptions) (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012; Saunders et al., 2019). As Saunders et al. (2019) explain, when considering ontology, epistemology and axiology, there are five significant philosophies in business literature: positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, postmodernism, and pragmatism. Positivism is a scientific approach with a focus on

observable reality to create generalisations. Critical realism focuses on explaining what can be seen based on underlying structures of reality. Interpretivism focuses on the meaning that humans create. Postmodernism focuses on the role of language and power. Finally, pragmatism focuses on the activities that can be supported by concepts (Saunders et al., 2019).

As Easterby-Smith et al. (2012) explain, the research philosophy depends mainly on what the study aims to investigate and the constraints of the research question. This research explores how brand activism campaigns can be best designed to encourage impactful consumer support responses. As highlighted in earlier sections, it is important for the progression of brand activism research, but due to the nascent and evolving nature of this area of literature, quantifying and categorising impactful consumer responses, particularly with the multiple facets of brand activism (brand, cause, and campaign) is inherently challenging. As such, this study first seeks to understand consumers perceptions of brand activism initiatives and further aims to understand how impactful consumer support responses can be best elicited. Due to the emergent and exploratory nature of this work and the nascence of the field of brand activism research, an interpretive research philosophy is the most appropriate for this study. As such, this study seeks to advance knowledge surrounding consumer responses to brand activism by analysing their opinions, thoughts, feelings and meanings attached to brand activism campaigns.

From an ontological perspective, interpretivism involves an acceptance of multiple meanings and realities (Saunders et al., 2019). Further, reality is understood to be socially constructed, rich and complex. From an epistemological perspective, acceptable knowledge is based on the stories, narratives, interpretations and perceptions of consumers with large scale theories and concepts considered too simplistic (Saunders et al., 2019). From an axiological perspective, research is bound to values; researchers are subjective and part of what is being researched.

When considering research theory development, it is also essential to consider the reasoning that the study adopts. Deductive approaches involve theory and the testing of hypotheses, inductive research approaches involve developing theory as a result of data analysis, and abductive approaches are used to generate or modify theory which is then tested. Interpretivism-based research approaches are inductive and aim to identify patterns and develop themes to answer the research question (Clark &

Bryman, 2019). This lends itself to qualitative research methods and in-depth investigations of small samples and is the approach selected for this study.

3.3 RESEARCH STRATEGY/APPROACH

Quantitative research approaches study “the relationships between variables, which are measured numerically and analysed using a range of statistical and graphical techniques” (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 178). Quantitative research approaches are often associated with a positivist research philosophy and a deductive approach whereby data is collected and analysed to test a theory (Saunders et al., 2019). As brand activism is a new and emerging topic in academia, there is limited pre-existing literature and research that would lend itself to deductive theory development and quantitative study.

In contrast, qualitative research considers the meaning and realities of participants and requires researchers to make sense of such data to understand the research phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2019). Thus, the qualitative research approach is most often associated with interpretive research (Battiste et al., 2018; Saunders et al., 2019). Moreover, while qualitative research can lend itself to deductive or abductive reasoning, it is most often suited to inductive reasoning with the aim of theme or theory development (Saunders et al., 2019). Because the research question for this study aims to uncover impactful consumer responses to brand activism and is exploratory in a nascent academic field, a qualitative approach is appropriate to address the research aim of this study.

Meaning is an essential aspect of qualitative research and is derived from analysing words, images and observations rather than numbers. Because words, images and observations may be unclear or have multiple interpretations, it is crucial to explore these components with participants. The necessity to explore words, images and observations lends itself to un- or semi-structured research methods to allow for a flexible approach to the questions and procedures during the research process. As outlined later in Section 3.4.6, this study used several techniques, including rating, free listing, discussion, questioning, and group activities. These characteristics of qualitative research and the specific techniques are applied in the research design for this study, outlined below.

3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN: FOCUS GROUPS

This research project aims to uncover how brand activism campaigns can be best designed to encourage impactful consumer support responses resulting in social change. This study seeks to understand the different consumer responses to various forms of brand activism and the reasons for these differences. To accomplish this, this study uses a qualitative research design comprising of focus groups (Saunders et al., 2019)

Focus groups allow for the collection of rich, in-depth data. As Morgan (1996) highlights, focus groups are a less naturalistic setting than participant observation. They are limited mainly to self-reported data and verbal behaviour, which may be skewed by the focus group setting and not portray reality in its entirety. In addition, the social nature of focus groups means that participants may respond in a socially desirable manner or not want to disagree with the group consensus. However, the benefit of focus groups is in the mediated discussion designed to spur a large and concentrated amount of participant interaction on a subject in a short period (Morgan, 1996). Further, as Carson et al. (2001) highlight, the focus group environment encourages interaction and involvement between participants, often leading to a higher degree of transparency. As Oates & Alevizou (2017) point out, focus groups are more than just group interviews as they encourage interaction between participants, group discussion and debate. The format of focus groups provides rich data that allows the researcher to extract meanings, interpretations, and how participants understand phenomena and convey their perspective to other participants (Bryman et al., 2019; Oates & Alevizou, 2017). As Clark & Bryman (2019) explain, over the years, focus groups have proven extremely useful in qualitative research to allow researchers to gather participant opinions, interpretations, and perspectives on a subject, leading to the researcher understanding why consumers think the way they do. Focus groups allow the incorporation of various techniques (outlined in Section 3.4.6) such as ranking, written, projective techniques and activities, along with traditional group discussion.

3.4.1 Research context

Focus groups were used to understand the nuance of consumer responses to brand activism. For ease of comparison and to keep the conversation as current as possible, brand activism in response to the support or opposition of the Black Lives Matter

movement following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 provided the basis for discussion. The murder of George Floyd has dramatically increased the number of brands that have taken a stand on social and political issues and provides us with a relevant and widely known case (WARC, 2020b). The focus groups in this study were conducted in October 2020, closely following the death of George Floyd. In response to the murder of George Floyd, brand activism activities have taken very different approaches, ranging from subtle messaging, confronting messaging, vague promises, internal targets to donations and seemingly tokenistic brand activism behaviours. This study aimed to differentiate the various types of brand activism approaches and dissect what this means for consumer responses.

3.4.2 Participant numbers and group size

Three focus groups were held to uncover how brand activism campaigns can be best designed to encourage impactful consumer support responses. Eighteen participants who have an opinion regarding brands taking a stand were recruited. Namey et al. (2016) find that 80% of all themes are detectable within two or three focus groups. For commercial focus groups conducted for market research on new products, adverts and ideas, 10-12 people per group are recommended (Oates & Alevizou, 2017). However, for non-commercial focus groups, like this study, Oates & Alevizou (2017) suggest groups of five to eight participants to allow each person to share their insights, experiences, and observations while allowing for a range of participant perspectives to be present in the group. Thus, three focus were conducted with groups ranging from five to seven participants per group.

3.4.3 Recruiting participants

The participants were recruited using purposive sampling through the primary researcher's network via email (Appendix A) and social media advertisements (Appendix B). Purposive sampling is a form of convenience sampling and non-probability sampling, whereby participants must meet practical criteria including location, accessibility, availability and willingness to participate (Etikan, 2016). Further, purposive sampling involves selecting participants based on the researcher's decision on those that will provide the information needed for the research study. Because purposive sampling is non-probability based, we must accept that there are limitations in the degree of generalisation from the research outputs (Etikan, 2016).

However, for the study's exploratory purpose, this sampling format is deemed appropriate to uncover effects warranting future study.

3.4.4 Selection criteria

This research sought consumers aged 18-38 that identified as either supporting or opposing at least one brand activism activity. Only adults in the millennial or Gen Z generations (aged 18-38) were selected since brand activism has been proven helpful when targeting these generations due to their awareness and interest in social and political issues (Smiley, 2019). The researcher also ascertained each participant's prior support or opposition to a brand activism activity through one-on-one conversation before the focus group. This ensured that each participant had some interest or knowledge of brand activism activities they could bring to the focus group. In addition, due to the Black Lives Matter context of the focus group discussion, each of the focus groups consisted of at least 50% non-pakeha (non-White) participants. Unfortunately, the New Zealand location of this study limits the ability to include Black American participants whom the Black Lives Matter Movement most impacts. However, using a New Zealand context, the researchers and ethics committee believed it was important to include at least 50% non-pakeha participants to avoid a predominantly White group of participants providing a White-skewed perspective. In this study, non-pakeha participants included indigenous (Māori) participants and participants from the Pacific Islands, Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

3.4.5 Profiles of participants

Table 3 outlines the participants' occupation, gender, pakeha/non-pakeha, age and focus group. The focus group participants were aged 22 – 33, with a mean age of 28.8. There was a good gender mix in the total participants (eight male, ten female), and while some focus groups were skewed toward a male or female make-up, there was always at least two males/females in each group. It was important to include non-pakeha participants, which is reflected in the skew toward non-pakeha in the total participants (five pakeha, 13 non-pakeha).

During the recruitment phase, the researcher noted the marketer-heavy nature of the personal network used to recruit participants. This led to a marketer-heavy participant group but also led to some valuable insights from participants that had both a consumer perspective and could understand the brand perspective, perhaps more than

lay consumers. This marketer-heavy skew does place limitations on the generalisability of this research. However, it is also worth noting that even the non-marketer participants came to the group with their prior knowledge of brand activism, brand perspectives and their own opinions on marketing. This indicates and highlights that consumers are becoming more educated and sophisticated when it comes to brand activism. They are doing their own research and forming their own opinions, which is reflected in the findings later in this thesis.

Table 3. Participant summary

Participant	Occupation	Male/ Female	Pakeha/ non- pakeha	Age	Focus group
1	Marketing	F	Non-pakeha	32	1
2	Marketing	M	Non-pakeha	28	1
3	Marketing	F	Pakeha	32	1
4	Sales	M	Non-pakeha	33	1
5	Marketing	F	Pakeha	30	1
6	Sales	F	Non-pakeha	26	1
7	Journalist	F	Non-pakeha	25	1
8	Student	M	Non-pakeha	22	2
9	IT	F	Pakeha	31	2
10	IT	M	Non-pakeha	29	2
11	Marketing	F	Pakeha	33	2
12	Student	M	Non-pakeha	24	2
13	Sales	M	Non-pakeha	24	2
14	Marketing	M	Non-pakeha	32	3
15	Marketing	F	Non-pakeha	32	3
16	Journalist	F	Non-pakeha	25	3
17	Sales	M	Non-pakeha	33	3
18	Sales	F	Pakeha	28	3

3.4.6 Focus group techniques and components

Focus groups have proven to be a valuable qualitative data collection method; however, researchers can face challenges in achieving good quality data (Colucci, 2007). One of the most significant benefits of face-to-face focus groups is the potential to include various activities such as: focusing exercises which concentrate the group's attention (Bloor et al., 2000), engaging questions/group discussion to explore participants' viewpoints (Morgan, 1997) and activity-based participant interaction to

capture a less stereotypical perspective (Colucci, 2007; Oates & Alevizou, 2017). Moreover, individual written activities allow time for reflection (Colucci, 2007), while group interaction encourages debate and discussion (Oates & Alevizou, 2017). The focus groups used in this study utilised various techniques to draw out insights from the consumers in different ways. The combination of techniques and different focus group components allowed consumers to have multiple opportunities and formats to provide insights. This section outlines the techniques and components used in the focus groups, and the following section (Section 3.4.7) explains their place in the focus group structure.

Rating – focusing exercise

Rating exercises can be powerful insight generators and can help to form the basis of further discussion (Bloor et al., 2000; Colucci, 2007; Morgan, 1997; Oates & Alevizou, 2017). Participants receive an item (or items) that they must rate on a scale. In this study, participants were asked to rate ‘How important do you think it is for brands to take a sociopolitical stand? (1 = not at all important, 10 = extremely important)’. As Morgan (1997) notes, individually completed self-determined scales are most likely to be closer to the participants’ beliefs and opinions. Further, scholars recommend that the use of rating scales in focus groups is not to achieve a statistical output but to foster group discussion and allow participants to reflect on their individual viewpoints (Colucci, 2007; Morgan, 1997). Thus, in this focus group, the rating exercise was conducted at the start of the group to allow participants to consider their own viewpoint before moving into a group discussion about how important it is for brands to take a sociopolitical stand.

Free listings – focusing exercise

Colucci (2007) explains that free listings can be a powerful strategy to stimulate discussion between participants and focus the group’s attention. In this technique, the moderator invites participants to list elements on a given topic (Colucci, 2007). In this study, participants were asked to individually list (1) brands that they know of that have taken a stand on a social/political issue, (2) causes that they know of that have seen brand support/opposition, and (3) words that come to mind when thinking about brands taking a stand on social/political issues. As Morgan (1997) recommended, participants were asked to share their list with the group after the individual listings. Colucci (2007) explains that free listings can be helpful to determine where to

concentrate efforts in a focus group. In this study, the lists were combined by the moderator to build the group knowledge of brands and causes that have been part of brand activism activities.

Developing a campaign – projective, activity-based interaction

Scholars suggest incorporating projective techniques into focus groups to capture less stereotypical and more emotional responses (Colucci, 2007; Guerrero & Xicola, 2018). As Colucci (2007) explains, using third-person narratives encourage participants to speak about a topic in a less personal way. Further, Colucci (2007) and Guerrero and Xicola (2018) suggest asking participants to pretend they are in charge of developing a new campaign linked to the topic. Colucci (2007) recommends that participants be provided with pens, paper, or whiteboards to develop their ideas. In this study, participants were provided with markers and large pieces of paper and were asked to imagine they are in charge of a brand's Black Lives Matter activity. They were asked to design this activity and explain how it would look.

Group discussion and engaging questions

The most basic and traditional technique used in focus groups is group discussion (Oates & Alevizou, 2017). Focus groups are designed to encourage interaction between participants, including group discussion and debate (Oates & Alevizou, 2017). The moderator facilitates group discussion through the use of engaging questioning techniques that often move from more general questions to more specific follow-up or probing/clarifying questions (Morgan 1997). In this study, group discussion and engaging questions were used throughout – to build on the exercises (rating, free listings, or developing a campaign) or on their own to explore participants' views on a topic.

3.4.7 Focus group structure and facilitation

The primary researcher conducted three focus groups in Auckland, New Zealand, in October 2020. During the focus group discussions, a semi-structured approach was used to uncover consumers' knowledge of brands that engage in brand activism and their responses to different brand activism approaches. The semi-structured approach outlined in the focus group guide (Appendix C) allows the moderator to guide participant discussion points, for participant interaction to occur and for the group to lead discussion points (Oates & Alevizou, 2017).

As Cason et al. (2001) highlight, participants should feel comfortable and relaxed during focus groups, so groups were conducted in a private room at Auckland University of Technology with refreshments available. Before beginning the focus group discussion, the primary researcher introduced themselves and handed out writing activity sheets (Appendix D), consent forms (Appendix E), and information sheets (Appendix F). The researcher then explained the purpose of the focus group and information on consent, privacy and the support available to them. As brand activism, and activism in general, can touch on controversial topics, participants were prepared for the possibility of conflicting opinions and sensitive discussion topics. Participants agreed to be respectful of others' views throughout the groups and were reminded that offending participants would be removed from the group if any disrespectful behaviour occurred. This was an essential part of the ethical considerations of this study (outlined further in Section 3.4.8) due to the possible discomfort that discussing activism and other controversial topics could generate. The group then began with each participant introducing themselves and telling the group about a brand they hated. This first activity was designed to break the ice, make participants feel more open with the group, and put the participants at ease about talking about more negative topics.

The first part of the focus groups (Part one: setting the scene and gauging comprehension of brand activism) was designed to get participants to think about their individual opinions and reflect on their existing brand activism knowledge before moving into the group discussions. As Colucci (2007) explains, individual activities in a focus group, such as rating and free listing activities, can focus the group's attention and provide time for individual reflection. As such, Part one of the focus groups began with an individual rating and free listing writing activity (Appendix D). Participants were asked to rank on a scale of 1-10 how important they think it is for brands to take a stand on social/political issues. They were also asked to write down examples of brands they had seen take a stand on social/political causes and examples of causes they have seen brands take a stand on. For the final part of the activity, participants were asked to write down what words come to mind when they think about brands taking a stand on social/political issues. The moderator then asked the group to line up according to how important they think it is for brands to take a stand on social/political issues. This allowed the group to see the similarities and differences in opinion throughout the group. Participants were asked to explain to the group why they chose their ranking. During this activity, participants went beyond explaining their

ranking to provide examples and opinions on brands they supported or criticised and provided more general opinions on brand activism. Part one finished off with a group brainstorm on brands that have taken a stand on social/political issues, which the moderator compiled on a shared piece of large paper.

The second part of the focus groups (Part two: reflections, perceptions and reactions to brand activism activities) set the more focused context for this study. The moderator introduced the specific context for discussion – brands’ responses to the Black Lives Matter movement following the death of George Floyd. Because the focus groups were conducted several months after the initial brand activism response to the murder of George Floyd, the moderator played a short video that explained the major brand activism activities following shortly after the death of George Floyd. This helped to jog participants’ memory and ensure everyone came into the discussion with at least some knowledge of the brand activism activity of the time. This was followed by readdressing the group brainstorm of brands that have taken a stand on social/political issues. Participants were asked to identify which brands took a Black Lives Matter stand following the death of George Floyd. The moderator then moved the group into the discussion-based section of the focus group and asked participants to share their responses to brands that have taken a stand on the Black Lives Matter movement following the death of George Floyd, what kinds of things they look for in ‘good’ brand activity in this context, and whether any brands have inspired them to support or oppose the cause. Probing and follow up questions were used to clarify participant answers or encourage group discussion.

