



Woke-washing or altruism?

Understanding the phenomenon of brand activism by studying the
media effects and audience responses to the practice

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Abstract for Master's thesis

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Title: Woke-washing or altruism? – Understanding the phenomenon of brand activism by studying the media effects and audience responses to the practice	
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Abstract: <p>At the latest in the summer of 2020 the world became aware of an emerging marketing tactic and phenomenon known as brand activism when companies rushed to release statements for the need of solidarity and change in the wake of mass demonstrations against racism and discrimination across the globe, that gained significant media- and social media attention at the time. Engaging in brand activism is risky, due to the biased nature of the practice – it may affect firm value and the brand's reputation either negatively or positively but predicting the effect of brand activism in advance is difficult. Authentic brand activism requires that the brand values, purpose, communication, and practices are subsequent.</p> <p>This study inspects the framing of the phenomenon in the news media in a Finnish context. Additionally, responses by the audience were studied in order to reveal the attitudes towards the practice. A framework was developed to understand the agenda-setting effect of the media and the interpretation of the 'reality' and 'media reality' by the public. The empirical case study used secondary data consisting of 44 news articles covering brand activism that were published in the Finnish major daily newspaper <i>Helsingin Sanomat</i> (HS) during 2020, as well as a total of 562 attached reader comments posted on the online platform of the newspaper, of which 423 were analysed. The research method was a qualitative content analysis that was partly conducted with the help of computer software program NVivo. The tone of voice was identified in both articles and the responses, and a frame analysis was conducted for the news articles covering brand activism. In addition, the articles and responses were analysed by themes.</p> <p>The main findings of the empirical study indicate that the Finnish media frames brand activism by emphasising the companies' or society's responsibilities. Economic consequences are also frequently highlighted, and the Black Lives Matter (BLM)-movement was declared an influential event to the research topic. The newspaper used a neutral tone when writing about the topic, yet the responses to the news coverage on brand activism were mainly negative. The readers of the studied newspaper were clearly sceptical towards the practice and often remarked on brand activism being used as a mere marketing trick while the newspaper underlined company values as a motivator. It is concluded that brands should proceed with care when addressing polarising societal issues.</p>	
Keywords: Brand activism, marketing methods, socio-political issues, qualitative content analysis, news framing, agenda-setting, frame analysis, case study	
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1 INTRODUCTION

We have seen a surge of activist messaging from companies around the world (Mahabier and Atteh, 2020) over the last few years, and last summer's protests for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement ignited a burst of activity among corporations (Menon and Kiesler, 2020) in particular. Various companies hurried to release statements citing the need for 'solidarity' and 'change' in the aftermath of the tragic death of George Floyd (Curry, 2020). Monetary donations to non-profits that support the BLM movement were made in the company's name, brands with racist associations were dropped, and other brands with unclear to outright offensive racial implications were repositioned (Menon and Kiesler, 2020). A significant number of businesses made promises to review their internal policies for racial bias or improve their employment practices within the company. Sportswear giant Nike and Brand Jordan pledged \$140 million to support black communities and television networks discontinued shows such as "Cops" and "Live PD". (Curry, 2020) Unilever-owned ice cream manufacturer Ben & Jerry's, a company often speaking up for progressive political issues, made a statement on June 2nd, 2020, with the title "*We Must Dismantle White Supremacy: Silence Is NOT An Option*" which was shortly after acclaimed as the most detailed and powerful message from any company seeking to denounce the series of abuse Black people have suffered at the hands of White people across centuries (Holman and Buckley, 2020).

However, many companies faced backlash due to these statements and actions, amongst them social media platform Facebook who, despite donating hundreds of millions of dollars to racial injustice causes and black businesses, was profoundly criticized for refusing to flag misleading and outright false posts made by U.S. President Donald Trump and others (Curry, 2020), leading hundreds of employees to stage a virtual walkout and some of the world's largest brands, including Coca-Cola, Lego, Unilever, and Verizon, to pause advertisements on the social media platform for at least a month (Holman and Buckley, 2020).

In 2019, Procter & Gamble's razor brand Gillette faced public recoil and boycotts due to the brand's attempt to tackle toxic masculinity in a video campaign, an issue brought

to light by the #MeToo movement. The campaign went viral and ended up receiving more dislikes than likes on YouTube. Customers blamed the brand for being hypocritical and guilty of sexism itself, as well as for issuing women the ‘pink tax’, i.e., promoting products towards women with a higher price than products advertised towards men. (Vredenburg et al., 2020, Al-Muslim, 2019, Ritschel, 2019)

In 2018, Nike faced repercussions when appointing the former NFL player Colin Kaepernick, the face of their “Just Do It” advertising campaign. Prior to Nike’s campaign, Kaepernick had been receiving a great deal of attention by kneeling during the U.S. national anthem, in order to highlight racial injustice in the U.S. which, in the end, cost him his career. Nike’s decision to support Kaepernick faced public backlash and, as a result, the brand saw its stock falling by 3.17% on the day of the announcement. Furthermore, videos of customers burning Nike products with the hashtag #JustBurnIt were posted online, going viral at the time of the event. (Moorman, 2020) Despite Nike’s attempt to support a social justice cause, the brand still has a long way to go in stopping racism and sexism in its own workplace, as well as trying to become more progressive to combat the image of exploitative sweatshop labour and gender inequality in the workplace (Sarkar, 2018).

Around the time of Donald Trump’s election and presidential inauguration, Trump’s opponents boycotted brands such as Nordstrom, Belk, and Neiman Marcus, for selling products associated with the Trump Family in the United States, ultimately leading the companies to drop these brands (Wolf, 2017; Chen, 2020). Even if political motives were denied, counter-boycotts initiated by Trump supporters were issued for companies such as Nordstrom, Starbucks, T.J. Maxx, as well as films with actors who oppose the President and the policies he issues (Wolf, 2017).

In light of these examples, one could state that brands have started to flirt with the realm of politics (Jones, 2019). The methods range from simple social media statements to multichannel marketing campaigns to make their point (Alemany, 2020). Companies that decades ago would have remained silent have now started to weigh in on partisan issues and change their marketing, lobbying, and sales strategies to match (Moorman, 2018). The emerging marketing tactic used by brands to stand out in a

fragmented marketplace (Vredenburg et al. 2020) is commonly referred to as *brand (political) activism* (Moorman, 2020, Sarkar & Kotler, 2018, Vredenburg et al., 2020).

1.1 Problematisation

Consumers increasingly expect companies and their brands to take a stand on current socio-political matters (Curry, 2020) and exercise their moral authority in the marketplace (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019). A noteworthy observation is that most of the time, these issues may not have a simple answer and are highly opinionated, which means that there is a fair amount of risk involved when a company takes a stance on an issue like this. Negative consequences of a brands' activist messaging are often financial; it might affect business revenue and brand equity (Du, Bhattacharya and Sen, 2010), and result in losing customers and investors who disagree with the statement but can also harm the company's reputation for an unknown period of time (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

The digital era has brought an increased risk of public backlash, in particularly on social media. When companies misbehave, brand activism can be hazardous when the company or brand takes a stance but is not known for doing so previously or has a history of previous scandals and neglect of human rights or environmental hazards. Brands whose activism is perceived inauthentic due to these reasons are being stamped for "woke-washing", a noun similarly used as green-washing, but in a socio-political context. Brand activism that is deemed as authentic is usually closely aligned with a brand's purpose and values as well as its prosocial corporate practice according to Vredenburg et al. (2020). Authenticity in marketing has always been best practice, but in times like these, with social unrest and a pandemic to deal with, authenticity in marketing becomes even more crucial (Alemany, 2020).

The case examples mentioned in the previous section give room for suggestion that advertising campaigns concerning current events and socio-political issues now leave businesses vulnerable to a deep level of scrutiny (Alemany, 2020) and that companies are no longer criticized due to their products, services, or wrongdoings, but due to their political view (Chen, 2020). Brand activism is viewed as an emerging marketing strategy by researchers, and research examining the phenomenon has been sparse

despite companies' and their brands' increased participation in these issues. The issues brands take a political stance for or against range from systematic racism, sexual harassment, reproductive rights, LGBTQIA+ rights, immigration, to gun control. (Bhagwat et al., 2020, Hambrick and Wowak, 2018, Vredenburg et al., 2018; 2020)

Our society is increasingly relying on various complex systems of communication and one could state that we live in an 'information society'. Mass media has a great significance for the economic, social, and political life, and its influence extends beyond any authority in democratic societies. (McQuail, 2000) The news media has the ability to shape public opinion (Carroll, 2010; McCombs, 2004), and the media can be a powerful force for public enlightenment (McQuail, 2000). Therefore, it can be stated that various media are an important instrument for learning about the world (Ross & Nightingale, 2003).

1.2 The purpose of the study and research questions

The thesis will study the phenomenon known as brand activism in order to add to the existing but at the moment sparse research on the subject.

The research objective

The aim of this thesis is to gain a deeper understanding of brand activism as an emerging phenomenon by studying the frames media uses and the tone of voice in reader responses to reveal what the audience thinks about the practice.

Therefore, the first research question focuses on why companies and brands are prepared to take a risk when addressing polarizing socio-political issues that could jeopardize relations with some stakeholders:

RQ1: What is brand activism and why are companies taking a stand on socio-political issues? (theoretical)

As is gathered from the introduction, vivid cases of brand activism have been observed particularly in North America during the last few years. The empirical focus of this study is the occurrence of the phenomenon in Finland, particularly how it is portrayed

in the Finnish media. This perspective is interesting for businesses and marketing executives and practitioners because mass media has the ability to shape public opinion and ultimately the attitudes towards the paid efforts of a business when participating in a societal debate. Therefore, a critical inspection of a media organisation's coverage on the phenomenon is of particular relevance for the subject of this thesis. Thus:

RQ2: How is brand activism covered and framed by Finnish media? (empirical)

The third research question relates to the public responses to the news coverage on brand activism. The aim is to find out how the practice is perceived by the public (i.e., readers of the studied newspaper). By studying the responses of an audience by tone of voice, a general indication about the attitudes towards the practice can be observed. The studied audience in this study are members of society that may well be customers, investors, or other stakeholders of companies engaging in brand activism. Therefore:

RQ3: What are the responses of the public to the media coverage on the phenomenon? (empirical)

As a fourth and final research question, I will list a number of practical implications for practitioners and executives who wish to engage in brand activism. Therefore:

RQ4: What are the recommendations for practitioners and executives who wish to engage in brand activism?

These implications and practical tips are sought after in the literature review and the answer to the final research question is presented in the concluding chapter of the thesis: 6.2. Managerial implications and recommendations.

1.3 Delimitations

This study will focus on understanding the concept of *brand activism*, and why its implications for businesses, consumers, and society at large is of great interest. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been researched for more than a decade

(e.g., Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010), and studies of the subject has resulted in an overall understanding of the practice, yet the same logic cannot be used when observing and explaining brand activism as a phenomenon. Brand activism is complex, and negative effects on the stock market returns have been documented, as well as scenarios where there have been positive financial consequences (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Hence, CSR as well as brand management and public relations (PR) will be omitted from the study, as these topics have been thoroughly researched for decades. Nonetheless, in order to help define the idea of brand activism and understand how it differs from traditional CSR initiatives and corporate political action (CPA) such as lobbying, some of these concepts will be briefly explained to differentiate these practices from brand activism. Further delimitations are directed at the empirical study in this thesis. The phenomenon is studied through the lens of the media, as the portrayal of the phenomenon by the agenda the media sets may influence public opinions and attitudes towards the practice. The significance of the media's influence is given a major role in this thesis, as brand activism is a highly public practice that largely focuses on communication. However, general corporate communication and communication theories are omitted from this study in order to not stray from the thesis subject. The empirical study is a single case study of how brand activism is covered in one daily newspaper published in Finland. Therefore, the results of the case study cannot be used to generalise public opinion of the phenomenon but may indicate towards the thought about the practice among the audience of the studied news medium.

1.4 Method

The empirical part of this thesis studies the coverage, agenda-setting, and framing of brand activism in the Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS) during 2020 as well as the audience responses to the news coverage by analysing the comments to the articles on the medium's online platform. The research method used is a qualitative content analysis, which is conducted with the help of NVivo, a computer software program. The empirical study aims to answer research questions 2 and 3, presented in chapter 1.2. A more detailed description of the research method and data sample is explained in chapter 3. The basis for the analysis is mass communication theory about the media's agenda-setting and framing of news as well as a theoretical framework

constructed by the author of this thesis, presented in chapter 2.4. The qualitative content analysis of a newspaper's coverage on the phenomenon of brand activism as well as the analysis of the attached comments give an insight into the attitude towards the practice in Finland.

1.5 Central concepts

Some central concepts are defined and discussed in the following section to help the reader understand the theoretical part of the thesis and help facilitate the context better.

Activism: According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the American definition for activism is *“the use of direct and noticeable action to achieve a result, usually a political or social one”* (Activism, 2020). Chon and Park (2020) define activism as *“a social phenomenon that often features contentious issues, collective action, solidarity or collective identity and an effort to solve problems using communication”* (p. 74). In this thesis, activism refers to the physical activity of an individual or an organisation to change the status quo in society, such as condemning systematic racism.

Brand: *“A brand is a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods or service as distinct from those of other sellers.”* – American Marketing Association (n.d.), and *“brands identify the maker of a product and allow customers to assign responsibility for its performance to that maker or distributor”* – Kotler and Keller, 2016, p. 322. The sports-wear manufacturer Nike is an example of a brand. The term brand refers to the front ‘figure’, which does not have to be an individual but a symbol that stands for a company who engages in brand activism in this thesis.

Brand activism: the subject of this thesis and the practice companies and their brands engage in when taking a stand for or against a partisan issue. Brand activism is defined in detail in chapter 2.2.3.

Brand equity: According to Cravens and Piercy (2003, p. 324), brand equity is *“a set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand, such as its symbol or name, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's*

customers”. These assets and liabilities that affect brand equity include name awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, proprietary brand assets, e.g., patents, and other brand associations (Cravens and Piercy, 2003). Kotler and Keller (2016, p. 324) consider brand equity as *“the added value given to products and services with customers, which may be reflected in the way customers think, feel, and act with respect to the brand, as well as in the prices, market share and profitability it commands”*.

Brand management: Brand management is *“the process of controlling the way in which a company markets a product or brand so that people continue to buy it or buy more of it.”* (Brand management, 2020)

Cancel culture: Cancel culture is *“a way of behaving in a society or group, especially on social media, in which it is common to completely reject and stop supporting someone because they have said or done something that offends you”*. An often brought up problem with cancel culture is that it does not enable the wrongdoer to apologise or learn from their mistakes. (Cancel culture, 2021)

LGBTQIA+: This group of letters refers to an expanded definition of the sexual and gender minorities. L stands for lesbian, G for gay, B for bi, T for trans, Q for queer, I for intersex, and A for asexual or ally depending on the context. The plus sign is meant to cover others who are not included in this acronym, such as pansexual and nonbinary gender. (Gold, 2018)

Partisan issues: Partisan issues are issues that are divisive by nature that may not have a simple answer. In this thesis, partisan issues often refer to socio-political issues.

Socio-political issue/s: Socio-political issues are described as outstanding unresolved social matters on which societal and institutional opinion is split, which has the potential to provoke hostile debate among groups (Nalick et al., 2016). Socio-political issues are biased and yield polarizing stakeholder responses according to Kotler and Sarkar (2017). Socio-political issues exist at the intersections of time, politics, and culture, and the debate around them can evolve or resolve over time. For instance,

universal women's suffrage was controversial a century ago but is now widely accepted. (Bhagwat et al., 2020)

Woke/Wokeness: '*Woke*' can be thought of as the opposite of "politically correct". In political discourse, "P.C." is at times used as an insult from the right, as a way of calling out hypersensitivity. Woke is then used to counter and confirm the sensitivity and has in recent years become a term used for people to inform others of how aware they have become. (Hess, 2016) Sobande (2019) explains the concept of '*wokeness*' as an act of resistance and solidarity in response to systematic racism, capitalism, and structural oppression with the help of definitions by Cauley (2019), Gray (2019), and Guobadia (2018). Wokeness is originally African American slang for 'well informed' and 'up-to-date' according to Guobadia (2018).

Woke-washing: *Woke-washing* is a term similar to *greenwashing*, used in a social justice context as corporations make their progressive values a part of their advertising pitch. (Boyd, 2018)

1.6 Thesis structure

The layout of this thesis is presented briefly. Chapter 1 including subchapters 1.1–1.6 presents the subject, *brand activism*, and the problem area to the reader. Moreover, the research aim, and questions and delimitations are presented, as well as central terminology is explained. In chapter 2, the literature review is presented. The literature review is divided into two parts, the first focusing on the development of corporate social responsibility-activities and thoroughly inspects the phenomenon of brand activism and the factors it builds on. The second part discusses mass media effects on businesses and the public. After, theoretical conclusions and the frameworks used in the empirical study are presented. Chapter 3 presents the methodology for the empirical study, the research method and the steps taken. Chapter 4 presents the main empirical findings, and the chapter 5 discusses and analyses the findings and links the findings back to the theory discussed in the literature review. Chapter 6 is the last chapter where the research questions are answered, managerial implications are presented, and a critical look at the thesis is taken, and finally areas for future research

are proposed. All chapters are shortly summarised in the last subchapter of each main chapter, and a full summary in Swedish can be read in chapter seven.

1.7 Chapter summary

Brand activism is used by businesses to show concern for current socio-political issues in society. Recent protests for the need for solidarity and change in the wake of BLM- and #Metoo-movements in the Trump-era has shown the emerging phenomenon in a company-context, but the phenomenon has been noted at an increasing rate over the past decades. Participation in brand activism is risky, due to its partisan nature. Negative outcomes include public criticism, boycott, and stock market reactions. The purpose of this thesis is to gain a deeper understanding of brand activism as an emerging phenomenon by studying the frames media uses and the tone of voice in reader responses to reveal what the audience thinks about the practice, and the research questions are: what brand activism is and why are companies taking a stand on socio-political issues, how is brand activism framed by Finnish media and what are the response of the potential stakeholders to the media coverage on the phenomenon? A fourth and final research question focuses on practical implications for marketing practitioners and executives. This thesis focuses on the concept of brand activism as a social phenomenon. The empirical study is a case study in a Finnish context, and the research method is a qualitative content analysis.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review gives the reader insight into previous research related to brand activism. The literature review is divided into two main parts. The first part (sub chapter 2.1 and 2.2) focuses on brand activism and begins with a brief discussion of the shift in marketing messaging and the evolution of the conscious brand, before moving on to defining what brand activism is, how it differentiates from other similar practices, discussing its distinct characteristics and authenticity (and lack thereof), and finally discussing the reasons for companies to engage in it. The second part of the literature review (sub chapter 2.3) is the foundation for the empirical study and in this section, the effects of mass communication on the public are reflected upon before summing up and presenting the theoretical framework for the empirical study. A short summary of the literature review can be read in chapter 2.4.

