



## Master's Degree Program in Marketing

Department of Business and Management

Course of Digital Marketing

### **Brand Activism and Generational Perceptions: A Comparison Between Activism Forms and Consumer Responses**

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is about how the perception of the authenticity of brand activism affects consumer trust and the intention to buy, taking into account differences between generations and the role of leadership. The research is based on the authenticity principle, brand-consumer identification, and CEO activism theory to fathom how brands could successfully communicate their social commitments without losing their clients' trust.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to design the study. The qualitative part studied the activist communication of Patagonia, Dove, H&M, and Tesla, pointing out examples of closely engaged authors, disputed practices, and CEO-driven activism. The survey from the quantitative stage was distributed among different generations (Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers). Validated scales were used to measure the constructs of authenticity, brand trust, and purchase intention. The data were processed with ANOVA and regression models.

Results indicate that authenticity has a positive impact on brand trust and purchase intention, depending on the generational differences. Younger generations reveal more openness towards brand activism and give brand loyalty to true commitments, whereas older generations have a more sceptical attitude and request proof. Leadership turns out to be the factor that can help or hinder the cause: CEO activism is among the ways that can increase a brand's credibility; conversely, it makes brands vulnerable to reputational risks.

The paper makes theoretical contributions by demonstrating the mediation function of brand trust and the moderation effect of generation and exploring the question of authenticity in the case of CEO activism. The management implications deal with the need for congruence between espoused values and actual corporate practices, adoption of generation-specific communication strategies, and cautious planning of leadership exposure.

Generally, research shows that true and consistent activism, if changed according to the needs of each generation, can not only change social involvement into a company's trust that is sustainable and consumer loyalty but also have such impact.

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## Introduction

Brand activism has been introduced to the public as one of the essential aspects of the strategy of any brand not only from the last decade but from the past ten years as well. As the society expects brands to promote values that mirror those of their consumers through consistent actions, activism becomes more a necessary feature of a brand's competitive advantages and stakeholder trust. This paper draws on that idea, on how perceived authentication in brand activism impacts consumer behaviour.

One parameter limiting the range of acceptable behaviour is the way a company expresses itself. What Generation Z, Millennials, Generation X, and Baby boomers expect from businesses and how much they will tolerate differ. Younger groups are more likely to support daring, value-driven commitments, while older groups may react sceptically and require more evidence of true commitment. These distinctions being known to the design of communications and the management of risks is vital.

Second comes leadership as a boundary condition. In the time of "CEO activism", the public declarations of leaders may bring a cause closer to people but at the same time divide them; therefore, to maintain trust, it is necessary that the company's actions and what leaders say be on the same line. One instance that powerfully illustrates the double-edged nature of a leader's singularity effect on the brand is the Elon Musk and Tesla scenario which not only shows the exposure availability but also the reputational risk that can unfold when the leader's identity becomes so intertwined with the brand.

Initially talking about the conflicts, the dissertation illustrates the issue of the management sector which are the communications of the activism designed to be credible and to create trust of the brand towards a heterogeneous audience. Namely, it inquires: What is the impact of the brand activism authenticity perception on brand trust and the intention to buy? How much are these relationships influenced by generational cohorts? Such questions demonstrate a necessity for a common language, correct action-communication, appropriate endorsers, and effectiveness measurement for the program of activism.

## Conceptual focus

The dissertation embraces a simplified conceptual model that focuses on the perceived portrayal of activism (true vs. opportunistic or personalized/CEO-driven) as the main influencer of brand trust, which along with purchase intention is the next key concept. The generational aspect has been added as a moderator of these relationships. This theoretical outline reaps benefits from the existing literature on authenticity, trust, and behavioural intentions and is a promising framework for practical use and further empirical studies.

## **Methodological approach**

On the methodology level the project is a mixed design. Briefly speaking, a qualitative phase dissects the communications of four iconic brands—Patagonia, Dove, H&M, and Tesla—to identify issues, terminology, and public reactions that cover the whole spectrum from highly authentic to contested activism. A quantitative phase then surveys consumers segmented by generation, employing validated 5-point Likert scales to measure perceived authenticity, brand trust, and purchase intention; the data are treated with ANOVA and linear regression in SPSS. This brand set is deliberately designed to juxtapose the best of sustainably authentic brands (e.g., Patagonia) with the most problematic cases (e.g., the greenwashing controversy of H&M) and CEO-centric dynamics (Tesla), thus, sharpening the questions of what makes credibility vs. inconsistency.

## **Contributions**

Theoretical contributions. This research strengthens a simple brand trust pathway—authenticity → brand trust → purchase intention—specifically in the context of brand activism and it also assesses the influence of the moderating role of generation, which is typically assumed but less frequently confirmed. Moreover, through the integration of CEO activism and emblematic instances, the study extends the authenticity dimension with co-changes and context-sensitive details.

Managerial contributions. The work for managers is presented in the form of clear and accessible tools: creating language suitable for the target audience, guaranteeing profound operational harmony with declared causes, picking the most suitable testimonials for the brand identity, tracking the results with both numbers and words. These tools enable managers not only to eliminate the possibility of credibility gaps (for instance, the perception of “eco-incongruences”) but also to transform activism into lasting trust and business outcomes that are of commercial interest.

## **Thesis structure**

The thesis is structured in the following way. The first chapter provides the framing of the brand activism, generational lens, CEO activism, and cases, besides defining the managerial problem. The next chapter introduces theoretical perspectives with scientific questions and hypotheses as well as a conceptual model. The next chapter describes the combined-methods design and presents the

empirical findings. Besides, there is a discussion of the possible implications, the scope, and the ways for future research.

# Chapter 1: Brand Activism and Generational Perception

## 1.1 Introduction to Brand Activism

In recent years, the concept of brand activism has gained increasing importance in the global marketing landscape. The term refers to a company's public commitment to social, environmental, or political issues, often accompanied by communication campaigns and concrete initiatives. According to Sarkar and Kotler (2018), brand activism goes beyond traditional Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), transforming purpose into tangible action. It is no longer just about maximizing profit, but actively contributing to the common good, promoting change processes, and taking an active role in contemporary challenges.

Brand activism differs from related concepts such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and cause marketing. While CSR focuses on adhering to ethical and regulatory standards and cause marketing on short-term initiatives, brand activism implies a deeper and continuous commitment, integrated into the corporate strategy and aimed at meeting external social needs beyond production and commerce. It is an evolution of the concept of "brand purpose," with a greater emphasis on operability rather than mere declarations of intent.

The Edelman Trust Barometer (2023) report notes that 64% of global consumers claim to buy or boycott a brand based on its positions on social issues, highlighting how consumers are becoming more active and selective in evaluating company beliefs. This data highlights a significant change in consumer behavior, who now expect brands to be not only providers of products or services, but also responsible social actors. In this context, the distinction between authentic forms of activism and opportunistic practices (e.g., greenwashing, femvertising) is crucial for evaluating the consistency and effectiveness of communication strategies (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Greenwashing, in particular, refers to the practice of presenting an ecologically responsible image without a real substantial commitment, deceiving consumers about the environmental benefits of a product or service.

Brand activism has become a relevant phenomenon in contemporary marketing due to several interconnected factors. Firstly, cultural changes and increased social awareness have led consumers to demand greater transparency and responsibility from companies. Secondly, increasing consumer pressure, amplified by the visibility offered by social media, has made it impossible for brands to ignore social and environmental issues. Finally, brands' ability to influence public opinion and

mobilize resources has made them powerful actors in promoting social change. Companies can no longer limit themselves to offering quality products or services; they must also demonstrate a positive impact on society and the environment, at the risk of losing trust and market share.

## **1.2 Evolution and Current Context**

The evolution of marketing has seen a significant shift from traditional "purpose-driven marketing" to a more active and incisive form: brand activism. While in the past companies merely declared their values or passively supported social causes, today the expectation is for concrete and visible commitment. This change has been fueled by greater social awareness among consumers, particularly new generations, who demand that brands take a stand on relevant issues and act consistently with their stated values. This has led to a redefinition of the role of businesses in society, transforming them from simple providers of goods and services into social and political actors.

The McKinsey & Company (2022) report highlights how Generation Z, in particular, expects concrete and consistent commitment from brands, while older generations show more critical or skeptical attitudes towards corporate activism. This fragmentation of perceptions represents a significant managerial challenge: how to design effective yet credible activist communication for heterogeneous audiences? Which forms of activism are more authentic and which, conversely, compromise consumer trust? The answer to these questions is fundamental for companies that want to build lasting relationships with their customers and maintain a positive reputation in a market increasingly attentive to ethical and social issues.

The current context is characterized by increasing social and political polarization, which makes it even more complex for brands to navigate the activism landscape. Companies that choose to take a stand on controversial issues risk alienating a portion of their consumers, but at the same time can strengthen the bond with those who share their values. It is therefore essential for brands to thoroughly understand their target audience and carefully evaluate the risks and opportunities associated with each form of brand activism. Transparency and authenticity are key elements for building and maintaining consumer trust, especially in an era where information spreads rapidly and companies are constantly under scrutiny.

## **1.3. The Generational Dimension in Brand Activism**

### **1.3.1 Differences in Perception between Generations**

The perception of brand activism varies significantly across different generations, a crucial aspect for companies seeking to communicate effectively and authentically. Each generation has been

shaped by unique socio-economic and technological contexts, which have influenced their values, expectations, and relationship with brands.

Understanding these differences is fundamental for developing targeted and successful brand activism strategies.

Generation Z (born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s), having grown up in a context of greater social and environmental awareness, expects concrete and consistent commitment from brands. For this generation, value alignment between consumer and brand is a decisive factor in purchasing decisions. They are digital natives, constantly connected and accustomed to a rapid flow of information, which makes them particularly adept at discerning authenticity from opportunism. Studies such as Chatterji & Toffel (2009) highlight how Gen Z is particularly sensitive to brands' social positions, often preferring or boycotting products based on those positions. Not only do they expect brands to take a stand, but also to act tangibly to support the causes they claim to espouse. Their propensity to seek information and share opinions on social media amplifies the impact of their choices, making them an extremely influential consumer segment.

Millennials (born between the early 1980s and mid-1990s) share with Gen Z a strong focus on social and environmental issues, but with some nuances. They were the first to push brands towards greater social responsibility, but tend to be more pragmatic and evaluate the real impact of brands' actions. They are attentive to sustainability and ethics, but also to the quality-price ratio. Their perception of brand activism is often linked to their personal experience and the consistency between the brand's message and its corporate practices. They are less likely to boycott a brand than Gen Z, but are more inclined to reward brands that demonstrate authentic and lasting commitment.

Generation X (born between the mid-1960s and early 1980s) and Boomers (born between the mid-1940s and mid-1960s) tend to show varying levels of skepticism towards brand activism. Although they also appreciate social commitment, they are often more critical of initiatives perceived as opportunistic or inauthentic. This skepticism can stem from past experiences of "greenwashing" or "woke washing," where brand promises were not supported by concrete actions. They are less influenced by brand activism campaigns than younger generations and tend to base their purchasing decisions on more traditional factors such as product quality, price, and established brand reputation. However, even for these generations, an authentic and transparent commitment can strengthen trust and loyalty to the brand.

In summary, while Gen Z and Millennials are proactive in seeking brands aligned with their values and expect tangible commitment, Gen X and Boomers are more cautious and require greater proof of authenticity. This generational divergence makes brand activism communication a complex

challenge, requiring careful audience segmentation and a message tailored to each age group. The CEO's figure and communication can

influence the perception of the authenticity of corporate activism, generating ambivalent reactions across different age groups (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021).