The third part of the focus group (Part three: looking forward, how to create change) involved participants considering how brand activism could be best used moving forward. Participants were asked to consider what they think are the most significant actions that a brand can take to create change for a cause. As Guerrero & Xicola (2018) highlight, recent approaches to focus groups have favoured incorporating projective stimuli to capture less stereotypical and more emotional responses. In part three of this study, participants worked together to outline how they would run a Black Lives Matter brand activism activity if they were put in charge. Participants were not given a rigid structure (i.e. it did not need to include an advertisement or any other type of element), but the group was provided with paper and markers. It was predicted that the group would come up with an image, video, storyboard or some other more traditional marketing or advertising output and that the

moderator would probe the group on – asking why they chose to design it in the way they did and whether they think it would inspire consumers to increase their support for the cause. However, it became clear in all three groups that the consumers were not looking for a traditional marketing or advertising activity but rather an internal commitment from the brand. The moderator probed this. The final part of the focus group included asking participants to share their advice for brands trying to support the Black Lives Matter movement and the moderator thanking participants for their input.

3.4.8 Ethical considerations

Ethics approval (Appendix G) was granted for this study (ethics application number 20/195) by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEK) on 30 July 2020. Through this process, the general premise of the research, participants, selection criteria, recruitment process, consent form, information sheet, data recording and storage, and research design was reviewed and approved from an ethics perspective. It was highlighted that, due to the nature of focus groups, participants could only be offered limited confidentiality and that participants must be comfortable with this to participate. It was also highlighted that due to the nature of focus groups and the topics covered, including views on race, some mildly stressful topics might arise. If any participant felt uncomfortable in the duration of the focus group, they could re-schedule at another time or withdraw entirely from the focus group. Further, if a participant became distressed, the moderator could refer the participant to a trained therapist.

3.5 METHOD OF ANALYSIS

3.5.1 Transcription

The focus group transcription was conducted by the primary researcher with the aid of audio transcription software, Trint. The audio files were loaded into the software, and the primary researcher listened to the audio files to edit the transcript with particular focus given to New Zealand-specific words and phrases that the North American software could not process correctly. Through this process, participants were anonymised and assigned a participant number (reflected in Section 3.4.5).

3.5.2 Thematic analysis

The data available for analysis includes transcripts from three focus groups. Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis technique was used to uncover ideas, explanations and patterns related to consumer responses to brand activism. Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-step process outlines how the transcript data is developed into codes, themes and come together to tell the story of the data.

Step one – becoming familiar with the data.

The first step of Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis is becoming familiar with the data. Because the researcher conducted both the focus group moderation, transcription, and the data analysis, they came to the data analysis with prior knowledge on the groups and some initial thoughts and impressions. This, along with active repeated reading of the data, allowed the researcher to immerse themselves in the data.

Step two – creating codes.

The second step of the thematic analysis entails creating initial codes from the transcript data. NVivo was used for this analysis and was used systematically to identify interesting features of the data across the whole data set. From this initial coding, the data can be collated into groups of related ideas.

Step three – re-focusing the data.

The third step involved focusing on the broad themes, opposed to codes, by sorting codes and collated codes into potential themes and subthemes.

Step four – reviewing themes.

Step four of thematic analysis involves reviewing the possible themes and subthemes identified in step three to evaluate whether themes should be combined, separated, or removed. In this stage, it was important to consider how the themes fit within the whole dataset to represent the data accurately. From this step, a thematic map of themes can be generated. Gioia et al.'s (2013) data structure was used to inform this stage, explained further in this section below (Section 3.5.3).

Step five – defining and naming themes.

This step of Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis involves defining and naming the themes. The data structure created in step four is used to identify what is

interesting and distinct about each theme and subtheme (second order theme). Once the overall story of the data and the specifics of each theme is understood, definitions and names can be developed.

Step six – producing the report.

This final step of thematic analysis involves producing the data analysis report. It is only possible to complete this stage once the full set of themes are understood thoroughly. This stage of the data analysis involves presenting the data in a coherent, logical way and highlights the importance and validity of the analysis. This stage of data analysis is demonstrated in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 of this thesis.

3.5.3 Data structure

The thematic analysis was further informed by Gioia et al.'s (2013) data structure. The data was structured according to first order concepts (codes), then grouped into second order themes, and finally linked to main themes. This data structure, illustrated in Figure 1, provides a visual representation of the progression from concepts to the main themes. The main themes correlate to the three main areas of the focus group structure; first a general discussion about brands that take a sociopolitical stand (main theme 1), then moving into consumers responses to brands taking a sociopolitical stand (main theme 2) and finally the discussion of what consumers expect of brands when taking a sociopolitical stand (main theme 3). While Gioia et al. (2013) provides the basis of the data structure, some first order concepts have relevance in multiple main themes, with notable variations depending on the context. For example, in each of the main themes, the first order concept 'Alignment with practice' was prominent even though the prompts and context of the discussion changed. While some first order concepts are present in each main theme, the different context of each theme provides us with a multifaceted view of such reoccurring concepts. Thus they appear in the data structure multiple times.

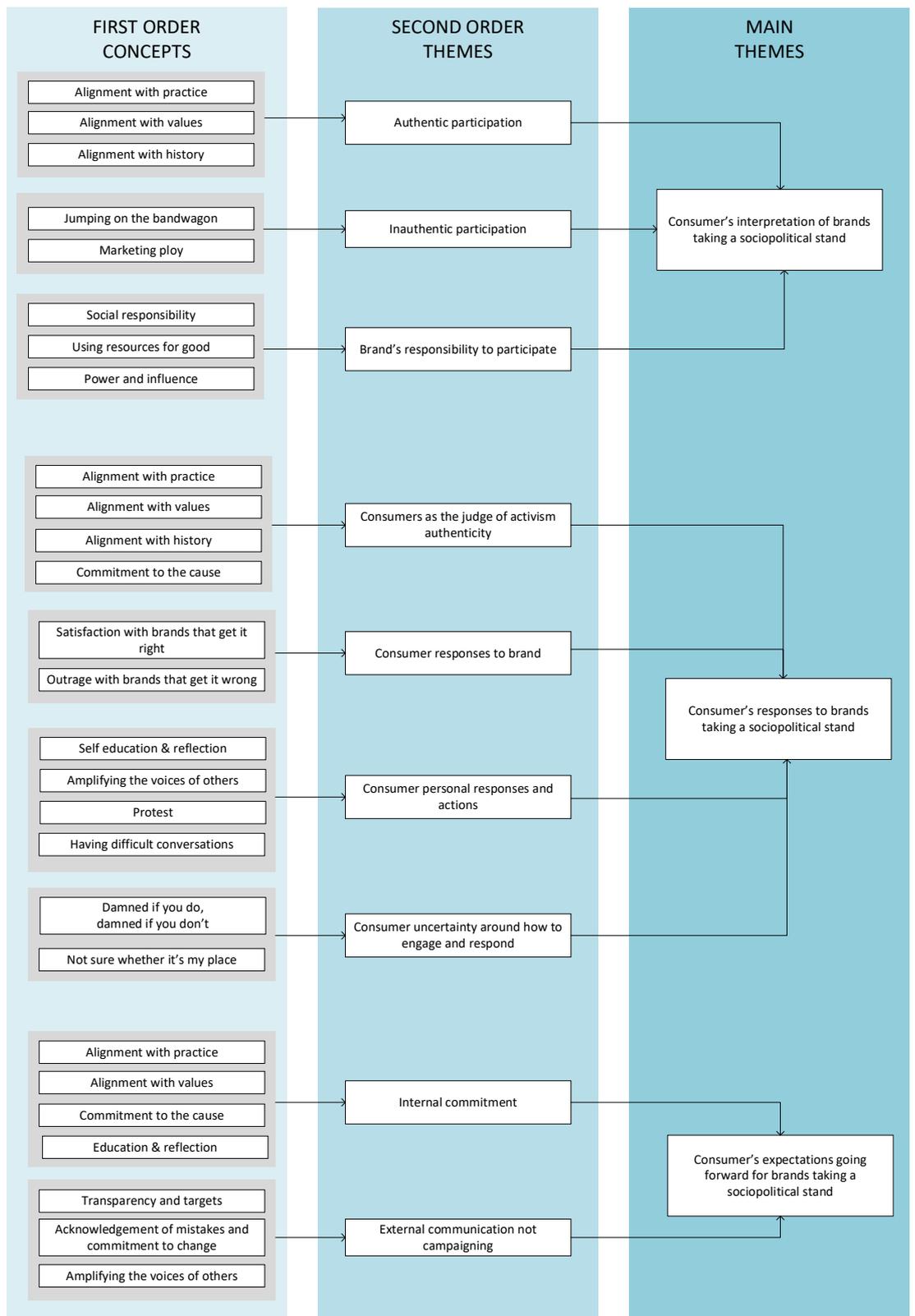


Figure 1. Data structure from thematic analysis of focus groups

3.5.4 Intercoder reliability

Lombard et al. (2010) explain intercoder reliability as the extent to which different coders reach the same conclusion. Intercoder reliability is a vital part of content analysis, and while it does not guarantee validity, the absence of intercoder reliability would mean the analysis would not be considered valid. Lombard et al. (2010) state that a minimum of 10% of the whole sample should be checked using intercoder reliability. In this data analysis, one of three focus groups (33%) was checked by the primary supervisor. While the independent coding surfaced some new names for codes, there was a very good general agreement on the coding.

3.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter outlined the methodology for this study. Brand activism is highlighted as an emerging and evolving area of research, and thus, quantifying impactful consumer responses is inherently challenging. As such, this research aims to understand consumer perceptions and responses to brand activism. Due to the emergent and exploratory nature of this topic, an interpretive philosophy is deemed most appropriate. Moreover, because this study aims to uncover impactful consumer responses to brand activism and is exploratory in a nascent academic field, a qualitative approach is appropriate to address the research questions of interest in this study. To understand the different consumer responses to various forms of brand activism and the reasons for these differences, a qualitative research design is used comprising focus groups that allow the collection of rich, in-depth data and the extraction of meaning from participant interaction. The focus groups in the study utilised multiple techniques such as rating, free listings, group discussion and developing a campaign to gain insight from consumers. The concentration for the focus groups was on brand activism in response to the support or opposition of the Black Lives Matter movement following the death of George Floyd in May 2020. This allowed participants to reflect on a specific time of brand activism and their responses to brand activism at the time. Focus group transcripts were analysed using NVivo and thematic analysis and structured according to Gioia et al.'s (2013) data structure. The findings of this analysis are explained in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER

This chapter will outline the findings discovered through Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis and is structured into main themes, second order themes, and first order concepts as per the data structure provided by Gioia et al. (2013). Findings are outlined according to the three main themes of the study: (1) consumers' interpretation of brands taking a sociopolitical stand, (2) consumers' responses to brands taking a sociopolitical stand, and (3) consumers' expectations going forward for brands taking a sociopolitical stand. These findings reflect the three main sections of the focus group discussion, but there are many commonalities throughout the themes. For example, consumers' understanding of and preference for authentic activism is prominent in each theme but is approached and explained by consumers differently. Through the second order themes and first order concepts outlined in this chapter, the nuance of consumers' interpretation, response and expectations of brands taking a sociopolitical stand can be understood.

4.2 CONSUMERS' INTERPRETATION OF BRANDS TAKING A SOCIOPOLITICAL STAND

Consumers' interpretation of brands taking a sociopolitical stand is the first main theme in this data analysis. This theme, summarised in Table 4 below (Section 4.2.4), includes the second order themes of authentic participation, inauthentic participation, and the brand's responsibility to participate. During the first part of the focus groups, consumers were asked to rate how important they think it is for brands to take a sociopolitical stand on a scale of 1-10 and to explain their rationale to the group. Without priming or prompting, participants in all focus groups talked about authentic (alignment of practice and messaging) and inauthentic participation (misalignment of practice and messaging), regardless of how important they thought it was for brands to take a sociopolitical stand. Both authenticity and inauthenticity second order themes highlight the same consumer desire for authentic practice. Still, both were included as consumer tone varied based on whether they were praising an effort (authentic) or criticising (inauthentic). Consumers also identify that brands are in a position of power (including influence and resources). This power denotes a sense of responsibility –

they interpret brands as being in a unique position to influence change and think brands should rise to the responsibility of taking a sociopolitical stand. These second order themes and their first order concepts (codes) are explained below.

4.2.1 Authentic participation

Consumers' interpretation of brands taking a sociopolitical stand highlighted consumers' preference for authentic participation above all else. Consumers look for authentic participation and inauthentic participation (outlined later in this section) when considering their interpretation of brands taking a sociopolitical stand. When consumers interpret authentic participation, they look for external brand activism messaging to be reflected in the brand's practice, values and history.

Alignment with practice

Consumers want brands to 'walk the talk', meaning that internal practices should align with external communication. "There needs to be substance behind it. I think that a lot of them do it because they think that it's cool and it's relevant to do it. But I think it's actually worse if you're doing it and your practices are not reflective of what you're saying." (Participant 14). Consumers are sceptical of brands but endorse brands that they can see actioning their stance within the company "If they actually action it, I think that's very impactful." (Participant 4).

Alignment with values

Consumers also want brands to believe in what they say, "If it's not something that they actually totally believe in...that's a bit pointless really." (Participant 3). This, while related to practice, suggests a desire from consumers for brands to go beyond messaging and practice to also align brand activism stances with the internal values and culture of the organisation. "I think it's really important that it aligns with brand ethos as opposed to just being reactive" (Participant 3).

Alignment with history

Some consumers notice when a brand changes tack, and if their past behaviour does not marry up with brand activism communications, consumers can be critical. "It comes across really awkward because I haven't seen them do anything up until then, and to me, it just seems very, very strange and misaligned" (Participant 15). In contrast, some consumers are more accepting of brand activism if the brand has a history of participation in sociopolitical issues. "You know, Nike, I don't think really change

who they are. There's no change in mood or feeling like, oh, it's Nike" (Participant 6). While some participants emphasised the importance of alignment with history, later in the focus groups, other participants were more forgiving of a brand's past so long as they acknowledged their past and committed to the cause moving forward (outlined later in sections 4.3 and 4.4).

4.2.2 Inauthentic participation

Authenticity and inauthenticity are two sides of the same coin. While the previous section discussed what consumers look for in authentic participation, this section highlights some of the markers of inauthentic participation – *jumping on the bandwagon* and *marketing ploy*. When consumers use authenticity-focused language, they tend to be more complementary of brand activism, for example, "If [brands] have the resources to actually implement the change... if they actually action it, I think that's very impactful (Participant 4). In contrast, when consumers use inauthenticity-focused language, they tend to be more critical of brand activism. For example, "There needs to be substance behind it. I think that a lot of [brands] do it because they think that it's cool and it's relevant to do it. But I think it's actually worse if you're doing it and your practices are not reflective of what you're saying" (Participant 14).

Jumping on the bandwagon

Consumers can be critical when brands jump on a trendy cause. "Often you see people just jumping on the bandwagon. I mean, it's like there's no need for you to just post that on social or, yeah, just join in" (Participant 3). Consumers acknowledge that some good can come out of authentic brand activism but consider it inauthentic to align with a cause only because it has public approval. For example, "It's important if people have the resources to actually implement the change, rather than jump on the bandwagon or just post the movement of the month" (Participant 4).

Marketing ploy

In a similar vein to jumping on the bandwagon, consumers can also be critical of brands aligning with a cause as a marketing strategy. "Brands aren't your friends; they're trying to sell something to you. So, on one hand, I'm like, yes; obviously, I want something from [a brand that has] the same ideals as me. But at the same time, it's all just marketing." (Participant 7). While consumers identify this as inauthentic, there is some disagreement on whether it is completely bad. "If we're only going to

get a brand who's paying money to make their image look better. I'm glad they're spending money on something positive at the end of the day." (Participant 2).

4.2.3 Brand's responsibility to participate

Looking beyond consumers' preference for authentic brand activism, consumers believe that brands have a responsibility to participate in sociopolitical issues. Consumers highlight the unique position that brands are in to impact a sociopolitical cause, given their position of power, influence, and the resources that are available to them. Consumers expect brands to use their resources (particularly monetary resources), following, and influence to contribute to advancing a cause. Further, consumers believe that not rising to this responsibility is a "cop-out" (Participant 11).

Social responsibility

Consumers highlight the impact that brands could have on society by taking a stand "Purely like on a societal view because then you can cause like societal change if you're like in support of something because people might start following that issue." (Participant 8). Moreover, consumers highlight that brands should feel a sense of responsibility to impact society positively "they have a social responsibility" (Participant 16). Further, consumers feel that the failure to take a stand is not living up to their responsibility. "I think if they don't take a position, it's kind of like a cop-out in my mind." (Participant 11).

Using resources for good

Consumers understand brands to have a responsibility to use their resources for good. They recognise that brands have many resources that they can leverage to support a cause and believe they should use them to do so. "They have the power and the money to influence people, so why don't they use it?" (Participant 18). Consumers emphasise the monetary contributions that brands can make and that brands have more money available to back a stance than individuals "They have the money to back a stance, which you and I won't have." (Participant 1).

Power and influence

Consumers identify brands as powerful and influential "Brands are in a position where they're very influential" (Participant 1). Consumers believe that brands should use this power and influence to support sociopolitical issues. For example, "I think that it's important if a brand again has influence, that they make a statement and that they

understand that they have a lot of people that look to that brand for guidance.” (Participant 11).