2.1 The shift in marketing and the conscious brand

Market-driven economies require advertising to succeed in merchandising goods and services. Marketing and advertising campaigns are needed in order to create consumer awareness and increase sales. (McPhail, 2014) Historically brands have used positioning and performance characteristics as marketing tools to reach their customers, with many slogans being similar to “our product is the best on the market”, or “our product gives you the best result” (Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020). However, Kotler and Sarkar (2017) argue, that positioning is no longer enough in our highly competitive markets. Businesses enhance their corporate image, reinforce stakeholder–company relationships, and improve stakeholders’ advocacy behaviour over time by engaging in corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities. Franssen (2020) states that corporate social responsibility (CSR) practicing companies can attribute up to 40% of their public reputation to their CSR work. Stakeholder relationships are an important part of the competitive advantage of a company, which is why investors are exceptionally attuned to how company actions affect stakeholder relationships (Bhagwat et al., 2020, Groening, Mittal, and Zhang, 2016).

The objective of cause-related marketing (CRM) is to improve a company’s performance, (Abitbol, 2016) and distribute its social responsibility through marketing

instruments (Paetzold, 2010) while helping a worthy cause (Abitbol, 2016). Companies attempt to enhance their corporate image and consumer attitudes towards their brands through CRM, as it can influence consumer perceptions of the company, and even the customer's willingness to purchase its products. The more a person is brand-conscious, the more the brand is regarded as representing the personality of the individual. (Abitbol, 2016). Several companies mix CSR initiatives with marketing activities, and a successful cause-marketing program can lead to benefits including improved social welfare, create distinguished brand positioning, build strong customer bonds, enhance the company's public image, drive sales, increase the company's market value, generates goodwill, and boost internal morale and motivate employees within the company (Kotler and Keller, 2016). Some brands may even view themselves as educators toward a better society, for example, strive to shift consumer behaviour or view themselves as legitimate sources of cultural power giving the brand the responsibility to spark change in society. (Sarkar and Kotler, 2018, Vredenburg et al., 2020, Moorman, 2020)

2.1.1 Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate social responsibility (hereafter CSR) is an ecological or social activity that a company engages in intending to ultimately benefit society (Abitbol, 2016). To encourage companies to take part or to be the catalyst to larger changes, governments give the companies incentives to start CSR activities (Fransen, 2020). These efforts include for example using clean energy, providing to the economically underprivileged, pursuing diversity in top management, restricting board compensation, donating to charity, and supporting unions (Mishra and Modi, 2016).

CSR activities are not only driven by ideological thinking that companies can be a powerful force for social change, but more by the multi-faceted business returns that companies can potentially gain from their CSR efforts (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010). Yet, CSR is not only about one-off campaigns or donation initiatives. Many big brands have aligned their agenda towards sustainable business strategies that tackle some of the largest environmental and social challenges we face today. (Fransen, 2020) CSR activities are generally viewed as beneficial by most of society, and it underlines actions, and the consequences of the actions, such as reputation and

sales (Vredenburg et al., 2020). However, even when stakeholders of a company claim they want to know about the good deeds of the company, customers can easily become suspicious of the company's external motives when promoting their CSR endeavours. CSR communication can lead to repercussions if stakeholders become doubtful and observe mainly exterior motives in a company's social initiatives. (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010)

By engaging in CSR activities, businesses can generate favourable stakeholder attitudes and improve sales, but also acquire investors and employees (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010), and customers appreciate companies that acknowledge what is going on in the world and genuinely want to make a change (Fransen, 2020). As CSR intends to improve relationships with most stakeholders (Mishra and Modi, 2016) stakeholder responses to activist messages from companies vary highly as they depend on the stakeholders' socio-political morals (Bhattacharya and Elsbach, 2002). Investors may view CSR as non-optimal use of financial or human resources without a clear link to the company's financial value, it can still increase company risk due to an increase in uncertainty curtailing from disciplinary actions e.g., customer boycotts, legislative repercussion, employee walkouts (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

This leads us to why effective communication of CSR and being transparent is key today. Pro-social and environment-conscious efforts are often well-received, especially on social media. Nevertheless, customers are quick to react if the content is perceived as inauthentic. Customers are quick to fact-check and actively look to call out someone with a false claim for the chance of a scandal. Companies that can show proof, origins, and traces, as well as the entire lifecycle to the stated claim, gain the customers' loyalty today. (Fransen, 2020)

2.1.2 Brands and politics

Companies have taken part in political activities, such as making campaign contributions, donating to political action committees, and lobbying over a long period of time (Bhagwat et al., 2020), and in addition to CSR, companies also engage in corporate political action (CPA), which involves efforts made by the company to influence political procedures in their favour, gaining policy-based competitive market

advantages (Lux, Crook & Woehr 2011). The goal of corporate political activity is to further a specific goal with direct financial payoffs rather than to support a social cause (Hillman, Keim & Schuler, 2004), which is why researchers view it as highly partisan (e.g., Bhagwat et al., 2020). A distinguishing feature of corporate political action (CPA) is, that it is usually exercised in silence and is not intended to be publicized. Lobbying is a “sensitive and often discreet activity” according to Lawton, McGuire, and Rajwani (2012), and is often disguised even though it is publicly available (Bhagwat et al., 2020). At times, when CPA is made public, it is usually by “accidental exposé”, according to Werner (2017). CPA is also generally aligned with the company’s own interests and strives to have a positive effect on the company’s value (Lux, Crook, and Woehr, 2011 and Werner, 2017; Bhagwat et al., 2020).

To summarize this short introduction to the conscious brand and the political brand, one could state that a shift in stakeholder expectations has led to the development of a conscious brand, which seems to have a greater purpose in society than only the acquisition of revenue. CSR initiatives and cause-related marketing campaigns have become a default for businesses, whether the intent is to spark social change or gain increased shareholder wealth. However, companies and their brands seem to have moved from advertising somewhat neutral CSR activities to the more polarized political domain, taking risks to address hot societal debates. These politically charged statements differ from CPA due to the high publicity they strive to achieve.

2.2 CSR 2.0: Brand Activism

Vredenburg et al. (2020) describes brand activism as an evolution of CSR. But historically, companies and their brands have not engaged in public activism for fear of potentially alienating customers (Vredenburg et al., 2018). Yet, a growing number of business entities, such as brands, CEOs, and endorsers, are taking part in environmental, social, and economic issues that are part of the political discourse, expected by their stakeholders (i.e., customers and employees). Industry observers note that while the decision to take a public stance on either side conveys substantial risk, it might not be an option to stay neutral. (Stein, 2018, Smith and Korschun, 2018, Hoppner and Vadakkepatt, 2019, Curry, 2020). It can be argued, that if companies

stay silent, they risk losing the moral high ground and allow others to write the history (Smith and Korschun, 2018).

Hence, it seems that companies face increased pressure to denounce discrimination publicly (Alemany, 2020), and must give room to their motives being scrutinized as the brand becomes an activist in the socio-political sphere (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Consumers may not find it credible when brands engage in activism (Du, Bhattacharya and Sen, 2010) and generic, hollow, and hypocritical sentiments can ring inauthentic and seem like a publicity stunt instead of an honest attempt at contributing to the conversation (Alemany, 2020). A social media post, an off-the-cuff remark during an interview, or even 'private correspondence' may find its way to the public via a whistle-blower, a journalist, or even a regular social media user (Dodd and Supa, 2014), and throughout the digital age, businesses have accumulated comprehensive paper trails on their social media accounts and websites. It does not require much work to comb through these platforms to see if the company is genuine with their concern, or if it is just empty talk. Statements that are perceived as inauthentic or inaccurate can be criticized, mocked, and shared virally over the internet. (Alemany, 2020) This type of backlash can ultimately harm the company's reputation, as was the case with Gillette, that became a target of a boycott due to a video campaign tackling toxic masculinity, or Nike, whose running shoes were burned by ex-customers who were angered by the brand's decision to support NFL player Colin Kaepernick.

Many companies might find this discord troublesome, because taking a stand is likely to upset not only customers but also employees and partners who do not agree with the company's actions (Moorman, 2020). It can be argued that while brand activism can strengthen the relationship with stakeholders who agree with a statement a firm does, it will likely damage the relationship with those who disagree (Bhagwat et al., 2020, Moorman, 2020). For example, the American airline Delta Airlines spoke out against the National Rifle Association (NRA) in the wake of a deadly school shooting at a high school in Parkland, Florida, U.S. in 2018 and had to pay dearly: home-state government legislators in the U.S. state Georgia withdrew an estimate of \$40 million tax break besides boycotts threatened by NRA supporters. Ed Bastian, the CEO of Delta Airlines, told that he had known there would be backlash, but had not anticipated the strength of it by the NRA movement. Yet, the company's decision to stand by its

values also created an outburst of support and appreciation. (Dantes, 2018) The example suggests that there may be no ‘right’ answer when a company addresses a socio-political issue by expressing public support for or opposition to one side of a biased issue but has the possibility to simultaneously both strengthen and sever stakeholder relationships (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

Many companies seem to think that their brands have an important role to play and feel obligated to support progressive causes at an increasing rate, some of which are politically divisive. The reason might be that these socially divisive actions are no longer viewed as political, given the public support for these efforts now, and compared with the support they received some years ago. Or perhaps companies finally see that doing nothing is a form of support of the status quo and therefore no longer an option. (Moorman, 2020). At the time of writing, recent events involving racial injustice and acts of police brutality and the public outcry because of it motivated corporations to show their support. Some brands launched full-scale marketing campaigns, while others only posted brief messages of solidarity and support on social media (Alemany, 2020) as described in the introduction chapter to this thesis. It almost seems the standard for advertising has shifted from “sex sells” to “social justice sells”, and although woke-washing is hypocritical, Mahdawi (2018) states that one can take solace in the fact that the more progressive messaging is out there, the better. As companies give *brand activism* a try, they might slowly start to change the norms and attitudes in society. In that sense, brands can also be innovators, problem solvers, and teachers and take a stand for what they believe is important in society (Moorman, 2020). In the next subchapter, the differences between brand activism and other kinds marketing initiatives such as cause-related marketing and corporate social responsibility are further discussed.

2.2.1 The differences between brand activism, CSR, CRM, and CPA

The controversial nature of brand activism sets it apart from corporate social responsibility (CSR) and cause-related marketing (CRM) that usually concerns issues viewed as non-divisive and pro-social, such as supporting education or disaster relief (Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020), as well as other political activities, such as corporate political activity (CPA) (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Brand activism lacks the consensus

(i.e., that most of the society finds it as beneficial as CSR is), as there is often not a universally ‘right’ solution to the socio-political issue in question, or that the problem might not be a problem that even needs to be solved, e.g., homelessness (Sarkar and Kotler, 2018). The main difference between traditional CSR and brand activism is the extent to which the focal issue is widely favoured (e.g., community resources, education, donations to research for curing disease) rather than partisan (e.g., gender equality, racial equality, transgender rights, and gun control). CSR and brand activism lie on a continuum in terms of their degree of partisanship. CSR is low in partisanship because it comprises of high societal agreement while brand activism is polarizing. (Bhagwat et al., 2020)

Therefore, CSR or CRM efforts are unlikely to provoke negative response from consumers unless the effort is perceived as a dishonest marketing trick. Brand activism may draw both positive and negative consumer reactions, and while CSR and CRM activities are often usually integrated into a company’s strategic plan, brand activism can be accidental or ad hoc. Even if brand activism appears to involve higher uncertainty and risk than CSR or CRM campaigns, the potential payoffs may also be higher (Mukherjee and Althuisen, 2020, Vredenburg et al., 2020), as brand activism can contain a much lower level of initial monetary investment (e.g., an open letter or a press release) (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

Besides engaging in CSR, companies also engage in corporate political action (CPA), e.g., lobbying or making monetary contributions to political campaigns or committees in order to gain a competitive market advantage (Lux, Crook & Woehr 2011; Bhagwat et al., 2020). Bhagwat et al. (2020) suggest that CPA differs from brand activism to the extent to which each activity is publicized. Kotler and Sarkar (2017) and Nalick et al. (2016) claim, that while the underlying motivations to engage in activism might vary, it is publicly communicated as the values of the company. As we have gathered, CPA is exercised in silence, and if it is made public, it is usually by what Werner (2017) calls “accidental exposé”.

Brand activism is related to CSR and CPA. However, brand activism is a different construction that has yet to be clearly explained. Bhagwat et al. (2020) constructed a 2 x 2 delineating model based on levels of publicity and partisanship, which is depicted

in figure 1. In this figure, *corporate socio-political activism* (CSA) is synonymous with brand activism. The figure shows that CSR is low in partisanship and can be either high or low in publicity, depending on whether it is routine or noteworthy, such as a CRM campaign. On the other hand, brand activism/CSA and CPA are highly partisan, yet CPA is not intended to be publicized, while brand activism/CSA is highly publicized.

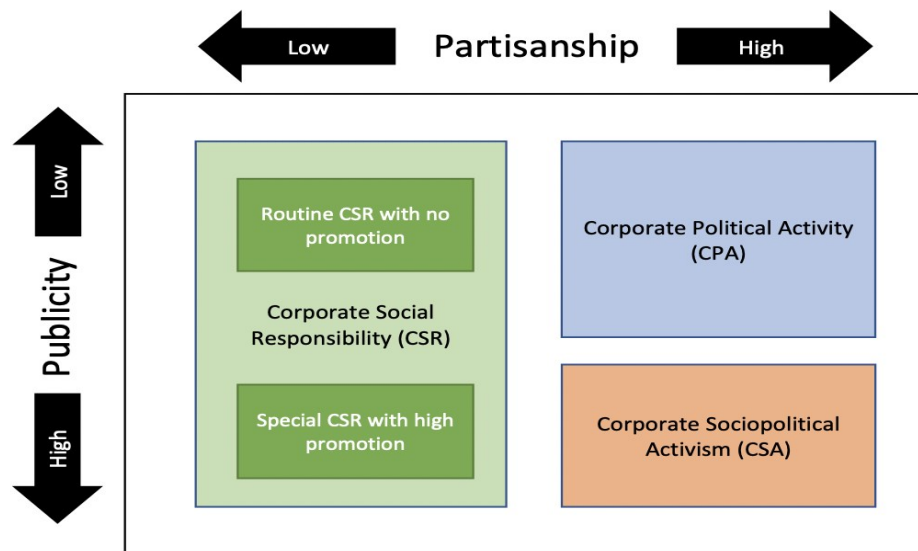


Figure 1: Conceptual distinctions of CSR, CPA, and CSA (Bhagwat et al. 2020)

2.2.2 Categories of activism companies engage in

Sarkar (2018) listed six major categories of activism corporations take part in, some of which can be considered as issues directly or indirectly related to corporate social responsibility or corporate political activity according to Bhagwat et al. (2020). Not all categories or topics of activism are socially divisive, yet the following categories involve some of the largest problems facing society today:

- **Social activism:** Social activism includes areas such as equality, meaning gender, race, age, and LGBTQIA+ issues. Also, community issues such as healthcare, social security, education, privacy, and consumer protection are included in this type of activism.
- **Workplace activism:** This category consists of governance-related issues such as corporate organization, CEO pay, labour and union issues, worker compensation, and supply chain management among others.

- **Political activism:** Political activism consists of voting and voting rights, lobbying, privatization, as well as policy including gerrymandering, campaign finance, et cetera.
- **Environmental activism:** This type of brand activism covers conservation, land use, air and water pollution, emission control, and ecocide issues as well as various environmental policies and laws.
- **Economic activism:** This category addresses wage and tax policies concerning inequality and wealth redistribution.
- **Legal activism:** This type of activism deals with the laws and policies that impact companies, such as citizenship, taxes, and employment laws.

(Sarkar, 2018)

2.2.3 *Defining brand activism*

As we have gathered so far, brand activism differs from various activities companies engage in, such as corporate political action, corporate social responsibility, and cause-related marketing initiatives. Next, some definitions for brand activism by previous researchers are scrutinised.

Moorman (2020) defines *brand political activism* as public speech or actions focused on biased issues made by or on behalf of a company using its corporate or individual brand name. The opinionated feature of the issue on which the actions are based is an important aspect of political activism. There are stakeholders (e.g., employees, partners, policymakers, and consumers) who want to maintain the current situation of an issue, and those who want a change. When a brand engages in socio-political topics, they need to pick a side, which is to either challenge or defend the current situation. This can be done by advocating for or against racial justice, transgender rights, climate change initiatives, minimum wage increases, or gun control. These actions might involve challenging political institutions e.g., same-sex marriage, while other actions challenge social conventions, e.g., profiling people of colour. (Moorman, 2020)

Vredenburg et al. (2020) emphasises on *brand activism* being a marketing tactic, that is motivated by intent and values when a brand adopts a non-neutral stance on topics that are contested, to contribute to social change and marketing success.

Bhagwat et al. (2020) looked at *corporate socio-political activism* (CSA) as a concept that is distinct from other major corporate social and political activities, namely corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate political activity (CPA), that has an overall negative effect with uncertain results on company values as well as the possibility of making a successful strategy in contrast. CSA is defined as “*a firm’s public demonstration (statements and/or actions) of support for or opposition to one side of a partisan socio-political issue.*” – (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1).

Kotler and Sarkar (2017) defined brand activism as ‘*the act of publicly taking a stand on divisive social or political issues by a brand or an individual associated with a brand*’.

Dodd and Supa (2014) discussed *corporate social advocacy*, of which they used the definition that it ‘*refers to an organisation making a public statement or taking a public stance on social-political issues*’ – (Dodd and Supa, 2014, p. 5). They underlined that the impact of corporate social advocacy can lead to impact a consumer’s intent to purchase from the company.

While all of these definitions are plausible, they still contain slight nuances and differences that differentiate them from each other. Instead of choosing an existing definition to explain brand activism in my empirical study, I propose the following definition that combines elements from the previous definitions. The definition for brand activism used in this thesis follows: brand activism consists of business efforts (public speech or actions) to support or oppose a socio-political issue that is considered biased in society and has uncertain consequences for the company and/or brand.