### **1.3.2 The Role of Leadership in Brand Activism**

The role of leadership, particularly the CEO, has become an increasingly relevant element in the brand activism landscape. The communication and actions of corporate leaders can profoundly influence the perception of a brand's authenticity and the credibility of its social commitment. In an era of greater transparency and connectivity, CEOs are no longer anonymous figures behind the scenes, but active voices in public debate, capable of generating both strong loyalty and fierce criticism.

CEO activism manifests when a corporate leader publicly takes a stand on social, political, or environmental issues not directly related to the company's core business. This can include statements on civil rights, climate change, gender equality, or other sensitive topics. The impact of such activism is twofold: on the one hand, it can strengthen the brand's image as a socially responsible entity aligned with consumer values; on the other hand, it can generate polarization and negative reactions, especially if the CEO's positions are perceived as inconsistent or opportunistic.

An emblematic example of CEO activism is Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla. Tesla's mission to accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy is a clear example of brand activism intrinsic to the product. However, Musk's personal and often controversial communication on social media and in public has generated ambivalent reactions (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). His statements on political issues or his interactions with public figures have often divided public opinion, influencing the perception of the Tesla brand. This case highlights the delicate balance that CEOs must maintain between promoting corporate values and managing their public image. A charismatic leader can amplify the brand's message, but communication perceived as inconsistent or excessively polarizing can undermine consumer trust and generate significant "backlash."

Research suggests that the effectiveness of CEO activism depends on several factors, including the consistency between the CEO's statements and the brand's actions, the relevance of the cause to the target audience, and the perceived authenticity of the leader themselves. Consumers are increasingly attentive to the congruence between what a brand and its leader declare and what they actually do. A CEO who takes a stand on a cause but whose company does not demonstrate concrete commitment in that direction risks being accused of hypocrisy, with negative consequences for the brand's reputation and trust. Conversely, a CEO who embodies the brand's values and acts

consistently can become a powerful catalyst for brand activism, strengthening the bond with consumers and distinguishing the brand from the competition (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

## **1.4 Exemplary Business Cases**

To fully understand the dynamics of brand activism and different generational perceptions, it is useful to analyze some emblematic business cases, ranging from examples of authenticity and consistency to more controversial situations. These cases offer valuable insights into the strategies adopted by brands and consumer reactions, highlighting the importance of consistency, transparency, and understanding of one's target audience.

### **1.4.1 Patagonia: Authenticity and Consistency as Pillars of Brand Activism**

Patagonia is universally recognized as an archetype of authentic and successful brand activism (Chouinard & Oreskes, 2012). Founded in 1973 by Yvon Chouinard, the company has distinguished itself from its origins by its deep commitment to environmental protection and the promotion of ethical business practices. This commitment is not merely a marketing strategy, but is intrinsically linked to its identity and corporate mission. Patagonia has demonstrated that it is possible to pursue profit goals in harmony with social and environmental responsibility, becoming a benchmark for other companies aspiring to a more sustainable business model.

Consistency is key to Patagonia's success in brand activism. Every aspect of its operations, from the choice of recycled and organic materials to supply chain transparency, from garment repair initiatives to donating 1% of sales to environmental causes, reflects its core values. Its communication campaigns, often provocative and direct, such as the famous "Don't Buy This Jacket" published in the New York Times on Black Friday (Patagonia, 2011), do not aim solely to sell products, but to raise consumer awareness about the environmental impact of excessive consumption. This approach has built unwavering trust among its customers, particularly among younger generations (Gen Z and Millennials) who appreciate genuine commitment and transparency. Patagonia's perceived authenticity is a striking example of how a brand can align its values with consumer expectations, transforming activism into a lasting competitive advantage and a source of deep brand loyalty. Its ability to maintain a firm and consistent position over time, even at the cost of sacrificing short-term growth opportunities, has strengthened its credibility and influence as a leader in the outdoor apparel sector and beyond.

#### **1.4.2 Dove: Femvertising and the Challenge of Body Positivity**

Dove, a Unilever-owned brand, has embarked on a significant journey in brand activism through its "Real Beauty" campaign, launched in 2004 (Dove, 2004). This initiative was a pioneer of "femvertising," a type of advertising that challenges gender stereotypes and promotes messages of female empowerment and body positivity (Drake, 2018). Dove's goal was to redefine beauty standards by showing real women of different ages, shapes, and ethnicities, in contrast to the often unrealistic and idealized images proposed by the beauty industry.

The campaign had a remarkable cultural impact, generating widespread debate and resonating positively with millions of consumers worldwide.

The "Real Beauty" campaign struck deep emotional chords, particularly among Millennials and Gen Z, who grew up in an era of greater awareness of inclusion and diversity issues. These generations seek brands that not only sell products but also promote positive social values and contribute to cultural change. However, Dove's journey has not been without challenges and criticisms. Despite the campaign's success, the brand has faced accusations of inconsistency, especially in relation to other Unilever products or corporate practices perceived as not fully aligned with the message of body positivity (Szabo & Webster, 2020). For example, Unilever's presence in sectors with more traditional beauty standards or the marketing of "slimming" products has raised questions about the authenticity of Dove's commitment. This case highlights the need for brands to ensure 360-degree consistency between the brand activism message and all corporate practices, to avoid accusations of opportunism and maintain consumer trust. The challenge for Dove, and for other brands embarking on similar paths, is to navigate consumer expectations and the complexity of a diversified product portfolio, ensuring that social commitment is perceived as genuine and not as a mere marketing strategy.

#### **1.4.3 H&M: Between Green Commitment and Greenwashing Accusations**

H&M, one of the giants of "fast fashion," represents an emblematic case of the challenges and contradictions that companies in this sector face in their attempt to embrace brand activism, particularly on the environmental sustainability front. In recent years, H&M has launched numerous initiatives and "conscious" collections, promoting the use of recycled and organic materials, garment collection programs, and awareness campaigns on responsible consumption (H&M Group, 2023). The stated goal is to position itself as a leader in sustainable fashion and to respond to growing consumer concerns about the environmental impact of the fashion industry.

However, despite these efforts, H&M has frequently been accused of "greenwashing" (De Freitas Netto et al., 2020). The fast fashion business model, based on the production of large volumes of low-cost garments and extremely short product life cycles, is intrinsically at odds with sustainability principles. Criticisms of H&M often concern the perception that its green initiatives are more of a marketing facade than a real structural change. For example, the quantity of garments produced and sold annually by H&M makes it difficult to believe that "conscious" collections can offset the overall impact of its business model. The perceived "eco-incongruences" by consumers, especially by generations more attentive to the environment like Gen Z and Millennials, have undermined trust and generated skepticism. This case highlights the difficulty for companies to reconcile a traditional business model with growing sustainability expectations, and how a lack of transparency and consistency between declarations and practices can severely damage

brand reputation. For a brand like H&M, the challenge is enormous: to be perceived as authentically activist, it should radically reconsider its business model, going beyond individual initiatives to embrace systemic transformation.

#### **1.4.4 Tesla: Eco-Sustainable Activism and the Polarizing Figure of Elon Musk**

Tesla is a unique and fascinating case in the brand activism landscape, where the brand's intrinsic mission to accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy (Tesla, 2023) merges and sometimes clashes with the highly polarizing figure of its CEO, Elon Musk. Tesla's vision, focused on the production of electric vehicles, energy storage solutions, and solar products, is in itself an act of brand activism. The company does not just sell products, but actively promotes a more sustainable future, challenging the status quo of the automotive and energy industries. This fundamental commitment has attracted a base of loyal and passionate consumers, particularly among those who share the vision of a greener future.

However, Elon Musk's influence on the perception of the Tesla brand is undeniable and complex. Musk is known for his direct, often unconventional, and sometimes controversial communication through platforms like Twitter (now X). His statements on political, social, or economic issues, as well as his interactions with other public figures, have generated ambivalent reactions (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). While his charismatic figure and futuristic vision have amplified Tesla's message and attracted a vast following of fans and investors, his impromptu positions or divisive opinions have alienated a portion of the public and raised questions about the alignment between the CEO's personal values and the brand's mission. This case highlights the delicate "trade-off" between the brand's mission and the influence of personal leadership. The perception of the authenticity and credibility of Tesla's corporate activism is constantly influenced by Musk's figure, generating both strong loyalty

and fierce criticism among different generations of consumers. For Tesla, the challenge is to balance the powerful resonance of its mission with the management of its leader's public image, ensuring that attention does not shift from the main cause to personal controversies.

## 1.5 The Managerial Problem and Practical Implications

The growing impact of brand activism and the diverse generational perceptions surrounding it pose a complex and fundamentally important managerial challenge for contemporary companies. In an increasingly saturated and competitive market, where differentiation based solely on product and price is increasingly difficult, social and environmental commitment can become a powerful value driver for the brand. However, managing this commitment requires a deep understanding of consumer expectations and a well-defined strategy to avoid missteps that could damage reputation and trust.

The central question that emerges for managers is: How to design brand activism communications that are credible and capable of generating trust (brand trust) across different age targets? This question does not have a single answer, but requires a strategic approach that considers cultural, generational nuances, and the specific context in which the brand operates. Companies must go beyond mere declarations of intent and demonstrate authentic and consistent commitment with their actions. A lack of alignment between what a brand says and what it does can lead to serious reputational damage and loss of consumer trust, as widely demonstrated by cases of greenwashing or woke washing (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Trust, once lost, is extremely difficult to regain, and the damage can extend far beyond the single campaign, influencing the overall perception of the brand and its ability to attract and retain customers.

### 1.5.1 Levers of Intervention for the Manager

To address this challenge and transform brand activism into a sustainable competitive advantage, managers must consider several strategic levers:

- Choice of language and tone of voice: Brand activism communication must be carefully calibrated to resonate with the target audience. This implies using language that is authentic, empathetic, and reflects the values and sensitivities of each generation. A tone that is too aggressive or, conversely, too bland, can compromise the effectiveness of the message. For example, Gen Z might appreciate more direct and activist language, while older generations might prefer a more measured and fact-based approach. It is crucial to avoid overly technical jargon or empty expressions that can be perceived as meaningless or, worse, as attempts at manipulation. Transparency and honesty in language are crucial for building credibility.

- Consistency between declared values and operational practices: Authenticity is the cornerstone of brand activism. Companies must ensure that their social and environmental commitment is deeply integrated into their value chain, daily operations, and corporate culture. It is not enough to make public declarations or launch ad hoc campaigns; it is necessary to demonstrate commitment with facts. This means investing in sustainable practices, ensuring ethical working conditions, promoting diversity and inclusion within the organization, and actively supporting declared causes. Internal and external consistency is fundamental: consumers, increasingly informed and attentive, can quickly identify inconsistencies between a brand's words and actions, and the consequences can be devastating for reputation.
- Choice of testimonials and alignment with brand identity: Testimonials chosen for brand activism campaigns must be credible and aligned with the brand's values and the cause they intend to promote. Their image, actions, and personal convictions must reinforce the message, not contradict it. A testimonial who does not embody the values of the cause or who has a controversial past can undermine the campaign's effectiveness and generate distrust. Similarly, activism must be consistent with the brand's overall identity and not appear as an isolated or opportunistic initiative. A luxury brand engaging in a social cause must do so in a way that is consistent with its image and positioning, just like a sportswear brand. Alignment between brand identity, cause, and testimonial is essential to ensure that the message is perceived as authentic and relevant.
- Measurement of effectiveness: It is fundamental to monitor and measure the impact of brand activism campaigns to evaluate their effectiveness and make any necessary adjustments. This can include a variety of metrics, both quantitative and qualitative. Among quantitative metrics, one can consider social media engagement (likes, shares, comments), sentiment analysis (analysis of online conversations to understand brand perception), brand mentions related to the cause, and impact on sales and market share. Qualitative metrics, on the other hand, can include consumer perception surveys, focus groups to gather in-depth feedback, and interviews to understand public motivations and reactions. Measurement allows for refining strategies and ensuring that investment in brand activism yields desired results in terms of reputation, trust, and business performance (Chatterji, Levine & Toffel, 2009). It is an iterative process that requires constant monitoring and the ability to adapt to changes in consumer expectations and the social context.