4.2.4 Summary of consumers’ interpretation of brands taking a sociopolitical stand

Consumers’ interpretation of brands taking a sociopolitical stand is the first main theme identified in this data analysis and comprises the second order themes of authentic participation, inauthentic participation, and brands’ responsibility to participate. These themes, along with the first order concepts that they contain, are summarised in Table 4 below. From these findings, consumers’ general interpretation of brands taking a sociopolitical stand can be understood. Also, many of the second order themes and first order concepts explained in this section carry throughout the following two main themes but are discussed from different viewpoints (Sections 4.3 and 4.4).

Table 4. Summary and description of first order concepts and second order themes relating to consumers’ interpretation of brands taking a sociopolitical stand.

Second order themes	First order concepts	Description	Exemplar Quotes
Authentic participation	Alignment with practice	Consumers are looking for brands to walk the talk. Internal practices should align with external communication.	“There needs to be substance behind it. I think that a lot of them do it because they think that it’s cool and it’s relevant to do it. But I think it’s actually worse if you’re doing it and your practices are not reflective of what you’re saying.” (P14) “If they actually action it, I think that’s very impactful.” (P4)
	Alignment with values	Consumers want brands to believe in what they say. Brand activism should align with the internal values and culture of the organisation.	“I think it’s really important that it aligns with brand ethos as opposed to just being reactive” (P3) “If it’s not something that they actually totally believe in...that’s a bit pointless really.” (P3) “I really look out for like virtue signalling in general.” (P16)
	Alignment with history	Consumers notice when a brand changes tack. If their past behaviour does not marry up with brand activism communication, consumers can be critical.	“It comes across really awkward because I haven’t seen them do anything up until then, and to me, it just seems very, very strange and misaligned” (P15) “You know, Nike, I don’t think really change who they are. There’s no change in mood or feeling like, oh, it’s Nike... so if they’re supporting something, just don’t try and, like, change everything for it. Just for me, it would seem a little off-key. I feel like that’s kind of not what you’ve been like for the past five, ten years.” (P6)

Inauthentic participation	Jumping on the bandwagon	Consumers are critical when brands jump on a trendy cause. It is inauthentic to align with a cause only because it has public approval.	<p>“It’s important if people have the resources to actually implement the change, rather than jump on the bandwagon or just post the movement of the month” (P4)</p> <p>“Often you see people just jumping on the bandwagon. I mean, it’s like there’s no need for you to just post that on social or, yeah, just join in” (P3)</p>
	Marketing ploy	Consumers can be critical when brands are aligning with a cause as a marketing strategy. While consumers identify this as inauthentic, there is some disagreement on whether it is completely bad.	<p>“Brands aren’t your friends; they’re trying to sell something to you. So, on one hand, I’m like, yes; obviously, I want something that I buy from the same ideals as me. But at the same time, it’s all just marketing..” (P7)</p> <p>“I feel like sometimes it’s [just] marketing. They don’t care about social that much, but they just do it to give some sort of excuse to do things more expensive.” (P12)</p> <p>“If we’re only going to get a brand who’s paying money to make their image look better. I’m glad they’re spending money on something positive at the end of the day.” (P2)</p>
Brand’s responsibility to participate	Social responsibility	Brands should feel a sense of responsibility to make a positive impact on society.	<p>“Purely like on a societal view, because then you can cause like societal change if you’re like in support of something because people might start following that issue.” (P8)</p> <p>“I think if they don’t take a position, it’s kind of like a cop-out in my mind.” (P11)</p> <p>“they have a social responsibility” (P16)</p>
	Using resources for good	Consumers recognise that brands have a large amount of resources that they can leverage to support a cause.	<p>“There are some real-world dollars from really massive marketing budgets that can make a difference to some of these organisations and these causes.” (P2)</p> <p>“They have the money to back a stance, which you and I won’t have.” (P1)</p> <p>“They have the power and the money to influence people, so why don’t they use it?” (P18)</p>
	Power and influence	Brands are powerful and influential. They should use this to support sociopolitical issues.	<p>“The business community has a huge influence in buying power” (P5)</p> <p>“Brands are in a position where they’re very influential.” (P1)</p> <p>“I think that it’s important if a brand again has influence, that they make a statement and that they understand that they have a lot of people that look to that brand for guidance.” (P11)</p>

4.3 CONSUMERS’ RESPONSES TO BRANDS TAKING A SOCIOPOLITICAL STAND

During the second part of the focus groups, consumers were asked to recall how they responded to brands taking a sociopolitical stand. Consumers were quick to highlight that they saw themselves in a position to judge whether brands were authentic in their sociopolitical stand and offered examples on the types of things they look for when judging activism authenticity. Consumers explain their satisfaction with brands that get their brand activism activity right but outrage with brands that get it wrong.

Further, consumers highlighted that responses toward the brand were different based on their judgement of the brand's sociopolitical stand. Consumers did offer examples of what they believe to be impactful brand or individual actions, but these individual actions were in response to the social movement rather than specific brand activity. These concepts (second order themes) and the first order concepts they comprise are outlined in the sections below.

4.3.1 Consumers as the judge of activism authenticity

In section 4.2, authentic participation (and the avoidance of inauthentic participation) was essential to understanding consumers interpretation of brands taking a sociopolitical stand. In this section, this notion intensifies as consumers highlight the criteria they look for in judging activism authenticity, including alignment with practice, values, history and commitment to the cause.

Alignment with practice

When consumers act as a judge of brand activism authenticity, one of the main things they look at is alignment with practice. Consumers believe that brands can “really help create some sort of change” (Participant 4) for the cause if they create change within their organisation. Consumers are actively looking past brand messaging to consider internal practice “are your staff diverse, are you doing your best to create a comfortable environment for your staff and for the people that you work with, or with people that you serve” (Participant 16). If there is misalignment between communication and practice, consumers perceive the activity to be inauthentic.

Alignment with values

When consumers judge a brand's activism activity, they look past brand messaging and consider if the brand truly values and believes in the cause. Consumers are looking for brands that mean what they say “you can share a post. That's cool...but do you really mean that?” (Participant 18) and back a stance that they believe in “the intention has to be there because words can only do so much” (Participant 11). If there is a misalignment between communication and values, consumers perceive activity to be inauthentic.

Alignment with history

When consumers judge a brand's activism activity, some look to past activity and brand positioning to inform whether the brand participates authentically. If a brand

does not have a track record of taking a stand on sociopolitical issues, some consumers consider their brand activism activity inauthentic. For example, “I think it’s just awkward. You can tell that the brand doesn’t align to that issue, but they’re just jumping on” (Participant 15).

Commitment to the cause

When consumers judge a brand’s activism activity, some are forgiving of misaligned previous practices and positioning. In this case, consumers look for an acknowledgement that previous practice was not up to standard and commitment to the cause going forward. For example, “If people can grow and change their views and they can be educated to change, so can brands. Yeah, they may be late to the party, but maybe this has had enough of an impact on them to show that we need to change what we are doing. And then it comes down the follow-through.” (Participant 18). If a brand does commit to change going forward, some consumers will consider their brand activism activity authentic. For example, “So, part of me is a little bit gracious to this idea of bandwagon-ing because I think if you’re late to the party, at least you’ve come to the party. And I come to this idea that it’s the follow-through because you might have just arrived now, but because you can’t change the past, you might have not seen it as an issue before. But yeah, you’ve come late, but then it’s about moving forward.” (Participant 17).

4.3.2 Consumer responses to brand

When consumers act as the judge of activism authenticity (Section 4.3.1), they form opinions of whether brands are taking a sociopolitical stand in the ‘right’ (authentic) or ‘wrong’ (inauthentic) way. There is a negativity bias when consumers respond with satisfaction to brands that get it right but outrage when brands get it wrong.

Satisfaction with brands that get it right

If brands take a sociopolitical stand in a way that consumers consider authentic, consumers are satisfied but not delighted. For example, “It can solidify your opinion depending on the brand to show that you’re supporting the right thing to a certain degree.” (Participant 11). The satisfaction judgement for brands that get it right is weaker than the outrage judgement for brands that get it wrong. For example, “I’m not

inherently swayed by a brand doing something positive. I'm more swayed by the fact that they're doing it terribly wrong." (Participant 2).

Outrage with brands that get it wrong

If brands take a sociopolitical stand in a way that consumers consider inauthentic, consumers are outraged. For example, "If they're taking a stand and not doing it well, I'm more likely to not use them. And I would follow Cancel Culture. Because they did it wrong once, so I'd go nah, not interested." (Participant 1). The outrage judgement for brands that get it wrong is stronger than the satisfaction judgement for brands that get it right. For example, "I wouldn't purchase the brand necessarily just because they stand for something, but I would stop purchasing that product if I knew, for example, that things were not quite right internally, they weren't ethical, they were racist, or they weren't diverse." (Participant 6).

4.3.3 Consumer personal responses and actions

The findings of this study show that consumers are willing to support the cause through personal responses and actions. While consumers did not attribute their responses directly to any brand activism activity, consumers were participating through self-education and reflection, amplifying the voices of others, protest, and having difficult conversations. Each of these responses and actions was prominent in the Black Lives Matter movement, which, as a movement, included brand participation.

Self-education and reflection

One of the most prominent personal consumer responses to the Black Lives Matter social movement was self-education and reflection. "My action is self-education" (Participant 5). Consumers identify self-education and reflection as a personally impactful action. "For me, it was more about educating myself. You know, I, I couldn't really comprehend or fathom what people go through on the daily. And it was about educating." (Participant 4).

Amplifying the voices of others

Consumers identify drawing attention to the voices of others as an impactful action that either individuals or a brand can take. Consumers highlighted the benefit that they received from those who had drawn attention to others' voices. "One of the most beautiful things or most educational things I saw shared... was a woman who

was black and I think her child was of mixed race... And he was sitting in her lap, and she recorded the conversation of her explaining what racism was to her son. And a friend of mine who has a young child of a similar age sent it to me... And, yeah, I just thought that was the most powerful educational thing that I could have read.” (Participant 11). Consumers also applaud brands that provide a platform to amplify the cause. For example, “The NBA, they empower their players more... A lot of these players like LeBron James, as you know, potentially a household name. He’s taking three minutes to talk about Breonna Taylor and how the police got off.” (Participant 4).

Protest

Some consumers felt that attending protests can be an impactful action if there is a belief in the cause, but others believed that protest participation could be considered virtue signalling and not impactful. “I participated in one of the Black Lives Matter protests, and I felt like people were posting [on social media] for the sake of showing that they were there.” (Participant 11). Moreover, some consumers seem undecided on the impact of protest and may feel a disconnect between the American movement and New Zealand-based support. “But it’s very different being in New Zealand where it feels a bit more performative in a way than it does over there” (Participant 3).

Having difficult conversations

Consumers also identify having difficult conversations as a personally impactful action. For example, “[I] had conversations with friends who I would go as far to say they were quite ignorant of the situation.” (Participant 11) and “It did open up conversations for me to have with people around racist remarks and casual racism in New Zealand” (Participant 18). However, consumers attribute this response to the social movement rather than a response to specific brand actions.

4.3.4 Consumer uncertainty around how to engage and respond

Consumers in this study identified feelings of uncertainty about whether and how to engage with the Black Lives Matter movement discussed in this study. Some consumers were apprehensive about whether they should engage with the cause since they could not see a personal connection. In addition, although many expressed support for the cause, they also identified the social pressure that was present at the

time and felt they were ‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’. There did not seem to be a universally acceptable way of participating.

Damned if you do, damned if you don’t

Consumers identify that they struggle to either participate or be quiet in the Black Lives Matter movement without receiving backlash. “You can never say the right thing. You’re always offending someone.” (Participant 1). Consumers also highlight the social pressure that they face when trying to decide whether to take a sociopolitical stand “There’s judgement from people going if you don’t do it, you’re against it. If you do it, you’re jumping on the bandwagon.” (Participant 5).

Not sure whether it’s my place

When there is no obvious personal connection to the cause, consumers can struggle to find their place. Consumers in this study identified feeling concerned about a lack of connection to the cause. For example, “where I got stuck at the time was trying to figure out how do you, how do you integrate this if it doesn’t affect you to the same level. There was a disconnect because it was very America-focused.” (Participant 4). In addition, consumers also identified a lack of connection with those affected “If you’re white can you not, like, you know... Can I talk about it? Should I have a stand on this? Or should I not? Should I sit back and let everyone else?” (Participant 6). This led to consumer uncertainty about whether it was their place to participate and respond to the social movement.

4.3.5 Summary of consumers’ responses to brands taking a sociopolitical stand

Consumers’ responses to brands taking a sociopolitical stand is the second main theme in this data analysis and includes the second order themes of consumers as the judge of activism authenticity, consumer responses to brand, consumer personal actions and responses, and consumer uncertainty around how to engage and respond. These themes, along with the first order concepts that they contain, are summarised in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Summary and description of first order concepts and second order themes relating to consumers' responses to brands taking a sociopolitical stand.

Second order themes	First order concepts	Description	Exemplar Quotes
Consumers as the judge of activism authenticity	Alignment with practice	When consumers are judging a brand's activism activity, they look past brand messaging and consider internal practice. If there is misalignment between communication and practice, consumers perceive activity to be inauthentic.	"It's all good for brands to like vocally support something or post something. But it's like, are your staff diverse, are you doing your best to create a comfortable environment for your staff and for the people that you work with, or with people that you serve. I think it is important to consider you actually enacting what you're saying." (P16) "It's the actioning that I think can really help create some sort of change." (P4) "I do feel that they need to take that action in order to make it clear to the rest of their staff and employees and customers that they do believe in the cause" (P11) "It's easy to say 'I support this', but live it." (P14)
	Alignment with values	When consumers are judging a brand's activism activity, they look past brand messaging and consider if the brand truly values and believes in the cause. If there is misalignment between communication and values, consumers perceive activity to be inauthentic.	"I think it's the follow-through. Like, you can share a post. That's cool. But like, what else? Like do you really believe that?" (P18) "I think intention has to be there because words can only do so much. Their actions speak louder. Lame as that sounds like it does." (P11) "I think brands need to know that as well. They can do good things. And yes, I know there's profit behind telling people they've done good things, but they don't have to do that. And you could just be a good person and not expect anything else." (P9)
	Alignment with history	When consumers are judging a brand's activism activity, some look to past activity and brand positioning to inform whether the brand is participating authentically. If a brand doesn't have a track record of taking a stand on sociopolitical issues, some consumers consider their brand activism activity inauthentic.	"I think it's just awkward. You can tell that the brand doesn't align to that issue, but they're just jumping on. If they were a brand that's always in the news and like, were quite [vocal] about political issues and all that kind of stuff, then that makes sense to me but, a lot of them aren't in that direction yet." (P15)
	Commitment to the cause	When consumers are judging a brand's activism activity, some are forgiving of misaligned previous practice and positioning. In this case, consumers look for an acknowledgement that previous practice was not up to standard and commitment to the cause going forward.	"If people can grow and change their views and they can be educated to change, so can brands. Yeah, they may be late to the party, but maybe this has had enough of an impact on them to show that we need to change what we are doing. And then it comes down the follow-through." (P18) "It's okay to take a stance and realise that maybe you haven't been practising things up until now the right way. But if you're not taking action within your own walls, then how can people trust your brand?" (P16)

		If a brand does commit to change going forward, some consumers will consider their brand activism activity authentic.	“So, part of me is a little bit gracious to this idea of bandwagon-ing because I think if you’re late to the party, at least you’ve come to the party. And I come to this idea that it’s the follow-through because you might have just arrived now, but because you can’t change the past, you might have not seen it as an issue before. But yeah, you’ve come late, but then it’s about moving forward.” (P17)
Consumer responses to brand	Satisfaction with brands that get it right	If brands take a sociopolitical stand in a way that consumers consider authentic, consumers are satisfied but not delighted. The satisfaction judgement for brands that get it right is weaker than the outrage judgement for brands that get it wrong.	“I would say I give it time before I re-engage with that brand [that previously had misaligned internal practice but has created change]. If that’s the kind of practices that are currently underway. But it definitely makes me think they’re on the right path. So maybe forgiving, but not forgetting.” (P11) “It can solidify your opinion depending on the brand to show that you’re supporting the right thing to a certain degree.” (P11) “I think I am not swayed necessary by a brand doing something right.” (P2)
	Outrage with brands that get it wrong	If brands take a sociopolitical stand in a way that consumers consider inauthentic, consumers are outraged. The outrage judgement for brands that get it wrong is stronger than the satisfaction judgement for brands that get it right.	“I know if a brand has done it negatively or if they are way more performative in their approach, I’m more likely to not go with that brand. So, I’m not inherently swayed by a brand doing something positive. I’m more swayed by the fact that doing it terribly wrong.” (P2) “If they’re taking a stand and not doing it well, I’m more likely to not use them. And I would follow cancel culture. Because they did it wrong once, so I’d go nah, not interested.” (P1) “I wouldn’t purchase the brand necessarily just because they stand for something, but I would stop purchasing that product if I knew, for example, that things were not quite right internally, they weren’t ethical, they were racist, or they weren’t diverse.” (P6)
Consumer personal responses and actions	Self-education and reflection	Consumers identify self-education as a personally impactful action but attribute this to the social movement rather than specific brand actions.	“My action is self-education.” (P5) “For me, it was more about educating myself. You know, I, I couldn’t really comprehend or fathom what people go through on the daily. And it was about educating.” (P4)
	Amplifying the voices of others	Consumers identify acting by drawing attention to the voices of others as an impactful action that either they or a brand can take.	“The NBA, they empower their players more... A lot of these players like LeBron James, as you know, potentially a household name. He’s taking three minutes to talk about Breonna Taylor and how the police got off.” (P4) “One of the most beautiful things or most educational things I saw shared... was a woman who was black and I think her child was of mixed race... And he was sitting in her lap, and she was she recorded the conversation of her explaining what racism was to her son. And a friend of mine who has a young child of a similar age sent it to me... And, yeah, I just thought that was the most powerful educational thing that I could have read.” (P11)