2.2.4 The distinctive characteristics of brand activism

Vredenburg et al. (2020) drew on Moorman’s (2020) research on *brand political activism* when identifying authentic brand activism, finding four defining characteristics to the phenomenon. Firstly, *brand purpose* is essential to authentic brand activism and focuses on a brand’s input to a broader interest of the public and goals in society (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Authentic brand activism prioritizes social

and environmental benefits beyond the brand's immediate financial interest. Moorman (2020) had suggested that some brands view themselves as educators and legitimate sources of cultural power which gives the brand the responsibility to spark change in society.

Secondly, brand activism has expanded beyond social accomplishment of participating in divisive, controversial, and polarizing socio-political issues. Contested or controversial issues have opposing ethics and interests, provoke disparities about assertions or behaviour, are politically volatile, and arouse strong emotions (Nalick et al., 2016; Vredenburg et al., 2020). However, all consumers do not have the same values as the brand, and some consumer groups may be more alienated than others. (Vredenburg et al., 2020)

Thirdly, the adoption of either a progressive or conservative stand on a divisive issue characterize brand activism further. Brand activism can address any controversial issue on the political spectrum, but the nature of these stances is subjective due to religion or political ideology. (Moorman, 2020, Chatterji and Toffel, 2018, Vredenburg et al., 2020) The adoption of the stand can be considered weak or strong according to Hoppner and Vadakkepatt (2019), depending on if it is a mere statement, or a stronger course of action, such as a review of the internal code of conduct.

The final defining characteristic of brand activism contains an intangible (messaging) and tangible (practice) devotion to a socio-political cause. Brand activism goes beyond mere advocacy and/or messaging and implicates alignment with company practices that uphold the purpose and values of the brand. The activist messages have to be backed up by real changes in the company through various reforms to corporate practice and policies, monetary donations, or partnerships in order to support its stakeholders, i.e., employees and customers and to ease societal change. However, these prosocial practices vary depending on how deeply rooted in the company they are. Vredenburg et al. demonstrate this by an example: a company that makes changes in its internal policy by adopting a gender-neutral bathroom policy or allowing same-sex couples to have parental leave will probably have a greater impact than if the company merely donated once to an LGBTQIA+ cause. This means, that long-term commitments might yield greater social influence. (Vredenburg et al., 2020)

2.2.5 Authentic brand activism vs. woke-washing

Vredenburg et al. (2020) identified four factors that build on the creation of authenticity in brand activism. These factors are (1) purpose, (2) values, (3) messaging, and (4) practice. Authentic brand activism is defined as a strategy, in which brands have a clear purpose and values-driven communication around an activist stance on socio-political issues while engaging in prosocial company practice too. Therefore, authentic activism equals the purpose and values of the brand with its company practice and activist marketing messaging. (Vredenburg et al., 2020)

The authenticity of brand activism becomes compromised in cases where a company's activist messaging differs from its company practice, purpose, and values. The same inauthenticity is perceived in cases where a company's practice is misaligned with its messaging, values, and purpose. (Vredenburg et al., 2020)

Vredenburg et al. (2020) borrow from the concepts of greenwashing and decoupling to understand authenticity in the context of brand activism. The lack of authenticity is greater than a mere inability to match prosocial company practice with messaging, which differentiates from decoupling as such. Matching messaging and practice are essential, but it is not enough for developing and maintaining authentic brand activism. Brands must demonstrate a balance and alignment between the four factors (purpose, value, messaging, and practice). When these four factors are in alignment, authentic brand activism can be achieved. As a result, consumers are more likely to perceive a brand's stance on the pivotal socio-political issue as truthful, relevant, and trustworthy. (Vredenburg et al., 2020)

To compare, 'woke washing' (see chapter 1.4 for definition) can be the outcome if a brand engages in a movement of socio-political matter out of urgency and/or market responsiveness, especially when the messaging is disconnected from the brand's purpose, values, and company practice (Vredenburg et al., 2020). As noted in previous chapters, social justice concerns are increasingly becoming a part of the marketing strategy of big companies (Boyd, 2018). Vredenburg et al. (2020) highlight the case of Nike and Colin Kaepernick as an example of woke washing. The brand supported

Kaepernick but also decided to sponsor the NFL teams that had rejected Kaepernick after his protests. In the example, companies and brands can deceive consumers about the socio-political output of the business, or the socio-political benefit of the product as is often the case in greenwashing. Consumers can also feel that social issues are used as a marketing trick to sell more of the brand's products, therefore questioning the intention as well as the social benefit of the brand's activism, detached from purpose and value and misaligned from company practice. (Vredenburg et al., 2020)

Furthermore, woke washing is often criticized as hypocritical and lazy (Mahdawi, 2018) and can risk the influence of authentic brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Additionally, it can be harmful by sanitizing toxic business practices (Mahdawi, 2018). If brand activism is not trusted by consumers to be a trustworthy method to push social change in socio-political issues, then the strategy's effectiveness is reduced in these issues. The customer's trust can be harmed by activist marketing messages that contain false claims or content, especially when the claims are important for the purchase decision. To clarify how the marketplace has developed to make room for brand activism, Vredenburg et al. (2020) constructed a typology (figure 2) that shows how brands align or fail to align purpose, value, messaging, and practice.

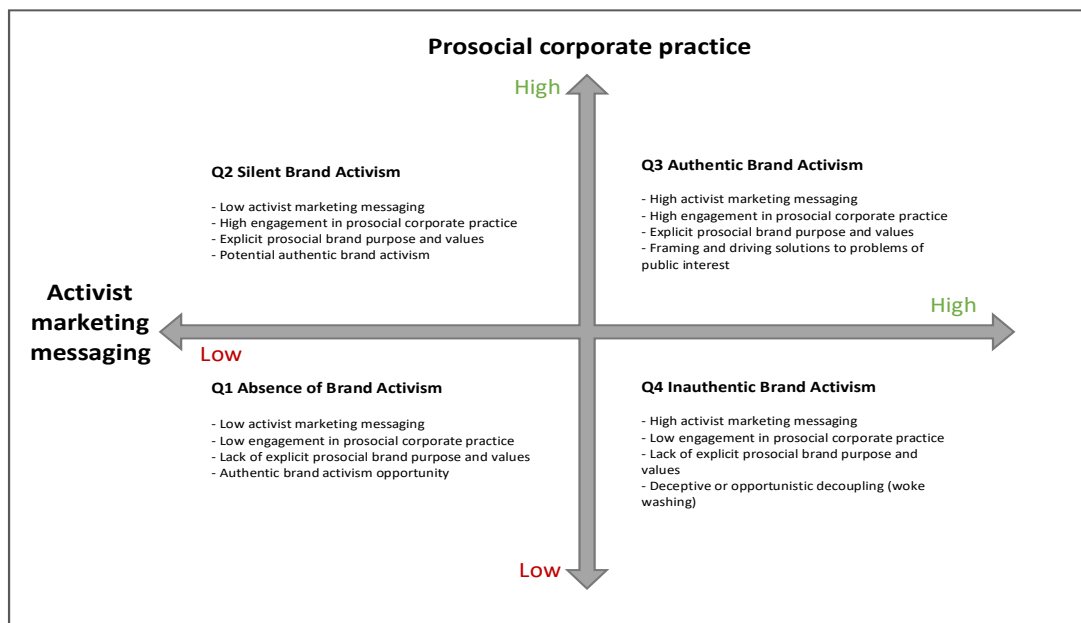


Figure 2: Typology of Brand Activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020)

The typology of brand activism shows how the degree of activism marketing messaging moves from high to low with the degree of prosocial corporate practice. The results are categorized into four quadrants:

Absence of brand activism

The brands that locate in this quadrant (1) have yet to adopt prosocial company practices in their marketing strategy. The brands do not have prosocial brand purpose and values or engage in activist marketing messaging. These companies tend to be situated in industries that usually do not depend on partnering with socio-political causes to acknowledge their brand legitimacy, and operate without consumer expectations, for example, business-to-business companies. An example is Caterpillar, the world's largest construction equipment manufacturer that relies on B2B sales and promotion strategies. Caterpillar has up until now not addressed socio-political causes. Vredenburg et al. (2020) suggest, that these kinds of industries may need to adopt prosocial brand purpose, values, company practices, and related marketing messaging as social norms. The expectations of brands taking a stance changes and as the marketing system evolves, like commitment to sustainable development nowadays is expected of the manufacturing and client-facing industry, and not only customer-facing brands (Kapitan, Kennedy, and Berth, 2019). (Vredenburg et al., 2020)

Silent brand activism

Silent brand activists (quadrant 2) embrace socio-political causes as part of their core mission or strategic focus but are likely to operate quietly and out of plain sight, operating long-term integrated prosocial company practices that are part of their strategy and essentially linked to their purpose and values. The brands tend to be smaller and less influential despite activism on disputed matters. These silent brand activists have the least to lose by entering the spectrum of political activist messaging, due to them already having a prosocial brand purpose, values, and company practices that align with their messaging, which is necessary for authentic brand activism. (Vredenburg et al., 2020)

Authentic brand activism

Brands in this category (quadrant 3) are viewed as authentic since their brand purpose and values, activist marketing messaging and prosocial company practice are aligned.

Vredenburg et al. (2020) highlight ice cream maker Ben & Jerry's as an example of authentic brand activism, as the company has values-driven messaging and its practices align with progressing social change such as transparency, fairness, and sustainability. Authentic brand activism contains honest alignment of activist marketing messaging with purpose- and value-driven prosocial company practice, which is an essential spark for social change. It also brings the greatest *brand equity* results. (Vredenburg et al., 2020) Furthermore, authentic brand activism can also be regressive even if it usually involves progressive stances on socio-political issues (Kotler and Sarkar, 2017).

Inauthentic brand activism

Brands in this category (quadrant 4) have already embraced activist marketing messaging that communicates their support of socio-political issues. Yet, the brands lack brand purpose and values and may not have prosocial corporate practices or are hiding the absence of these practices. Inauthentic brand activism can lead to negative brand equity implications through unfavourable brand associations and false signalling. The activist messages can be considered hypocritical, inauthentic, or even false. These brands tend to be consumer-facing in this quadrant, and as consumers increasingly expect brands to take a stand on socio-political issues, the stakes are high for the brands if they attempt to respond quickly. Inauthentic brand activism can also be perceived as unethical, similarly, to greenwashing, and might ultimately endanger the potential for social change by misleading the customers and losing their trust in brand activism. (Vredenburg et al., 2020)

2.2.6 Reasons for brand activism

Company value and investor responses of CSA

As established, customers and other stakeholders have for long pressed companies to provide societal advantages besides generating shareholder wealth, the main concern of the companies' investors, and these advantages have traditionally come in the form of corporate social responsibility. The strain between shareholder value maximization and social responsibility is not a new phenomenon, as investors often question investments in corporate social responsibility (Bhagwat et al., 2020, Mishra and Modi, 2016). However, engagement in activism raises the risk and uncertainty beyond that

of traditional CSR activities due to its opinionated nature. Bhagwat et al. (2020) has examined the effect of *corporate socio-political activism* (CSA) on firm value by investigating investor and customer responses.

Bhagwat et al.'s (2020) study provides insights to managers in terms of what to expect from investors if they choose to engage in *corporate socio-political activism* (CSA), and how CSA should be implemented based on the company's objectives. Their research contributes to the marketing strategy literature and the emerging work on activism and is built on existing conceptualisation of activism to provide a broad definition of CSA, as well as empirically confirms that CSA utilises distinctive outcomes on company value given its different characteristics. The results showed that investors react negatively to CSA on average, especially in cases where CSA stances deviate from the dominant political values of a company's key stakeholders. Bhagwat et al.'s (2020) results reveal that investors' reactions are worse when CSA:

- (1) deviates from stakeholders' political values,
- (2) takes the form of actions (instead of only statements),
- (3) is announced by the CEO (instead of another person or entity within the company),
- (4) does not explicitly communicate any business interests, and
- (5) is a solitary company activity (vs. in coalition with other companies).

(Bhagwat et al., 2020)

Regardless of the underlying motivation a company has, engaging in CSA indicates the socio-political values of a company. This indicator reduces information unevenness between the company and its stakeholders by informing stakeholders of the company's socio-political values. (Bhagwat et al., 2020) CSA may be appealing to some stakeholders who agree with the stance, but at the same time, it will offend them who hold opposing views (Kotler and Sarkar, 2017, Bhagwat et al., 2020). It is challenging for companies to predict the magnitude of the opposing reactions to CSA, and whether the positive reactions will lead to noticeable benefits, such as an increase in sales (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Shareholders may think that the more time, attention, and resources managers allocate to CSA, the less they will be able to bestow on innovation, operations, and other profit-generating activities (Nalick et al., 2016; Bhagwat et al., 2020). This unease exists even when CSA delivers a business interest or is supported by some stakeholder groups such as employees and customers, as it

can still upset many people, which increases more uncertainty and requires companies to allocate even more of their time and resources to managing any backlash. Additionally, CSA engagement may signal a fundamental shift in the company's strategic priorities. (Bhagwat et al., 2020)

Stakeholder relationships are an important part of the competitive advantage of a company, which is why investors are exceptionally attuned to how company actions affect stakeholder relationships (Bhagwat et al., 2020, Groening, Mittal, and Zhang, 2016). Consistent with stakeholder alignment theory, CSA can either reinforce values and strengthen or risk the relationships with stakeholders (Bhagwat et al., 2020, Hambrick and Wowak, 2019) CSA that differs from the stakeholders' political values might lead to stakeholders disidentifying with the company (Reed, Aquino & Levy, 2007; Bhagwat et al., 2020). The result can be seen in a wide variety of negative consequences: customers might switch to a competitor, employee turnover might rise, tax breaks might be withdrawn (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

CSA is a risky marketing strategy that investors commonly are cautious towards, however, it can at times be advantageous. On average, investors react negatively to CSA, specifically in cases where it strays from the values of key stakeholders and signals the company's resource-intensive pledge to activism. Nevertheless, investors award activism in cases where it closely aligns with the stakeholders. In addition, customers reward CSA when it resonates with their personal values. This demonstrates that CSA can be an effective means for companies to appeal to their target markets. The investor responses to CSA are shaped by the implementation of CSA, depending on whether it is a statement or an action, as well as its alignment with the personal values of the company's key stakeholders, specifically, customers. The influence on sales growth of CSA suggests that customers pay attention to and make long-lasting CSA-based purchase decisions. While CSA can be a risky strategy, it can have real performance advantages as well. (Bhagwat et al., 2020)

Attitude shift among marketing executives

Christine Moorman has been tracking marketing leaders' response to the question "*Do you think it is appropriate for your brand to take a stance on politically-charged issues?*" since February 2018 in her CMO survey. The purpose of the CMO survey is

to objectively collect the opinions of chief marketing officers to track marketing quality, improve the value of marketing in companies and society as well as help forecast the future of markets. The study has been conducted twice a year since August 2008 through an online survey and is administered by the Fuqua School of Business at Duke University. (The CMO Survey, 2020) 47% of marketing leaders think that it is appropriate to “make changes to products and services in response to political issues” because it indicates the companies are quite willing to take risks. It is considered risky because service and product changes are likely to affect the core of the company’s business. (The CMO Survey 2020; Moorman, 2020) The latest findings of Moorman’s CMO Survey indicate, that the attitudes of chief marketing officers are changing in relation to whether their brands should take a stand on issues viewed as controversial, as there has been a slight increase in the ‘yes’ answers over the last few years. Further, the willingness to make changes in products according to politics is a remarkable result, of which evidence has been seen in the aftermath of the BLM-protests in the U.S. in the summer of 2020, as some companies made changes to their brands with racial bias associations. However, it is worth noting that regardless of the approach, brands should proceed with care when taking a stand on issues related to social justice or other politically polarizing topics, as protests against racial injustice continue across the world. (Moorman, 2020)

Increased consumer expectations

It can be argued that brands have no alternative than to promote social action, as today’s consumers are politically and socially conscious and expect companies to establish and spread clear stances on social and political issues. The purchasing power of the young has grown significantly in recent years and the millennial and Z generations have high expectations towards brands. (Alemany, 2020, Curry, 2020) At a time when many young people feel that the economic system does not work for them, it could be a smart move for big brands to appeal to their sense of idealism according to Jones (2019). Simply ‘standing in solidarity’ or saying the ‘right thing’ is no longer enough for the customers, they want the brands they support to back up the platitudes with action (Alemany, 2020). By 2020, generation Z will account for about 40% of all customers in America according to an American survey from 2018 conducted by DoSomething (Ferguson, 2018). 76% of young people said they had bought (53%) or would consider buying (23%) a brand or a product to show support for the issues the

brand supported. 67% of the respondents stated to have stopped purchasing (40%) or would consider doing so (27%) if the company behaved in a way or stood for something that would not support their values. (Curry, 2020, Ferguson, 2018) Furthermore, pro-social initiatives and environment-conscious efforts are received well on social media, especially by these young generations, who actively seek out organizations that are devoted to sustainable practices in their consumerism (Fransen, 2020), and are increasingly using the power of their social media feeds as well as their feet to shape corporate behaviour (Curry, 2020).