## 1.6 Research Methodology (In-depth Summary)

This thesis adopts a mixed-methods research approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies to deeply explore the phenomenon of brand activism and its generational perceptions. This integrated approach was chosen for its ability to provide a holistic and multifaceted

understanding of the research problem, overcoming the limitations that a purely qualitative or quantitative approach might present. The combination of different types of data allows for triangulation of results, increasing the validity and reliability of the conclusions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The objective is to capture both the nuances and complexities of consumer perceptions (through qualitative analysis) and the statistically significant relationships between the variables under examination (through quantitative analysis).

### **1.6.1 Mixed Approach: From Quality to Quantity**

The qualitative phase of the research involves an in-depth analysis of the content of four selected brands: Patagonia, Dove, H&M, and Tesla. The choice of these brands is not random: they represent a range of approaches to brand activism, from those perceived as highly authentic (Patagonia) to those more controversial or subject to greenwashing criticisms as in the case of H&M (Delmas & Burbano, 2011), passing through examples of femvertising (Dove) and activism related to the CEO's figure (Tesla). The analysis will focus on various communication sources,

including advertising campaigns (ADV), content published on social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, LinkedIn), and information present in the "Our Mission" or "Sustainability" sections of corporate websites. The objective is to identify how each brand communicates its social and environmental commitment, the issues addressed, the language used, and public reactions to such communications. Comments, shares, and other forms of engagement will be analyzed to capture evidence of generational perception and any criticisms or appreciations.

The quantitative phase, on the other hand, will be based on the administration of a structured online questionnaire. The questionnaire will be designed to collect large- scale data, allowing for generalization of results to a broader population. The distribution will occur to a carefully selected sample of consumers divided by generational cohorts (Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers). This segmentation is crucial for capturing differences in perceptions and attitudes among different cohorts, as highlighted in the previous section. The questionnaire will include questions aimed at measuring the key variables of the research, ensuring standardization of responses and the possibility of conducting comparative statistical analyses (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). The combination of these two methodological phases will allow for a complete and in-depth view of the phenomenon, integrating qualitative depth with statistical robustness.

## 1.6.2 Measured Variables and Analysis Tools

The key variables to be measured through the questionnaire have been carefully selected to answer the research questions and test the proposed conceptual model. These include:

- Perception of activism authenticity: This variable aims to quantify how consumers perceive the brand's commitment as genuine, sincere, and not opportunistic. Validated measurement scales from the literature will be used, exploring dimensions such as transparency, consistency between words and actions, and the brand's intrinsic motivation to support a cause.

- Brand Trust: Trust is a fundamental construct in marketing and in building lasting relationships with consumers. This variable will assess the level of trust consumers place in the brand regarding its social and environmental commitment. Dimensions such as reliability, integrity, and perceived benevolence of the brand will be investigated.

- Purchase Intention: This variable measures the likelihood that consumers will purchase the brand's products or services based on their perception of activism. It is a key indicator of the behavioral impact of brand activism and its ability to translate into concrete economic results.

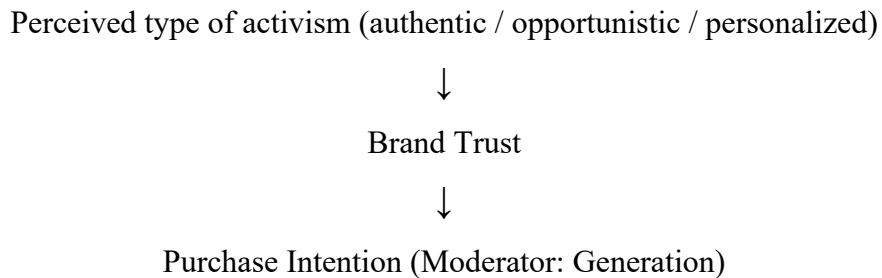
These variables will be measured using 5-point Likert scales (e.g., from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree"), a widely recognized method for measuring attitudes and perceptions in social and marketing research contexts. The collected data will then be analyzed using SPSS statistical software (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) as explained by Field (2013). The analyses will include:

- ANOVA (Analysis of Variance): Will be used to compare the means of the measured variables across different generational cohorts. This will allow for identification of significant differences in the perception of authenticity, brand trust, and purchase intention among Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, and Boomers.

- Linear Regression: Will be used to measure the impact of the perceived type of activism (authentic, opportunistic, personalized) on brand trust and purchase intention. This analysis will quantify the strength and direction of the relationships between variables, providing valuable insights into which aspects of activism are most effective in generating trust and purchase propensity.

## 1.6.3 Conceptual Model (Simplified and Detailed)

The conceptual model guiding this research, although simplified in its graphical representation, illustrates the hypothesized relationships between the main variables and serves as a theoretical framework for the analysis (MacInnis, 2011). This model is dynamic and reflects the complexity of the interactions between different elements:



This model suggests that the type of activism perceived by consumers (e.g., whether a brand activism action is seen as authentic, opportunistic, or linked to the CEO's personality) directly influences the trust they place in the brand (van der Linden & Maibach, 2019). In turn, this trust affects purchase intention. The relationship between these variables is moderated by the consumer's generation, indicating that the impact of activism can vary significantly depending on the age group (Williams & Page, 2011). This implies that an effective brand activism strategy cannot be unique for all audience segments, but must be differentiated and adapted to the specific sensitivities and expectations of each generation. This model provides a solid basis for empirical analysis and for formulating targeted managerial recommendations.

## 1.7 Conclusions and Perspectives

This first chapter has offered an in-depth analysis of brand activism, a rapidly evolving phenomenon that is redefining the role of companies in contemporary society (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). We have explored its definition, distinguishing it from related concepts such as CSR and cause marketing, and analyzed the factors that have determined its growing relevance, including cultural changes, consumer pressure, and media amplification (Edelman, 2023). It has become clear that brand activism is no longer an option, but a strategic necessity for companies that wish to build meaningful and lasting relationships with their stakeholders.

A particular focus has been placed on the generational dimension, highlighting how the perception and expectations of brand activism vary significantly among Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, and Boomers. While younger generations tend to reward authentic and consistent commitment, older generations may show greater skepticism, requiring more proof of authenticity and transparency. We have also analyzed the crucial role of leadership, particularly the CEO, in shaping the perception of a brand's activism, as demonstrated by the case of Elon Musk and Tesla. Consistency between the leader's statements and the brand's actions is fundamental to avoid accusations of hypocrisy and to build trust (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021).

The analysis of exemplary business cases such as Patagonia, Dove, H&M, and Tesla has illustrated the diverse facets of brand activism, from models of authenticity and consistency (Patagonia) to challenges related to femvertising and perceived inconsistencies (Dove), to the problems of greenwashing (H&M) and the influence of individual leadership (Tesla). These examples have highlighted the importance of a strategic and holistic approach to brand activism, which takes into account all aspects of corporate operations, from production to communication, to ensure a consistent and credible message.

The central managerial problem identified in this chapter concerns the design of brand activism communications that are credible and capable of generating trust in a heterogeneous audience. We have discussed the strategic levers available to managers, including the choice of language and tone of voice, consistency between declared values and operational practices, the selection of testimonials, and the importance of measuring effectiveness. These levers, if applied with attention and awareness of generational specificities, can transform brand activism into a powerful tool for value creation and for strengthening corporate reputation (Chatterji, Levine & Toffel, 2009).

Finally, an in-depth summary of the research methodology that will be adopted in the thesis has been presented, based on a mixed approach combining qualitative and quantitative analysis. This approach will allow for exploration of perceptions of authenticity, brand trust, and purchase intention, with generation as a moderating factor, providing a comprehensive and robust framework for the phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The proposed conceptual model will guide the empirical analysis, allowing for identification of key relationships between variables and formulation of targeted managerial recommendations.

The subsequent chapters of the thesis will further explore these themes, providing a more detailed analysis of the literature, a complete description of the research methodology, the presentation and discussion of empirical results, and theoretical and managerial implications. The ultimate goal is to offer a significant contribution to the understanding of brand activism and to provide practical tools for companies that wish to successfully navigate this complex and dynamic context, transforming challenges into opportunities and contributing to a more sustainable and socially responsible future. The research aims to fill identified gaps in existing literature, particularly regarding comparative analysis across different generations and the impact of leadership on brand activism, providing new perspectives and insights for academics and marketing professionals.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review and Research Methodology

### 2.1 Brand Activism: Evolution of the Concept and Key Distinctions

Brand Activism, understood as a company's public commitment to social, environmental, or political issues, represents a significant evolution in the contemporary marketing landscape (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). This phenomenon is distinct from related concepts such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Cause Marketing, although it shares with them the goal of generating a positive impact on society. To fully understand Brand Activism, it is essential to analyse the evolutionary path that has led companies to move from a passive to a proactive approach in addressing social challenges.

The evolution from traditional corporate philanthropy to contemporary Brand Activism is not a linear progression but rather a complex interplay of societal shifts, consumer expectations, and corporate strategic responses. Historically, corporate engagement with social issues was largely confined to philanthropic activities, often driven by altruistic motives or a desire to enhance local community relations. These early forms of engagement, while valuable, were typically disconnected from core business operations and lacked a strategic alignment with the company's overall mission.

As societies became more interconnected and globalized, and as the impact of corporate activities on the environment and social welfare became more apparent, the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) gained prominence (Carroll, 1999). CSR, as it emerged in the mid-20th century, represented a more formalized approach to corporate accountability, encouraging companies to consider their broader societal impact beyond mere profit generation. This involved integrating ethical considerations into business practices, addressing environmental concerns, and fostering positive relationships with employees, suppliers, and local communities. However, CSR often remained a voluntary endeavour, driven by a sense of moral obligation or a desire to mitigate reputational risks, rather than being central to the company's competitive strategy.

Cause Marketing, which gained traction in the 1980s, marked a significant shift by explicitly linking corporate social initiatives to marketing objectives (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). This approach involved partnerships between for-profit companies and non-profit organizations, where a portion of product sales or a direct donation was tied to a specific social cause. While successful in raising funds and awareness for various causes, Cause Marketing was often criticized for its transactional nature and for potentially commodifying social issues. Critics argued that such initiatives could be perceived as opportunistic, lacking genuine commitment, and primarily serving the company's commercial interests rather than the cause itself.

Brand Activism, therefore, represents a further evolution, moving beyond the reactive or transactional nature of CSR and Cause Marketing (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). It signifies a proactive and often bold stance on controversial social, political, or environmental issues, driven by a deep-seated purpose and a commitment to societal change. Unlike its predecessors, Brand Activism is not merely about doing good or associating with a good cause; it is about taking a principled stand, even if it means alienating a segment of the consumer base or facing backlash. This shift reflects a growing expectation among consumers, particularly younger generations, that brands should not only provide quality products but also embody values and contribute actively to addressing pressing societal challenges.