	Protest	Protest can be an impactful action if there is belief in the cause, but some protest participation could be seen as virtue signalling.	“I participated in one of the Black Lives Matter protests, and I felt like people were posting [on social media] for the sake of showing that they were there.” (P11)
	Having difficult conversations	Consumers identify having difficult conversations as a personally impactful action but attribute this as a response to the social movement rather than a response to specific brand actions.	“It did open up conversations for me to have with people around racist remarks and casual racism in New Zealand, which we still have obviously.” (P4) “I chose not to post anything, but I instead contacted the people I know who were most affected and had conversations with them about it and also had conversations with friends who I would go as far to say they were quite ignorant of the situation.” (P11)
Consumer uncertainty around how to engage and respond	Damned if you do, damned if you don't	Consumers identify that they struggle to either participate or be quiet in the Black Lives Matter movement without receiving backlash.	“You can never say the right thing. You're always offending someone.” (P1) “You either talk about everything, or you talk about nothing at all. But, if you talk about everything, you will always be shouting; if you don't talk about anything, then you don't have a stand. You don't.... are you ignorant? Do you not care?” (P1) “There's judgement from people going, if you don't do it, you're against it. If you do it, you're jumping on the bandwagon.” (P5) “I find it quite horrible when everyone started blacking out their Instagram... and then there was all this backlash. The people saying like 'you're using the wrong hashtag'. And I was like, man, people are just trying to take a stance and do the right thing.” (P18)
	Not sure whether it's my place	When there is not an obvious personal connection to the cause, consumers can struggle to find their place.	“I find this situation really awkward. If you're white can you not, like, you know... Can I talk about it? Should I have a stand on this? Or should I not? Should I sit back and let everyone else? Like, that's where it gets hard to know.” (P6) “There's all this information, all these organisations. But how do I fit into it?... I think that's where I got stuck at the time was trying to figure out how do you, how do you integrate this if it doesn't affect you to the same level. There was a disconnect because it was very America-focused..” (P4)

4.4 CONSUMERS' EXPECTATIONS GOING FORWARD FOR BRANDS TAKING A SOCIOPOLITICAL STAND

During the final part of the focus groups, consumers were asked to consider how brand activism could be best used moving forward to achieve meaningful outcomes for the cause. This included considering how they would structure a brand activism campaign and providing advice for brands considering taking a sociopolitical stand. Consumers emphasised the need for internal commitment if brands were to take a sociopolitical stand. Consumers want brands to reflect any external campaign or

communication with internal commitment. In addition, consumers are not looking for brands to use marketing campaigns to take a sociopolitical stand but instead use their external platform to communicate their change implementation or share important messaging from relevant sources. The findings in this theme echo consumers' interpretations and responses to brands taking a sociopolitical stand, but there are differences in the language and tone used when consumers talk about their expectations.

4.4.1 Internal commitment

In support of the findings in sections 4.2 and 4.3, when consumers are thinking about the way forward for brand activism, internal commitment is the most prominent finding. Echoing the findings in previous sections, consumers expect alignment with practice, values and a commitment to the cause. Further, consumers also want brands to invest in education within their company before making an external stand. The absence of an internal commitment to match any external messaging is considered inauthentic by consumers.

Alignment with practice

Once again, consumers expect internal practice to reflect the brand's stance. Alignment with practice is now considered a bare minimum, "It needs to be coming from internally first, and then you can try externally." (Participant 12), and without internal practice, external communication is not authentic. For example, "it's also looking internally to make sure that what you're actually saying lines up with the values in your company. Because it's very easy to say something and not live it." (Participant 2).

Alignment with values

Another recurring finding throughout this study is consumers' preference for alignment with values. Consumers expect brand values to align with an external brand's stance. For example, "Don't be like cool, we have to completely re-jig, our goal, our motto, everything. Like still be you, be authentic in how you're relating to the political or social issue" (Participant 4). The values should run strongly throughout the organisation for the stand to be authentic "Put your people first and live your values from the top down and be authentic." (Participant 5).

Commitment to the cause

Again, consumers want brands to commit beyond a cause's popular period/trendiness. For example, "If you are going to have to stand up for an issue or some sort of social or political cause to follow through with it" (Participant 13) and "Be in it for the long haul because I've noticed lots of brands. It's like in that moment... or when they're on it, they're on it. And then after it's like oooh, you're very quiet." (Participant 14). Consumers can be forgiving of past transgressions so long as there is a commitment to support as a long-term practice. For example, "Show consistency and clear intent and support just so that you're continuing past like the popular period with, say, Black Lives Matter." (Participant 8).

Education and reflection

Consumers identify that if taking a sociopolitical stand, brands should be educated on their position "Do your research, be educated, understand that you're genuinely going into it." (Participant 5). Furthermore, brands can educate their staff within their company "Maybe getting involved in education, like in the sense of there are lots of programmes like racial equity programmes and stuff like that, for corporates." (Participant 14).

4.4.2 External communication, not campaigning

Along with internal commitment, consumers are looking for external communication, not campaigning. Consumers want brands to set aside the traditional, highly produced marketing and advertising approaches that some have criticised as a marketing ploy. Instead, consumers want brands to focus on using external channels (i.e. social media, website, traditional media) to communicate transparency and targets that support the cause, acknowledge mistakes, and commit to change. In addition, consumers are open to brands using their platform to amplify the voices of those more educated on the cause than they are. These consumer expectations reflect what consumers want to see in brand activism and are explored further in the sections below.

Transparency and targets

Consumers want brands to show them what they are working toward and how they are tracking toward their goals. Vague statements are not enough. "Instead of just showing support through slogans and campaigns but to actually have a view to be like, this is what we're doing." (Participant 13). Consumers expect concrete and transparent

metrics when brands take a sociopolitical stand. “I want you to tell me how much you are doing by this date. Like, I want those SMART goals. I want stuff that’s specific and measurable and realistic timelines.” (Participant 14).

Acknowledgement of mistakes and commitment to change

Consumers can be forgiving of brands that have made mistakes in the past but expect transparency “If they have made some sort of mistake, they should be transparent about it” (Participant 16). If brands were not always well aligned to a cause, they should disclose any errors and communicate what they are doing to move forward with transparency. For example, “It’s even more endearing if the brands are kind of like, ‘you know what, we’ve been neglecting gender, equality or something and we’re going to rectify it by doing these things and taking a stand at the same time’.” (Participant 9).

Amplifying the voices of others

Consumers identify that brands can draw attention to the voices of those more educated or pertinent to the causes. This is considered an impactful use of a brand’s social media platforms because consumers identify that it is difficult for every brand to be highly educated on every cause. For example, “it’s not practically possible for all teams and all organisations and all brands to be diverse and have a voice... But if I was in charge of a campaign, I would just create a platform that enables them to have a voice rather than me having my own. I’ve got the platform; I’ve got the reach. I’ve got the influence. And I just let the ones that have the voice but don’t have the platform, reach, and influence have a say.” (Participant 1).

4.4.3 Summary of consumers’ expectations going forward for brands taking a sociopolitical stand

Consumers’ expectations going forward for taking a sociopolitical stand is a main theme in this data analysis. This main theme includes the second order themes of internal commitment and external communication, not campaigning. These second order themes, along with the first order concepts that they contain, are summarised in

Table 6 below.

Table 6. Summary and description of first order concepts and second order themes relating to consumers' expectations going forward for brands taking a sociopolitical stand.

Second order themes	First order concepts	Description	Exemplar Quotes
Internal commitment	Alignment with practice	Consumers expect internal practices to reflect the brand's stance. Without internal practice, external communication is not authentic.	<p>"It's also looking at it holistically like it's not just a marketing campaign, it's also looking internally to make sure that what you're actually saying lines up with the values in your company. Because it's very easy to say something and not live it, and I think if you if you're truly passionate and you want to do it, then actually it should affect every part of your business, not just where your marketing dollars are being spent." (P2)</p> <p>"I also think it needs.. like it needs to be coming from internally first and you can try externally." (P12)</p>
	Alignment with values	Consumers expect brand values to align with an external brand's stance. The values should run strongly throughout the organisation for the stand to be authentic.	<p>"I think for me, it's authenticity. So assuming wherever your sort of wheelhouse is, whatever industry you're in, if you have a clear focus in what you do and you want to also advocate for something, do it authentically. Don't be like cool; we have to completely re-jig our goal, our motto, everything. Like still be you, be authentic in how you're relating to the political or social issue" (P4)</p> <p>"Put your people first and live your values from the top down, and be authentic." (P5)</p>
	Commitment to the cause	Consumers want brands to commit beyond a cause's popular period/trendiness. Alignment or support of a cause should be a long-term practice.	<p>"If you are going to have to stand up for an issue or some sort of social or political cause to follow through with it" (P13)</p> <p>"Be consistent, like just keep doing what you are doing... I just want to see that they're consistent. I mean, keep going and keep doing. Otherwise, they're just like doing three months, and they're like, no, I don't care about it anymore. That's just for the marketing stuff." (P12)</p> <p>"Show consistency and clear intent and support just so that you're continuing past like the popular period with, say, Black Lives Matter." (P8)</p> <p>"Be in it for the long haul because I've noticed lots of brands. It's like in that moment, or they're on it, they're on it, they're on it. And then after it's like oooh, you're very quiet." (P14)</p>
	Education and reflection	If taking a sociopolitical stand, brands should be educated on their position and educate staff.	<p>"Do your research, be educated, understand that you're genuinely going into it." (P5)</p> <p>"Maybe getting involved in education, like in sense of there are lots of programmes like racial equity programmes and stuff like that, for corporates." (P14)</p> <p>"There's the education around... it needs to come internally first, and it needs to come from an educational point." (P18)</p>

External communication, not campaigning	Transparency and targets	Consumers want brands to show them what they are working toward and how they are tracking toward their goals. Vague statements are not enough.	<p>“I think it’s for brands to actually show what they’ve done to support... Instead of just showing support through slogans and campaigns but to actually have a view to be like, this is what we’re doing.” (P13)</p> <p>“SMART goals. Because then once they’ve achieved and everyone’s on the board, then you can start marketing that. And having that as part of your story, in your narrative. Without that, I feel like there’s a missing piece.” (P15)</p> <p>“If you imagine if Nike listed how the pay equality across the different races, across their business and show that there’s no inequality” (P11)</p> <p>“I want you to tell me how much you are doing by this, by this date. Like, I want. Like those SMART goals. I want stuff that’s specific and measurable and realistic timelines.” (P14)</p>
	Acknowledgement of mistakes and commitment to change	If brands were not always well aligned to a cause, they should disclose any errors and communicate what they are doing to move forward with transparency.	<p>“It’s even more endearing if the brands are kind of like, ‘you know what, we’ve been neglecting gender, equality or something, and we’re going to rectify it by doing these things and taking a stand at the same time’.” (P9)</p> <p>“Views do change; perhaps even values of the company do change. So, if you’ve arrived late to the party, just own it, and then just talk through perhaps your intentions and process moving forward, so be transparent about it.” (P17)</p> <p>“If they have made some sort of mistake, they should be transparent about it” (P16)</p>
	Amplifying the voices of others	A brand can draw attention to the voices of those more educated or pertinent to the causes. This is considered an impactful use of a brand’s social media platforms.	<p>“So my background, I’m Senior Marketing Manager for the Travel Corporation... and the stance we took was there was an element where we did social media posts, especially Contiki - we support, this is where we stand, and we started elevating black voices. So, hearing their voices, using our social channels, our influence to be able to raise their voices and their opinions.” (P2)</p> <p>“My opinion at the moment is it’s not practically possible for all teams and all organisations and all brands to be diverse and have a voice... But if I was in charge of a campaign, I would just create a platform that enables them to have a voice rather than me having my own. I’ve got the platform I’ve got to reach. I’ve got the influence. And I just let the ones that have the voice but don’t have the platform reach and influence have a say.” (P1)</p>

4.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter presents the findings from three focus groups and includes the three main themes, including consumers' interpretation of, responses to, and expectations of brands taking a sociopolitical stand. When looking at consumers' interpretation of brands taking a sociopolitical stand, consumers believe that brands are responsible for participating in sociopolitical issues due to their position in society, their resources, and their influence. Consumers' preference for authentic participation (alignment with practice, values and history) and criticism of inauthentic participation (jumping on the bandwagon or using sociopolitical issues as a marketing ploy) come through strongly. The preference for authentic brand activism returns in consumers' responses to brands taking a sociopolitical stand; here, consumers are acting as the judge of activism authenticity. It is also worth noting that consumer responses to brands are unbalanced; consumers are only satisfied with brands that get activism right (through authentic alignment) but are outraged with brands that get activism wrong (through inauthentic alignment).

When probing participants for their personal responses to and engagement with the Black Lives Matter movement, consumers attribute their responses to the movement rather than a specific brand's support/opposition. Nevertheless, consumers consider self-education, amplifying the voices of others, protests and having difficult conversations as personally impactful actions that they can take to support the cause. However, they also note the social pressure, difficulty in taking a stand in such a controversial area, and apprehension on whether it was their place to engage with the cause.

The findings from the first two themes lead to consumers' expectations of brands going forward, prioritising internal commitment to match any external stance; this means alignment with practice, alignment with values, commitment to the cause and education within the company. Moreover, consumers are not looking for traditional marketing campaigns but rather using their external channels to convey transparency, targets, acknowledgement of wrongdoing, and amplification of the voices of those more educated on the issue. The implications and theoretical relevance of these findings are discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER

This research aimed to understand how brands should design brand activism campaigns to encourage impactful consumer responses such as donations, attending protests, signing petitions or lobbying for and promoting change in other ways. When approaching this study, it was expected that the focus groups would uncover factors for a successful brand activism campaign. It was hoped that specific campaign elements (e.g. message source or type of appeal) that most effectively encourage impactful consumer support responses would be uncovered. When beginning this study in late 2019, brand activism campaigns were relatively rare, with seemingly clear distinctions in execution and results. For example, Nike's 'Dream Crazy' campaign featured Colin Kaepernick, a spokesperson with credibility in the Black Lives Matter movement. In contrast, PepsiCo's 'Live for Now' campaign featured Kendall Jenner, someone without a history or credibility in activism. Hickman (2019) suggested that campaign elements such as a credible spokesperson could create a more successful brand activism campaign and create more impactful consumer responses. However, throughout this study, the Black Lives Matter movement became more prominent, and the number of brand activism activities increased drastically.

Along with divisiveness around the Black Lives Matter movement, America went through an incredibly divisive time in 2020. The American election encouraged divisiveness between Trump supporters and Biden supporters (Pew Research Centre, 2020). Further, there was extreme polarisation regarding the government management of the coronavirus outbreak, with 24% of Trump supporters saying the management of the outbreak was very important to their vote, and 82% of Biden supporters saying it was very important to their vote (Pew Research Centre, 2020). This environment of divisiveness and polarisation contributed to an increase in brand activism activities and changed the consumer interpretations, responses and expectations of brands taking a sociopolitical stand (Ritson, 2020). The standards have changed; as brand activism becomes more widespread, consumers' appreciation of it also becomes more sophisticated, and consumers' standards increase. This chapter will elaborate on

consumer interpretations, responses and expectations of brands taking a sociopolitical stand in this era of brand activism, uncovered in the current study.

5.2 MAIN THEME ONE: CONSUMERS' INTERPRETATION OF BRANDS TAKING A SOCIOPOLITICAL STAND

The first main theme discovered through thematic analysis and the Gioia et al. (2013) data structure was *consumers' interpretation of brands taking a sociopolitical stand*. This theme includes three second order themes of *authentic participation (1)*, *inauthentic participation (2)*, and *brand's responsibility to participate (3)*, which are explained further in the subsequent subsections. The overarching main theme describes consumers' general thoughts and feelings on whether brands should take a sociopolitical stand and why they hold that belief. In line with Sprout Social (2020), who found that 70% of respondents agreed that it is important for brands to take a stand on sociopolitical issues, most focus group participants in this study believed that brands have a responsibility to take a sociopolitical stand. While this appetite for brands to take a sociopolitical stand was not surprising, it was interesting to see that authenticity (and inauthenticity) was the primary determinant of consumers' enthusiasm for brands to take a sociopolitical stand.

5.2.1 Authentic participation

Authentic brand activism, formally defined by Vredenburg et al. (2020), should be purpose- and values-driven, address a controversial sociopolitical issue (either progressively or conservatively) and, importantly, must include a contribution to the sociopolitical issue through both messaging and practice. Both consumers who were complimentary or critical of brands taking a sociopolitical stand used authenticity (or inauthenticity) as the primary determinant of their position. As Vredenburg et al. (2020) outline, authentic brand activism requires “both intangible (messaging) and intangible (practice) commitments to a sociopolitical cause” (p.448). In the second order theme of *authentic participation*, consumers highlight that they look for three main areas of authenticity: *alignment with practice*, *alignment with values*, and *alignment with history*. These areas represent the first order concepts discovered through thematic analysis and are further explained below.