Politicized consumer activism

To fully comprehend brand activism as a social phenomenon, a consumer perspective is required. As we have noted, consumers respond differently to the companies' efforts of communicating their values and responses to ongoing politically charged debates in society today. Chen presented a new category of consumer behaviour: politicized consumer activism in his 2020 study. He defined it as *“consumers ascribing political meaning to and/or interpreting the political stances of corporate conducts, and they then act collectively to pressure companies based on these perceptions”* (Chen, 2020, p. 1). The term “politicized” comes from “politicalization” of consumption, e.g., consumers taking environmental issues upon themselves as a co-responsibility, meaning that consumers consider the environmental aspect in their daily consumption, leading to the consumption becoming “politicized”. The politicalization of consumption conceptualises consumption habits and decisions as a process through which consumers attribute political value. According to Chen (2020), consumer activism is placed somewhere between a social movement and general activism. A social movement is defined as “the coming together of relatively large numbers of people around a commonly held set of values or view of human and/or social rights in order to create social change”, while activism refers to people gathering around problematic situations caused by organisations and taking action together to solve these problems. A social movement is generally concerned with social good and social change. (Chen, 2020)

To be able to better understand the altering definitions of consumer activism, Chen (2020) placed them on a continuum between the self-interest of the consumers and the greater good (figure 3). Consumer activism due to self-interest includes problems with

products and services and the not-in-my-back-yard (NIMBY) effect (i.e., becoming an activist when a problem affects oneself personally). Consumer activism for the sake of a greater good includes political consumer activism such as the politicization of consumption due to morality, ethics, and social responsibility. Chen argued that politicized consumer activism follows a different logic, and therefore placed politicized consumer activism in the middle of the two differing motives to consumer activism. As argued, politicized consumer activism does not necessarily aim for ‘*politicalization*’ to create an institutional means of expression, meaning that it does not see social change being the ultimate goal. Chen suggested that the term is linked to consumer nationalism, meaning consuming in order to feel belonged to a national identity, of what an everyday example is preferring domestic produce to foreign. (Chen, 2020)

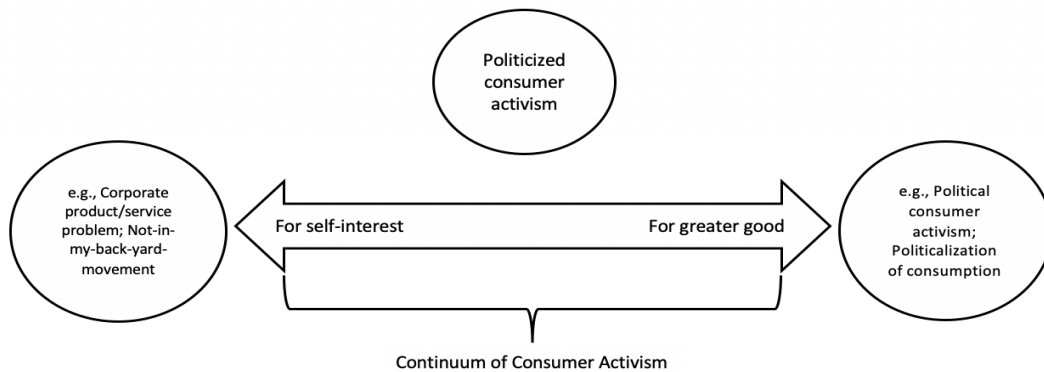


Figure 3: Conceptual map of consumer activism (Chen, 2020)

2.3 Mass media: shaping public opinion

Up until now, brand activism has been discussed from several viewpoints and it has been differentiated from other activities companies take part in, such as corporate social responsibility and brand political action. Next, the role of the mass media as an influencer of public opinion is discussed and theories relating to mass communication are presented. The media’s effect on how we perceive commercial brand’s effort in igniting social change is further elaborated upon in the empirical study.

The term ‘mass media’ is described by McQuail (2000: 4) as “*the means of communication that operate on a large scale, reaching and involving virtually everyone in a society to a greater or lesser degree.*” The content of media has been referred to by historians, sociologists, and anthropologists as proof of values and

beliefs of a specific time and place or social group, on the premise that it generally responds to the dominant hopes, anxieties or beliefs of the people and represents common values. Media can be considered a cultural indicator in a similar way that have allowed social and economic indicators to become describing conditions. McQuail stated that we live in an 'information society': "*one in which work is extensively based on information and service industries and where information of all kinds is the key to wealth and power*" (2000: 32). Today's modern societies are increasingly relying on various complex systems of communication of which one part is mass communication. Mass media is significant for economic, social and political life, and its significance extends beyond any authority in democratic societies. (McQuail, 2000)

The news media has the ability to shape public opinion (Carroll, 2010; McCombs, 2004), and the media can be a powerful force for public enlightenment (McQuail, 2000). Therefore, it can be stated that various media are an important instrument for learning about the world (Ross & Nightingale, 2003). Castells (1998: 336) said that the rise of the information society originates in more central changes than only the development of information technologies and advancement in the production and distribution of information. The economic, social, and cultural changes in our society originates historically in three independent processes: the information technology revolution, the economic crisis of both capitalism and statism and their following reformation, and the flourishing of cultural social movements, e.g., environmentalism, feminism, human rights, and libertarianism (Castells, 1998).

Ross and Nightingale (2003) conduct that the relationship between political news coverage and the public is highly complex and not readily agreeable to simplistic theories which frame that influence in absolute terms. The media can achieve a positive role in democratic societies by its ability to empower the public to take political action and participation, but Ross and Nightingale (2003) argue that the media don't seem to offer those opportunities so often.

2.3.1 *Setting the agenda*

Carroll inspected the agenda-setting theory in relation to the news media's influence on company reputation in his 2020 study. In order to gain reputation and brand name recognition, businesses must acquire the public's attention. Carroll argues that the news media may not succeed in telling the public *what* to think about a particular business, they succeed better in telling the public which companies to 'think about'. Sullivan (2013) claimed that communication research has produced evidence that news media profoundly shape public political awareness and information environment.

McQuail (2000) describes agenda-setting as the process of media influence that can be intentional or unintentional, by which the relative importance of news events, issues, or personages in the public mind is affected by the order of presentation or relative salience in news reports. Media influence is not on the direction of opinion but on what people think about. The concept has been applied to political communication and election campaigns. Despite the near certainty that the process does occur as hypothesised, it is not easy to prove, because media take their priorities from public opinion as well as from politicians. With the help of the agenda-setting theory, each news story can be analysed by coding the "tone of writing/mentioning" of the text (see table 1).

Table 1: *Tone of writing/mentioning categories*

Tone	Explanation
Positive tone mention	Favourable aspects for the company mentioned
Negative tone mention	Unpleasant and unfavourable aspects for the company mentioned
Neutral tone mention	Facts, mentions with neither positive nor negative tones attached
Mixed tone mention	Both positive and negative aspects

2.3.2 *The framing of news*

The framing theory is regarded as an extension of the agenda-setting theory. Both agenda-setting and framing research show that the news media can affect the public's perception of political issues. The news media can affect both the appearance of particular issues for the public and the types of conclusions that the public draw about

said issues. (Sullivan, 2013) Scheufele & Tewksbury (2007) stated that framing is based on the assumption that how a subject is presented in news media may have an effect on how viewers perceive it.

How media presents certain issues and its effects on the public can be studied through news framing. Sullivan (2013: 71) argues that framing takes place when media producers or journalists “*select some aspects of a perceived reality to make them more salient in a communicating text, in such way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation*” (Entman, 1993: 52). Numerous studies have shown that the media can affect how people interpret the news and the conclusions they draw after viewing or reading the news (e.g., Perse, 2001: 106). News reports shape public awareness on public issues and provide a conceptual framework in which to understand these theories. Further, frames can be used to direct respondents toward a specific policy solution for social and economic problems. (Iyengar, 1994; Sullivan, 2013).

Pan & Kosicki (1993, p. 70), in Semetko & Valkenberg (2000) explain that framing analysis “*expands beyond agenda-setting research into what people talk or think about by examining how they think and talk about issues in the news*”. Semetko and Valkenberg (2000) drew on Entman’s (1991) work on frames often used in news stories: (1) conflict, (2) human interest / personalisation, (3) (economic) consequence, (4) morality, and (5) responsibility. These frames are explained in the following section.

- *Conflict frame.* This frame prioritises conflict between parties as opposed to the actual decision made (Arawolo, 2017). This conflict can be between individuals, groups or institutions and is underlined in the news story as a method of detaining the interest of the audience. In a U.S. study conducted by Neuman et al. (1992), it was found that the media most frequently used the conflict frame. As an example, news about presidential election campaigns is mainly framed in terms of conflict according to Patterson (1993). By frequently framing news via conflict, the news media has received criticism for encouraging public cynicism and mistrust of politicians (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). (Semetko and Valkenberg, 2000)

- *Human interest / personalisation frame.* This frame is used to give an issue, problem, or an event a human face or an emotional perspective. The capturing and retaining of audience interest are of high importance in a time when the news industry is increasingly competitive (Bennett, 1995). This can be achieved when framing news from a personalised perspective. In this way, news can be dramatized, personalised, and even emotionalised. (Semetko and Valkenberg, 2000) Arawolo (2017) argues, that by using the human-interest frame, personality is promoted over more important aspects.
- *Consequence frame.* The (economic) consequences frame reports an issue, problem, or an event in terms of the consequences it will have economically on an individual, group, institution, region, or country. Economic consequences are often wide ranging in the event of a problem, which is why reporting of the economic impact is of significant news value (Graber, 1993). (Semetko and Valkenberg, 2000)
- *Morality frame.* Media coverage can often moralise, sometimes due to indiscretions of political actors, or alternatively, policies can be seen as morally questionable (Arawolo, 2017). Semetko and Valkenberg (2000) argue, that the morality frame puts the event, problem, or issue in the context of moral doctrines or religious beliefs. Because professional journalism often strives for objectivity, this frame is often used indirectly, for example through a quotation, or an implication, or by having someone raise a question (Neuman et al., 1992). Neuman et al. (1992) found that this frame to be more common among the minds of audiences than in news content, yet this frame was identified among several used in reporting. (Semetko and Valkenberg, 2000)
- *Responsibility frame.* The responsibility frame presents an issue or problem in a way that points towards responsibility for the cause or solution to that problem, which is directed at the government, a group, or the individual. Arawolo (2017) adds, that this frame is used for attributing responsibility for a cause or a solution. In the U.S., the news media has been criticised for

shaping public understanding of who is responsible for causing or solving key social problems, such as poverty (Iyengar, 1987). Iyengar (1991) also argued, that by covering issues and problems in terms of an event, instance, or individual (episodically) rather than in terms of the larger historical context (thematically), the television news encourages people to offer individual-level explanations to problems in society. As a result, a poor woman on welfare aid is held responsible for her fate rather than the government or the system. (Semetko and Valkenberg, 2000)

2.3.3 Studying the news in a Finnish context

According to Carroll (2010), the news media's role in the creation of public images and opinions is especially interesting by a case study in a Finnish context, because there is one major newspaper that dominates the news media spectre in the country, and with Finland being a relatively small country, it can be argued that the news media's effects are more visible than in a more populous country among other reasons. The Finnish news media are politically a homogenous entity argued by Ojala and Uskali (2005) in Carroll (2010). Finland has been ranked among one of the least corrupt countries in the world (RSF, 2021), and there is a great emphasis on honesty in Finnish society. News is mostly fact-based in Finland while news is more narrative in the U.S. Further, Finland has been called the most "Americanized country in Europe" by Heinonen and Pantzar (2002) due to its quick adoption of food, television and films originating from the U.S. (Luoma-Aho, Uskali, Heinonen & Ainamo, 2010; Carroll, 2010).

2.3.4 Criticism directed at mass communication theories

It can be argued that the mass media do not necessarily serve the public. Further, the assumption that the media must reflect reality in some kind of direct and proportional way has been the basis for criticism over the last several decades (McQuail, 2000). McPhail (2014) criticises the news media for directly and indirectly promoting a core-based focus and emphasis in reporting values since most journalists, editors, and managements have graduated from elite universities. McPhail (2014) emphasises their decent salaries and argues that they will not promote a revolution or seriously question the economic structure global economy that is providing them a stable financial future.

McPhail (2014) goes as far as stating that journalists, editors, and managements are part of the ruling elite, which is why many news media puts an emphasis on financial news and information rather than on news of general interest, social problems, and development issues. In addition to McPhail’s (2014) criticism, McQuail (2000) also highlights the influence of personal characteristics of ‘mass communicators’ (i.e., journalists, editors and managements) in the news framing.

2.4 Literature review conclusions and theoretical framework

Next, some conclusions will be drawn from the literature review and a theoretical framework used in interpreting my empirical study result will be presented.

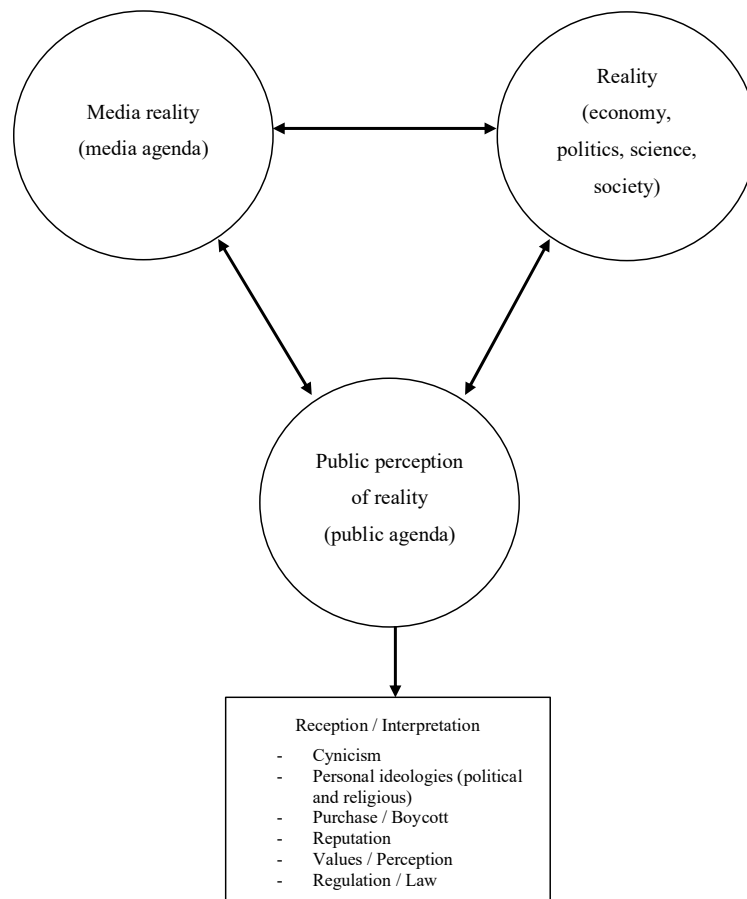


Figure 4: The agenda-setting effect and interpretation

Figure 4 helps interpret the media effects of various social phenomena, and in this study particularly brand activism. The figure is created by me, modified from Hoppner and Vadakkepatt’s (2019) moral authority framework and Sullivan’s agenda-setting

effect (2013, p. 70). The ability of the mass media to convey the appearance of objects and their attributes from the news media to the public is called the agenda-setting effect, and according to Sullivan, the media's agenda-setting can undermine the personal experiences of our own in directing our opinions about important public issues (2013, p. 70). The reality sphere refers to the 'perceived' reality, i.e., the society as a whole, where businesses and other sectors of society are active. The media reality sphere refers to the media's portrayal of this reality. The public perception of reality sphere is influenced by both the 'reality' and the 'media reality'. The addition to Sullivan's agenda-setting effect is the reception / interpretation factors, that have been borrowed from Hoppner and Vadakkepatt (2019) and concern how *brand activism* is interpreted in this agenda-setting context. The factors Hoppner and Vadakkepatt (2019) identified are explained next.

The reception and interpretation of a piece of news about brand activism in society depends on several factors. There can be either positive and/or negative changes for the company and society. Firstly, the effect of brand activism is unclear, but recent research suggests (e.g., Bhagwat et al., 2020) that brand activism can positively impact financial performance (purchase) but as the engagement in brand activism is often related to taking a stand to a partisan issue, it means there are both supporters and opposers of said issue. Therefore, taking a stance brings often negative effects as well. Companies engaging in activism can provoke, aggravate, and engage individuals and groups to action, and negative effects include damaged reputation and boycott. Brand activism can be motivated by the attempt to impact change in society through values or perceptions, or the laws and regulations administered. This can in turn provoke punishment or reward from the society. Furthermore, the impact of the stance will be coloured by the values, judgements, and feelings of the individuals, including cynicism and personal ideologies. (Hoppner and Vadakkepatt, 2019) This framework is used when answering research question three and analysing the data in the upcoming empirical study, but it also helps identifying factors that influence the public perception of reality when consuming news.

2.5 Chapter summary

In the literature review, the evolution of the brand's role has been discussed. The marketing standard has shifted from brand positioning to bolder stances on sensitive societal issues. Consumers are conscious, and therefore expect the brands they support to act accordingly. The biased nature of brand activism makes it a challenging activity to engage in. If a brand takes a stance for a progressive socio-political issue while its corporate practices are questionable, its stance will not be perceived as authentic, and the brand might soon be accused of woke-washing. Authentic brand activist messaging requires a balance in the brand's purpose, corporate practice, as well as its values reflect the activist marketing messaging the brand performs. It has been conducted that brand activism affects firm value, that shareholders punish companies if the stand delineates grandly from stakeholders, but also tend to award companies for stances that align with stakeholder socio-political values. Predicting the effect of brand activism on company value before taking a stand remains uncertain, adding to the risks.

Mass media can influence public opinion as well as be a powerful force for public enlightenment. Media can be viewed as an important instrument for learning about the world. The media sets the agenda for the news. The agenda-setting can be intentional or unintentional, that in turn affects how important news events, issues, or personages in news are perceived. The agenda-setting theory can be applied into media research by analysing the tone used in text. Furthermore, how media presents certain issues and its effects on the public can be studied through news framing. Framing occurs when the media chooses some aspects of a perceived reality to make them more prominent in a communicating text. Entman (1991) identified five frames that the media uses in news presenting, that Semetko and Valkenberg (2000) helped further develop and comprise of (1) conflict, (2) human interest / personalisation, (3) (economic) consequence, (4) morality, and (5) responsibility.

3 METHODOLOGY

The following chapter discusses the research method, the selected case study, data collection and sampling, the sources used as well as credibility and authenticity and ethical consideration concerning this study. The methodology chapter is summed up in section 3.5.

3.1 Research method

The two common inquiry methods available when researchers work on a research project are quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research focuses on numbers and statistics, while qualitative research puts an emphasis on the use of words and the meaning of them. Qualitative case study methodology allows academics to conduct an in-depth examination of complex phenomena within a specific context (Rashid et al. 2019). The overall aim of qualitative research is to gain understanding of certain social phenomena (Renz, Carrington & Badger, 2018), but defining the object of the study in regard to a social issue or a phenomenon is not simple (Hamel, Dufour & Fortin, 1993), as was not the case for this study either.

The most widely used qualitative research method is case studies (Rashid et al. 2019). A case study method is suitable when studying contemporary phenomena as opposed to historical events. In such events, the borders between phenomena and contexts are usually not specific, therefore studying sporadic cases may further investigate the related influences. (Chen, 2020; Yin, 2018) The topic of this thesis is the social phenomenon brand activism, that has been called an emerging marketing tactic by researchers (e.g., Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Yin (2018) identifies three factors when a case study research method is suitable: (1) the main research questions are ‘why’ or ‘how’ questions, (2) there is little or no control over behavioural elements, and (3) the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon. Induction and deduction are two popular research logics used in social sciences-related research. Subjective accounts of lived experiences on which theory is built on begin with inductive research logic. The logic of deductive research begins with theory and aims at testing arguments. The two types of research logic are more

dominant than the third one, abduction. Abduction can be argued to be about investigating the relationship between everyday language and concepts, and the method will produce ideas and provisional theories that can serve as hypothetical perceptions (Thomas, 2010). Abduction accepts existing theory that can increase the theoretical strength of case analysis. The outcome of an abductive research is a framework that provides a speculative notion of what theory can look like. (Rashid et al. 2019) Abductive research combines theoretical frameworks, empirical fieldwork, and case analysis simultaneously (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). This method is valuable when the objective of the study is to develop new theories and offer a proposal for future research (Rashid et al. 2019).

Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010) suggests, that abduction is an associated strategy of modern constructionism. The aim of abduction strategy is exploration and understanding of a social phenomenon through a lens consisting of social actors. Abduction claims that theoretical frameworks evolve simultaneously with empirical observation. The researcher interprets the empirical material and provides rich descriptions based on participants' views. Abductive process goes back and forth between empirical material and literature. (Rashid et al. 2019)

As the purpose of this study is to explain a contemporary circumstance, mainly the social phenomenon referred to as *brand activism* in this thesis, a case study approach is of high relevance and suitability. A quantitative research method may not be as suitable, and as the studied phenomenon has not yet been thoroughly researched and was identified not long ago, a qualitative approach was deemed more suitable in this study.

3.1.1 Case: Brand activism in Helsingin Sanomat in 2020

The case chosen and examined in this study is *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS), the leading daily newspaper in Finland. Mass media play a significant part of the daily lives of most people. New forms of message delivery such as smartphones, laptops, and tablets and the growth of new forms of mass media such as social media, news aggregators, blogs and websites amplify the media presence in everyday life. (McLeod, Wise & Perryman, 2017)

This case study focuses on how brand activism was covered in the newspaper. HS was selected due to its large readership as the dominating newspaper in Finland and for my accessibility to the digital archive as a subscriber myself. Furthermore, as one of the objectives is to analyse the responses of the public, this newspaper is a plausible object of examination, as the comments section in the online newspaper platform is frequently used among the readers.

Initially, the goal was to examine a decade (2010-2020) of news coverage of the thesis subject from several news sources across the Nordic countries, but due to lack of time and resources, the timeframe and the number of sources had to be narrowed down. Qualitative content analysis allows the researcher to go back and forth between the conceptualization of the study, so the initial timeframe was changed to a course of one year, 2020 (January 1st to December 31st of 2020). Thankfully, during 2020, there was plenty of media coverage on the phenomenon of brand activism. Furthermore, I noted that there were only a few articles a year covering the subject prior to 2020 which might indicate to an increased public and media interest to the subject of brand activism (e.g., Moorman, 2020, Vredenburg et al. 2020). A detailed analysis might not have been possible with a sparser number of documents to analyse had the timeframe been a decade, with only one or two articles a year, if any, which is why the decision to limit this study to the year 2020 was taken.

One of the main themes in this study as well as in 2020 was the resurrection of the Black Lives Matter (BLM)-movement in the summer and its effects on businesses globally, as highlighted in the introduction and literature review in chapters 1 and 2. The BLM-movement itself was subjected to significant media coverage during the protests and the following months, and one can already see the consequences in society. These consequences will be observed more closely in the following chapters. However, this study is not limited to the news coverage of the societal consequences of the BLM-movement, but the news year (2020) as a whole in regard to companies engaging in brand activism for the good of society.

3.1.2 Content analysis

Content analysis can be performed both quantitatively and qualitatively and is defined as the systematic and objective analysis of message characteristics, and it includes both human-code analyses and computer-aided text analysis. Its applications include computer-driven analysis of word usage in news media, advertising, blogs, social media exchanges, and political speeches and more. (Neuendorf, 2017)

When studying the media and especially the adoption of frames in the news a common research method is a content analysis of the news media (Odjik et al. 2013). Furthermore, when studying a phenomenon, a content analysis of the phenomenon's occurrence in mass media can be used. A major drawback with qualitative research is that it generally produces a large amount of unwieldy data in the form of field notes, interview transcripts and other types of documents. But unlike quantitative content analysis, the processes through which the themes are obtained are usually left implicit in qualitative content analysis. The themes can be illustrated for example by brief quotations from a newspaper article. With qualitative content analysis, there is often movement back and forth between the conceptualization, data collection, analysis and interpretation when comparing with quantitative content analysis. (Bryman & Bell, 2007) Finding connections, making comparisons, asking questions, and finding patterns in the material is the core of qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis deals with a lot of data, so the material used for the analysis is read multiple times, even before conducting the analysis, in order to get a grasp of the material as a whole and to be able to plan coding and classifications. (Larsen, 2018)

3.2 Data collection

Data collection in a qualitative study is based on experiences, and therefore the collected data cannot be viewed as objective facts (Larsen, 2018, p. 135). This study uses secondary data consisting of newspaper articles from the online platform of the news medium HS as well as comments left on the articles. Theoretical sampling selects cases due to theoretical reasons (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The initial goal of theoretical sampling is to select cases that are probable to examine or extend theories (Eisenhardt, 1989). Theoretical sampling is widely used in the study and analysis, as the objective is to gain a deep insight in the social phenomenon of companies and

brands taking a stand on socio-political issues that are perceived controversial in society.

3.2.1 Sources

A quantitative form of content analysis can be used to explore mass media outputs, but the sources can also be investigated through a qualitative point of view. Usually, such analysis involves searching for themes in the sources that are being examined. (Bryman & Bell, 2007) The sources used in this study consist of various kinds of mass media output and documentation, including news articles, columns, editorials, opinion pieces, and reportages, as well as the online commentary section along with comments posted by the readers of HS. The common denominator for the sources used was that the articles selected cover brand activism. As they are not created particularly for this study, this material is categorized as a secondary source of data. The study focuses on written communication, and a major Finnish daily newspaper available online was chosen due to its ability to influence the public opinion.

3.2.2 Method and sampling

Data were collected manually from the online archive of HS and imported into NVivo; a tool used by researchers for qualitative content analysis. The data collection of news articles included comments by readers on the article in order to analyse the public opinion on the piece of news itself and the general attitude towards the event described in each article. The data collection began in January 2021 and continued until February 2021. The data were gathered from <https://hs.fi> (the digital platform for the news media *Helsingin Sanomat*). The data were gathered with the help of the article search feature on said webpage, and as the newspaper is Finnish, the search words selected were in Finnish as well. The newspaper uses tags to categorise the news in different categories according to the subject, however, I soon noted, that the tags were not used consistently. I had assumed that only a few search words would suffice, but I had to search through various categories of tags to find as many articles containing brand activism as possible. Eventually, the search words selected for the data collection included “company activism” (*yritysaktivismi*), “marketing” (*markkinointi*), “brands” (*brändit*), “economy” (*talous*), “social media” (*sosiaalinen media*), and “companies” (*yrietykset*). Additional search words are “racism” (*rasismi*), and “black lives matter”,

as well as “responsibility” (*vastuullisuus*), and “corporate communication” (*yrittäjäviestintä*).

These additional search words were selected due to the fact that a major part of articles related to brand activism during the year 2020 also contained these tags. The articles were manually sampled using theoretical sampling from all search results appearing when entering the search word in question. As the content analysis will be focusing on the written communication, only text was included from the articles, which means that images attached to the articles were left out. The imported content besides the body of the article itself included:

- Heading
- Ingress
- Author
- Date of publication
- Tags, what the news content is related to (if any)
- Reader comments (if any)
- Number of comments

3.2.3 Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis: NVivo

Due to the large amount of data, a tool was used to help sort and group common themes together. The tool used in this study is the software NVivo created by QSR International, which is used for computer-assisted qualitative data analysis. NVivo was used for the coding and sorting of data in this study. The content analysis followed the steps for qualitative content analysis by Larsen (2018: 160), and NVivo was used in the first four of the following steps:

- The data (text) is coded.
- The codes are classified into themes and categories.
- The data material is sorted with the help of these categories.
- The data material is examined to identify meaningful patterns and/or processes.

- Identified patterns are assessed in relation to existing research and theories. Transferable knowledge is established.

(Larsen, 2018, p. 160)

3.3 Data analysis

A total of 47 articles were acquired for the preliminary qualitative content analysis using the steps described in the previous chapter: 4.3.1 Data collection methods. The data was sampled by theoretical sampling, giving room to selecting and sorting out data of no relevance at an early stage in this study. The coding and categorising of data are a vital phase of qualitative content analysis. One is able to notice patterns and tendencies by coding and categorising, which therefore helps interpreting the findings. Further, this phase helps limiting the amount of data. Qualitative research methods usually contain collecting non-relevant data of no importance to the initial research questions, and in this phase data of no relevance is sorted out. (Larsen, 2018) The data sample was analysed with both the help of NVivo and manually in excel. In NVivo, the articles and comments were coded. The coding was conducted by reading through the material several times and highlighting pieces of text and putting them into various categories. In NVivo, the singular codes are called nodes, and this is done to develop recurring themes. The nodes can be organised into a hierarchical structure, such as having a parent node with the general topic and child nodes for more specific subtopics. The general topics, i.e., the parent nodes in this analysis were called General information, with child nodes consisting of heading, ingress, author, date of publication, number of comments, and tags. Other parent nodes used was related to the article content and comment section content. The news articles were analysed in tone mention (see table 1, section 2.3.1) and by frame analysis. The criteria looked upon when analysing the frame in each individual article is shown in table 2 below, which shows the criteria for measuring a frame. The model has been modified from Semetko and Valkenberg (2000) in Dirikx and Gelders (2010).

Table 2: Content analysis measure for frame

Frame	Explanation
Conflict frame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Mentions of disagreement between parties / individuals / groups / countries -Mentions of reproach between one party / individual / group / country -Mentions of two or more sides of the problem/issue at hand -References to winners and losers
(Economic) Consequence frame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Mentions of (financial) losses or gains now, or in the future -Mentions of costs/degree of expense involved -Reference to (economic) consequences or not pursuing a course of action
Human interest frame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Provides a human example or "human face" on the issue -Use of adjectives or personal vignettes that might generate feelings of outrage, empathy, caring, sympathy, or compassion -Emphasis on individuals and groups that are affected by the issue/problem -Mentions of the private or personal lives of the affected -Story contains visual information that might generate feelings of outrage, empathy, caring, sympathy, or compassion
Morality frame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Story contains a moral message -References to morality, God, and other religious tenets -Story offers specific social prescriptions about how to behave
Responsibility frame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Suggestions that some level of government has the ability to alleviate the problem or is responsible for the issue/problem -Suggestions of solution(s) to the problem/issue -Suggestions that an individual/group of people in society is responsible for the issue/problem -Suggestions that the problem requires urgent action

The reader responses are analysed by tone of voice using the same criteria as with the articles for a more consistent analysis. Furthermore, a thematic analysis is conducted on the responses with the help of a framework presented in figure 4, in section 2.4, in order to find out patterns and general attitudes towards brand activism as a practise.

3.3.1 Steps taken

The content analysis began with reading the articles sampled and trying to identify themes that the articles had in common and following the steps presented by Larsen (2018), described in section 3.2.3. Out of 47 articles 3 were sorted out which left me with 44 articles to analyse. The three articles that were sorted out lacked mentions brand activism and instead discussed brand renewals due to other reasons (e.g., internationalisation of the brand) and were therefore found irrelevant for this study. The content analysis was conducted with the help of the agenda-setting and framing theories. First, each article was briefly analysed and coded into “tone of writing/voice” categories. Then, each article was analysed with Semetko and Valkenberg’s (2000) extended categories of framing of news stories (conflict, human interest, consequence, morality, responsibility). To find similarities and themes, pieces of text were highlighted and coded into categories I identified while reading through the data sample. Main information about the article, i.e., the heading, ingress, author, date of publication, number of comments, and tags used by *hs.fi* were coded separately. Then, the body of the article was coded into content categories by each mention. When coding the body of the article was complete, I moved on to the comments. First, the agenda-setting tone of mention was coded, and then the content of the comment was coded into content categories. The coding of the content of the text body as well as the comments was done in multiple stages, as more categories were added when proceeding with the thematic analysis. When visualising the findings, a word frequency cloud was generated in the software for the article content and the reader responses respectively. Finally, the findings from the qualitative content analysis were quantified and visualised in Excel.

3.4 Validity and reliability

Avoiding biasness is a main goal of all scientific research, which is why objectivity is required. However, concepts such as ‘knowledge’ and ‘facts’ are socially agreed upon,

which means that there is no such thing as true objectivity. Therefore, all research conducted by humans is somewhat subjective. (Altheide & Schneider, 2013) Reliability and validity are vital criteria when establishing and assessing the quality of quantitative research. However, measurement in terms of number and statistics is not the major concern in qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2007) and it does not necessarily aim for results that could be reproduced. Yet, as stated before, validity, reliability and transferability are factors that must be taken into consideration while conducting academic research.

Validity deals with relevance. In qualitative studies, provability, trustworthiness, and transfer value are assessed. Reliability deals with accuracy and trustworthiness. The research should be trustworthy, and the research process should be based on accuracy. (Larsen, 2018) Authenticity and credibility issues are known to occur in qualitative content analysis of mass media outputs (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Issues include the subjectivity of the researcher(s) conducting the study. As qualitative research commonly examines a smaller number of data than a quantitative research, one must bear in mind that generalisations of the results of the gathered data sample cannot be made. This study looks at how journalists present a piece of news and the comments the article receives. General conclusions from these subjective opinions cannot be drawn, but the tone of voice and general attitudes can be analysed within the sampled data.

Finland, along with the other Nordic countries, ranks the highest in the World Press Freedom index by Reporters Without Borders (RSF). In 2020, Finland ranked 2nd after Norway in 1st place, Denmark in 3rd place, and Sweden in 4th place. (RSF, 2021) From this information, the conclusion that the Finnish press is free and therefore suitable for academic investigation is drawn, which improves the validity and reliability of this study.

Regarding this particular study, it must be noted that the data sample may not cover every news piece on the topic as the data was gathered manually by theoretical sampling, which may affect the validity and reliability of this study. Theoretical sampling supports the notion of gathering data based on theoretical reasons, that are likely to examine or extend theories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, Eisenhardt, 1989).

Furthermore, the replication of this particular study might prove to be challenging, due to the nature of the selected news media. *Helsingin Sanomat* is a nationwide newspaper available in all of Finland regardless of its name which refers to regional news in the capital region of Helsinki. While all articles sampled for the analysis were retrieved from the online article archive of the newspaper, however, it must be mentioned that *Helsingin Sanomat* only offers a limited number of free articles to read without a paid subscription, which inevitably affects the validity and reliability of this study. The sampled data were collected from a singular source (<https://hs.fi>) in a similar manner, which ensures that the data files are consistent, which enables using the same technique when coding the data and performing the analysis on each sampled article and the comments from the comments section.

3.4.1 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are an important aspect to any research, and it is essential to make sure that the participants of the study are fully aware about their participation and role (Rashid et al. 2019). Ethical issues are to be considered when conducting research by using internet sources as a method of data collection (Bryman & Bell, 2007). This study contains a few issues worth discussing from an ethical perspective. The data sample covers a great number of news articles and reader comments, whom in general are subscribers to the newspaper in question. Both articles and comments are public, and therefore acceptable to academic examination. However, only the representative of the newspaper, i.e., the journalist writing for *Helsingin Sanomat* is mentioned by name if it is deemed necessary for the discussion. All reader comments are cited anonymously. Moderation of the comments section is another factor to be considered. *Helsingin Sanomat* exercises moderation in the comment section, which affects the validity and reliability of the study.

Further, media professionalism and media ethics are considered. The journalistic code of ethics is a number of principles of professional behaviour that journalist themselves adopt and control at work. The most frequent principles in journalistic codes are: (1) truthfulness of information, (2) the clarity of information, (3), the defence of the public's interests, (4), the responsibilities in forming public opinion, (5) the standards of gathering and presenting information, and (6) respecting the integrity of the sources

(McQuail, 2000: 152). However, some criticism towards these seemingly objective codes of conduct include the fact that the “*press always takes the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates. Especially if reflects a system of control*” (Siebert et al. 1956: 1, in McQuail, 2000).

3.5 Chapter summary

This study tries to explain a contemporary phenomenon, *brand activism*. Therefore, a case study approach was selected for this study. This case study focuses on how brand activism was covered in the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS) during 2020, and how the audience (i.e., subscribers of said newspaper) reacted to the news coverage. This study examines a phenomenon, so a qualitative content analysis of the phenomenon’s occurrence in mass media is used as a research method. At the core of qualitative content analysis there is finding connections, making comparisons, asking questions, and finding patterns in the material. The study uses secondary data consisting of newspaper articles from the online platform of the news media as well as comments posted by readers. The sources consist of various kinds of mass media output and documentation, including news articles, columns, editorials, opinion pieces, and reportages that cover brand activism, as well as the online commentary section along with comments left by the subscribers of HS. The data was collected during January and February 2021, from <https://www.hs.fi> with the help of the article search feature. The data was sampled by theoretical sampling, that gave room to selecting and sorting out data of no relevance at an early stage. A total of 47 articles were acquired for the qualitative content analysis but 3 of them were sorted out during the analysis of data because they lacked mentions of brand activism. 44 articles and attached comments remained. The coding and preliminary analysis of the data was done in NVivo, a computer software program used in qualitative content analysis.

4 EMPIRICAL DATA PRESENTATION

The following chapter presents the findings from the computer-assisted qualitative content analysis described in the previous chapter. These findings will be analysed and discussed in chapter 5. The data sample consisted of 44 articles and the attached comments that were published on <https://hs.fi> during 2020. The articles and comments were analysed separately and have therefore been divided into two subheadings in this chapter: 4.1 Articles and 4.2 Responses. The articles were analysed by tone of writing in accordance with the agenda-setting theory. Also, a frame analysis on the articles was conducted. The criteria for the frame analysis are presented thoroughly in table 2 found in section 3.3. Moreover, a word frequency cloud was generated for the articles and responses respectively with the help of NVivo. The responses were analysed by tone of voice following the same criteria as the articles. The tone of writing and frame for each article is presented in appendix 1. Furthermore, a thematic analysis was conducted for the responses, following the framework presented in figure 4, found in section 2.4. The findings are summed up in section 4.3 before moving on to analysing these findings in chapter 5.

4.1 Articles

The distribution of the 44 articles covering brand activism over the year 2020 is illustrated in figure 5 below. During the first five months of the year, *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS) published two articles about brand activism, one in January and one in March. However, in June and July, the number of published articles about brand activism rose to double digits. For the remaining months of 2020, the number decreased significantly, but at least one article per month was published about the researched subject.