This historical trajectory underscores a fundamental change in the relationship between businesses and society. What began as peripheral philanthropic gestures has evolved into a strategic imperative for many brands, where taking a stand on societal issues is increasingly seen as integral to brand identity, consumer loyalty, and long-term sustainability. The rise of social media and the heightened transparency of the digital age have further amplified this trend, making it imperative for brands to align their words with their actions and to demonstrate genuine commitment to the causes they champion.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, focuses primarily on the voluntary integration of social and environmental concerns into business operations and interactions with stakeholders (Carroll, 1999). CSR is often seen as a way for companies to act ethically and contribute to sustainable development, but it tends to be more reactive and focused on minimizing harm or complying with regulations. CSR initiatives can include sustainable production practices, charitable donations, corporate volunteering, and improving working conditions. The main objective of CSR is often to improve corporate reputation and manage risks, without necessarily taking explicit positions on controversial issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Cause Marketing, on the other hand, is a marketing strategy in which a company and a non-profit organization form a partnership to promote a product or service and, at the same time, raise funds or awareness for a social cause (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). A classic example is the association between a food brand and a campaign against world hunger, where a percentage of sales is donated to the cause. Cause Marketing is typically transactional and short-term, with a focus on generating sales and improving the brand's image through association with a positive cause. Although it can generate significant benefits for both parties, Cause Marketing is often criticized for its opportunistic nature, as the brand's commitment is limited to the duration of the campaign and does not always reflect a deep value alignment (Andreasen, 1996).

Brand Activism is positioned as an evolution of these concepts, going beyond mere responsibility or transactional partnership. According to Sarkar and Kotler (2018), Brand Activism implies that a company takes a public and active stance on social, political, economic, or environmental issues, often controversial, with the intent of promoting change (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Unlike CSR, which is more compliance-oriented and risk-minimizing, and Cause Marketing, which is focused on sales, Brand Activism is driven by a deep sense of purpose and a willingness to act for the common good, even at the cost of alienating some consumers (Moorman, 2020).

Types of Brand Activism can vary widely depending on the nature of the issues addressed and the company's approach. Several main categories can be identified:

- Social Activism: Concerns issues related to human rights, gender equality, racial justice, inclusion, and diversity. Examples include campaigns in favour of the LGBTQ+ community, the Black Lives Matter movement, or pay equity (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

- Environmental Activism: Focuses on sustainability, the fight against climate change, the conservation of natural resources, and the reduction of pollution. Brands that adopt ecological practices, promote the circular economy, or fight against deforestation fall into this category (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

- Political Activism: Involves taking a stand on specific political issues, such as immigration laws, gun control, or health policies. This type of activism is often the riskiest, as it can strongly polarize public opinion (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021).

- Economic Activism: Refers to issues related to economic justice, minimum wage, working conditions, and financial transparency. Companies that promote fair trade or fight for living wages are examples of economic activism (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021).

These forms of activism need not be mutually exclusive and can overlap in a single campaign as well. For example, environmental activism is represented by brands like Patagonia, which openly champions the fight against climate change and sustainable development through both its communication and its choices. Social activism is well represented by Ben & Jerry's, which has openly taken a stand on issues of racial justice and LGBTQ rights. Political activism has been the hallmark of brands like Nike, which backed Colin Kaepernick's protest against police brutality—winning supporters but also feeding its detractors. On the other hand, economic activism is the terrain of brands that want to fight income captivity such as Danone, which has experimented with various forms of inclusive capitalism. Examples make the ideas clearer and show how categories translate into practice.

The evolution towards Brand Activism reflects a change in consumer expectations, who no longer just evaluate products or services based on their quality or price, but also consider the social and

environmental impact of companies. In an era of greater awareness and connectivity, brands are increasingly called upon to demonstrate authentic commitment and to actively contribute to solving global problems (Edelman, 2023).

To recap, the transition from traditional CSR to Brand Activism indicates a paradigmatic change in the connection between brands and society. The transformation is typified by the need for more purpose-driven dialogue, value congruence, and real initiatives. Knowledge about the kinds and the history of Brand Activism is necessary to realize how the present brands deal with the sociopolitical involvement and how they get ready to meet the increasing consumer inspection. The following part discusses the importance of genuineness as a factor which determines the triumph or non-fulfilment of such attempts.

## **2.2 Authenticity and Credibility in Brand Activism**

The effectiveness of Brand Activism depends largely on the perception of authenticity and credibility by consumers. In a context where companies are increasingly under scrutiny, the consistency between declared values and operational practices becomes crucial for building and maintaining trust. A lack of authenticity can lead to negative reactions, undermining the brand's reputation and customer loyalty.

Building upon the foundational understanding of Brand Activism, the concept of authenticity emerges as the cornerstone of its effectiveness. Authenticity in this context refers to the perception that a brand's engagement with social or political issues is genuine, deeply rooted in its core values, and consistently reflected in its actions, rather than being a superficial or opportunistic marketing ploy (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry & Kemper, 2020). This perception is paramount because consumers, especially in an era of heightened transparency and information overload, are increasingly adept at discerning genuine commitment from mere rhetoric.

Several factors contribute to the perception of authenticity. Firstly, consistency between a brand's stated values and its operational practices is non-negotiable. If a brand advocates for environmental sustainability but its supply chain is riddled with exploitative labour practices or its production processes are environmentally damaging, its claims will be met with scepticism and accusations of hypocrisy. Consumers expect brands to 'walk the talk' and demonstrate their commitment through tangible actions that align with their stated positions.

Secondly, transparency plays a vital role. Brands that are open about their motivations, processes, and the impact of their activism are more likely to be perceived as authentic. This includes being transparent about challenges and setbacks, as well as successes. Consumers appreciate honesty and are more forgiving of imperfections when a brand is upfront about its efforts and limitations.

Thirdly, long-term commitment signals genuine dedication. Brand Activism should not be a one-off campaign or a reactive response to a trending social issue. Instead, it should be an ongoing, integrated part of the brand's strategy, demonstrating a sustained investment in the cause. This continuous engagement builds trust and reinforces the perception that the brand's commitment is deeply embedded in its identity, rather than being a fleeting marketing tactic.

Finally, the relevance of the cause to the brand's core business or values enhances authenticity. While brands can engage with a wide range of issues, those that are logically connected to their industry, products, or historical mission are often perceived as more credible. For example, an outdoor apparel company advocating for environmental conservation is likely to be seen as more authentic than a tobacco company doing the same.

## 2.3 Theoretical Foundations of Brand-Consumer Identification

Consumers characteristically are leaning beyond the traditional transactional relationship while purchasing and they are energizing themselves with brands psychologically in the way that they connect with the brands that speak about the brands' values and they themselves have derived from their beliefs. Such a phenomenon is explicated using the lens of the Social Identity Theory (SIT), initially introduced by Tajfel and Turner (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT maintains that man gets part of his self-concept from the fact that he is a member of social groups. A brand that decides to make the public aware of its position on the social or political issue, in fact, is signalling that it has decided to take the side of a particular social group or ideology (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). The consumers who are of the same mind as that group or ideology, therefore, will be more likely to see the brand as the 'in-group' member, which means that the identification, trust, and loyalty to that brand will increase. It is this identification process that is indispensable for Brand Activism because through it the brand can become no longer just a product provider but a symbolic representation of shared values. Whenever a brand is the advocate of a cause that goes in line with a consumer's social identity, the customer will be the consumer who gets a new self-image from this brand and their beliefs will be confirmed. There might come a time when the customer finds himself/herself in the state of a strong emotional bond, thus, standing with that brand will become its expression and the consumer will be indistinguishable from the cause. On the contrary, in a situation when the brand will adopt a position that is on the opposite side of a consumer's social identity, the latter will very probably respond with a lot of negative emotions and disidentification, boycotts, and public condemnation will be the forms of these reactions. Just as an illustration, a consumer who is environmentally friendly to a high degree will be the one that most probably identifies the brands such as Patagonia, whose

consistent environmental activism is for them like a mirror of their eco-conscious identity, for instance (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry & Kemper, 2020). Such identification is not limited to only product quality; the crux is shared purpose and values. The brand turns into a consumer's identity's part and supporting it gives a consumer the opportunity to prove the commitment to saving the environment. The above-mentioned dynamics vividly demonstrate why authenticity is the utmost importance to Brand Activism: any tangible difference between a brand's declared values and the actual practice will be viewed as akin to betrayal of the consumer's own identity, hence the backlash it would give rise to. SIT also provides a rationale for the divisive impact that Brand Activism can have. One brand that has decided to side with one group of people cannot therefore avoid the creation of an 'out-group' of consumers who have different values- the effect is inevitable. The in-group among supporters will be more united while the out-group will show more antagonism. For this reason, the brands that are into the activism should be very careful in the decision of their position as they must balance potential loyalty versus possible alienation that if they are not cautious, they could lose their sense of identity in the marketplace if the audience sees them as the wrong side of the social identity struggle.

The perils of inauthenticity are significant and can lead to severe reputational damage. When a brand's activism is perceived as opportunistic, hypocritical, or merely a superficial attempt to capitalize on social trends, it can trigger a strong negative backlash from consumers, media, and other stakeholders. This phenomenon, often termed "woke washing," involves brands appropriating progressive values or social justice movements without genuine commitment or action (Moorman, 2020). The consequences can include consumer boycotts, public shaming on social media, erosion of brand trust, and long-term damage to brand equity.

Examples of inauthentic activism abound. Greenwashing, a specific form of woke washing, refers to the practice of misleading consumers about the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). This can range from vague claims of being "eco-friendly" without substantiation to outright deceptive marketing that conceals environmentally harmful practices. Similarly, femvertising, while often aiming to empower women, can be criticized if the brand's internal practices (e.g., gender pay gap, lack of female leadership) do not align with its external messaging. Consumers are increasingly sophisticated and have access to vast amounts of information, making it difficult for brands to sustain inauthentic claims without being exposed. The digital age, with its rapid dissemination of information and collective consumer voice, has amplified the risks associated with inauthentic Brand Activism, making genuine commitment not just an ethical imperative but a strategic necessity.

The role of consistency between declared values and operational practices is fundamental. A brand that declares its support for a cause but whose actions do not reflect that commitment risks being perceived as opportunistic. For example, a company that promotes environmental sustainability but uses polluting production practices or an unethical supply chain will hardly gain consumer trust. Authenticity is built through long-term commitment, transparency in operations, and a deep alignment between the corporate mission and the supported causes.

The factors that influence the perception of authenticity include:

- **Transparency:** Clarity and openness about the motivations, actions, and results of activism. Consumers appreciate companies' willingness to share information, even the less positive, demonstrating honesty and integrity.

- **Long-term commitment:** Activism should not be an isolated campaign or a reaction to a specific event, but a continuous and integrated commitment in the corporate strategy. Consistency over time reinforces the perception of authenticity and seriousness.

- **Relevance of the cause:** The supported cause must be relevant to the brand's core business or its fundamental values. A clothing company that fights for the rights of workers in the textile sector will be perceived as more authentic than a company that deals with a completely different sector.

- **Concrete action:** In addition to statements, consumers expect tangible and measurable actions. Investment in specific projects, changes in business practices, and collaboration with non-profit organizations are examples of actions that strengthen credibility (Moorman, 2020).

The pitfalls of opportunism represent a significant threat to brands that venture into Brand Activism without authentic commitment. Among the most criticized practices are:

- **Greenwashing:** The practice of presenting an ecologically responsible image without a real substantial commitment, deceiving consumers about the environmental benefits of a product or service (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). A common example is the use of green labels or naturalistic images on products that have a negative environmental impact.

- **Femvertising:** The use of messages of female empowerment and body positivity to promote products, often superficially and without a real commitment to gender equality. Although it can have a positive impact, femvertising is often criticized when it is not supported by concrete actions, such as pay equity or female representation in corporate leadership (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry & Kemper, 2020).