Alignment with practice

Scholars echo the findings of this study, and state brand's stances must go beyond external messaging and advocacy to be authentic (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). As Sobande (2019) suggests, when it comes to taking a sociopolitical stand, brand approaches to demonstrating support can range from light touch subtle nods to a cause, to explicit support for a social cause, to financial contribution to a cause. When looking broadly at consumers' interpretation of brands taking a sociopolitical stand, consumers in this study did not offer specific examples of the types of practices they want to see from brands. However, existing literature suggests that practices could include: change to corporate policy and practices (Kapitan et al., 2019), financial contribution to the cause (Crimmins & Horn, 1996), or corporate partnerships that aim to assist social change (Duane & Domegan, 2019). Sobande (2019) argues that brands who aim to market themselves as being concerned with sociopolitical issues may be participating in surface-level "woke-washing" and should be held to account when there is no sustained commitment to supporting the cause. Practice should go beyond representation in superficial tactics in marketing material and should consider the brand's inner workings (Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2018). Later in this discussion, it is highlighted that consumers consistently see alignment with practice as a foundation to authentic brand activism.

Alignment with values

Consumers also look for brands to believe in what they say and align any external messaging with their internal values and culture. As Vredenburg et al. (2020) outline, brands should have explicit prosocial brand values that align with any external messaging to achieve authentic brand activism. Consumers in this study echoed this sentiment, looking for external messaging to align with the brand ethos and for brands to believe in their stance, as illustrated by the following quote "If it's not something that they actually totally believe in...that's a bit pointless really." (Participant 3). Alignment with values works hand-in-hand with alignment with practice, and consumers look for both components in authentic brand activism. Like alignment with practice, alignment with values can be adapted and improved upon through purposeful evaluation processes and a commitment to change.

In addition to consumers looking for alignment between brand's values and actions, they also look for signals of brand's values in order to purchase from brands

that align with their personal values and beliefs for example, “I want to spend my money on brands and businesses that share a similar, you know, ideology as I do.” (Participant 16). Past literature shows us that, at least in theory, consumers want to purchase from brands that align with their personal values (Bucic et al., 2012; Jacobs et al., 2018; Oberseder et al., 2011). While many consumers indicate a preference for ethical brands or brands that align with personal values, there does still seem to be a persistent attitude-behaviour gap whereby consumers may still not purchase from a brand that they align with (Bucic et al., 2012; Jacobs et al., 2018; Oberseder et al., 2011). This notion was also supported by participants in this study who highlighted that they are not as likely to purchase from a brand that aligns with their values but are more likely to avoid a brand that misaligns with their values “I’m not inherently swayed by a brand doing something positive. I’m more swayed by the fact that they’re doing it terribly wrong” (Participant 7). Thus, an alignment between brand and personal values could cause some favourable attitudes toward the brand, but misalignment between brand and personal values is very likely to drive negative attitudes and behaviours toward the brand, a point that returns later in this chapter.

Alignment with history

Some consumers in this study want to see congruency between a brand’s past actions and their sociopolitical stance, as illustrated by the following quote: “It comes across really awkward because I haven’t seen them do anything up until then and to me, it just seems very, very strange and misaligned” (Participant 15). This critique of brand history supports the brand authenticity view of brand political activism outlined by Moorman (2020). Moorman (2020) explains that consumers will resonate more with a brand that remains true to its position. Moving too far away from a position can cause consumers to think critically about whether the brand’s motivations are authentic or inauthentic.

In contrast, Vredenburg et al. (2020) highlight that sometimes incongruence between brand reputation and cause could favour the brand. Vredenburg et al. (2020) explain that a consumer’s interpretation of a brand taking an unexpected sociopolitical stand depends on the level of prior prosocial activity and the level of sociopolitical cause incongruency. If a brand has little prosocial history, consumers will likely be delighted if they support a moderately incongruent sociopolitical cause but outraged if the brand aligns with a completely incongruent sociopolitical cause. In contrast, if a

brand has a solid prosocial history and supports an entirely congruent sociopolitical cause, consumers will likely be satisfied but not delighted, illustrating the evolution of brand activism and consumer expectations (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Based on this study's findings, *alignment with history* appears to hold greater value for some consumers, whereas others accept incongruency as initial attempts to enter brand activism conversations. To enter into brand activism conversations authentically, brands must own up to any past transgressions and show transparency in how they seek to improve, including a tangible change to internal practice and values. This carries through this study as consumers increasingly expect brands to commit to strong internal values and for their internal practice to match any external stance. This differentiation is explained further in the consumer responses (Section 5.3) and consumer expectations (Section 5.4) sections of this discussion.

5.2.2 Inauthentic participation

Inauthentic participation is inextricably linked to the previously discussed authentic participation. As Vredenburg et al. (2020) outline, inauthentic brand activism involves activism messaging without meaningful engagement, prosocial corporate practice and values. This misalignment of messaging and practice has been considered deceptive and is termed 'woke washing' (Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2018). The findings section noted that both authenticity and inauthenticity are two sides of the same coin. Both highlight consumers' preference for authentic brand activism – the difference between these themes is how they are framed – positively (authentic participation) or negatively (inauthentic participation). Consumers highlight two main areas of inauthentic practice: *jumping on the bandwagon and marketing ploy*. These areas represent the first order concepts discovered through thematic analysis and are further explained below.

Jumping on the bandwagon

Consumers are critical when brands jump on a trendy cause, and it is considered inauthentic to align with a cause only because it has public approval. Scholars have highlighted that some brands may take a sociopolitical stand in response to market trends (Campbell, 2007; Georgallis, 2017). When brands respond to market trends, they often do so with a sense of urgency and without aligned practice, values, and history (Georgallis, 2017). In this study, consumers echoed this sentiment and are critical of brands who take a sociopolitical stance only when it is trendy to participate

and neglect to implement any supporting change in corporate practices. According to the Vredenburg et al. (2020) typology of brand activism, brands that engage in a high level of activist marketing messaging (perhaps when responding to market trends) but exhibit a low level of prosocial corporate practice engage in inauthentic brand activism.

In comparison to authentic brand activism (high levels of prosocial corporate practice and activism marketing messaging), inauthentic brand activism can be judged more harshly by consumers, as seen in this study. However, for brands that previously had low activism marketing messaging and low prosocial activity (classed as an absence of brand activism in the Vredenburg et al. (2020) typology), perhaps an increase in activism marketing messaging could be considered progress toward the consumer gold-standard, authentic brand activism. This notion is also supported by some consumers who believe that brands that become involved with a cause during a trendy period can still make some progress toward authentic brand activism. For example, “If people can grow and change...so can brands. Yeah, they may be late to the party, but maybe this has had enough of an impact on them to show that we need to change what we are doing. And then it comes down the follow-through.” (Participant, 18).

Marketing ploy

Consumers can also be critical of brands taking a sociopolitical stand as a marketing strategy if it comes across as purely profit-driven. Edelman (2019) supports this position and describes how consumers can interpret a brand’s stance on sociopolitical issues as a marketing tactic to increase sales without implementing any change in corporate practices. While consumers identify this as inauthentic, in this study, there is some disagreement on whether it is entirely negative to use a sociopolitical stance as a marketing tactic. “If we’re only going to get a brand who’s paying money to make their image look better. I’m glad they’re spending money on something positive.” (Participant 2). Vredenburg et al. (2020) state that if consumers interpret brand activism as inauthentic, it is considered less effective to drive social change. However, as suggested by Participant 2 in this study, inauthentic brand activism may be better than no brand activism at all. Many consumers are open to value-based purchasing, and that brands taking a stand allow consumers to assess the degree of self-brand connection according to their personal stance (Escallas, 2004;

Graeff, 1996). When brands successfully and authentically align with a sociopolitical stance, aligned consumers are likely to offer their support through purchase, improved attitude toward the brand or positive word-of-mouth (George & Leidner, 2019; Hydock et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020). This indicates that consumers can accept brands using a sociopolitical stance in marketing activity so long as it is more than just a sales tactic (Hydock et al., 2019).

5.2.3 Brand's responsibility to participate

Aside from authentic and inauthentic participation, the other second order theme to emerge was consumers' interpretation of the *brand's responsibility to take a sociopolitical stand*. Consumers want brands to participate in social and political conversations, with 70% of respondents agreeing that it is important for brands to take a stand on important issues like race relations, human rights and immigration (Sprout Social, 2020). Many consumers want to purchase from brands that support a sociopolitical stance that they agree with (Shetty et al., 2019). However, this section's findings take this one step further and explore how consumers interpret brands to have a responsibility to take a sociopolitical stand. This includes three types of brand responsibility that consumers identified: *social responsibility, using resources for good*, and *power and influence*. This echoes the USA Business Roundtable (2019) statement, which states that the purpose of a corporation is to promote an "economy that serves all Americans" and commits to delivering value for customers, being ethical and fair with suppliers, investing in employees, supporting local communities and creating long-term shareholder value. In a climate where trust in traditional institutions is declining (Edelman, 2019), brands are given an opportunity to build trust through thoughtful use of their power and influence. 74% of consumers believe that a brand's impact on society will help build brand trust, with 85% of consumers wanting brands to solve their personal problems, and 80% of consumers who want brands to solve society's problems (Edelman, 2019). Consumers are putting the onus on brands to participate, and consumers in this study highlight three types of brand responsibility – explained below.

Social responsibility

Consumers interpret brands to have a social responsibility to take a sociopolitical stand. Consumers believe that brands should feel a sense of responsibility to impact society positively, and it is considered a "cop-out" (Participant 11) not to take a

position on sociopolitical issues. Hoppner and Vadakkepatt (2019) support this and explain that many stakeholders, including customers and employees, are increasingly expecting businesses to exert their moral authority on sociopolitical issues. As Hoppner and Vadakkepatt (2019) also explain, brands can be pressured into taking a sociopolitical stand if confronted with social pressure from stakeholders. However, consumers in this study indicate an inherent social responsibility for brands to take a sociopolitical stand; “they have a social responsibility” (Participant 16). On the whole, consumers in this study suggested that brands should be motivated by their position in society rather than social pressure.

Using resources for good

Consumers also interpret brands to have a responsibility to use their resources for good. In particular, consumers highlight the monetary contributions that brands (especially prominent brands) can put toward backing a sociopolitical stance. Financial contributions to causes are not a new concept and are prominent in CSR practices (Crimmins and Horn, 1996). Further, some brand activism campaigns have included financial contributions, such as the Gillette donation to charities aiming to reduce toxic masculinity (Al-Muslim, 2019). However, it is interesting to note that financial contributions only appear strongly when consumers think broadly about brands taking a sociopolitical stand. In Section 5.3, where consumers reflect on specific brand activism examples and Section 5.4, where consumers lay out their expectations going forward for brands to take a stand, a financial contribution is notably absent, and discussion favours change of internal corporate practices over financial contribution. Vredenburg et al. (2020) suggest that a one-off donation to a cause is likely to have a weaker impact on the cause than making long-term changes to corporate practices that reflect support for a cause. Perhaps consumers also recognise this and, when tasked with thinking more specifically, consumers favour internal change over financial contribution.

Power and influence

Finally, and linked to the previous two sub-themes, consumers interpret brands as responsible for using their power and influence to support sociopolitical issues. As French and Raven (1959) explain, influence refers to the capacity to spur a change in thoughts, attitudes and behaviours – it could be argued that a brand would take a sociopolitical stand to exert influence in support of their stance. In a brand activism

context, a brand's likelihood to influence is made up of two components; power (including credibility in the eyes of the target market) and platform (the means to reach the target market) (French & Raven, 1959; Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019). To this end, respondents in this study also identified that brands are in a unique position of power, including buying power, being an entity that fans will listen to and having a large platform with a wide reach. Consumers in this study on balance believed that brands should use these affordances to take a sociopolitical stand.

5.3 MAIN THEME TWO: CONSUMERS' RESPONSES TO BRANDS TAKING A SOCIOPOLITICAL STAND

The second main theme discovered through thematic analysis and the Gioia et al. (2013) data structure was consumers' *responses to brands taking a sociopolitical stand*. This theme also includes four second order themes of *consumers as the judge of activism authenticity (1)*, *consumer responses to brand (2)*, *consumer personal responses and actions (3)*, and *consumer uncertainty around how to engage and respond (4)*, which are explained further in the subsequent subsections. The overarching main theme describes consumers' responses to Black Lives Matter brand activism activities that followed George Floyd's May 2020 death. It was expected that by asking consumers to recall their responses to a specific event that instigated brand activism campaigns, this study would uncover some insights into how brands can craft brand activism campaigns to elicit consumer support for the cause. However, it became apparent that consumer responses to brand activism activities were directed toward the brand, not the cause. This was an unexpected finding in this study as the focus group structure probed for cause-directed consumer responses. Indeed, this study aimed to understand how to create meaningful cause outcomes. However, despite probing, it became clear that consumers' personal responses to brand activism activity focused on the brand, while the responsibility was placed on the brand to positively affect the cause. The brand-directed consumer responses that emerged in the focus groups included *consumers as the judge of activism authenticity* and *consumer responses to brand*. When probed about consumer's cause-directed activities and responses to demonstrate support for the cause, it became clear that consumer's cause-directed actions were not a response to specific brand activism activities but rather a response to the general Black Lives Matter movement. This included *consumers' personal responses* and *consumer uncertainty around how to engage and respond*.

These unexpected findings highlight the evolution of brand activism in the past few years. In 2018, Nike's 'Dream Crazy' campaign was praised for taking a controversial stand using the controversial spokesperson, Colin Kaepernick (Hickman, 2019). However, it is clear that consumers have become harder to impress. Nike's 2020 Black Lives Matter brand activism campaign, 'For once, Don't Do It', included more explicit support for the Black Lives Matter Movement than their 2018 campaign, but received criticism when Nike's internal practices (namely, lack of black representation on the board) did not reflect Nike's external messaging (Ritson, 2020). The change in consumer standards is evident, and consumers are harder to delight with standard marketing campaign structures. Consumers are now looking for unmistakable authenticity in any external messaging. Furthermore, even when consumers approve of brand activism activities, they are unlikely to change their personal responses and actions toward a cause. Therefore, rather than uncovering the proposed aim of understanding how to elicit impactful consumer responses, this study uncovered the elements consumers look for in impactful brand activism activities.

5.3.1 Consumers as the judge of activism authenticity

One surprising second order theme to emerge from consumers' responses to brands taking a sociopolitical stance was consumers acting as the judge of activism authenticity. In Section 5.2, authentic participation was highlighted as essential in consumer's general thoughts regarding whether brands should take a sociopolitical stand. However, the findings of this section focus on consumers' specific responses to Black Lives Matter brand activism activities following George Floyd's death in May 2020. It was expected that this study could uncover concrete examples of responses to brand activism activity, such as donating to the cause or attending a protest. However, instead, the findings of this study saw authentic participation come to the fore of discussion, once again – this repeated some of the same notions as consumers' general thoughts on whether brands should take a sociopolitical stand, but took this a step further. In particular, when reflecting on specific responses, consumers saw themselves as the judge of brand activism authenticity rather than responding to brand activism activities personally. Consumers outlined the criteria for judging brand activism activities which have strong parallels to their interpretation of brands taking a sociopolitical stand (Section 5.2) and include: *alignment with practice*, *alignment with values*, *alignment with history*, and *commitment to the cause*. These areas

represent the first order concepts discovered through thematic analysis and are further explained below.

Alignment with practice

Consumers are actively looking past brand messaging to consider internal practice. Like consumers' general interpretations of brands taking a sociopolitical stand, this supports the academic literature that states that the brand's sociopolitical stances need to move beyond external messaging to include corporate practice (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Kapitan et al., 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). However, it is interesting to note that other traditional markers of commitment, such as financial contributions (Crimmins & Horn, 1996) or corporate partnerships with a cause (Duane & Domegan, 2019), appear less important than change to internal practice. If there is a misalignment between communication and corporate practice, consumers perceive activity to be inauthentic and judge brands critically. The findings in this section are similar to consumers' interpretation of brands taking a sociopolitical stand (Section 5.2) but take it one step further – the findings in this section are extrapolated from consumers' personal accounts of reactions to specific brand activism activities. Rather than responding with a cause-directed response, consumers double down on their initial hypothetical judgements highlighted in the first theme and use alignment with practice as a criterion they look for in their self-appointed role as judge of activism authenticity.

Alignment with values

When consumers judge brand activism authenticity, they also look for alignment with values. This supports the work of Vredenburg et al. (2020) who outline, that authentic brand activism should include explicit prosocial brand values that align to any external messaging. Consumers are looking past brand messaging to consider if the brand truly values and believes in the cause. If there is a misalignment between communication and values, consumers perceive the activity as inauthentic and are critical of brands. Like the previous section, consumers double down on hypothetical interpretations of brand activism and carry this through into specific responses to brand activism activity. Once again, consumers act in the self-appointed role of judge of activism authenticity and use alignment with values as one of a few criteria when making their assessment.

Alignment with history

When consumers judge a brand's activism activity, some look to past activity and brand positioning to inform whether the brand participates authentically. If a brand does not have a solid prosocial history, some consumers consider their brand activism activity inauthentic and are critical of brands. This supports Moorman's (2020) notion that consumers are more likely to judge a brand's authenticity favourably if it remains true to its past activity and brand positioning. However, as explained further in the following section, not all consumers value alignment with history as strongly – some view incongruence favourably so long as brands are committed to the cause moving forward. This is to say that although alignment with history may be seen as ideal for some consumers, brands without historical engagement with sociopolitical issues can still move from an absence of brand activism toward authentic brand activism by purposefully assessing and updating their values and purpose (Vredenburg et al., 2020). For example, "Part of me also is perhaps, a little bit gracious to this idea of bandwagoning, because I think if you're late to the party, at least you've come to the party. And I come to this idea that it's the follow-through because you might have just arrived now, but because you can't change the past, you might have not seen it as an issue before. But yeah, you've come late, and where have you been but then it's about moving forward." (Participant 17).