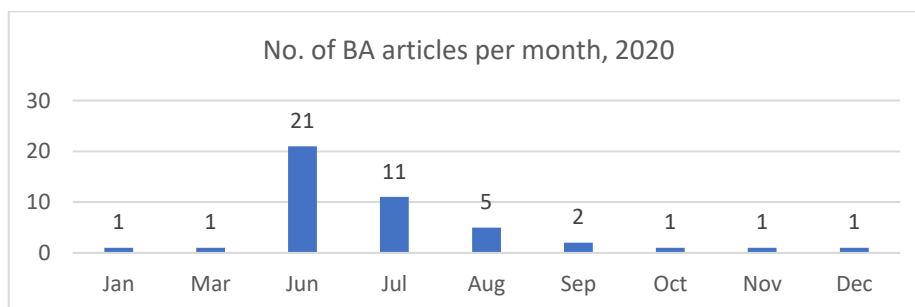


Figure 5: No. of published articles per month

4.1.1 *Tone of writing*

The articles covering brand activism published in HS were analysed by tone of writing. The results of the tone mention in the comments section are presented in section 4.2.1. Figure 6 illustrates the tone of writing used in the analysed articles, explained briefly next.

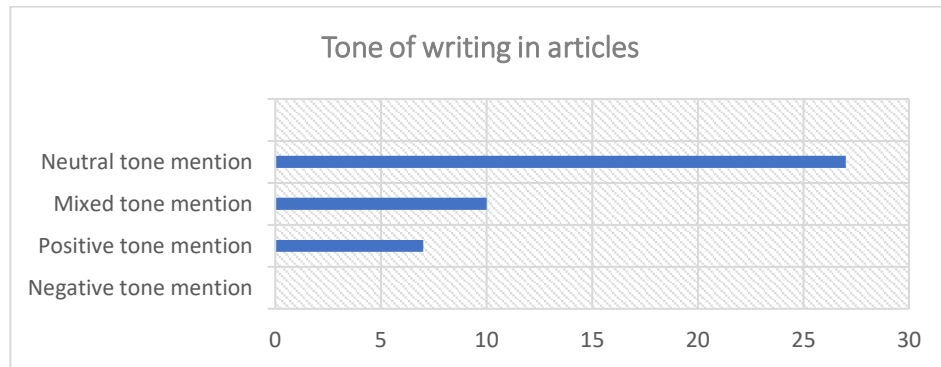


Figure 6: *Tone of writing in the analysed articles*

A neutral tone mention was the most frequently used tone in the articles about brand activism. 27 out of 44 (61%) of the articles had a neutral tone. These articles focused on facts, and neither positive nor positive tones were attached. A mixed tone of writing with both negative and positive aspects of the company was given to 10 articles out of 44 (23%). A mixed tone means that the tone mention in the article had mix of a disapproving and approving attitude towards the brand activism discussed in the article. 7 out of 44 articles (16%) were given a positive tone mention. In these articles favourable aspects for the company were discussed and the article was written in an approving tone towards the brand activism discussed in it. None (0%) of the written articles covering brand activism used a negative tone. A negative tone would have been given to an article written with a disapproving tone towards the brand activism discussed in it, with unpleasant and unfavourable aspects for the company brought up in it.

4.1.2 *Frame analysis*

The articles were analysed with the help of frames used in news media identified by Entman (1991) and further developed by Semetko and Valkenberg (2000). The frame is the perspective that is used in delivering the news and the frames used in this study are morality, personal interest/personification, conflict, responsibility and (economic) consequence. Out of 44 analysed articles, 16 were presented from the responsibility

frame, 10 were presented from the consequence frame, 8 from the morality frame, 8 from the human interest/personalisation frame and 2 from the conflict frame (table 3).

Table 3: Occurrence of news frames in the analysed data

Frame	No. of articles (44 in total)	Percentage	Example of article: heading (<i>original</i> [translation]), newspaper, date of publication)
Conflict	2	5 %	<i>Sijoitusyhtiöt vaativat jättifirmoja lopettamaan sponsoriyhteistyön NFL-joukkueen kanssa rasistisen nimen vuoksi</i> [Investment firms call on giant companies to stop sponsorship cooperation with NFL team due to racist name], HS, 2.7.2020
Consequence	10	23 %	<i>Facebookin työntekijät järjestivät ulosmarssin ja syytivät yhtiön johtoa riittämättömästä reagoinnista presidentti Trumpin kirjoituksiin</i> [Facebook employees marched out and accuse the company's management of failing to respond to President Trump's writings], HS, 2.6.2020
Human Interest /Personalisation	8	18 %	<i>Hyvästi Pekka</i> [Farewell Pekka], HS, 25.12.2020
Morality	8	18 %	<i>"Älä käännä selkäsi rasismille", sanoo Nike – Brändit osoittavat nyt tukeaan rasismien vastaiselle liikkeelle, mutta vaarana on "vastuullisuuspesu", sanoo professori</i> ["Don't turn your back on racism," says Nike – Brands are now showing their support for the anti-racism movement, but there is a danger of 'responsibility washing'], HS 9.6.2020
Responsibility	16	36 %	<i>Koskenkorvaa markkinoidaan maanläheisenä pikkukylän viinana, Fortum tahtoo puhua vastuullisuudesta: Brändeissä vedottiin ennen nautintoon, mutta nyt otetaan kantaa asioiden puolesta</i> [Koskenkorva is marketed as a down-to-earth small village liquor, Fortum wants to talk about responsibility: Brands used to appeal to enjoyment, but now we take a stand for issues], HS, 2.8.2020

Conflict

Only two articles out of 44 (5%) were framed by conflict in the study. The conflict frame was the least used frame by journalists writing articles about brand activism in HS during 2020. The conflict frame was given to articles that clearly underlined a conflict between two parties giving room to each (or several) of the disagreeing perspectives. This frame differentiates from the consequence frame by not presenting the brand activism as a result of an influencing event and therefore does not focus on

the economic consequences of said event for the company. Both of the articles framed by morality emphasised the demands of the accusing party, but also presented the accused party's perspective by interviewing a member of the opposing party. One of the articles given this frame was published on July 2nd, 2020 with the headline "Investment firms demand giant companies to stop sponsoring NFL team over racist name"¹. In this article, the main topic is the conflict between the investors and sponsors, who allegedly did not want to comment on the investors' demand to stop the sponsors from sponsoring the NFL team Washington Redskins because of the team's name, which the investors wanted to be changed due to the name having racist connotations. The second article that was given the conflict frame was published July 3rd, 2020 with the headline "'Marimekko, stay on the good guys' side' – NGO demands action from clothing company to get their Japanese partner to pay compensations"². Both articles emphasise the demands of the accusing party in the heading.

Consequence

Ten articles, which is 23% of a total of 44 articles were framed by (economic) consequences in the analysed data. The consequence frame was given to articles that presented the news about brand activism as a consequence of another event, e.g., a brand renewal being a result of public criticism directed towards the brand. This frame also highlighted the economic aspects and consequences. A majority of the articles given the consequence frame were neutral in tone and the articles were fact based and informative. Several of the articles framed by consequence focused on a boycott campaign directed at Facebook. Furthermore, all 10 articles discussed brand activism as a consequence of the Black Lives Matter movement and therefore a main theme in these articles was *racism*. One example of an article framed by consequence was published June 29th, 2020 with the headline "Advertisers try to 'brighten their brand' with boycott: €50bn lost from Facebook's market value"³. This article highlighted the economic losses on Facebook's market value due to the previously mentioned boycott

¹ In Finnish: "*Sijoitusyhtiöt vaativat jättifirmoja lopettamaan sponsoriyhteistyön NFL-joukkueen kanssa rasistisen nimen vuoksi*", HS, 2.7.2020

² In Finnish: "*Marimekko, pysykää hyvien puolella*" – Kansalaisjärjestö vaatii vaateyritykseltä toimenpiteitä, että tämän japanilainen yhteistyökumppani maksaisi korvauksia", HS, 3.7.2020

³ In Finnish: "*Mainostajat yrittävät 'kirkastaa brändiään' boikotilla: Facebookin markkina-arvosta katosi 50 miljardia euroa*", Written by Kari Räisänen and Laura Kukkonen, HS, 29.6.2020

that had been initiated by several NGOs and later joined by hundreds of global brands that use the social media platform for advertising.

Human interest / personalisation

Eight out of 44 articles were given the human interest/ personalisation frame in the data sample. 18% used a human interest or personalisation frame by narrating the phenomenon of brand activism with the help of a human face or giving the practice an emotional perspective. One such example is an article published on December 25th, 2020 with the headline “Farewell Pekka”⁴. Pekka refers to a Finnish card game which was originally known as “*Black Pekka*” (*Musta Pekka*) that was later changed to “Pekka” only. This article summarised individual cases of social justice-related brand activism in 2020 in a Finnish context, by taking the perspective of two women running a consultant firm with the aim to promote diversity and inclusion by helping companies with their corporate social responsibility. Another example of the use of the human-interest frame is an article about the CEO of Apple, Tim Cook, that was published August 18th, 2020 that discussed Cook’s personal journey and his role as the CEO of Apple. In general, the articles framed by human interest strived to stirring emotions in the reader by bringing up personal struggles of the interviewees. The articles were mainly positive in tone and had a strong emphasis on brand activism as an aid to inflict societal change.

Morality

The morality frame was given to eight articles covering brand activism, which is 18% of the total data sample. The morality frame was mostly given to opinion pieces and analytical articles, that clearly discussed brand activism more critically than in the news articles given the responsibility or consequence frame. The tone in these articles was mainly mixed. Semetko and Valkenberg (2000) argued that the morality frame puts the news issue in the context of moral doctrines or religious beliefs, but in the analysed data sample, no parallels between brand activism and religious beliefs were perceived. However, the articles given the morality frame were often characterised by the author asking rhetorical questions and discreetly moralising the issue in the article, for example by including a critical quote from a stakeholder. An example of this is

⁴ In Finnish: “*Hyvästi Pekka*”, Written by Laura Kukkonen, HS, 25.12.2020

clearly seen in an article published on June 16th, 2020 with the headline “We are now removing old TV series with racism and knocking down statues, but is that the solution to the problem itself? – “One should learn from history””⁵. In this article, the journalist moralises streaming platforms for taking down old films and shows that contain racist scenes because of BLM protests and includes several quotes from various stakeholders.

Responsibility

16 out of 44 articles used the responsibility frame, which is 36% of the total data sample and thereby the most frequently used frame for news articles in HS that covered brand activism in 2020. The responsibility frame was given to articles that emphasised on responsibility and/or pointed towards a solution to the problem brought up in the article. Several articles using this frame emphasised on change and promises companies and/or brands had made to initiate societal change. Furthermore, articles using this frame often discussed the responsibility of companies as societal actors and often underlined a company’s values in the article. For example, in an article published on June 22nd, 2020 with the headline “Uncle Ben’s and Eskimo ice creams are changing their packaging in the wake of the racism debate: “Companies wants to let go of stereotypies””⁶. This article had a strong emphasis on companies being a part of transforming society to become more inclusive and therefore must act on their own initiative by highlighting how they are reforming and trying to let go of stereotypies.

4.1.3 Word frequency cloud

A word frequency cloud (figure 7) was generated with the help of NVivo, with the aim to find out most used words to find patterns and themes in the data. The word cloud consists of words most frequently used within the data sample. This word cloud consists of words that were used in the article content of 44 articles, including the heading, ingress, and body. Reader comments were left out of this word cloud. The

⁵ In Finnish: “*Nyt poistetaan rasismia sisältäviä vanhoja tv-sarjoja ja kaadetaan patsaita, mutta onko sekään ratkaisu itse ongelmaan? – “Historiasta pitäisi oppia”*”, Written by Markku Haavisto, HS, 16.6.2020

⁶ In Finnish: “*Uncle Ben’s -pakkaus ja Eskimo-jäätelöt ovat muuttamassa muotoaan rasismikeskustelun vanavedessä: “Yritykset haluavat päästää irti stereotyyppioista”*”, Written by Laura Kukkonen, HS, 22.6.2020

boycott initiated by NGOs and joined by hundreds of global brands which targeted Facebook in the summer months of 2020. To highlight some additional words, the word “*yhdysvalloissa*” (in the United States) appeared 79 times in 18 articles. The word “*eskimo*” appeared 83 times in 9 articles. The stemmed words “*yhtiö*” and “*yhtiön*” (corporation, the corporation’s) together appeared 203 times in 23 articles.

4.2 Responses

In this subchapter, the responses to the analysed articles are presented. 32 out of 44 articles received comments, with the total number of 562 comments. On average, each article received 12,77 comments. The article receiving the most comments was published November 19th, 2020, with the headline “*Pingviini*⁷ renounces Eskimo name, ice cream continues under the name ‘*Puikko*’⁸ – manufacturer stresses ‘learning away from offensive terms’”⁹ and received 86 individual comments. The articles that did not receive any reader comments were often short opinion pieces written by readers of HS or published around the same time as other articles covering the subject.

423 of 562 comments were analysed. All comments could not be analysed because some comments were about another matter entirely and therefore did not discuss the article at hand. The 423 comments that were analysed related to the article content in some way. The comments were analysed by tone of voice with the same criteria as the articles, in order to find out the attitude towards brand activism discussed in the article. Moreover, the content of the comments was coded into categories and themes in NVivo, and additionally, a word frequency cloud was made for the comment sections as well, to find similarities or differences between the articles and responses. A thematic analysis was conducted on the responses accordingly to figure 4, found in section 2.4. However, a frame analysis was not conducted on the responses.

4.2.1 *Tone of voice*

The tone mention was used in analysing the comments section to find out the general attitude towards brand activism that was brought up in the article. The tone mention

⁷ Pingviini refers to a brand name meaning penguin.

⁸ Puikko is Finnish and refers to [ice-cream] ‘stick’ in this context.

⁹ In Finnish: “*Pingviini luopuu Eskimo-nimestä, jäätelö jatkaa nimellä Puikko – valmistaja korostaa ’poisoppimista loukkaavista termeistä’*”, written by Laura Kukkonen, HS, 19.11.2020

in the responses were analysed with the same agenda-setting criteria as the articles in order to be consequent with the analysis of tone. As can be seen from the chart below (figure 8), most of the comments were negative or mixed in tone. However, a about a third of the comments were either neutral or positive towards the brand activism discussed in the article. Yet, completely neutral comments were not as common as comments with an approving or disapproving attitude.

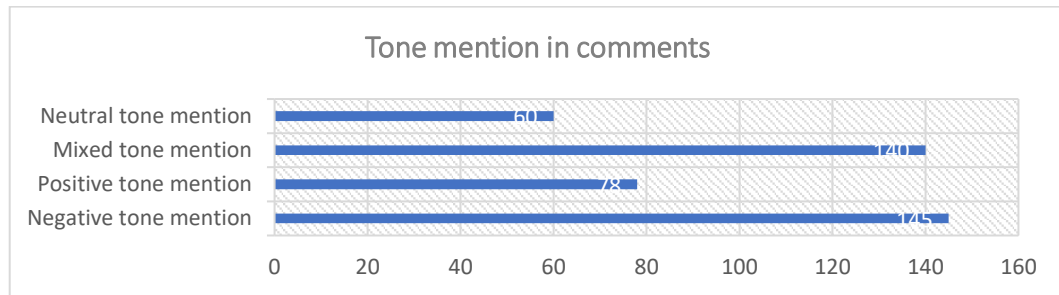


Figure 8: Tone mention in 423 analysed reader comments

By analysing tone mention in the comments section, an indication of the general attitude towards brand activism or news about brand activism among the readers of HS can be noted. Next, the tone mention of the responses is briefly discussed tone by tone, with one example to illustrate.

Neutral tone mention

The smallest number of comments left on the articles discussing brand activism were neutral in tone, only 60 out of 423 comments (14%) that discussed the article topic could be regarded as neutral. A neutral tone mention was given to comments that were neither approving nor disapproving of the brand activism discussed in the article or the article content in general. The following example is taken from the comment section of an article discussing brand activism and ongoing renewal of several brand names in Finland, initiated by the BLM-movement. By this example a neutral tone mention is illustrated:

“What's with this distress people have with these name changes? Companies do as they like. Personally, I believe that if someone is offended by a name, it must be changed, regardless of whether I am used to it. These product names

are not relics. I think they [the products] can still be found on the [store] shelves under a new name.”¹⁰

Mixed tone mention

The second most comments left on articles discussing brand activism were mixed in tone (140 out of 423, amounting for 33%). A mixed tone means that the comment contains both positive and negative tones. In this analysis, a mixed tone mention was given to comments that brought up two different points of view in the same comment. An example of a mixed tone mention in a comment in the same context as the previous negative comment:

“It could be that even the word ‘stick’ is starting to make you upset. Almost every Finn has had a stick inserted into their noses this year for corona testing.”¹¹

In this context, I believe the commentator does not seem disapproving of the name change of the ice-cream in general but chooses to point out how the new brand name might give consumers a negative reference as well over time because of Covid-19 tests being executed by a nostril swab/stick.¹²

Positive tone mention

The second least comments left on the articles discussing brand activism were positive in tone (78 out of 423, amounting for 18%). A positive tone mention in this analysis means that the commentator had an approving attitude towards the brand activism discussed in the article or the article content in general. An example of a positive tone mention in the same context as the previous two comments follows:

“Perhaps the point is to try to see the issue from somebody else’s perspective. Even if a (brand) name that is disconnected from myself as a person is not offending to me, it might be a good idea to let go of it in case it offends

¹⁰ Reader comment in Finnish: *”Mikä ihmeen hätä ihmisillä on näistä nimenmuutoksista? Yritykset tekevät niin kuin niitä huvittaa. Itse olen sitä mieltä, että jos joku nimitys joitakuita loukkaa, niin se on muutettava, riippumatta siitä olenko minä tottunut siihen. Eivät nämä tuotteiden nimet mitään pyhänjäännöksiä ole. Eivätköhän ne sieltä hyllyiltä löydy uudellakin nimellä.”*

¹¹ Reader comment in Finnish: *”Voi olla, että puikko-sanakin alkaa aiheuttaa pahaa mieltä. Miltei jokaisen suomalainen nenään on työnnetty tänä vuonna puikko koronatestausta varten.”*

¹² The word ‘puikko’ refers to ‘swab’ in this context.

somebody else. Especially when the matter is completely meaningless from our perspective.”¹³

Negative tone mention

Most of the comments left on articles about brand activism were negative in tone (145 out of 423, amounting for 34%). In this analysis, a negative tone mention was given to comments that were disapproving of the brand activism presented or the delivery of the piece of news in the article. The following quote is a comment with a negative tone mention from an article discussing the Finnish ice-cream manufacturer Froneri Finland changing its individual ice-cream brand name from Eskimo to Puikko. With this example, the disapproving attitude towards brand activism discussed in the article is illustrated:

“Froneri Finland could have kept its head up and said that ‘yes that is right, we have an old, beloved brand whose name we are definitely not going to change. Getting upset and apologising on the behalf of others has already grown to ridiculous proportions, and not a single product manufacturer should be listening to individual complainers!’”¹⁴

4.2.2 Recurring themes in reader comments

A thematic analysis was conducted for the reader comments to reveal attitudes towards the news coverage on brand activism and the practice itself. The agenda-setting effect and interpretation framework (figure 4, section 2.4) was used to find themes and patterns in the data. Sub themes were found in the data sample over time while coding the data. In table 4 below, the main themes are found in the left column called “Reception/interpretation of brand activism”, sub-themes identified in reader comments in the middle column, and one or a few examples of discussed issues are translated from Finnish in the right column. The number of references shows the number of times the sub-theme occurred among the reader comments and was coded

¹³ Reader comment in Finnish: “Tässä ehkä pointtina onkin koittaa nähdä asia jonkun toisen näkökulmasta. Vaikka jonkun minuun liittymättömän nimen käyttö ei minua loukkaisi, kannattaa ehkä luopua siitä, jos se loukkaa jotakuta toista. Etenkin kun kyse on kannaltamme täysin merkityksettömästä asiasta.”