- **Woke Washing:** The appropriation of ethical and progressive values as a form of advertising to improve corporate reputation, without a real commitment to social justice. This practice can be particularly harmful, as it exploits important social movements for commercial purposes, generating cynicism and distrust (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry & Kemper, 2020).

In conclusion, authenticity and credibility are the pillars of effective Brand Activism. Companies that wish to embark on this path must be willing to make a deep and long-term commitment, ensuring consistency between words and deeds and avoiding the traps of opportunism. Only in this way can they build relationships of trust with consumers and generate a positive and lasting impact on society.

## **2.4 The Generational Dimension in Marketing and Consumption**

### **2.4.1 Characteristics and Values of Generations**

Generational differences play a crucial role in determining consumer expectations and reactions to Brand Activism. Each generation has been shaped by unique socio-economic and technological contexts, which have influenced their values, consumption habits, and relationship with brands. Understanding these differences is essential for developing effective marketing strategies and for communicating authentically with each audience segment.

The generational lens offers a powerful framework for understanding the diverse attitudes, values, and behaviours that shape consumer responses to Brand Activism. Each generation, forged by distinct historical, technological, and socio-economic contexts, exhibits unique characteristics that influence their expectations of brands and their engagement with social issues. A nuanced understanding of these generational cohorts is paramount for brands seeking to effectively communicate their activist stances and build meaningful connections.

Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012): Growing up in a hyper-connected and digital world, members of Generation Z are digital natives, accustomed to a constant flow of information and immediate communication. They are characterized by a strong sense of social and environmental responsibility, and they expect brands to share their values and act accordingly. Transparency, authenticity, and inclusivity are fundamental to them. Gen Z is particularly attentive to issues related to diversity, gender equality, and sustainability, and does not hesitate to boycott brands that do not live up to their expectations. They are also very skilled at recognizing inauthenticity and "woke washing," and prefer brands that demonstrate a concrete and long-term commitment (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996): Millennials were the pioneers of corporate social responsibility, pushing brands to become more aware of their social and environmental impact (Chatterji, Levine & Toffel, 2009). They are an idealistic and value-oriented generation, seeking meaning and purpose not only in life, but also in the products they buy. Millennials are willing to pay more for sustainable products and to support brands that engage in social causes. They are also very active on social media and use these platforms to inform themselves, share their opinions, and interact

with brands. However, compared to Gen Z, they can be more pragmatic and less inclined to boycott, preferring to reward brands that demonstrate authentic commitment.

**Generation X** (born between 1965 and 1980): Generation X is often described as pragmatic, independent, and sceptical. Growing up in an era of economic uncertainty and social change, they tend to be more cautious and less idealistic than Millennials. They are informed consumers who are attentive to the quality and value of products. Although they appreciate the social commitment of companies, they are also very critical of initiatives perceived as opportunistic or inauthentic. Their trust is earned through consistency and transparency, and they are less influenced by emotional marketing campaigns. Generation X prefers brands that demonstrate a concrete commitment and that communicate honestly and directly.

**Boomers** (born between 1946 and 1964): Boomers are a generation that experienced a period of great economic growth and stability. They are often linked to traditional values such as family, work, and security. They are loyal consumers to brands they know and trust, and tend to base their purchasing decisions on quality, reliability, and brand reputation. Although they are less sensitive to social and environmental issues than younger generations, they appreciate companies that demonstrate responsibility and integrity. Boomers are less active on social media and prefer more traditional communication channels. Their trust is earned through consistency over time and a demonstrated commitment to quality and service.

The analysis of generations is not merely a demographic issue, but rather a sociological and marketing approach that recognizes how formative experiences, available technologies, and historical events deeply shape worldviews, values, and consumer behaviour. Understanding the specific traits of each generation is crucial to grasp their differing responses to Brand Activism.

**Generation Z**, often referred to as “digital natives,” is the first generation to grow up with the internet, social media, and smartphones as integral parts of their daily lives. This technological immersion has shaped their ability to process information quickly and to communicate in a concise and visual way. They are extremely attentive to social and environmental issues—not only out of a sense of responsibility, but because they perceive these issues as urgent problems directly affecting their future. Their tendency to seek information from multiple, often non-traditional sources makes them sceptical of one-way narratives and particularly sensitive to authenticity. For Gen Z, a brand is not merely a provider of products or services, but an entity with a voice and a social responsibility. They expect brands to take a stand on important issues and to act consistently with the values they claim to uphold. Their influence also manifests through “cancel culture”, the tendency to boycott or publicly call out brands or figures that fail to meet their ethical standards. This makes them a

demanding audience, but also one that can be highly loyal if a brand earns their trust through genuine and transparent commitment.

**Millennials**, or Generation Y, experienced the transition from the analogue to the digital world. They witnessed significant global events such as 9/11 and the 2008 financial crisis, which shaped their worldview and increased their awareness of inequality and the need for social change. They are a generation that values experiences over possessions and seeks deep meaning in what they do and consume. For Millennials, work is not just a means of earning a living but an opportunity to contribute to something greater. This search for meaning also extends to their relationship with brands: they are drawn to companies that show social and environmental commitment and are willing to pay a premium for ethical and sustainable products. Unlike Gen Z, who may adopt more radical positions, Millennials tend to be more pragmatic and seek a balance between profit and purpose. They are active on social media but use it more to connect with their networks and stay informed rather than engage in direct activism. Their trust in brands is built through transparency, consistency, and evidence of tangible positive impact (Edelman, 2023).

**Generation X** is the “bridge generation” between Boomers and Millennials. Growing up during a period of rapid social and technological change, they developed a strong sense of independence and self-sufficiency. They are often described as sceptical and cynical, but also as highly informed consumers who pay attention to value. They are not easily swayed by trends or fads and prefer brands that offer quality products and reliable service. While not as vocally activist as younger generations, Generation X is attentive to social and environmental issues but tends to express their support through purchase decisions rather than public activism. They are less likely to trust brand statements and prefer to see concrete evidence of commitment (Moorman, 2020). Their loyalty is earned through consistency over time and a straightforward, honest communication approach.

**Boomers**, born in the post-war period, lived through a time of economic prosperity and social stability. They are a generation that values tradition, family, and hard work. They tend to be loyal consumers of brands they have known and trusted for a long time and are less likely to change their purchasing habits. Although they are less sensitive to social and environmental themes than younger generations, they appreciate companies that demonstrate responsibility and integrity (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Their trust is based on an established reputation, product quality, and excellent customer service. Boomers are less present on social media and prefer more traditional communication channels such as television, radio, and print media. For them, Brand Activism can be seen as a positive initiative if it aligns with traditional values and is not overly polarizing.

A study that compares Generation Z with Baby Boomers has uncovered deep changes in their behavioural characteristics relating to the Brand Activism concept. Gen Z insists on the brands that

are genuinely good and corresponds to their values, and they are ready to act against those brands that deceive them. Their power of recognizing authenticity, transparency, and social justice is the result of their life in a digital world and their great need for information. Boomers, on the other hand, are characterized by conservative consumption and are more likely to give their loyalty to brands that are consistent, have a good quality and a long-term reputation rather than those which are actively engaged in social issues. Even if they recognize responsible behaviour, they don't respond well to highly politicized campaigns as they don't see them as their own. The changes show the impact of generational sensitivity on the success of communication strategies.

Understanding these generational nuances is essential for brands that wish to embark on an effective Brand Activism strategy. A one-size-fits-all communication approach risks failing to reach, or worse, alienating important audience segments. Tailoring the message and choosing the most appropriate communication channels for each generation are key elements in maximizing the positive impact of activism and building lasting relationships with consumers (Bhagwat, Warren, Beck, & Watson, 2020).

#### **2.4.2 The Digital Amplification of Brand Activism**

The rise and intensive utilization of social media platforms have indelibly altered the Brand Activism terrain, turning it into a dynamic, multi-directional dialogue from a mostly one-way corporate communication. Social media acts as both a bullish megaphone for activist messages and a litmus test for public opinion and instant reactions (Kapitan, Kennedy, & Berth, 2019). Its features—speed, reach, interactivity, and user-generated content—are game changing for brands that decide to be part of the activism world or that are perceived to be so. First, social media channels give an unprecedented reach and speed to activist campaigns. A brand's position on a social issue can catch fire in no time, exposing it to millions of consumers globally. With such a fast and wide dissemination, brands have the possibility to quickly rally support, change the level of awareness about an issue, and even be part of the ongoing/discussed events in society. On the other hand, the very same speed also can pose as a double-edged sword: there is very little time for correction of errors and flaws can be accentuated and spread just as fast, thus causing a backlash. After that, social media also energizes interactivity and direct engagement between brands and consumers. Contrarily to traditional media, wherein communication is mostly a one-way process, platforms like Twitter (now X), Instagram, and TikTok allow consumers to directly comment, share, and critique a brand's activist efforts (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020). This direct feedback loop means that brands must be prepared for the immediate reactions, be they of the positive or of the negative kind and must still react by dialoguing in an authentic manner with the other party. These interactivities may serve as an

engine of a community that draws together people who share similar values, but it is at the same time a source of problems for brands, which can find themselves at the epicentre of a call-out against a perceived hypocrisy or inconsistency. Furthermore, a sharp increase in user-generated content (UGC) leveraging social media results in the brand's activism narrative not being solely the brand's prerogative. Consumers, influencers, and even employees can create and share their own content, endorsing or criticizing a brand's stance. This democratization of content creation can greatly boost the believability of authentic activism, as peer endorsements are typically more trusted than corporate messaging. On the contrary, an accident caused by negative UGC can wreak havoc to the brand's reputation in no time, hence the importance of the brand's careful and strategic monitoring of social conversations and timely response to them. Lastly, social media sites are the breeding ground of a grassroots movements and mass actions. Consumers can easily organize boycotts, petitions, or support campaigns in response to a brand's activism. This collective power means that brands cannot be merely performative; their conduct must be sincere and fuelled with concrete exercises since social media users are swiftly unmasking those who mismatch between speech and deed. In fact, cancel culture, which integrates mainly the social media phenomenon, is the perfect example of the consumer's power to hold brands accountable for their promises (Ng, 2020). Social media has transformed Brand Activism into a high-risk venture. Although it presents unparalleled opportunities for interaction and impact, it also requires extreme openness, consistent behaviour, and readiness to engage in sincere dialogue with a well-informed and empowered customer base. Brands that understand all the details of social media and can incorporate them into their activist work are more likely to build solid value-driven relationships with their audiences.

#### **2.4.3 Impact of Generational Differences on the Perception of Brand Activism**

The different characteristics and values of the generations translate into different expectations and reactions to Brand Activism. While younger generations, such as Gen Z and Millennials, are more likely to support brands that take a stand on social and environmental issues, older generations, such as Gen X and Boomers, may be more sceptical and require more proof of authenticity (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

Audience segmentation thus becomes a key to effective communication (Chatterji, Levine, & Toffel, 2009). Companies that want to embark on a path of Brand Activism must understand the nuances of each generation and adapt their message and actions accordingly. For example, a campaign aimed at Gen Z could use more direct and activist language and focus on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, while a campaign aimed at Boomers could be more institutional and based on

concrete data, communicated through more traditional channels such as print or television (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

Furthermore, it is important to consider that within each generation there are individual differences and that not all members of a generation think the same way. Therefore, effective communication requires not only an understanding of generational trends, but also a deep knowledge of one's target audience and their specific sensitivities and expectations (Edelman, 2023).

After defining the theory of Brand Activism and studying its acceptance among different generations, it is now necessary to investigate the people who lead these activist projects in businesses. The role of leadership—especially CEO activism—has a significant impact on the image of the brand in the minds of consumers. The next period will be devoted to a detailed discussion of this aspect.