Commitment to the cause

When consumers judge a brand's activism activity, some are forgiving of misaligned previous practice and positioning. In this case, consumers look for an acknowledgement that previous practice was not up to standard and commitment to the cause moving forward. This notion is more aligned to the work of Vredenburg et al. (2020), who explains that sometimes incongruence between brand reputation and a cause can be viewed favourably by consumers. The caveat to this is that consumer's judgement of incongruent brand activism depends on the level of prior prosocial activity and sociopolitical cause incongruency. Brands with little prior prosocial behaviour and a moderately incongruent sociopolitical stance are more likely to be judged favourably by consumers (Vredenburg et al., 2020). If a brand does commit to change going forward, some consumers accept misaligned previous practice or positioning and will still consider their brand activism activity authentic.

5.3.2 Consumer responses to brand

Another surprising second order theme to emerge was consumer responses to the brand. Based on the research design, questioning and probing, it was expected to uncover cause-focused responses on the back of Black Lives Matter brand activism activities. It was expected that this study might uncover increased/decreased support of the cause or specific actions that support the cause (e.g. donation, advocacy or protest). However, this study revealed that consumer responses to brands taking a sociopolitical stand were almost entirely directed toward the brand rather than the cause.

Moreover, it became apparent that positive consumer responses to brands taking a sociopolitical stand are hard to come by. As explained in the sections below, consumers experience *satisfaction with brands that get it right* and *outrage with brands that get it wrong*. This is interesting because consumers were delighted with brands that got brand activism right only a few years ago. This shift can be explained by the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1980), highlighting that confirmation or disconfirmation of consumer expectation drives consumers' level of satisfaction (Tsiotsou & Wirtz, 2015). Consumers are delighted if performance exceeds expectations; if performance meets expectations, consumers are satisfied; and if performance fails to meet expectations, consumers are outraged (Tsiotsou & Wirtz, 2015). This also supports the work of Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020), who found brand attitudes decreased significantly when consumers disagree with a brand's controversial stance, but the support of a brand's controversial stance leads to no significant impact on attitude to the brand. Consumers now expect brands to take a sociopolitical stand and are unforgiving if brands get this wrong. This phenomenon is explored further in the following sections.

Satisfaction with brands that get it right

Consumer response to brands taking a sociopolitical stand is primarily directed toward the brand and not the cause. Further, consumers see themselves as able to judge brand activism authenticity (Section 5.3.1). Findings from this study show that when brands take a sociopolitical stand in a way that consumers consider authentic, consumers are satisfied but not delighted. According to the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm, this indicates that consumers now expect brands to take an authentic sociopolitical stand but are not delighted when they do this right (Oliver,

1980; Tsiotsou & Wirtz, 2015). This highlights a shift in the market; in 2018, Nike was able to delight consumers with brand activism messaging (but not authentic practice), but now consumers are looking for authentic activism as a bare minimum for satisfaction. This consumer expectation of brands to participate authentically puts more social pressure on brands to participate but does not reward brands with consumer delight if they do it right (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019; Tsiotsou & Wirtz, 2015).

Outrage with brands that get it wrong

In contrast to the consumer satisfaction that brands experience when they participate in authentic activism, consumer outrage is present when consumers deem a brand's activism inauthentic. This also supports the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm and indicates that consumers are outraged when consumers' expectations (of authentic brand activism) are not met (Oliver, 1980; Tsiotsou & Wirtz, 2015). As Tsiotsou & Wirtz (2015) explain, consumer outrage can lead to complaints, switching, and negative word of mouth. It is clear that consumer outrage is much stronger than consumer satisfaction. For example, "I wouldn't purchase the brand necessarily just because they stand for something, but I would stop purchasing that product if I knew, for example, that things were not quite right internally, they weren't ethical, they were racist, or they weren't diverse." (Participant 6). This highlights how important it is for brands to avoid consumer outrage and participate authentically in their sociopolitical stand, even if that only means meeting consumer expectations and achieving base level satisfaction.

5.3.3 Consumer personal responses and actions

As stated in previous sections of this discussion, initially, this study aimed to uncover how to best elicit impactful consumer responses from brand activism activities. However, it became clear that consumers' responses and actions toward the discussed cause (Black Lives Matter) were in response to the wider social movement, not brand activity. Although consumers self-report as responding to the general social movement, it is clear that brand participation in the Black Lives Matter has contributed to the Black Lives Matter social movement, especially following George Floyd's death (WARC, 2020b). Indeed, before 2020, very few brands were outwardly supportive of Black Lives Matter, so brands that did take a stand, such as Nike's 'Dream Crazy' campaign, stood out and were salient in the minds of the

consumer (Kim et al., 2020; WARC, 2020b). In contrast, in the weeks following George Floyd's death, there was a wave of brand support, with hundreds of brands making statements, commitments and standing in solidarity (WARC, 2020b). As the weeks following George Floyd's death saw a flood of activity from both individuals and brands, it could be difficult for consumers to distinguish different sources of Black Lives Matter messaging in their minds. Moreover, the messaging from both individuals and the many brands involved added to the broader Black Lives Matter movement (WARC, 2020b). Given the volume of Black Lives Matter activity at the time, it is not surprising that consumers struggled to attribute any cause-directed responses to a brand activism activity.

The huge prevalence of brands' participation in the Black Lives Matter movement of the time means that consumers likely blended brand actions with the larger social movement (WARC, 2020b). So, while during the focus groups, consumers attribute the cause-directed responses to the social movement rather than brand activism, the lines between these phenomena are blurred and interconnected. Thus, it is worth noting the types of responses and actions that consumers attributed to the social movement. The most prominent consumer responses and actions include *self-education and reflection, amplifying the voices of others, protest, and having difficult conversations*. Through this study, these are the responses and actions that many consumers find impactful. Further, some of these responses and actions, such as education and amplifying the voices of others, carry through into consumers expectations moving forward of brands taking a sociopolitical stand (Section 5.4). It is worth noting that the following subsections outline consumer responses to the Black Lives Matter movement and may not be generalisable to all sociopolitical issues.

Self-education and reflection

One of the most prominent personal consumer responses to the Black Lives Matter social movement was self-education and reflection. Self-education and reflection is a prominent part of the Black Lives Matter movement and is highlighted by the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation as one impactful action that individuals can take (Woolfenden, 2020; Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, 2021). Following the death of George Floyd, influencers (USA Today, 2020), media organisations (e.g. Elle (Wahi, 2020) and Vouge (Devaney, 2020)) and

non-profits (e.g. Amnesty International, 2020 and Greenpeace, 2020) were sharing self-education resources for their audiences, so it is not surprising that consumers in this study also consider self-education and reflection an impactful personal response. While self-education and reflection are prominent in the Black Lives Matter social movement, there are also other controversial causes such as LGBTQIA+ (Global Alliance for LGBT Education, 2021), climate change (Natural Resources Defence Council, 2017) and toxic masculinity (Berdahl et al., 2018) pushing for self-education and reflection. Using Milbrath's (1965) activism framework, self-education and reflection could be considered a high-volume, low-intensity spectator type of activism. Consumers carry the importance of self-education and reflection through to brands which are highlighted as one aspect of consumers' expectations of internal commitment in Section 5.4.

Amplifying the voices of others

Another prominent personal consumer response to the Black Lives Matter social movement was amplifying the voices of others. Consumers highlighted the benefit that they received from those who had drawn attention to others' voices. While consumers in this study did not specifically reference who's voices are worth drawing attention to, looking at the media of the time, those with credibility and knowledge on black issues and Black Lives Matter or black voices sharing their own experiences were prioritised in the Black Lives Matter movement of the time (Lerman, 2020; Mustafa, 2020). By comparing this action to the activism framework of Milbrath (1965), sharing content to amplify the voices of others could be considered a high-volume, low-intensity spectator type of activity.

Consumers also highlight that drawing attention to the voices of others is an impactful action that a brand could take as part of its sociopolitical stance. "The NBA, they empower their players more... A lot of these players like LeBron James, as you know, potentially a household name. He's taking three minutes to talk about Breonna Taylor and how the police got off." (Participant 4). Like self-education and reflection, amplifying the voices of others was a personal action that was prominent following the death of George Floyd. Interestingly, some Black Lives Matter supporters were condemning the proliferation of the 'black square', which was often intended as a sign of support for the movement but was demonstrated to bury black voices or those sharing valuable information (Lerman, 2020). There was even an 'I am muted' sub-

movement that asked non-black social media users to stop posting their own content from 1 June 2020 to 7 June 2020 to remove clutter on social media and bring more attention to black voices (Mustafa, 2020). The ‘I am muted’ sub-movement used the hashtags #amplifymelanatedvoices and #mutewhitenoise (Mustafa, 2020). While most of the consumers in this study did not share or amplify the voices of others themselves, they did avoid token shows of support like the ‘black square’, and they appreciated their peers who did amplify the voices of others. Consumers appreciate thoughtful amplification of others’ voices, which becomes an expectation of brands’ external communication in Section 5.4.

Protest

Some consumers felt that attending protests can be an impactful action if there is a belief in the cause. Still, others believed that protest participation could be considered virtue signalling and not impactful. As part of the Black Lives Matter movement, police brutality protests were a prominent feature of the USA-based social movement following the death of George Floyd (Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, 2021; Gabbat, 2020). Protesting is a traditional social movement personal response, and in Tilly’s (2006) WUNC (worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment) model, it would be considered an effective way to create impact for the cause. Moreover, by comparing protest to the activism framework of Milbrath (1965), it could be considered a moderate-volume, moderate-intensity transitional activity. However, some consumers in this study appear to be undecided on the impact of protest and feel some disconnect between the American movement and New Zealand-based support. It is interesting to note that while some consumers did support the founders of Ben And Jerry’s participating in a protest “Ben and Jerry’s, I heard someone say they went to protest and got arrested and stuff like that... it does make me respect them that they went out and really stood for Black Lives Matter” (Participant 3), as a whole most consumers considered protest a personal action that the public could participate in and did not expect brands to be part of protests.

Having difficult conversations

Consumers also identify having difficult conversations as a personally impactful action in response to the Black Lives Matter social movement. While this was a prominent first order theme in this study, this consumer response could be specific to the Black Lives Matter movement. Having difficult conversations around racial

inequality, like other consumer responses in this section, feature prominently in the Black Lives Matter movement (Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, 2021; Liu, 2020). The Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation (2020) provides scripts, prompts and responses to aid in difficult conversations around racial inequity for white, black and non-black people of colour. Celebrities, influencers and general social media users shared resources on how to have thoughtful and impactful conversations about racial inequality (WARC, 2020b). With such prominence in the social movement, it is no surprise that consumers in this study took it upon themselves to have difficult conversations with their own network. Consumers see having difficult conversations as a micro-response and a small action they can take in their own lives to help Black Lives Matter. Using Milbrath's (1965) activism framework having difficult conversations could also be considered a high-volume, low-intensity spectator activity.

5.3.4 Consumer uncertainty around how to engage and respond

In a similar vein to consumers' personal responses and actions to the social movement, consumers also faced personal uncertainty around engaging and responding to the Black Lives Matter social movement discussed in this study. Consumers demonstrate that the social pressure applied to brands to participate in a sociopolitical movement (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019) also applies to consumers in their personal lives. Consumers highlight their uncertainty in the first order concepts *damned if you do, damned if you don't*, and *not sure whether it's my place*. Interestingly, consumers have high expectations of brands to take a sociopolitical stand; however, consumers face uncertainty regarding their personal engagement. While some consumers draw parallels to personal feelings of uncertainty and those of brands, for others, there is an element of separation where brands are held to a higher standard. This supports the work of numerous scholars who have found that consumers can hold brands to a higher ethical or moral standard than they hold themselves (De Bock & Van Kenhove, 2010; Vermeir & Van Kenhove, 2008; Vitell & Muncy, 1992; Wilkes, 1978). This notion is explored further in the following sections.

Damned if you do, damned if you don't

Consumers identify their struggle to either participate or be quiet in the Black Lives Matter movement without receiving backlash and highlight the social pressure they face when deciding whether to take a sociopolitical stand. However, most

consumers did not make the association that brands may face the same social pressure and uncertainty around taking a sociopolitical stand. Brand activism is inherently connected to a controversial position and is likely to create judgement and criticism, no matter which side of the argument one stands (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Despite this, consumers still have a high expectation for brands to take an authentic sociopolitical stand with less expectation placed upon themselves. Previous research shows us that those with higher levels of prosperity or power are held against higher moral and ethical standards (De Bock et al., 2013). So, consumers could understand a desire to avoid potential criticism in their personal lives but still expect brands to take a sociopolitical stand despite potential backlash. Perhaps this double standard should not be surprising as, right from the outset, in consumers' general interpretation of brands taking a sociopolitical stand, consumers are quick to highlight the brand's responsibility to participate (Section 5.2.3.) Indeed, in this research, the themes of brand's social responsibility, power, influence and using resources for good come through strongly when consumers think of brands, but much less strongly when consumers think of themselves. This double standard is supported by the work of several scholars who find that consumers can be less tolerant of unethical behaviour when brands are financially successful (De Bock et al., 2013; Vermeir & Van Kenhove, 2008) or market leaders (Goldschmied & Vandello, 2009; Vandello et al., 2007) in comparison to other brands.

Not sure whether it's my place

Consumers also face uncertainty around how to engage and respond to a sociopolitical cause when there is no obvious personal connection to the cause. Consumers can struggle to find their place and highlight this in a Black Lives Matter context. Consumers were concerned about a lack of connection to the location, and also a lack of connection with those affected "If you're white can you not, like, you know... Can I talk about it? Should I have a stand on this? Or should I not? Should I sit back and let everyone else?" (Participant 6). This concern about a lack of connection and authority invited an acceptance of uncertainty on engaging or responding from a consumer perspective. However, it is unclear whether consumers are also accepting of brand's uncertainty on how to respond/engage if brands also lack an obvious connection to the cause.

5.4 MAIN THEME THREE: CONSUMERS' EXPECTATION GOING FORWARD FOR BRANDS TAKING A SOCIOPOLITICAL STAND

The third main theme discovered through thematic analysis and the Gioia et al. (2013) data structure was consumer's expectation going forward for brands taking a sociopolitical stand. This theme also includes the second order themes of *internal commitment* (1) and *external communication, not campaigning* (2). This data was collected by asking participants how they would create a brand activism campaign in which probing questions were used to dig deeper into consumers' rationale for their positions. Initially, it was expected that by asking consumers how they would create a brand activism campaign, this study might uncover some campaign elements (e.g. a donation call-to-action) to encourage a meaningful impact on the cause. However, it became clear that consumers are not looking for a traditional marketing campaign structure. Instead, they prioritise authenticity, internal commitment, transparency and honest communication.

This section's findings echo the importance of activism found in previous sections (Section 5.2 and Section 5.3). It is now clear that consumers act as the judge of activism authenticity and will either respond to brands with satisfaction or outrage (Section 5.3). This section is important for brands because it digs deeper into what consumers specifically expect when it comes to internal commitment and external communication. By understanding consumers expectations, brands are less likely to experience brand outrage with future sociopolitical stands.

5.4.1 Internal commitment

Echoing the findings in Section 5.2 and Section 5.3, consumers expect an internal commitment to align with any external messaging. Like previous sections, consumers expect *alignment with practice*, *alignment with values*, and a *commitment to the cause*. In addition, consumers also expect *education and reflection* within the company, which draws parallels to the *self-education and reflection* (Section 5.3.3) that consumers consider personally impactful. The prominence of these first order themes that appear throughout different contexts highlights how important internal commitment is to consumers. Scholars have highlighted that internal commitment is a requirement for authentic brand activism (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Kapitan et al., 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020), and it is clear that looking to consumers' expectations

of brands going forward, internal commitment is a priority for consumers. Brands should consider internal commitment through long-term practice, and explicit prosocial values and education should be considered a crucial part of any brand's sociopolitical stance going forward. To neglect internal commitment would be deemed inauthentic, and brands would likely face consumer scrutiny and outrage. The following sections describe the types of internal commitment consumers are looking for when brands take a sociopolitical stand.

Alignment with practice

As per other sections of this discussion, alignment with practice is a significant consumer expectation for brands taking a sociopolitical stand. When considering what consumers want from brands moving forward, consumers emphasise the preference for alignment with practice and expect this from brands taking a sociopolitical stand. Alignment with practice is now considered a bare minimum. Consumers are looking for marketers to think of brand activism as more than a marketing campaign and make sustained efforts inside the company to live out any sociopolitical stance "It's not just a marketing campaign, it's also looking internally to make sure that what you're actually saying lines up with the values in your company. Because it's very easy to say something and not live it. And I think if you're truly passionate and you want to do it, then actually it should affect every part of your business, not just where your marketing dollars are being spent." (Participant 2). These consumer expectations echo the findings by Delmas and Burbano (2011) and Vredenburg et al. (2020) who also explain that brand's stances must go beyond external messaging and advocacy to be authentic. As one of the most prominent findings in this study throughout all contexts (consumer interpretations, responses, and expectations), alignment with practice should be at the top of the marketer's priorities when considering taking a sociopolitical stand.