¹⁴ Reader comment in Finnish: “Froneri Finland olisis voinut pitää päänsä pystyssä ja sanoa että aivan, meillä on vanha rakastetu tuotemerkki, jonka nimeä emme todellakaan aio muuttaa. Muidenpuolestamielensäpahoittaminen on kasvanut jo naurettaviin mittoihin, eikä yhdenkään tuotevalmistajan pitäisi lotkauttaa korvaansa yksittäisille valittajille!”

into the category in question. A total of 510 references were coded into one or several sub-themes.

Although the majority of the comments were either negative in tone or mixed negative and positive, the content of the comment was coded into sub-themes according to the topic of the comment, not tone mention itself. The comment may be positive, neutral, negative, or even mixed in tone regardless of the topic. Hence, sub-themes such as “racism / anti-racism” can contain both racist and anti-racist comments if the topic was either of them. Moreover, some comments have been coded into several sub-themes if they discussed several topics. The example in the right column illustrates some of the arguments from readers.

All of the identified themes for both the analysed articles and comments are found in appendix 2.

Table 4: Thematic analysis findings: reader comments

Reception / interpretation of brand activism	Sub themes identified in reader comments	Example
Cynicism	Comparing article content to another issue (32 references) Discrimination (21 references) Freedom of speech (3 references) Generational differences (4 references) Humor reference (10 references) Not comprehending why it's an issue (8 references) Linguistic issues (35 references) Right vs. wrong kind of activism (4 references)	Not understanding why a product changes its name Remarks on how everything was better "back in the good old days" and how people have lost their "common sense" nowadays Worrying over further discrimination towards people of other than Finnish ethnic background
Personal ideologies (political & religious)	Culture / traditions (7 references) Equality / inequality (19 references) Historical reference (38 references) Minorities vs. the majority (23 references) Racism / anti-racism (91 references)	Remarks about how social justice movements have gone too far as brands take a stance Worried about minorities getting the upper hand Comparing issue at hand with Colonialism
Purchase / boycott	Initiation to boycott (24 references)	Declaring their intention to boycott a product/brand due to brand's new values / packaging Applauding brands for taking a problem seriously
Reputation	Csr activities (2 references) Marketing or pr related (66 references) Media criticism (23 references) Profitability for company (43 references)	Remarks on how companies/brands have double standards when engaging in woke/green washing while destroying the nature and avoiding taxes
Values / Perception	Companies as drivers of change (2 references) Social change (9 references)	Remarks on how public opinion changes only as a result of outside pressure and how brand activism campaigns may contribute to positive development regardless of the cynicism or hypocrisy behind it
Regulation / Law	Political consequence / aspect (40 references)	Remarks on connection between equality, legislation (by politicians) and image Remarks on how politicians improve equality through legislation and commercial companies improve equality through their own image

4.2.3 Word frequency cloud

A similar word frequency cloud (figure 9) for the responses was generated with the help of NVivo as with the articles. See section 4.1.3 for details about criteria and software limitations.



Figure 9: Word frequency cloud: responses

Although the words in the word cloud are generated from the readers' comments in Finnish, one can observe several brand names and other words that are recognisable for a native English-speaker as well, such as 'eskimo', 'facebook', 'uncle', 'cancel', 'geisha', and 'Zuckerberg'. The most frequently used word among commentators was 'eskimo', with a word count of 199. However, the word 'eskimo' only appeared in the comment section of 4 articles, out of the total 44, which indicates to a heated debate about the word 'eskimo' in maximum 4 articles. The word 'rasismia' (racism in plural) only appeared 64 times among the comments but was used when commenting 11 different articles. Together with 'rasismi' (racism in singular) the word count goes up to 108 in total, and with 'rasismin' (racism's) to 149 in total with the words mentioned at least once in 15 out of 44 articles in total. This figure gives a hint towards that a large part of the discussion about brand activism in HS during 2020 was somehow connected to racism.

4.3 Chapter summary

There were 44 articles covering brand activism in *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS) during 2020. Of these, 32 were published in June and July. The tone in the articles was mainly neutral (27 articles). These articles presented brand activism through facts and had neither positive nor negative tones attached. 10 articles had a mixed tone of writing, i.e., included both disapproving and approving tones of voice. 7 articles had a positive tone mention and discussed favourable aspects for the company and its brand activism. Zero articles used a negative tone, which means that no article presented the brand activism or the company in an unpleasant and unfavourable manner. The frame analysis showed that out of 44 analysed articles, 16 were presented from the responsibility frame, 10 were from the consequence frame, 8 from the morality frame, 8 from the human interest/personalisation frame and 2 from the conflict frame. The word frequency cloud showed that the articles had a large focus on individual mainly U.S. owned companies. 32 out of 44 articles received comments, with a total of 562 comments. Each article received 12,77 comments on average. The highest number of comments in one individual article was 86. Of 562 comments, 423 were analysed. Comments that weren't analysed lacked relevance for the article content and were therefore not analysed by tone. The most used tone was negative (145 comments), and mixed (140 comments). 78 comments had a positive tone, and 60 comments were neutral. The word frequency cloud showed that the word 'Eskimo' was the most frequently used among the comments and that 'companies' in the articles.

5 DISCUSSION

In the previous chapter, the findings from the study were presented without a thorough analysis. Therefore, in this chapter, the findings of the empirical study are discussed and analysed as well as linked to the theory presented in the literature review.

The data consisted of 44 articles and a total of 562 reader comments published in the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS) during 2020, that was about brand activism. As could be seen from the date of publication (see figure 5 in section 4.1) the first five months of 2020 news about brand activism was not recurring, and only two articles were published before June 2020, when a surge of articles was suddenly written about the subject. The influential event for the surge in brand activism articles was the tragic death of George Floyd when he was arrested on the streets of Minneapolis in the U.S. at the end of May. The event was filmed by pedestrians and posted online, and the clips went viral and sparked massive Black Lives Matter protests all over the globe. Companies were not spared of consequences due to this influential event, and therefore, the actions companies took due to the public uprising against racism was one of the most recurring themes in the analysed data.

5.1 Tone of writing and the frames used in the articles

The tone of voice used by HS when covering brand activism was mostly neutral. Most articles were informative and did not hint to the journalist's opinions or the newspaper's ideologies. The delivery of news about brand activism often focused on economic consequences, yet the responsibility frame was the most popular frame used by journalists writing about the research subject. The two articles that were framed by conflict used a neutral tone of writing. Both articles were fact-based and showed no mention of the author's or the newspapers' own political ideology or opinions on the matter. Out of the ten articles that were framed by consequence, nine used a neutral tone of writing. Only one article used a mixed tone. This implies to that the articles framed by consequence were largely fact-based and did not use a neither positively nor negatively influenced narrative. Out of eight articles using the human-interest frame, four used a positive tone of writing, two used a neutral tone of writing, and the remaining two used a mixed tone of writing. In the analysed data, the human-interest

frame was most used when the journalist wanted to portray the brand activism in the article through a positive narrative and show only favourable aspects of the phenomenon. Out of eight articles that were framed by morality, six used a mixed tone of writing. A mixed tone means that these articles showed both favourable and unfavourable aspects for the companies and the brand activism discussed in them. One article used a positive tone of writing, which means that the article portrayed mainly positive aspects for the company and/or its brand activism. The last one used a mixed tone of writing, which means that it showed both favourable and unfavourable aspects of the brand activism-related issue discussed in the article. Out of 16 articles framed by responsibility, 13 used a neutral tone of writing. Two used a positive tone of writing and one a mixed tone of writing. This gives us a hint that even if the articles emphasised on responsibility, they did not emphasise on neither favourable nor unfavourable aspects of the brand activism discussed in the articles.

Neuman et al. (1992) had found that the conflict frame was the most frequently used news frame in their U.S. study, but this was not the case in this case study in a Finnish context. HS did not use the conflict frame as much as initially believed, and instead used four of the five frames (responsibility, consequence, morality, and human interest) quite evenly. The conflict frame was used the least frequently as opposed to the findings of the study by Neuman et al. It seems that the news media may prefer a more conflict-driven narrative delivery in the U.S., than in this case study in a Finnish context, perhaps due to the studied newspaper's commitment to journalistic objectivity and the overall focus on economic news in HS.

The human-interest frame was used in eight out of 44 articles when covering brand activism. As a noteworthy side observation, HS cooperates with *The Wall Street Journal* (TWSJ) and occasionally publishes TWSJ's articles translated into Finnish. The data sample consisted of two Finnish translations of articles originally published in TWSJ. Both articles were framed by human interest and gave brand activism a human face. One article featured Tim Cook, CEO of Apple and the other article covered brand activism by taking the perspective of Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook during the #StopHateForProfit-boycott Facebook was the target of. Neuman et al. (1992) had found that the human-interest frame was frequently used by American

media, yet it may seem that this frame was not as popular in a Finnish context, as HS did not use it as much when covering brand activism.

5.2 The main themes and discourse about brand activism

The qualitative content analysis resulted in finding common themes and categories for both the articles and the comments alike. In this subchapter, the main themes of both articles and comments are discussed as they are relating to one another. The word frequency clouds that were generated in NVivo helped in identifying themes context wise for both the articles and the reader comments. Although the most recurring words in the article content-cloud were business-related and emphasised on companies and brands, the BLM-movement and mentions of racism/anti-racism were referenced most frequently. The comment content-cloud strongly emphasised strongly on the word ‘Eskimo’, of which mentions were categorised in a sub-theme ‘minorities vs. the majority’ or ‘racism’ depending on whether the comment had focused on the word itself being racist or not or discussed issues regarding indigenous people. All identified themes are found in appendix 2.

Articles

The five top sub-themes that recurred in the collected data are presented in table 5 below.

Table 5: Themes and references in articles

Theme identified	Number of references	Number of articles reference appeared in
Black Lives Matter/racism	51	31
Brand/marketing related activity	50	26
Criticism/boycott towards brand	28	20
Company values	44	25
Societal change	20	11

Responses

The five top sub-themes that recurred in the comments section are presented in table 6 below.

Table 6: Themes and references in comments section

Theme identified	Number of references	Number of articles' comments section reference appeared in
Racism	91	16
Marketing/pr-related trick	66	16
Profitability (for company)	43	17
Political aspects	40	12
Linguistic issues	35	6

These top themes are discussed in the following section from both the newspaper and the readers' perspective. Quotes from the articles and the reader responses are used to illustrate the issue and/or theme.

Black Lives Matter / racism

There was one recurring theme that was highlighted repeatedly in the brand activism coverage in HS during 2020: Black Lives Matter (BLM) and racism. This theme was brought up 51 times in 31 articles, but it was even more elaborated upon amongst the comments as there were 91 references to the theme in the comments section of 16 individual articles. It is interesting to note, that the BLM-movement was mentioned in almost three quarters of the analysed articles, yet the commentators only commented on the subject in just over a quarter of the articles, although the actual references were many.

I found it surprising that the second article of the year, published March 2nd, 2020 discussed racism, as this article was published months before the uprising of the BLM-movement and the broadcasting of news about BLM-repercussions for businesses. The article was about the brand renewal of a chocolate dessert made by the Finnish sweets-manufacturer Brunberg. Brunberg had decided to renew their packaging of a controversial sweet which had originally been known by a name with an outright racist innuendo. See appendix 3 for pictures of the old packaging used prior to 2020 and new packaging that was introduced at the beginning of 2020. The company had renamed the sweet already two decades ago in 2001, but the company had kept a caricature-like

picture of a man and woman of allegedly African descent kissing on the package, as a reference to the sweet resembling a 'kiss'. HS wrote about the brand's decision to renew the packaging to depict the town where the sweets are manufactured on the box. The headline to this article led "Brunberg's kiss packaging changes, landscape of Porvoo replaces controversial characters"¹⁵. The interesting thing with this article is that HS chose to bring up the controversy of the old packaging, whereas the interviewed CEO, Katarina Enholm, asserted that the packaging renewal was done due to the brand's anniversary year, not due to accusations of controversy or racism. The old packaging had stayed the same since the 1950's but they had now chosen to renew the packaging due to the anniversary. Furthermore, the interviewee (CEO) also referred to a study Brunberg had conducted in 2016 amongst its customers which had shown that 90% of the respondents had not perceived the old product package as racist. Yet, the article implies that the brand had had to defend the old name and package on several occasions over the years due to complaints about the illustration on the box. There seemed to be a conflict between the journalist and the interviewed CEO, Katarina Enholm, who repeatedly emphasised on the reason for the brand renewal being enhancing the company's brand values (local production). Although this article was not framed by conflict, the controversy of the characters on the old product package was only brought up by the journalist and not by interviewee. It seemed; the article at least partly aimed to spark a debate about the subject and the company. This observation also strengthens Carroll's (2010) argument on the media's ability to influence the public on which companies to think about and subsequently supports the agenda-setting theory.

Yet, the readers of HS who commented on this article mainly had a positive tone when commenting the new packaging. However, negative comments initiating to boycott (regarding the new packaging) were found in the comment sections of other articles. One commentator brought up the following aspects:

"When advertising becomes overdramatised and one starts to see racism see everywhere, I'm leaving the product in the shelf. For example, Brunberg kisses

¹⁵ In Finnish: "*Brunbergin suukkojen pakkaus muuttuu, kiisteltyjen hahmojen tilalle porvoolaismaisema.*", Written by Jussi Pullinen, HS, 2.3.2020

and Valio sticks. Old products have been ruined by new names when the manufacturers have joined this overdramatised hype about society.”¹⁶

In another context but relating to Black Lives Matter and/or racism, some criticised the brands for changing their names and appearances, where others criticised brands for taking advantage of indigenous peoples’ or ‘exotic’ ethnicities in marketing their products. The following comment summarises several of these points and brings up several good points in the discussion:

” Cultural ownership and the use of derogatory designations are two different things. Selling products with a culture that has nothing to do with the product or the person who made it is the first.

Outdated and derogatory illustrations and titles perpetuate racist dialogue. If a company wants this support by sheeting the the phenomenon in a world where the extreme right is rearing its head should not be surprised at the unfortunate attention it has received. If you are still consciously exploiting the situation, by benefiting from this racially motivated buyer base, the company will also be profiled in the same group.

Discriminative and racist propaganda has always included 'humour'. Its purpose is to dehumanise, degrade and distance. To make us forget the fact that we're all just people.

A lot of people who use contemptuous sayings don't think they are racists. Language reflects the world we live in, but it also shapes it. Purposeful language creates a sober world. Don't play into the hands of racists.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Reader comment in Finnish: *”Kun mainonta alkaa mennä ylidramatisoinniksi ja joka paikassa aina nähdään rasismi jää minulla tuote hyllyyn. Esimerkkinä brumbergin suukot ja valion puikot. Vanhoja tuotteita jotka on pitänyt nimellä pilata kun valmistajat ovat lähteneet tähän yhteiskunnan yli dramatisoivaan hypetykseen mukaan.”*

¹⁷ Reader comment in Finnish: *”Kulttuurinen omiminen ja halventavaksi koettujen nimitysten käyttö ovat kaksi eri asiaa. Tuotteiden myyminen kulttuurilla, joka ei millään tavalla liity tuotteeseen tai sen tekijään on ensimmäistä. Vanhentuneet ja halventavat kuvitukset ja nimitykset ylläpitävät rasistista dialogia. Jos yritys haluaa tätä tukea arkistamalla ko. ilmiötä maailmassa, jossa äärioikeisto nostaa päätään, ei pitäisi ihmetellä saamaansa ikävää huomiota. Jos vielä tietoisesti käyttää tilannetta hyväkseen, hyötymällä tästä rasistisesti motivoituneesta ostajakunnasta, profiloituu yritysikin samaan joukkoon. Syrjinnän ja rasismin propagandaan on aina kuulunut "huumori". Sen tarkoitus on epäinhimillistää, väheksyä ja etäännyttää. Saada unohtamaan se tosiasia, että me kaikki olemme vain ihmisiä. Moni halveksuvia sanontoja käyttävä ei koe olevansa rasisti. Kieli kuvastaa maailmaa, jossa elämme, mutta se myös muokkaa sitä. Asiallisella kielenkäytöllä luodaan asiallista maailmaa. Älä pelaa rasistien pussiin.”*

The previous comment was posted to an article published December 25th, 2020 with the headline “Farewell Pekka” (“*Hyvästi Pekka*”), which focused on the discourse on racism and brand activism in Finland. Pekka refers to the name of a Finnish card game that was previously known as ‘Black Pekka’ (*Musta Pekka*). When the manufacturer of said card game, Martinex, announced the brand’s decision to stop manufacturing the game, the sales of the game spiked as a result. The CEO of the company, Riia Sandström told HS that the spike in sales shows, that there are people advocating for the game, and that even if there were both positive and negative feedback about the brand’s decision, there seems to be more people advocating for the Pekka game (according to her). This comment is interesting, especially when analysing the comments to said article. The main part of comments had a negative tone, which can imply to what Sandström said is true among the readers of HS as well. According to Kristina Stenman, a non-discrimination representative also interviewed in the same article, a debate on discriminatory or racist image and language is always about the position of power. “*One has to be sensitive in a debate when there is a strong majority.*”¹⁸, Stenman said, and she has a good point here, which is also brought forward by the comment quoted previously among others. In the comments section of the analysed newspaper, this sensitivity seemed often lost due to people focusing on their own experiences and emotions instead of attempting to view the issue from someone else’s perspective.