#### **2.4.4 Strategic Implications for Brand Management**

The subtle knowledge of generational characteristics and values is not just a learning exercise; it has important implications for brand managers, who are dealing with the complicated Brand Activism market. The efficient engagement demands a methodical approach that confirms to and utilizes these generational differences, thus going beyond the usual communication model.

First, individually targeted communication strategies are of utmost importance. As already mentioned, Generation Z and Millennials are very likely to be influenced by a daring, values-driven message, which is brought forth through social media and digital, focusing on authenticity and direct engagement (McKinsey & Company, 2022). In the case of these two cohorts, brands must put their focus on a truthful narrative, making it clear what they are doing to the community, and being ready to have an interactive conversation. On the other hand, Gen X and Boomers are more inclined to receive information through reliable, fact-based communication, broadcasted via conventional media, where the emphasis will be on consistency, reliability, and the brand's long-term commitment. For those generations, aggressive or polarizing activist stances might not only be met with suspicion but also with a lack of interest.

Secondly, based on the generational expectations of Brand Activism, product and service development can be altered accordingly. The younger generation is particularly more open to paying more for goods that are produced ethically, sourced from green materials, and comply with the rules of CSR activities of the company (Nielsen, 2015). This gives brands a chance to bring their activist commitments to the products or services, which they develop and market, thus making their value propositions more attractive for these segments. Respectively, older generations, while not

undermining the ethical factors, will probably weigh product quality, durability, and brand reputation higher.

Thirdly, internal alignment and employee engagement become very important. An external brand activist message needs to be aligned with the internal culture of the brand and the way it operates. Gen Z and Millennial cohorts, younger workers, are very much so those who are attracted to companies that can prove to be genuinely engaged in social and environmental causes (Deloitte, 2021). If a brand's activism is true and it is reflected in corporate values, then it can really make a great impact in employee morale, bring in the best talent, and create a sense of community. On the other hand, a gap between what is said and what is being done can make employees cynical and they may even go public with their criticisms.

Fourthly, the generation aspect of risk management and crisis communication strategies should be considered. The chance of the wrong reaction because of the false activism or the divided opinion is greatly increased in the online world. Do you understand that brands cannot be caught off guard? They need to develop crisis communication plans that cover all potential generational differences and risks that may arise. In the first place, they should follow what people say on social media, know the differences in vocabulary, and be ready to respond quickly and genuinely if they find any unethical behaviour.

Lastly, brand development for the long haul in the activist age demands a thorough familiarity with generational changes. Moreover, as these younger generations grow and have more impact due to their buying power, their values and expected norms will influence the market increasingly. The brands that do their best to truly build value-driven relations with these cohorts through genuine activism will be the ones that can continue to enjoy their loyalty and keep on top of the market. It is important that brands conduct research on generational changes regularly and be open to modifying their strategies to keep up with the changes (Twenge, 2017), thus, ensuring their activism is still relevant, effective, and compatible with the societal landscape that is continuously changing.

## **2.5 The Role of Leadership in Brand Activism**

### **2.5.1 CEO Activism: Definition and Implications**

CEO Activism is a growing phenomenon that sees corporate leaders take a public stand on social, political, or environmental issues not directly related to the company's core business. This form of activism can have a significant impact on brand perception, both positive and negative, and represents a new frontier of Brand Activism (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021).

The 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer indicates that 63% of consumers are looking for CEOs to be vocal about social issues. These are mainly the environmental, legitimate, and employee treatment issues. This change symbolizes a deeper transition in corporate leadership. Silence today is often seen as being on the wrong side of the issue (Edelman, 2023).

When a CEO becomes the spokesperson for corporate values, it can strengthen the perception of authenticity and brand commitment. A charismatic and credible leader can inspire trust and loyalty in consumers, especially if their positions are consistent with the company's mission and values (Edelman, 2023). However, CEO exposure also carries risks. If their positions are perceived as opportunistic, inconsistent, or too polarizing, they can damage the brand's reputation and alienate some consumers.

The phenomenon of CEO Activism, although not entirely new, has gained unprecedented prominence in the digital age, where the voice of a single individual—especially an influential one—can reach millions of people in real time. This type of activism differs from traditional Brand Activism in that the public stance on social or political issues is taken directly by the company's Chief Executive Officer, rather than being an institutional communication from the brand itself (Moorman, 2020).

In contrast with traditional Brand Activism that is commonly a consequence of collective decision-making in the organization, CEO Activism is based on the personal convictions and public deeds of only one person. This kind of personal visibility may be a plus, granting the brand a direct connection and emotional impact, but it still makes the brand image less predictable. The brand's reputation in the public eye becomes almost indistinguishable from the CEO's personality, thus, it can be more at risk if there is a change in public opinion or if the leader faces a scandal, even if it is only on an individual basis.

The advantages of CEO exposure are manifold. First, a CEO who speaks out on a cause can provide a human face and greater authenticity to the brand's commitment. The perception that the position is driven by the leader's personal conviction, rather than by a mere marketing strategy, can strengthen trust among consumers and stakeholders. A charismatic and credible leader can inspire not only consumers but also employees, improving internal morale and enhancing the company's attractiveness as an employer (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). CEO Activism can also go way beyond influencing public perception and can have a major impact on the internal landscape of the organization. A CEO who is a vocal advocate for a certain issue can draw the employees' sense of purpose out very deeply and thus have a positive impact on their morale and engagement. When employees see that their company reflects their own values, they are more likely to be loyal, which

in turn leads to better retention rates, attracts like-minded employees, and strengthens the overall organizational culture.

Additionally, CEO Activism can generate significant free media coverage, amplifying the brand's message and positioning it as a thought leader on important issues. This can lead to increased brand awareness and a stronger reputation, especially among audience segments that share the CEO's expressed values.

However, the risks of CEO exposure are equally significant and, in some cases, may outweigh the benefits. The main risk is polarization. When a CEO takes a stand on a controversial issue, it is almost inevitable that a portion of the public who disagrees with that position will react negatively. This can lead to boycotts, criticism on social media, and reputational damage to the brand. The overlap between the CEO's personal image and the brand's identity can be a double-edged sword: if the CEO becomes involved in personal scandals or changes their views, the brand may suffer direct consequences (Bhagwat, Warren, Beck & Watson, 2020).

The issue becomes more of a challenge when there is a perceived disconnection between the CEO's personal beliefs and the company's actions. It then becomes a situation of double talk or insincerity with the core values of the leader and the brand being questioned. Alongside this, if the activist positions are not accompanied by internal policies or concrete actions, it is possible that there will be potential sources of conflicts within the staff, the employees becoming indifferent, or the investors reacting negatively. This is particularly the case for publicly traded companies where the pressure of governance is high.

Another risk is the perception of opportunism or hypocrisy. If the CEO's stance is not consistent with the company's practices or is perceived as a calculated move to gain visibility, public reaction may be extremely negative, resulting in a collapse of trust and credibility.

A notable example of CEO Activism—beyond Elon Musk—is that of Howard Schultz, former CEO of Starbucks. Schultz has often taken public positions on social issues such as immigration and race relations, encouraging employees to discuss these topics with customers and launching initiatives to hire refugees (Schultz, 2017). His actions have generated both praise and criticism, demonstrating how CEO Activism can be a powerful tool to promote corporate values, but also a source of controversy. The key to successful CEO Activism lies in consistency, authenticity, and the leader's ability to communicate their motivations effectively and transparently, showing a genuine commitment that goes beyond mere rhetoric (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021).

One more prominent instance is Marc Benioff, CEO of Salesforce, who has frequently leveraged his platform for the promotion of social and political issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, public education, and homelessness. Besides these, he has also made his voice heard against discriminatory laws and

corporate responsibility for addressing social injustices. Benioff's campaigning has situated Salesforce as a brand driven by core values and has enabled the company to reach socially minded consumers more easily. However, it has also invited those who consider such interventions as unsuitable or too political to get angry and criticise the brand.

In summary, CEO Activism indicates a significant means of communication, which can bring a brand closer to people and increase the impact of its mission aimed at social good. On the other hand, the tactical employing of such exposer calls for a thorough matching with corporate values, the organization's culture, and the expectations of stakeholders. The following part is going to explore the influence of the CEO's public image on the authenticity of Brand Activism perception.

### **2.5.2 The Influence of the CEO's Figure on the Perception of Authenticity**

The influence of the CEO's figure on the perception of the authenticity of Brand Activism is a complex and debated topic (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). On the one hand, a CEO who exposes themselves personally can give a human face to the company and make the social commitment more credible and personal. On the other hand, the personalization of activism can lead to an overlap between the CEO's image and the brand's, with the risk that the leader's personal controversies will affect the company.

This trend is known as "executive branding overlap" where the CEO's personal identity is so deeply embedded with the brand that the company's reputation changes depending on the leader's actions. Although it is possible that this may lead to the establishment of strong emotional bonds, at the same time, it can lead to the loss of the organization's ability to recover from the changes in the leadership or from the crisis, therefore, it can be vulnerable to reputational issues.

An emblematic case study is that of Elon Musk and Tesla (Bhagwat, Warren, Beck & Watson, 2020). Tesla's mission to accelerate the transition to sustainable energy is a clear example of Brand Activism intrinsic to the product. However, Musk's often controversial and polarizing communication on social media has generated ambivalent reactions, influencing the perception of the brand. While some consumers are attracted to his figure as a visionary and nonconformist leader, others are repelled by his political positions or provocative statements. This case highlights the delicate balance that CEOs must maintain between promoting corporate values and managing their public image.

Besides that, the authenticity perception is not necessarily co-operative with the actual consistency. A CEO might come across as authentic through persuasive communication, but if the company's core practices or governance are at odds with the declared values, the misunderstanding will be evident. Consumers—especially digital-native generations—are getting increasingly skilled in spotting this

gap and social media is often their weapon with which they reveal the loopholes between words and deeds.

The polarization generated by CEO activism is another aspect to consider. Younger generations, such as Gen Z and Millennials, may be more open to an activist CEO and appreciate their stance, while older generations may be more sceptical and prefer a more traditional and neutral approach. Therefore, even in this case, it is essential for companies to understand the different generational sensitivities and carefully evaluate the risks and opportunities of CEO activism (Edelman, 2023).

## **2.6 Conceptual Model and Research Hypotheses**

### **2.6.1 Detailed Representation of the Model**

The conceptual model that guides this research illustrates the hypothesized relationships between the main variables and serves as a theoretical framework for the analysis (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). The model suggests that the perceived type of activism (authentic, opportunistic, or personalized) directly influences brand trust, which in turn influences purchase intention. The relationship between these variables is moderated by the consumer's generation, indicating that the impact of activism can vary significantly depending on the age group.

Such a generational moderation underscores the significance of taking a segmentation-based method in brand strategy. Various groups of people transmit brand messages through different cognitive, emotional, and cultural filters. For instance, if on one hand, Gen Z could be positively influenced by a bold activist stance, on the other hand, Boomers might react with a cautious or even reluctant attitude. The utilization of generation as a moderator not only enables a deeper investigation of behavioural trends but also confirms the importance of customized communication strategies.

### **2.6.2 Formulation of Hypotheses**

Based on the conceptual model and the analysed literature, specific hypotheses will be formulated to guide the empirical research. For example, it could be hypothesized that:

- H1: Activism perceived as authentic has a greater positive impact on brand trust than activism perceived as opportunistic.
- H2: Brand trust has a positive impact on purchase intention.
- H3: The impact of perceived activism on brand trust is stronger for younger generations (Gen Z and Millennials) than for older generations (Gen X and Boomers).