Alignment with values

Another prominent finding throughout this study is alignment with values. In previous sections, it is noted that consumers use alignment with values to interpret brands taking a sociopolitical stand and use alignment with values to judge whether brand activism activity is authentic. This trend continues with consumers now expecting brand values to align with any external sociopolitical stances taken going forward. The values should be present throughout the whole organisation for the stand to be authentic. These findings are in accordance with Vredenburg et al. (2020) who

outline, that authentic brand activism should include explicit prosocial brand values that align with external messaging. Like alignment with practice, consumers are looking for marketers to go past marketing campaigns and incorporate external advocacy with internal values. As one of the most prominent findings in this study throughout all contexts (consumer interpretations, responses, and expectations), alignment with values should also be a priority for marketers considering taking a sociopolitical stand.

Commitment to the cause

Commitment to the cause is a first order concept that is carried through from consumers' responses to brands taking a sociopolitical stand (Section 5.3) into consumers' expectations for brands. Consumer responses focused on forgiving misaligned previous practice and position, providing there was an acknowledgement of any wrongdoing and a commitment to the cause going forward. This remains true for consumers expectations of brands going forward. However, consumers now expect a long-term commitment to the cause beyond a cause's popular/trendy period. A short-term commitment is criticised by consumers and considered inauthentic. While it is too soon to tell whether the support of Black Lives Matter is here to stay, it seems that some companies are engraining support into their core product offerings, such as service review company, Yelp, which launched a new feature that allows users to flag businesses that use racist language (AdAge, 2021). Many brands such as Pinterest and Pizza Hut are appointing senior roles that focus on inclusion, diversity or representation and brands such as Band-Aid are expanding their product range to include more skin tones and steer away from a light tone as the only 'nude' option (AdAge, 2021; Forbes, 2020). To be considered authentic and meet consumer expectations, marketers should consider what long-term practices they will set in place to take a sociopolitical stand.

Education and reflection

Commitment to the cause is a first order concept that consumers consider an impactful personal response to a sociopolitical movement (Section 5.3.3). This carries through into consumer's expectations going forward for brands taking a sociopolitical stand. Consumers expect brands to be educated on their sociopolitical stance before any external advocacy. In addition, consumers want brands to educate their staff on the sociopolitical issue and build a level of understanding within their organisation.

Following the death of George Floyd, some brands have bolstered black education programmes for their staff; fast-food chain Chipotle is allowing their staff debt-free education to one of the USA's oldest Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Paul Quinn College, and a collective of Midwestern advertising agencies under the BrandLab umbrella are pledging to take staff through anti-racism education programmes (AdAge, 2021). Before taking a sociopolitical stand, marketers should educate themselves on the issue and the brand's position and consider how to educate staff within the organisation.

5.4.2 External communication, not campaigning

As highlighted in the previous section, internal commitment is a priority for consumers, and they expect brands to 'walk the talk' when it comes to brands taking a sociopolitical stand. But what does the 'talk' look like? Consumers can be critical of brands that use brand activism as a marketing ploy – consumers can see it as merely a way of making sales, virtue signalling or jumping on the bandwagon when causes are trendy. This was evident in the toxic masculinity Gillette campaign 'The Best a Man Can Be', which was criticised for being overly produced, preachy, and inauthentic. Consumers are not looking for marketing slogans or donating a portion of sales. It is apparent that consumers now favour an external communication style with more parallels to public relations than a traditional marketing campaign. This means that previously successful campaign styles such as Nike's 'Dream Crazy' campaign, which was praised for featuring a credible spokesperson, may no longer meet consumers' expectations. Instead, consumers are looking for public relations-style campaigns that communicate *transparency and targets, acknowledgement of mistakes and commitment to change* and for brands to use their platform to *amplify the voices of others*. These consumers expectations are explored further in the sections below.

Transparency and targets

Consumers now expect brands to be transparent about their past, their intentions and provide clear measurable targets. Gone are the days where consumers accept vague support statements with open arms. This expectation for transparency and targets is relatively new in the brand activism space and demonstrates how quickly consumer expectations are changing. As previously mentioned, in 2018, Nike's 'Dream Crazy' campaign was praised by consumers for taking a sociopolitical stand on a controversial topic (Hickman, 2019). Now, consumers look beyond advocacy and

want to see action to align with the cause. For example, “If you imagine if Nike listed how the pay equality across the different races, across their business and show that there’s no inequality” (Participant 11). Since George Floyd’s death, brands have increased their transparency and publicly announced targets; the broadcaster CBS has committed to at least 50% non-white casting on reality TV shows; snack company Mondelez committed to doubling the representation of black employees in senior US management roles by 2024; and coffee company Starbucks has committed to donating \$100 million to community projects that help black and indigenous people of colour by 2025 (AdAge, 2021). This shift in transparency and expectations placed on brands highlights the shift in consumer behaviour. Consumers are now more educated on sociopolitical causes and are harder to impress. Brands now need to do more than the campaign-style advocacy that worked before if they want to please consumers.

Acknowledgement of mistakes and commitment to change

Most consumers are willing to forgive a brand if the brand’s practices were not always well aligned to a cause. However, consumers want brands to disclose any past transgressions or misjudgements and communicate what they are doing to move forward with transparency. Like consumers preference for transparency and targets, an acknowledgement of mistakes is not a marketing campaign-driven activity but rather an internal commitment to change that the brand chooses to disclose to the public. The Stuff ‘Our Truth, Tā Mātou Pono’ critique, acknowledgement, and disclosure of racist actions is an example of a brand acknowledging its mistakes and committing to change (Stuff, 2020). This internal-first approach is well received by consumers and should be the foundation of any brand’s sociopolitical stance going forward for authentic brand activism.

Amplifying the voices of others

Another form of external communication that consumers are open to is drawing attention to the voices of those more educated or pertinent to the cause. Consumers consider this an impactful use of a brand’s social media platforms. Once again, this is not a marketing-driven activity and is instead about using a brand’s platform and influence to stand with experts or those impacted by a sociopolitical issue. More pragmatic participants highlighted the use of a brand’s platform as a way for brands to make a meaningful impact without, perhaps, the total internal commitment that most consumers favour. “My opinion at the moment is it’s not practically possible for all

teams and all organisations and all brands to be diverse and have a voice... But if I was in charge of a campaign, I would just create a platform that enables them to have a voice rather than me having my own.” (Participant 2).

It is worth noting that if brands choose to draw attention to others’ voices, they may not meet consumers’ expectations of internal commitment. Moreover, by drawing attention to others’ voices, brands may still be scrutinised by consumers and considered inauthentic for not enacting what they share externally. However, if a brand were to draw attention to the voices of others more educated or pertinent to the cause, in addition to an internal commitment to the cause, this would likely meet consumer’s expectations of brands.

5.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY: MAIN THEMES, FINDINGS AND TAKEAWAYS

This research aimed to understand how brands should design brand activism campaigns to encourage impactful consumer responses such as donations, attending protests, signing petitions or lobbying for and promoting change in other ways through brand activism design. This study hoped to uncover the levers that brands could use to encourage cause-directed consumer responses. However, it became apparent that consumers’ responses to brand activism activities were directed toward the brand and not the cause. Consumers believe it is important for brands to take a stand on sociopolitical issues but are quick to judge brands when they engage in such issues. Consumers use authenticity (alignment with practice, values, and history) as their primary criteria to judge brands and are highly critical of brands they consider inauthentic.

It is apparent that consumers are holding brands to a very high standard, and when brands get it right (authentic brand activism), they are satisfied, but when brands get it wrong (inauthentic brand activism), consumers are outraged. This disproportionately negative response toward brands could be considered off-putting. However, consumers can also be forgiving. Many consumers are also considering their personal responses to sociopolitical issues and are aware of the pressure to participate but uncertain of how to participate meaningfully.

While this personal uncertainty and pressure does not directly translate into consumers’ expectation of brands, consumers can be willing to forgive past

transgressions and welcome a first step into brand activism behaviour, provided there is a willingness to commit to change. Similarly, it is possible that consumers could be more forgiving of brands that are transparent with their purpose and values (e.g. sustainability, gender equality, or LGBTQIA+ issues) and align with sociopolitical issues that most strongly reflect said purpose and values rather than taking a stand on trending sociopolitical issues. While this notion did not appear strongly throughout the focus groups in this study, there was an understanding that not all brands can be everything to everyone. Although brands are now expected to take a stand, it is unrealistic for brands to create change for all causes and movements. It may be that brands start to reflect internally on their brand values and positions to guide a conscious choice on the causes that they choose to align with.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

6.1 INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER

This chapter first reminds us of the research aim of the study, to better understand how to create meaningful social change through brand activism. This study focused on the consumer perspective and aimed to uncover how brand activism campaigns could be best designed to elicit consumer support for the cause. However, based on the findings and analysis of this study, consumers are unlikely to exhibit cause-directed responses to brand activism activities. Instead, this study highlights that consumer expectations have changed, and consumers now expect brands to impact the cause through authentic practice directly. The theoretical and practical implications of this study are discussed in this chapter. This chapter also presents the study's limitations and highlights potential directions for future research to aid the development of the brand activism body of knowledge.

6.2 RESEARCH AIM

This thesis aimed to contribute to understanding how to create meaningful social change through brand activism. It focused on the consumer perspective and aimed to understand how brand activism campaigns can be best designed to encourage meaningful consumer support responses for the cause. A literature review provided an understanding of brand activism, success indicators for brand activism and potential consumer responses to brand activism. Further, focus groups were conducted with consumers to understand what prompted their cause-directed support responses to brand activism.

Based on this study's findings, it can be concluded that consumers do not offer meaningful cause-directed support responses to brand activism campaigns in a Black Lives Matter context. Instead, consumers expect brands to contribute to the cause by conducting authentic brand activism, which includes an internal commitment to the cause and external communication – this is in stark contrast to traditional marketing campaigns. Initially, this study expected to uncover a set of campaign elements (e.g. donation call to action or credible spokesperson) that would encourage consumers to offer support for the cause. However, it became clear that consumers' cause-directed

actions are a response to the broader social movement rather than specific brand activism activities. Thus, this study cannot answer the research question in the manner first expected. However, this study was able to uncover consumers' interpretation, responses and expectations of brand activism. This consumer perspective provides insight into the contribution that consumers want brands to make to the cause. Additionally, the consumer perspective contributes to understanding how to create meaningful outcomes for the cause through brand activism. The following section outlines the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

6.3 IMPLICATIONS

6.3.1 Theoretical implications

From a theoretical perspective, it can be concluded that consumers are unlikely to offer meaningful cause-directed responses to Black Lives Matter brand activism activities. It is unclear if other brand activism causes would experience the same lack of cause-directed consumer responses. But, in the context of this study, it can be seen that consumers offer cause-directed responses to the social movement rather than brand activism activities. In addition to the absence of cause-directed consumer responses, consumers are putting the onus on brands to impact the cause directly. As shown in studies of moral authority in the market (Hoppner et al., 2019), consumers have higher standards for brands to contribute to the cause than themselves. This finding highlights a double standard in brand activism – consumers judge brands harshly and expect a high level of authenticity and practice in any brand activism activity but are more understanding of a reluctance to get involved at a personal level. Previous consumer-focused brand activism studies have focused only on brand-directed consumer responses to brand activism (Kim et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, 2020; Shetty et al., 2019). This study opens the doors to understanding cause-directed consumer responses. It highlights the need for more research in this area that explores how brand activism activities can be executed to best contribute to social change.

Although this study aimed to focus on cause-directed outcomes, some interesting brand-directed insights were uncovered. As highlighted by other scholars (Hydock et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Shetty et al., 2019), consumers are likely to exert brand-directed responses to brand activism

campaigns. It became clear that brand-directed consumer responses were more abundant and stronger than cause-directed responses. One of the main consumer responses was consumers acting as the judge of brand activism authenticity. Scholars have highlighted the importance of brand activism authenticity (Vredenburg et al., 2020), but in this study, consumers are clearly taking on the role and responsibility of judging brand activism authenticity. Consumers form their own criteria of brand activism authenticity and look for alignment with practice, alignment, history, and commitment to the cause to judge brands on their activism position. This consumer criterion for brand activism highlights the shift in consumer expectations in recent years; in the consumer's eyes, it is no longer acceptable to merely advocate for a position or raise awareness. Brands need to go further and authentically practice their position.

The change in consumer expectations plays a significant role in understanding this study's results and should be considered in brand activism research moving forward. When commencing this research, brand activism was a relatively new phenomenon in the market, and it was considered brave to make a controversial statement (Moorman, 2020). This means that providing the brand activism message was well executed (e.g. Nike's Dream Crazy campaign), the activity was likely to receive support from those who believed in the stance. However, it is now clear that consumers look beyond the messaging and actively search for internal commitment indicators. Authentic activism has become a bare minimum. This highlights why consumers are merely satisfied if a brand engages in authentic brand activism but are outraged if a brand engages in inauthentic brand activism – their standards are higher, and they are harder to please. This supports the negativity bias explained by Hydock et al. (2020).

The change in consumer expectations also gives context to why it was difficult to answer the research question “*how can brand activism campaigns be best designed to encourage meaningful consumer support responses for the cause?*”. Consumers in this study expect the brand to impact the cause directly through authentic brand activism. Consumers are not looking for specific campaign elements (e.g. slogan or credible spokesperson) because they are looking for an authentic internal commitment to the cause. This study has contributed to the brand activism literature and theory by advancing what is known about the consumer perspective of brand activism;

consumer's expectations have changed; the onus is now on brands to impact the cause directly through authentic internal practice, and consumers will take it upon themselves to judge activism authenticity.

6.3.2 Practical implications

From a practical perspective, this study's research findings provide useful insights for brand managers and marketers who decide to engage in brand activism activities. By focusing on consumer responses to brand activism activities, this study provides new insights into consumer expectations of brands taking a sociopolitical stand. As explained in the theoretical implications section, consumer expectations have changed in recent years, which is important for practitioners to understand. When consumers consider and respond to brand activism, they now expect authenticity at a bare minimum. Consumers expect a brand's internal commitment; this means aligning messaging with practice and values, committing to the cause beyond its trendy/popular period, and considering educating staff. Without this internal commitment, brands are likely to experience consumer outrage, which could lead to boycotts, negative word-of-mouth and other negative brand impacts (Kim et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Once brands have committed to the cause, consumers are no longer looking for traditional marketing campaigns. Instead, consumers want brands to use their external channels to be transparent about their actions and targets and draw attention to the voices of those impacted by the cause or who can provide an expert opinion.

The good news for practitioners is that many consumers accept incongruity between a brand's history and their sociopolitical stance – with a caveat – brands should acknowledge any wrongdoing and commit to change going forward. This action would reflect the internal commitment and external communication that consumers seek. The standards and expectations that consumers set for brands are far higher than they were in previous years. This means that practitioners should be confident about their internal commitment before taking a sociopolitical stand and consider more non-traditional means of external communication (i.e. not a traditional marketing campaign). When considering the Vredenburg et al. (2020) typology of brand activism, authentic brand activism is the gold standard in the eyes of the consumers. However, this study highlights that many consumers recognise that authentic brand activism (including historical alignment with prosocial behaviour) is not always possible, and brands need to start somewhere. Some consumers are open

to the idea of 'jumping on the bandwagon' with external activism messaging but a lack of explicit prosocial behaviour (inauthentic brand activism) as a first step so long as efforts are made to implement prosocial behaviour going forward.

6.3.3 Methodological implications

From a methodological perspective, this study uses numerous techniques to make the focus group data collection and consumer insights as robust as possible. Scholars have highlighted that focus groups can be a valuable qualitative data collection method, but there can be challenges in achieving robust, good quality data (Colucci, 2007; Oates & Alevizou, 2017). However, face-to-face focus groups introduce the potential to layer multiple types of focus group activities to generate consumer insights through different types of approaches. The focus groups in this study began with an individual writing exercise which included a rating and free listing exercise. By beginning with individual written activities, participants are given space and time to consider their own perspectives before being influenced by a dominant group perspective. Not only did the individual written activities allow for personal views to be recorded, but the sharing of the rating exercise also provided a launch point for robust group discussion and debate, while the free listings exercise helped to build the group knowledge ahead of deeper discussion. By beginning with these techniques, it allowed the group discussion and debate, which was facilitated by moderator questions, to be grounded in both shared knowledge (via free listing) and defined unbiased personal perspectives (via rating). Moreover, the final activity, developing a campaign, allowed participants to separate themselves from their consumer perspective and put themselves in the brand's shoes to consider how brands could best approach brand activism. This projective technique saw consumers highlight what they want to see from brands going forward. The focus groups used in this study utilised various techniques to draw out insights from the consumers in different ways. Combining techniques allowed consumers to have multiple opportunities and formats to provide insights and is an approach that future focus group studies could use to generate more robust data and consumer insights.

6.4 LIMITATIONS

Although this research provides valuable insight into consumer expectations of brand activism, it also includes some limitations. In particular, the focus on the Black Lives Matter movement following George Floyd's death, the New Zealand focus of the study and the research design. These limitations are explained further below.

This study focused on the Black Lives Matter movement following George Floyd's death. This context was a helpful tool in the focus groups because it allowed the group to reflect on a specific event that they all had knowledge of. Using this context, a discussion was generated on consumers' different perspectives and experiences with brand activism activities following George Floyd's death. This led to valuable participant interaction, consensus and disagreement throughout each focus group. However, by focusing on the Black Lives Matter social movement, the generalisability of these findings is reduced. For example, consumers' personal responses to the Black Lives Matter movement included self-education, protest and having difficult conversations. These items featured prominently in the Black Lives Matter social movement, and thus, it is not surprising that consumers responded in this way (Cohn & Quealy, 2020; Mundt et al., 2018). However, not all causes encourage or benefit from the same actions and responses.