These hypotheses will be tested through the analysis of the collected data, providing an empirical basis for answering the research question and for formulating targeted managerial recommendations.

Beyond the conceptual distinctions, it is important to analyse the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that drive companies to engage in Brand Activism. Intrinsic motivations stem from a genuine alignment with the company's values and mission, reflecting a deep belief in the supported cause. This type of activism is often rooted in organizational culture and is expressed through long-term commitment and concrete actions that go beyond mere communication. For instance, Patagonia, a brand known for its environmental commitment, has integrated sustainability into every aspect of its business, from production to sourcing, demonstrating exemplary consistency between its declared values and actual practices.

Extrinsic motivations, on the other hand, may be linked to external factors such as consumer pressure, stakeholder expectations, the pursuit of competitive advantages, or the need to improve corporate reputation. Although these motivations are not inherently negative, an excessive focus on them without a true value-driven commitment can lead to the pitfalls of opportunism, such as greenwashing or woke washing, which ultimately undermine a brand's long-term credibility<sup>1</sup>. The challenge for companies is to balance these motivations, ensuring that their activism is perceived as authentic and not merely as a marketing strategy. The perception of authenticity is crucial to the success of Brand Activism, as consumers are increasingly sceptical and attentive to the consistency between companies' words and actions.

The model is indeed a good theoretical foundation to comprehend the connections between the chosen variables, but it lacks the representation of the whole intricacy of consumer decision-making. Such factors as brand recognition, personal political orientation, or cultural background might influence perceptions of activism along with their interaction. However, they are not part of this research's focus. Potential further investigations can broaden the model to cover these new aspects or use it in particular sectors to verify situational variations.

The next section outlines the results of an empirical study performed using an online questionnaire. The intention here is to establish whether the hypotheses set out are correct and to explore the impact of generational differences on the understanding and success of Brand Activism strategies.

## Chapter 3: Research Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

This research work comprises a quantitative survey-based experimental design, basically, the first phase of the research, whose main purpose is to test the conceptual model made in Chapter 2. The objective is to explore how consumers understand Brand Activism in different generations (Vredenburg et al., 2020). The study is centered on three constructs: perceived authenticity of activism, brand trust, and purchase intention (Delgado-Ballester, 2004; Spears & Singh, 2004).

The sole independent variable is the perceived authenticity of brand activism. Brand trust is considered the mediator, while purchase intention is the dependent variable. The influence of authenticity on trust and purchase intention is expected to be moderated by generational cohort (Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers; Edelman Trust Barometer, 2020).

Four brands were taken as representatives (Patagonia, Dove, H&M, Tesla) for the case of Brand Activism developed with different means: environmental activism of the highest standard (Patagonia), femvertising (Dove), highly questionable greenwashing cases (H&M), and CEO activism (Tesla; Szabo & Webster, 2020; Hambrick & Wowak, 2021).

Among the main reasons for picking those four brands out is the fact that they embody distinctly different means of brand activism. Being an environmentally conscious brand is the base of the Patagonia's brand for the most part and the company has quite a history of combining the social mission with product sustainability and corporate responsibility (Chouinard & Stanley, 2012). Dove is an advertising brand that uses female empowerment as its main theme and completely revolves around topics of body image, diversity, and inclusivity within the beauty industry (Drake, 2017). H&M has been an extremely controversial brand in the fashion business, always faced with accusations of greenwashing, thus, providing a perfect example of the issue with the brand that is in conflict with its activists (Testa et al., 2021). Just think of Tesla as a classic example of dishing out CEO activism where almost everything coming and going in the company is shaped by the character and principles of the leader (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). This variety of consumer reaction to the different nature of activist behaviour is the primary way to deepen the study's external validity.

### 3.2 Data Collection and Sampling

The data collection process was based on an online survey that was disseminated via Qualtrics. The participants were initially given the introduction and the informed consent form, which

guaranteed them the anonymity and the right to refuse participation (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014).

Randomly, each participant was assigned to one of the four brands. Respondents were shown a brief description and a visual of a brand's activism campaign, after which they completed the questionnaire.

The stages were as follows:

1. Informed consent
2. Exposure to brand stimulus (Patagonia / Dove / H&M / Tesla)
3. Manipulation check
4. Measurement of main constructs (Authenticity → Trust → Purchase Intention)
5. Demographic questions (age, gender, familiarity with the brand, frequency of purchase)
6. Debriefing

On average, the survey took 7-8 minutes to complete.

They opted for an online survey format mainly because it guarantees reaching a diverse sample of participants both in an efficient way and keeping the anonymity of the respondents. The distribution took place through social media platforms, university email lists, and personal networks, following a logic of snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961). This strategy was aimed to raise the response rate while keeping the demographic composition varied. Moreover, online administration reduces the risk of social desirability bias, as participants complete the survey on their own, without direct contact with the researcher (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

In order to have experimental control, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four brand conditions (Patagonia, Dove, H&M, Tesla). Such between-subject randomization ensures that every respondent was only exposed to one brand stimulus, thus eliminating the possibility of carryover effects and direct comparisons between brands. This procedure, by allocating participants equally to different conditions, allows for unbiased comparisons between groups and hence, it increases the internal validity of the study design (Campbell & Stanley, 1963).

In addition to the data collection process, the study used a convenience sampling method to recruit participants, which involved leveraging personal networks and social media sharing through snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961).

Inclusion criteria: respondents aged 18 years or older. No exclusion criteria were set for the nationality or brand purchase history, while brand familiarity and purchase frequency were assessed and later controlled during the analysis.

Identifying generational cohorts based on birth year:

- Gen Z: 1997–2012

- Millennials: 1981–1996
- Gen X: 1965–1980
- Boomers: 1946–1964

In order to have a minimum statistical power for comparisons between generational cohorts (50 participants per group), the target was set for at least 200 valid responses (Cohen, 1992).

The choice to divide participants according to generational cohorts is backed by today's publications that point to varying value orientations, consumption patterns, and brand expectations across different generations (Parment, 2013; Twenge, 2010). For example, Gen Z is frequently described as being very sensitive to sustainability and the true nature of things, whereas the older generations might be more critical or passive towards brand activism (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). The research, by having four separate cohorts, is able to not only recognize these differences between generations but also verify if they perceive authenticity, trust, and purchase intention differently.

### 3.3 Measures

**Table 1. Summary of Constructs and Measurement Scales**

Construct	N. of items	Example item	Source	Notes
<b>Manipulation Check</b>	2	“This brand clearly took a stand on a social or environmental issue.”	Self-developed	–
<b>Perceived Authenticity of Activism</b>	5	“This brand’s activism seems genuine.”	Vredenburg et al., 2020; Napoli et al., 2014	One item reverse-coded
<b>Brand Trust</b>	5	“I trust this brand.”	Delgado-Ballester, 2004	Items averaged to form composite score
<b>Purchase Intention</b>	3	“I would consider buying this brand’s products.”	Spears & Singh, 2004	–
<b>Control Variables</b>	3	“Age, gender, familiarity with brand”	Self-developed	Demographics & brand-related info

The measurement instruments were chosen from widely recognized and validated scales which are used in consumer behaviour and brand management research (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Napoli et al., 2014; Delgado-Ballester, 2004; Spears & Singh, 2004), thus, ensuring both the reliability and the ability to compare with previous studies. Some standard items were reworded in the context of Brand

Activism to be more relevant for both theory and practice. With this approach, the study can achieve the combination of the scientific rigor and the focus on the specific phenomenon. All items were quantified using 7-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree; Likert, 1932). In short, response categories were scored from 1 to 7; where 1 represented extreme disagreement and 7 represented extreme agreement. Analysis was preceded by the unitization of reverse-coded items.

**Manipulation Check** (self-developed, 2 items):

- “This brand clearly took a stand on a social or environmental issue.”
- “The message I saw represents a form of activism by the brand.”

**Perceived Authenticity of Brand Activism** (adapted from Vredenburg et al., 2020; Napoli et al., 2014; 5 items):

- “This brand’s activism seems genuine.”
- “The activism is consistent with the brand’s values.”
- “The activism reflects a long-term commitment.”
- “The activism is mainly opportunistic.” (reverse-coded)
- “Overall, I find this activism authentic.”

**Brand Trust** (Delgado-Ballester, 2004; 5 items):

- “I trust this brand.”
- “This brand is reliable.”
- “This brand keeps its promises.”
- “This brand is honest with its consumers.”
- “This brand would not disappoint me.”

**Purchase Intention** (Spears & Singh, 2004; 3 items):

- “I would consider buying this brand’s products.”
- “It is likely that I will purchase this brand in the future.”
- “My intention to buy this brand is high.”

**Control Variables:**

- Age, gender, country of residence
- Brand familiarity (1 = Not familiar at all, 7 = Very familiar)
- Purchase frequency (Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often)

The application of validated measurement scales adds to the reliability of the study and permits comparison with previous research on Brand Activism and consumer behaviour. Furthermore, the presence of control variables guards against the possibility that the observed effects are due to the constructs under investigation.

### 3.4 Data Analysis Plan

All analyses will be conducted with SPSS (IBM Corp., 2021).

1. **Data cleaning:** removal of incomplete responses, attention check failures, and unrealistic completion times.

2. **Reliability analysis:** Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for each scale (threshold  $\geq 0.70$ ). Composite variables (AUTH\_M, TRUST\_M, PI\_M) will be computed as averages of the items.

3. **Manipulation check:** one-sample t-test to confirm that the brand was perceived as engaging in activism (Field, 2013).

4. **Descriptive statistics:** means, standard deviations, and correlations among all variables.

5. **Hypothesis testing:**

o H1: AUTH\_M  $\rightarrow$  TRUST\_M (linear regression).

o H2: TRUST\_M  $\rightarrow$  PI\_M (linear regression).

o H3: AUTH\_M  $\rightarrow$  PI\_M (linear regression).

o H4: Generational cohort moderates the relationship between authenticity and trust, and between trust and purchase intention (moderation analysis via regression with dummy variables and interaction terms; alternatively, ANOVA with generation as factor, as proposed by Hayes, 2017).

6. **Effect size reporting:**  $\beta$  coefficients,  $R^2$  for regressions,  $\eta^2$  partial for ANOVA, with 95% confidence intervals (Cohen, 1988).

7. **Optional exploratory analysis:** interaction between brand and generational cohort (two-way ANOVA).

Regression analyses and ANOVA were chosen due to their capacity to test not only the causal relationships between constructs but also differences in groups across generations (Field, 2013). Precisely, regression models fit well to probing mediation effects that can be exemplified with the case of brand trust playing the mediating role between perceived authenticity and purchase intention (Hayes, 2017). Meanwhile, ANOVA is especially fitting for identifying differences in means among different generational cohorts, hence being the most suitable way to verify the moderating effect of age. Such an analytical strategy provides a match between hypotheses and the statistical methods used, thereby improving the extent of the results' reliability (Cohen, 1988).

### 3.5 Results

The present section is a report of the statistical tests, the organization of which is based on the hypotheses and the data analysis plan described above. The composition follows a systematic

sequence, beginning with sample characteristics and scale reliability, and then continuing with hypothesis testing by means of ANOVA and regression models (Field, 2013; Hayes, 2017).

**Table 2. Sample Characteristics**

Variable	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	71	48.0%
	Female	76	51.4%
	Other	1	0.7%
Generation	Gen Z	83	56.5%
	Millennials	27	18.4%
	Gen X	20	13.6%
	Boomers	17	11.6%

Table 2 shows the demographic characteristics of the sample, including gender distribution and generational cohorts.

The sample is balanced in terms of gender, with a slight prevalence of women (51.4%) compared to men (48.0%). One participant only, however, chose to be identified as another gender category (0.7%).

In terms of generational cohorts, the sample is largely made up of respondents from Generation Z (56.5%), followed by Millennials (18.4%), Generation X (13.6%), and Baby Boomers (11.6%), according to the Edelman Trust Barometer (2020).

**Table 3. Manipulation check- The brand took a stance on a social/environmental issue**

Response	N	Valid %
1= Strongly disagree	8	5.4%
2	7	4.7%
3	6	4.1%
4	30	20.3%
5	28	18.9%
6	29	19.6%
7= Strongly agree	40	27.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Valid N = 148; Missing = 2

*Note: low (1–3) = 14.2%; neutral (4) = 20.3%; high (5–7) = 65.5%*

The way the participants came to respond to the manipulation check shows that most of them understood the brand as a socially or environmentally clearly engaged entity. More concretely, 65.5% of respondents reported high agreement (scores 5–7), among which 27% were totally in agreement (score 7). Only 14.2% of participants disagreed with the statement (scores 1–3), whereas 20.3% remained neutral (score 4). These results ensure that the experimental manipulation has been successfully realized since the majority of respondents recognized the brand as a socially and environmentally active one. The one-sample t-test against the theoretical midpoint of the scale (4) was significant,  $t(147) = 7.76$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.82; 1.37]. This finding suggests that, on average, respondents indicate the brand as clearly being a social or environmental issue ( $M = 5.09$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ).

**Table 4. Reliability of Scales**

Scale	N. of items	Cronbach's $\alpha$	Mean	SD
Authenticity	5	0.735	4.43	1.16
Brand Trust	5	0.966	4.30	1.46
Purchase Intention	3	0.940	4.24	1.69

Table 4 provides the information of measurement scales reliability. The values of Cronbach's  $\alpha$  support the internal cohesion of each concept, with a reliability that can be considered as acceptable for Authenticity ( $\alpha = .735$ ) and as excellent for Brand Trust ( $\alpha = .966$ ) and Purchase Intention ( $\alpha = .940$ ). The average scores are a little over the center of the 7-point scale, implying that respondents incline to view the brand as quite authentic ( $M = 4.43$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ), to trust it highly ( $M = 4.30$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ), and to give a similar evaluation of purchase intention ( $M = 4.24$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ). The standard deviations that vary from 1.16 to 1.69 show the presence of a fair amount of variation in the responses of the participants.

**Table 5. ANOVA by Generational Cohort**

Variable	F	df	p	$\eta^2$	Post-hoc differences
Authenticity	0.387	3,143	0.762	0.008	Not significant
Brand Trust	0.486	3,143	0.693	0.010	Not significant
Purchase Intention	0.544	3,143	0.652	0.011	Not significant

Table 5 details the outcomes of the ANOVA tests performed to check for differences across generational cohorts with respect to perceived authenticity, brand trust, and purchase intention. The findings indicate that none of the effects are statistically significant (all  $p > .05$ ). In particular, authenticity ( $F (3,143) = 0.387$ ,  $p = .762$ ,  $\eta^2 = .008$ ), brand trust ( $F (3,143) = 0.486$ ,  $p = .693$ ,  $\eta^2 = .010$ ), and purchase intention ( $F (3,143) = 0.544$ ,  $p = .652$ ,  $\eta^2 = .011$ ) are not statistically significant.

.010), and purchase intention ( $F (3,143) = 0.544$ ,  $p = .652$ ,  $\eta^2 = .011$ ) remained unchanged across generations. The results point to the fact that participants' ratings of the brand are quite similar from one generational cohort to another.

**Table 6. Regression Results**

DV	IV	$\beta$	t	p	R <sup>2</sup>
Trust	Authenticity	0.835	18.350	<0.001	69.8%
Purchase Intention	Trust	0.754	13.886	<0.001	56.9%
Purchase Intention	Authenticity	0.689	11.483	<0.001	47.5%

Table 6 presents the details of multiple regression tests that entail the relationships between the attributes of the model related to authenticity, trust, and intention to purchase. The outputs reveal that authenticity is a primary factor positively leading to trust ( $\beta = .835$ ,  $t = 18.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ), thus 69.8% of the change in the variable is accounted for. Trust then significantly associates with purchase intention ( $\beta = .754$ ,  $t = 13.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ), hence 56.9% of the change in the variable. Moreover, authenticity is on the side of purchase intention with a positive direct effect as well ( $\beta = .689$ ,  $t = 11.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ), thus 47.5% of the change in the variable are explained. In summary, the findings show the relationship model advocated by the authors, which see authenticity as the main driver of the consumers' trust in the brand that, in turn, leads to their purchase intention, while also being on their side in a direct hold of purchase behaviour.

### 3.5.1 Conditional Process Analysis (PROCESS Model 58)

To explore further the primary relationships, a conditional process analysis was performed. This was done by using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 58; Hayes, 2017). The model here depicts perceived authenticity (AUTH) as the independent variable, brand trust (BTRUST) as the mediator, purchase intention (PURINT) as the dependent variable, and generation (GEN) as the moderator.

The study results support the effect of authenticity on brand trust as  $B = 1.06$ ,  $p < .001$ , and brand trust on purchase intention as  $B = 0.77$ ,  $p < .001$ . The direct effect of authenticity on purchase intention also stayed at the significant level, although, with less strength ( $B = 0.30$ ,  $p = .045$ ), thus indicating the mechanism of partial mediation. The indirect effect via brand trust was also statistically significant with confidence intervals not including zero (BootLLCI = 0.52; BootULCI = 1.01). These findings are in agreement with the role of brand trust as a mediator in the connection between authenticity and purchase intention (Delgado-Ballester, 2004; Spears & Singh, 2004; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

On the other hand, there is no evidence to support the hypothesis of a moderating role for generation as the interaction terms were not significant for the authenticity-trust path nor the trust-purchase intention path (all  $p > .30$ ). The conditional indirect effects of different generational cohorts did not differ much, which indicates that the mediating mechanism of brand trust is the same across different age groups (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2020).

### 3.6 Discussion

The goal of this research was to determine whether the perception of brand activism as being authentic influences brand trust and the intention to buy, as well as whether these relationships change depending on the generation.

Moreover, brand trust was confirmed as a mediator through the combined regression and ANOVA analyses, and the conditional process analysis (PROCESS Model 58) as well. The results were in line with the previous ones and showed that authenticity was the main driver of brand trust, which led to higher purchase intentions (Delgado-Ballester, 2004; Spears & Singh, 2004; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Also, the direct effect of authenticity on purchase intention was still significant, indicating that the mediation mechanism was only partial. On the other hand, the role of generational cohort as a moderator was not supported, since no significant interaction effects were found. These results are consistent with the authenticity-trust-purchase intention pathway as the most stable and not being dependent on age groups differences (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2020).

The results largely confirm the assumed relationships between authenticity, trust, and purchase intention. The method of regression showed that authenticity is the main predictor of brand trust, which then has a positive effect on purchase intention. Additionally, authenticity also carries a direct impact on purchase intention. These findings agree with the previous studies that have identified authenticity as the flagship source of trust (Delgado-Ballester, 2004; Vredenburg et al., 2020) and in line with acknowledged theories that consider trust as a factor leading to consumer behavioural intentions (Spears & Singh, 2004).

Meanwhile, the results of ANOVA did not find differences to a significant extent between generations, which implies that authenticity is equally important for Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, and Boomers. This is contrary to the view that younger consumers are more likely to be particularly sensitive to brand activism (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2020), and authenticity instead emerges as a concept that is relevant to all generations and not only to those of a certain age-group.

The findings, from a conceptual point of view, underscore the main role of truthfulness as one of the ways through which brand activism can elicit consumer reactions. Since there were no differences

in generations, authenticity may be seen as one of the core psychological aspects of trust and purchase intentions that do not vary across age-based consumer segments.

The outcomes, from a managerial standpoint, point towards the attentions that companies, rather than different activism initiatives, should spend more on communicating authentic and committed brands. Trust and purchase intentions driven by authenticity seem to be present in all age groups, so that credible and transparent activism is likely to bring good returns not only in one segment but in the overall consumer base. Managers will therefore have to focus on the unity of a brand's declared values and its actions and use resources to steer away from the promotion of antagonistic or inconsistent messages.

The presented study has some limitations. Firstly, the sample represents a relatively small size and was composed of people selected by convenience sampling (Goodman, 1961), therefore, the findings cannot be generalized extensively. Secondly, the data is based on self-reporting, which may lead to the production of socially desirable results (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Thirdly, in the experimental design, even though four different brands were involved, each respondent was exposed to only one brand. The between-subjects design, in this case, limits the scope of conclusions to the selected cases and does not allow direct comparisons of the same individual. To gain a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon, future research might consider increasing the number of brands and their diversity, using within-subjects designs, and adopting mixed methods (e.g., surveys, experiments, interviews).

### **3.7 Conclusion**

This thesis set out to investigate the role of authenticity in brand activism and its impact on consumer perceptions across generations. Building on the theoretical framework presented in Chapters 1 and 2, the empirical study in Chapter 3 tested whether authenticity drives brand trust and purchase intention, and whether these relationships vary by generational cohort.

The decision process analysis went even further to back up the main idea by indicating that brand trust was the bridge connecting brand authenticity and purchase intention (Delgado-Ballester, 2004; Spears & Singh, 2004). Importantly, at this stage, no differences between generations were found in this process, which implies that the effect of authenticity is the same for all cohorts and therefore can be considered as a driver of consumer trust and purchase, which is universally relevant (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2020).

The findings provide strong support for the hypothesized model. Authenticity emerged as a significant predictor of brand trust, which in turn positively influenced purchase intention, in line with prior research highlighting authenticity as a cornerstone of consumer-brand relationships (Delgado-Ballester, 2004; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Spears & Singh, 2004). Notably, authenticity also

exerted a direct effect on purchase intention, underscoring its dual role as both a relational and behavioural driver. In contrast, ANOVA results revealed no significant differences across generations, suggesting that authenticity operates as a universally relevant construct, rather than being confined to specific age groups.

From a theoretical perspective, these results confirm the centrality of authenticity as a psychological mechanism linking brand activism to trust and consumer behaviour. From a managerial perspective, they suggest that companies should prioritize authentic communication and coherence between declared values and actions, since such efforts foster positive consumer responses across all generational cohorts. Investments in transparent and credible activism are thus likely to generate broad-based benefits, rather than being effective only within specific demographic groups.

Even though the study has its merits and presents useful insights, it also has certain restrictions that should be recognized. The sample size was quite small and was convenience-sampled (Goodman, 1961) which inevitably affects the extent to which the results can be generalized. In addition, dependence solely on self-reporting data may have led to the presence of a social desirability bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Finally, the experimental setup with four different brands only one brand per each respondent was exposed, thus limiting the range of direct comparisons. These limitations imply that future research should aim at bigger and more varied samples, should combine different methodological approaches, and should include more brands to extend the external validity.

This thesis, in general, adds up to the increasing volume of the brand activism literature by evidencing the fact of authenticity being the main drivers of trust and buying intentions for all the generational cohorts. The data point to authenticity as a consumer universal reckoning of activist brands, thus giving companies the strategic imperative of going about their climate engagement in a way that is consistent, transparent, and credible.

To sum up, this thesis has been able to show that the true hallmark of a brand activism is the authenticity which leads to trust and buying intention being the key drivers. Besides range from one generation to another, what is most important is the congruence between values declared and actualized: only in this manner can brands establish authentic and enduring relationships with customers.

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