In this study, consumers' cause-directed actions were in response to the Black Lives Matter social movement rather than specific brand activism campaigns or activities. As Black Lives Matter was highly prominent in social and mainstream media at the time, consumers effectively blended the brand's sociopolitical stand with the larger social movement but attributed their cause-directed responses to the social movement. It is unclear whether this is an anomaly to the Black Lives Matter social movement, given its extreme prominence at the time.

Another limitation of this study was the New Zealand perspective that consumers offered. This study used New Zealand participants due to convenience along with budgetary and travel constraints. However, this meant that the study's findings reflect a New Zealand view on a predominantly North American-focused social movement. This perspective means that some of the findings of this study may not be generalisable to other countries. This was particularly evident when New Zealand-based participants were uncertain about whether it was their place to comment on, or respond to, the Black Lives Matter movement due to its North American focus. While some

consumers drew parallels between the Black Lives Matter movement and racism issues in New Zealand, consumers also highlighted a distinction between the two locations.

A further limitation with the participants of this study is the marketing-heavy nature of the participant make-up. The researcher of this study is a marketing practitioner and has many marketing practitioners within their network. Through using purposive sampling, the researcher advertised through their own network. The marketing-heavy network, along with the increased interest in marketing-related topics from marketing practitioners, led to an oversubscription of marketing professionals in the focus groups. While this did lead to useful insights from participants that could bring their consumer knowledge and marketing knowledge to the focus group, this likely skewed the focus groups to a more 'expert' group of participants. This means that the results of this study may not be as generalisable to the general public. However, it is worth noting that most of the 'lay' (non-marketing) participants also came to the groups with sophisticated knowledge and considered opinions of brands and brand activism. This indicates a possible shift toward consumers becoming more invested in brands and their brand activism opinions and considerations becoming more sophisticated.

Additionally, this study used a focus group method comprising of three focus groups and 18 participants in total. The focus group method allowed us to uncover the nuance of consumer responses and expectations of brand activism activities through participant discussion and interaction. However, the social nature of focus groups means that participants may respond in a socially desirable manner or not want to disagree with the group consensus. While the focus groups included some individual activities which aimed to prevent socially desirable responses, some consumers may have felt socially pressured not to share their opinion if they thought the group might disagree. In addition, the focus groups relied on a small sample size and consumers' self-reported responses to brand activism activities. While this was useful to understand why consumers respond the way they do, it is challenging to quantify consumer responses through this method. For example, this study could not track a change in general public perception as a result of brand activism activities. Indeed, this highlights the difficulty in determining the cause and effect of brand activism efforts on the cause. However, this research has provided an important and necessary step to explore an unknown phenomenon. It is difficult to measure cause and effect until there

is some basis for what to measure. This study helped to contribute to baseline knowledge in the brand activism space and will make it easier for future research to understand the cause and effect of impact on the cause.

6.5 DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Building on the limitations of this research, it is proposed that future research considers consumers' cause-directed responses to brand activism in different contexts and methods to this study. Suggestions for this are outlined below.

Firstly, it is suggested that future research considers focusing on brand activism activity that aligns to a different cause – ideally a cause that is less mainstream than the Black Lives Matter movement. By selecting brand activism activity that is less likely to blend with a significant social movement in consumers' eyes, future research could isolate cause-directed consumer responses to brand activism. This may provide more insight into the cause and effect of brand activism on cause-directed consumer responses. Research in this area may support this study's findings and find that consumers do not exhibit cause-directed responses to brand activism. However, based on this study's context and findings, this study cannot offer a definitive answer to whether and how brand activism can create impactful consumer responses when the cause and the brand are not linked in the consumers' minds.

Secondly, it is suggested that future research is conducted with a cause that is highly relevant to consumer participants. In this study, some consumers felt that they did not have a clear connection to the cause (Black Lives Matter), which may have impacted their responses, and may have led to their lack of impactful consumer responses to brand activism activities. If future research uses a cause context that is highly relevant to the consumers, they may see an increase in impactful cause-related consumer responses.

Finally, future research could investigate understanding the cause-directed consumer responses to brand activism activities using quantitative data to measure any impact on the cause. For example, consumer opinion polls could indicate whether brand activism causes a shift in consumer opinion over time. Or, future research could focus on analysing specific brand activism calls to action. For example, brands may choose to use a specific donation mechanism, volunteer programme, or petition. Such research would be cause and brand-dependent, but it could present an opportunity to

track the consumer response impact on a cause without the requirement for self-reporting if such a case arose.

The research presented in this study is an important and necessary step forward in understanding the unknown phenomenon of consumers' cause-directed responses to brand activism. Cause and effect are difficult to measure without an understanding of the underlying phenomena. Thus, this study lays the groundwork for future brand activism research to understand how to measure the impact of brand activism on cause-directed consumer responses.

6.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This study aimed to better understand how to create meaningful social change through brand activism. By focusing on the consumer perspective, this study aimed to uncover how brand activism campaigns can be designed to drive consumer support for the cause. The findings of this study were surprising and showed that, in fact, consumers are unlikely to demonstrate cause-directed responses to brand activism activities. Instead, this study highlights the shift in consumer expectations – consumers now put the responsibility on brands to impact the cause directly. This responsibility that consumers place on brands is greater than the responsibility that consumers place on themselves and highlights a double standard of expectations. A negativity bias exists whereby consumers are merely satisfied if a brand engages in authentic activism but are outraged if brands engage in inauthentic activism. These phenomena may be off-putting to brands wanting to take a sociopolitical stand but reflect the changing consumer expectations. It is no longer acceptable – as it was just a few years ago – to purely raise awareness or advocate for a position, brands need to go further and ‘walk the talk’. Consumers are no longer looking for a specific campaign execution (e.g. a credible spokesperson) but are looking for an authentic internal commitment to the cause. The encouraging news for practitioners is that consumers can be forgiving of past transgressions or incongruity with a sociopolitical stance so long as brands acknowledge past wrongdoing and commit to internal change. This means that it is not too late for brands that may be ‘late to the party’, and that there is still an opportunity for brands to meet new consumer expectations and engage in taking a sociopolitical stand. While this study has some limitations, it contributes interesting insight to the nascent body of brand activism literature. This study has provided a necessary early step to understanding the growing brand activism phenomena. While brand activism

is still developing in the market, this study helps to lay the foundation for future consumer research that will hopefully help future brand activism activities benefit both the brand and the cause, driving important social change.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Email advertisement for participant recruitment

From: Tash Lewis, tash.lewis@aut.ac.nz

To: Potential participant

Subject: Invitation to participate in a focus group

Dear [potential participant],

I would like to invite you to be part of a focus group at one of the following times 8th October (10am or 2pm) or 9th October (2pm). The focus group is part of a research project that aims to uncover how brand activism activities can be best executed to create impactful consumer responses. This can benefit brands who seek to adopt brand activism best practices to create impactful outcomes for the cause through consumer responses. In addition, this research will assist me in meeting the requirements of my Master of Business qualification.

The researchers are from Auckland University of Technology, and this research is undertaken as part of Master of Business qualification. The researchers are seeking participants that are aged 18-38 who should either support or oppose at least one brand activism activity that was part of the recent Black Lives Matter movement (post-George Floyd's death on 25 May 2020) to take part in a focus group investigating aspects of consumer responses to brand activism.

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may withdraw at any time without explanation or penalty, and any unprocessed data can also be withdrawn. Further, any information you provide should you choose to take part will be de-identified by the researchers using confidential ID's and will not be disclosed to anyone outside the research team. No one else will have access to or be able to identify any information you provide. At the completion of this research project, general findings will be reported, however, your personal information will not be separately identifiable.

Please respond to the primary researcher at tash.lewis@aut.ac.nz to obtain more information and take part in this study. We believe this is important research that may assist in brand activism activities that can create meaningful outcomes for the causes they associate with.

Kind regards,

Natasha Lewis



Appendix B

Social media advertisement for participant recruitment



I am seeking participants for a focus group at one of the following times: 8th October (10am or 2pm) or 9th October (2pm). The focus group is part of a research project that aims to uncover how brand activism activities can be best executed to create impactful consumer responses. This can benefit brands who seek to adopt brand activism best practices to create impactful outcomes for the cause through consumer responses. In addition, this research will assist me in meeting the requirements of my Master of Business qualification.

The researchers are from Auckland University of Technology, and this research is undertaken as part of Master of Business qualification. We are seeking participants that are aged 18-38 who should either support or oppose at least one brand activism activity that was part of the recent Black Lives Matter movement (post-George Floyd's death on 25 May 2020) to take part in a focus group investigating aspects of consumer responses to brand activism.

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may withdraw at any time without explanation or penalty, and any unprocessed data can also be withdrawn. Further, any information you provide should you choose to take part will be de-identified by the researchers using confidential ID's and will not be disclosed to anyone outside the research team. No one else will have access to or be able to identify any information you provide. At the completion of this research project, general findings will be reported, however, your personal information will not be separately identifiable.

Please respond to me via private message to obtain more information and take part in this study. We believe this is important research that may assist in brand activism activities that can create meaningful outcomes for the causes they associate with.

Thank you.

Appendix C

Focus group guide

Introduction:

5 mins

Consent:

- Hand out consent forms and information sheets
- Explain limited confidentiality.
- Explain the recording and use of the recording.

Setting expectations:

- 1 hour
- Want to hear their perceptions and experiences.
- Ground rules - Please turn off phones and talk one and a time.
- Participants do not need to answer if they feel uncomfortable.
- If participants feel uncomfortable, they are able to leave at any time – we can reschedule or remove them from the focus groups completely
- Expected to be tolerant of different views – it's okay to disagree but not hateful or hurtful behaviour will not be tolerated, and the participant will be asked to leave.

Group introductions: What is your name, what brand do you hate?

Part one: setting the scene and gauging comprehension of brand activism.

10 mins

Writing activity: (complete handout)

- On a scale of 1-10, how important do you think it is for brands to take a stand on social/political issues?
- What brands do you know of that have taken a stand on social/political issues?
- What causes/issues do you know of that have seen brand support/opposition?
- What words come to mind when you think about brands taking a stand on social/political issues?

Probing questions to writing activity above:

- With 1 being [one side of the room] and 10 being [the other side of the room], please organise yourselves in order of how important you think it is for brands to take a stand on social/political issues. **Please explain to the group why you're standing where you are.**
- **Please share the brands that you know that have taken a stand on social/political issues.** **Moderator to compile these on a shared piece of large paper. **

Activity (to add to the conversation if the above examples are off-track/slim)

- Nike – For once, Don’t Do It:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drcO2V2m7lw>
- Ben & Jerry’s – Dismantle White Supremacy:
<https://www.benjerry.com/about-us/media-center/dismantle-white-supremacy>
- Google - our commitments to racial equity: <https://blog.google/inside-google/company-announcements/commitments-racial-equity/>

Part two: reflections, perceptions and reactions to brand activism activities.

30 mins

Moderator:

- This is brand activism. So far, we have been talking about brand activism in a general sense, but I’d like to explore the specific context of brands’ response to the BLM movement following the death of George Floyd. To refresh your memory, [here is a short overview](#) (only up to 55 seconds) of the activity at the time.

Activity:

- Following from the brands that we were talking about, **which of these brands do you know of that have done this?** (moderator to circle). **Can you think of any other brands?** (moderator to add to the list)

Questions:

- When you see brands that have taken a stand in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement following the death of George Floyd, what do you do in response?
 - Probe: Is your reaction different if you support or oppose the position that the brand takes?
- What kinds of things do you look for in ‘good’ brand activity in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement following the death of George Floyd?
 - Probe: Do you take into account the internal practices of brands? What do you look for in a brand’s internal practices?
 - Probe: How does this change your response?
- Have any brands inspired you to further support or oppose a cause in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement following the death of George Floyd?
 - Did you take any specific action? Why do you think you were inspired to do so?

Part three: looking forward, how to create change.

15 mins

Questions:

- What do you think are the most significant actions that a brand can take to create change for a cause?
 - Probe: Do you think this would inspire you to take any specific action?

Activity (participants supplied with paper and markers – no prescriptive structure given):

- If you were put in charge of a brand's Black Lives Matter activity, how would you design it? What would it look like?
 - Moderator comment – this could be an image, video, text, storyboard, list etc. Consider what you would do, how you would communicate this and what you'd be looking to achieve.
 - Probe: Why did you choose to design it like this?
 - Probe: Do you think that this would inspire consumers to increase support for BLM?

Part four: wrap up and closing.

- What advice would you give to brands that are trying to support the BLM movement?
- Thank you.

Appendix D

Focus group activity sheet

Q1: On a scale of 1 – 10, how important do you think it is for brands to take a stand on social/political issues?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Q2: What brands do you know of that have taken a stand on social/political issues?

Q3: What causes/issues do you know of that have seen brand support/opposition?

Q4: What words come to mind when you think about brands taking a stand on social/political issues?

Appendix E

Focus group consent form



Project title: *Understanding impactful consumer responses to brand activism*

Project Supervisor: *Dr Jessica Vredenburg*

Researcher: *Natasha Lewis*

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 27 June 2020.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that identity of my fellow participants and our discussions in the focus group is confidential to the group, and I agree to keep this information confidential.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the focus group and that it will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then, while it may not be possible to destroy all records of the focus group discussion of which I was part, I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes No

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....
.....
.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 30 July 2020 AUTEK Reference number 20/195.

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix F

Focus group information sheet



Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

27/06/2020

Project Title

Understanding impactful consumer responses to brand activism

An Invitation

I, Natasha Lewis, am a Master of Business student at Auckland University of Technology Business School. I would like to invite you to participate in my research regarding consumer responses to brand activism activities and approaches.

What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of this research is to uncover how brand activism activities can be best executed to create impactful consumer responses. The findings of this research may be used for academic publications and presentations.

How was I identified, and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You have been invited through personal networks of the researcher and/or responded to an advertisement and have been chosen as a potential participant because you are aged between 18-38 and have identified as either supporting or opposing a brand activism activity related to the Black Lives Matter movement post-George Floyd's death on 25 May 2020.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

To confirm that you want to take part in this research, you will need to complete a Consent Form provided at the focus group. Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice), and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

What will happen in this research?

The focus group will discuss the different types of brand activism approaches and dissect what this means for consumer responses. The focus groups will focus on: why consumers choose to support a cause in different ways, how alignment/misalignment between messaging and corporate practice changes methods of support, and which brand activism components inspire consumers to support a cause or issue. The focus group will take place at AUT City Campus in the WU, Level 4 seminar room. The focus group will be recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

What are the discomforts and risks?

We do not foresee significant discomforts in completing the focus group. But, the focus group conversation may touch on sensitive issues such as race and inequality due to the focus on brand activism in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

If you feel uncomfortable at any point, you are free to leave and discontinue the focus group. If this is the case, you can either participate in a future focus group if one is available or withdraw completely. The primary researcher conducting the focus groups is also trained in focus group moderation and will be diligent at ensuring any divergence within the group is properly managed to maximize participant comfort.

AUT Health Counselling and Wellbeing is able to offer three free sessions of confidential counselling support for adult participants in an AUT research project. These sessions are only available for issues that have arisen directly as a result of participation in the research and are not for other general counselling needs. To access these services, you will need to:

- drop into our centres at WB219 or AS104 or phone 921 9992 City Campus or 921 9998 North Shore campus to make an appointment. Appointments for South Campus can be made by calling 921 9992
- let the receptionist know that you are a research participant, and provide the title of my research and my name and contact details as given in this Information Sheet

You can find out more information about AUT counsellors and counselling on <http://www.aut.ac.nz/being-a-student/current-postgraduates/your-health-and-wellbeing/counselling>.

What are the benefits?

By being part of this focus group, we are able to gain insights on the way that brand activism tactics can influence consumer responses. This could help brands who seek to adopt brand activism best practices to create impactful outcomes for the cause through consumer responses. In addition, this research will assist me in meeting the requirements of my Master of Business qualification.

How will my privacy be protected?

Notes will be taken during the focus group, and it will also be audio-taped and transcribed. Due to the nature of focus groups, only limited confidentiality can be offered, but participants within each focus group will be asked to keep information discussed in the focus group confidential. The data recorded will be anonymised and stored secured on AUT premises and on the AUT server. No third party will be able to access the information you provide in the focus group.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

The focus group will take about an hour.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

Please take up to one week to decide if you want to respond.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

If you would like to receive an Executive Summary of the research results when they are completed, please tick 'yes' on the consent form item 'I wish to receive a summary of the research findings'.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Jessica Vredenburg, jessica.vredenburg@aut.ac.nz, +64 09 921 9999 ext 5411.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, ethics@aut.ac.nz , (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details: Tash Lewis, tash.lewis@aut.ac.nz

Project Supervisor Contact Details: Jessica Vredenburg,
jessica.vredenburg@aut.ac.nz, +64 09 921 9999 ext 5411

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 30 July 2020, AUTEK Reference number 20/195.

Appendix G

AUTEC Ethics Approval



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

Auckland University of Technology
D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316
E: ethics@aut.ac.nz
www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

30 July 2020

Jessica Vredenburg
Faculty of Business Economics and Law

Dear Jessica

Re Ethics Application: **20/195 Understanding impactful consumer responses to brand activism**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 29 July 2023.

We note that you have not included the additional text on discussions or debriefs after the focus group and we are happy to leave this to your discretion. We would suggest, however, that the researcher refer the participant to a trained therapist should the interaction move beyond a debrief.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTEC in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard and that all the dates on the documents are updated.

AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and

you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz. The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEK Secretariat

Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: Tash.lewis@aut.ac.nz