Company values and societal change

The company values were highlighted 44 times in 25 of the analysed articles. Articles framed by responsibility often highlighted societal change, and societal change was referred to 20 times in 11 articles. An article published January 23rd, 2020 with the headline “The majority of business leaders believe they should promote the interests of non-shareholders”¹⁹ presented the results of a study that had been conducted by a major bank in Finland which showed that the attitude among business leaders that believe companies have a duty to initiate social change had increased over the last few years. The bank’s study augments the results of Moorman’s CMO study that was

¹⁸ Quote in Finnish: “*Keskustelussa pitää olla herkkä siinä tilanteessa, jos enemmistö on vahva.*”, stated by Kristiina Stenman, in HS, 25.12.2020

¹⁹ In Finnish: “*Yritysjohtajien enemmistö katsoo, että heidän pitää edistää muidenkin kuin osakkeenomistajien etua*”, Written by Tuomas Niskakangas, HS, 23.1.2020

presented in the literature review in section 2.2.6, and affirms the attitude change among business leaders who believe it is their duty to participate in societal debates and initiate change as a significant factor for the increase in brand activism over the last few years. Company values were not brought up as significantly in the comments sections as they were emphasised on by journalists in the articles. The commentators instead questioned the motives behind progressive marketing campaigns (i.e., brand activism). Although many comments were sceptical of the true intentions of the brands and discussed the hypocrisy and cynicism of business leaders, they still emphasised on the progressive societal change these sorts of campaigns can bring. The following comment pointed out how it is up to the managers and owners of a company to make big decisions and argued that they should be able to sniff the winds of today to stay relevant, regardless of their own personal ideologies:

“In the case of privately owned companies, decisions are not made according to any democracy, it is the owners that decide. And one gets to be a pretty stupid owner if one does not take into account today’s demands for what is ok and what is not.”²⁰

Another commentator stated that the change in public opinion often is a result of outside ‘pressure’, and that progressive marketing campaigns (brand activism) may well contribute to this attitude change among the public:

“The so-called public opinion only changes as a result of ‘pressure’ and communications from the environment [society]. Such [marketing] campaigns may well contribute to positive developments, regardless of the cynicism or hypocrisy of the entrepreneurs behind them. Without words, there is no progress.”²¹

The changed company values and the reader comments support the theoretical framework named the agenda-setting effect and interpretation (figure 4 in section 2.4), which was developed with the help of Sullivan’s (2013) agenda-setting effect, that was used in determining the empirical study objective. According to the agenda-setting

²⁰ Reader comment in Finnish: ”Yksityisomisteisten yritysten kohdalla ei tietenkään mennä minkään demokratian mukaan, vaan omistajat päättävät. Ja saa olla melko typerä omistaja jos ei ota huomioon nykypäivän vaatimuksia sen suhteen mikä on ok ja mikä ei.”

²¹ Reader comment in Finnish: ”Ns. Yleinen mielipide muuttuu vain ympäristön ”painostuksen” ja viestien seurauksena. Tällaiset kampanjat voivat hyvinkin vaikuttaa myönteiseen kehitykseen, lainkaan riippumatta yrittäjien omasta kyynisyydestä tai tekopyhyydestä. Ilman sanoja ei ole edistystä.”

effect, it is a combination of the media reality and the ‘true’ reality that influences the public on issues, and vice versa. And as stated before, the more progressive messaging out there, the better. These messages may help shape the public opinion regardless of the underlying motives of companies and brand behind them and help initiate societal change.

Brand-related activity, marketing tricks and the profitability for the company

Journalists covering brand activism in HS during 2020 often portrayed the activity as marketing initiatives or campaigns, or as a brand renewal. There were 50 references to marketing or brand-related activity in 26 articles in the analysed data, and they often narrated the brand activism being a marketing- or a social media campaign. Although the tone of voice was neutral, the audience were of another opinion most of times. When articles mentioned brand- or marketing-related initiatives, responses often focused on the profitability of the initiatives for the companies. The profitability for the company was referred to 36 times in the comment section of 17 articles by readers of HS. Readers referred to marketing or pr-related tricks 66 times in the comments section of 16 articles. The readers often commented on brand activism being used to gain reputation or publicity, or as a trick to increase sales and seemed to think it was a calculated move to take a stance. A reader comment follows to illustrate:

“This kind of marketing trick is an easy way to gain positive visibility and brand value, but for example, based on yesterday’s news, these big American companies are not complying with the values they advertise, e.g., in their personnel policies and salaries. That’s why these [attempts] smells more like calculated marketing tricks than a genuine eagerness to improve equality.”²²

Both articles and comments often focused on the economic consequences for the company or brand that had engaged in activism. It was identified that the articles used a neutral tone and the consequence frame and often focused on numerical figures of revenue or rises or drops in the company’s stock price. However, the use of a mixed tone and the morality frame was not uncommon, as for example in an analyse

²² Reader comment in Finnish: ”Tälläinen markkinointikikka on helppo keino saada positiivista näkyvyyttä ja brändiarvoa, mutta esim. eilisen uutisen perusteella nämä isot amerikkalaiset yritykset eivät noudata mainostamiaan arvoja esim. henkilöstöpolitiikassaan ja palkkauksessaan. Siksi nämä haisevat lähinnä laskelmoiduilta markkinointikikoilta kuin aidolta halukkuudelta parantaa tasa-arvoa ja yhdenvertaisuutta”.

published on July 17th, 2020 about cancel culture and how ‘lazy’ online activism has become, the author, Arttu Seppänen states that, ” *When a beer brand updates its logo on social media with rainbow colours, some cheer and some comment “Drinking this [brand’s] beer stops now.”*²³. This quote illustrates the division among a brand’s consumers and the complexity of brand activism and strengthens Bhagwat et al.’s (2020) argument that brand activism may simultaneously strengthen the relationship with some stakeholders and harm the relationship with other stakeholders. Even if an issue seems ‘accepted’ by the majority of the society, as in this case equal rights for all sexual orientations, there remains those who oppose of it, or has another reason to express their dissatisfaction with the brand’s decision to support the annual pride-events. The brand is left in a situation where it must choose which consumers to anger. Those, who support the issue, or them, who oppose of it. Remaining silent may not be an option, especially in cases where competitors in the same industry have already taken a stance on the matter and stakeholders are pushing. Furthermore, by staying silent the brand might lose even more than by opening a dialogue about socio-political issues with their stakeholders.

This risk that has been mentioned on several occasions in the data sample is often referred to as the somewhat charged word ‘cancel culture’ (see chapter 1.5 for definition). However, cancel culture as a definition is not quite right, as it aims for ‘cancelling’ a person, a company, or an organisation by not enabling the target of ‘cancelling’ an opportunity to apologise and learn from their mistakes (Cancel culture, 2021), but the idea is somewhat the same: the company might face backlash on social media which could damage the brand’s reputation seriously if a consumer raises a question about the brand’s stance on e.g., social media, and the brand chooses not to reply and therefore stay outside of the conversation.

Seppänen’s criticizing comment about the laziness of online activism can also be linked back to Chen’s (2020) study on politicized online activism. Chen (2020) studied the motivators for who becomes an online activist and drew a continuum for where online activism takes place: between the self-interest of the consumers and the pursuit

²³ In Finnish: “*Kun olutmerkki päivittää sosiaaliseen mediaan logoonsa sateenkaaren värit, osa hurraa ja osa kommentoi: ”Nyt loppui tämän oluen juonti.”*”, quote in article by author Arttu Seppänen, HS, 17.7.2020

for the greater good. Chen argued that *politicized consumer activism* does not necessarily aim for either of these two but is more closely linked to consumer nationalism. In this context, as some people initiate a boycott due to a brand's stand on a socio-political issue, the activism might not be simply explained by nationalist reasons, but perhaps more because of one's own political or moral ideologies, in this case underlining whether the individual supporting or opposing the brand's stance has conservative or liberal values.

When the readers responded to articles framed by economic consequence or morality, the comments were mainly negative in tone when the profitability for companies was brought up. Commentators often blamed brands for woke-washing and voiced suspicion of the brands truly committing to their lavish promises for ending discrimination and striving for equality. For example, a reader commented on brand activism and corporate social responsibility being propaganda and brought up the problem with 'sustainable' or 'responsible' consumerism on an article published on June 22nd, 2020 which discussed the rebranding of consumer product brand's with racist associations (e.g., Uncle Ben's, Eskimo-pie, and Aunt Jemima's, of which all have now new names and appearances). The comment encourages others to join a large-scale protest against consumerism and blames capitalism for the surge in brand activism, but has an important point as well:

“This is not about any big narrative, but about old and familiar corporate propaganda. But yes, concrete problems are being turned into commodities and consumer products.

Are you worried about child labour? Buy product X from us that, according to our company observers, does not use child labour.

Are you worried about mass production? Buy Oatly and vegan food.

Are you worried about climate change? Buy carbon-compensated products.

Are you worried about X? Buybuybuy.

The focus has shifted so deeply to individualistic ideology that the only options for influencing occur as different consumption alternatives, because according to the neoliberal mindset, YOU, as an individual, are responsible for the fact that 100 companies create the vast majority of the world's carbon dioxide emissions. As long as we try to solve the problems of the capitalist hyper-consumption society by consuming and not by fighting the system itself, we do not stand a chance.

Ps. The bosses of all these polluting companies have addresses that are easy to look up. Protests against overconsumption and climate change should not

take place in market squares, but in these people's backyards and workplaces.”²⁴

Although brand activism and brand renewal were emphasised on due to progressive reasons in HS, it can be concluded that the commentators were not convinced of these seemingly well-meaning motives.

Linguistic issues

The articles only brought up linguistic issues on a few occasions, but the readers brought up issues related to words and word-usage on several occasions. Among the readers, linguistic issues were mentioned 35 times in the comment section of six individual articles. Oftentimes, the main topic of an individual comment was to point out linguistic issues in the article, for example, regarding a product name or some word in a quote given by a CEO of a company. The word itself often seemed the major concern among the commentators. Linguistic issues were often discussed together with the most referenced theme, racism.

The case with the Brunberg's kiss described previously is a mild example compared to the debate that stirred among commentators regarding news articles to other Finnish brands changing their brand names. One such example is the Eskimo case mentioned already a number of times. To give some background to the case, several brands, abroad and in Finland let go of using the term 'Eskimo' in their product names during 2020 because the term is perceived offensive by indigenous people who have historically been referred to as 'Eskimos', as they do not use the term themselves and instead prefer other terms, such as Inuit and Yupik. Although the debate itself was not new and had been ongoing for decades, the issue was given a spotlight due to the

²⁴ Reader comment in Finnish: *"Kyse ei ole mistään isosta narratiivista vaan vanhasta ja tutusta yrityspropagandasta. Mutta kyllä, konkreettiset ongelmat muutetaan hyödykkeiksi ja kulutustuotteiksi. Oletko huolissasi lapsityövoimasta? Osta meiltä tuote X jossa ei meidän yrityksen tarkkailijoiden mukaan käytetä lapsityövoimaa. Oletko huolissasi tehotuotannosta? Osta Oatlya ja vegaaniruokaa. Oletko huolissasi ilmastonmuutoksesta? Osta hiilikompensoituja tuotteita. Oletko huolissasi asiasta x? ostaostaasta. Keskutelu on siirtynyt niin syvälle individualistiseen ideologiaan että ainoat vaikuttamisen vaihtoehdot esiintyy erilaisena kuluttamisena, koska neoliberaalin ajatusmaailman mukaan SINÄ olet yksilönä vastuussa siitä, että 100 yritystä luo valtaosan maailman hiilidioksidipäästöistä. Niin kauan kun yritämme selvittää kapitalistisen hyperkulutusyhteiskunnan ongelmia kuluttamalla emmekä taistelemalla itse järjestelmää vastaan, meillä ei ole mahdollisuuksia. Ps. Näiden kaikkien saastuttavimpien yritysten pomoilla on osoitteet, jotka on suht helposti löydettävissä. Kulutukseen tai ilmastoon liittyvien protestien ei pitäisi tapahtua toreilla, vaan näiden ihmisten kotipihoilla ja työpaikoilla."*

resurrection of the BLM-movement, ultimately leading to companies and museums alike not being able to ignore the masses on social media and the voices of indigenous people anymore and were forced to act and stop using the discriminative term. When reading the comment section to several news pieces discussing the issue, the case was brought up repeatedly. It seemed that HS commentators hung on to the definition and meaning of the word, not being able to understand the reason why brands felt the need to change term 'Eskimo' in their product names. An example of this followed:

*" I don't think the name Eskimo is offensive at all on an ice cream stick. I feel that this kind of action helps create negative phenomena in society that seeks to be offended at all times and to see everything as upsetting and evil. "*²⁵

However, several commentators defended the decision of ice-cream manufacturer Froneri Finland and explained why the using of the 'Eskimo' term is problematic. One example follows:

"Although in Finnish the word Eskimo is not malicious in tone" [referring to a quote in the article]

*This speaks of Brunberg's²⁶ lack of understanding and nothing else. The person using the word may not be malicious when using the e-word, but it is nonetheless a word with a malicious tone. The person who uses the word can only be ignorant and expedient, but the word itself is a designation given by colonialists to the northern indigenous peoples that includes the whole of colonialism's arrogant, racist and resonant values of non-European peoples. "*²⁷

This linguistic focus on the issues in the Finnish discourse on racism and brand activism was also noted in one article published on the 29th of June 2020 with the headline "Advertisers try to 'brighten their brand' with boycott: 50 billion euro lost

²⁵ Reader comment in Finnish: "Mielestäni Eskimo-nimi ei ole lainkaan loukkaava jäätelötikussa. Koen, että tällaisilla käytännöillä luodaan yhteiskuntaan negatiivisia ilmiöitä eli mallia, jossa kaikesta pyritään pahastumaan, kaikessa yritetään nähdä paha."

²⁶ Brunberg refers to Minna Brunberg, the marketing director of Froneri Finland in this context, and not Brunberg the sweet manufacturer mentioned previously.

²⁷ Reader comment in Finnish: ""Vaikka suomen kielessä Eskimo-sana ei ole sävyltään pahantahtoinen" Tuo kertoo Brunbergin ymmärtämättömyydestä eikä mistään muusta. Sanaa käyttävä ei välttämättä ole pahantahtoinen e-sanaa käyttäessään mutta sävyltään sana sitä kyllä on. Sanaa käyttävä voi olla vain tietämätön ja ymmärtämätön mutta sana itsessään on kolonialistien pohjoisille alkuperäiskansoille antama nimitys joka sisältää koko kolonialismin ylimielisen, rasistisen ja toiseuttavan arvomaailman ei-eurooppalaisista kansoista."

from Facebook's market value"²⁸. The article discussed a boycott initiated by several NGO which more than a hundred brands joined. The boycott was directed at Facebook due to the social media platform inability to moderate hateful content posted on the platform. In this article, Riikka-Maria Lemminki, CEO of Marketing Finland, an advertisers' association, comments on whether the boycott had reached Finland as well and says that *"in Finland, the issue may have taken on slightly different tones than in the United States. There have been Eskimos and other product-related cases. The discussion has gone to word-level when we should be talking about structural racism."*²⁹

Furthermore, a major part of the debate about the use of the word 'Eskimo' by an ice-cream brand consisted of mentions of the era of European colonialism and its consequences for indigenous people all over the world as well as racism and history in general. At several times, the discussion spiralled out of context and because of it, several comments could not be analysed in tone mention as they did not relate to the issue discussed in the article. However, there were several commentators defending the brand name renewal by stating for example:

*" This is a very interesting debate. After all, it is a name change that shows how civilised and intellectual the ice cream maker is. In my opinion, this debate demonstrates that there is not much teaching about indigenous people in Finnish schools. To this day, my own children's schoolbooks refer to "the Indigenous People of North America that Columbus found" or the Indians. It simply cannot be assumed that people are widely aware of what is meant by an Eskimo or Inuit. These opinions should be compiled and published in English in a scientific journal. Perhaps the curricula will also be updated in this respect. Either way: a fine gesture from a company that shows understanding of the issue."*³⁰

²⁸ In Finnish: "Mainostajat yrittävät "kirkastaa brändiään" boikotilla: Facebookin markkina-arvosta katosi 50 miljardia euroa", Written by Kari Räisänen and Laura Kukkonen, HS, 29.6.2020

²⁹ Reader comment in Finnish: "Suomessa asia on ehkä saanut eri sävyjä kuin Yhdysvalloissa. On ollut Eskimoa ja muita tuotetapauksia. On menty sanatasolle, kun pitäisi puhua rakenteellisesta rasismista".

³⁰ Reader comment in Finnish: "Tämä on todella mielenkiintoista keskustelua. Loppujen lopuksi kyseessä on nimenvaihdos, joka osoittaa jäätelönvalmistajan sivistyneisyyden ja oppineisuuden. Mielestäni keskustelussa näkee sen, ettei alkuperäiskansoista opeteta Suomen kouluissa juurikaan mitään. Vielä tänäkin päivänä omirn lasten koulukirjoissa puhutaan "Pohjois-Amerikan alkuperäiskansasta, jonka Kolumbus löysi" tai intiaaneista. Ei yksinkertaisesti voi olettaa silloin että ihmisillä olisi laajasti tiedossa mitä tarkoitetaan eskimolla tai inuitilla. Nämä mielipiteet kannattaisi koota ja julkaista englanniksi tieteellisessä lehdessä. Ehkä myös opetussuunnitelmat saadaan tältä osin ajantasaisiksi. Niin tai näin: hieno ele yritykseltä, joka osoittaa ymmärrystä asiaa kohtaan."

Criticism towards the brand

HS emphasised on the critique directed towards brands and/or companies 50 times in 26 articles. Although the tone of writing was mainly neutral, the newspaper brought up reasons why the company or brand was getting the public's attention. Especially articles framed by consequence and responsibility brought up the reasons behind the public dissatisfaction with the company's actions. For example, an article framed by consequence published June 23rd, 2020 with the headline "Prominent brands suspend advertising on Facebook, NGO boycott in the background"³¹ brought up political issues Facebook has been repeatedly criticised for:

*"Civil rights organisations have voiced criticism of Facebook and its founder Mark Zuckerberg for, among other things, the company's failure to address posts by US President Donald Trump that have been encouraging violence or misinformation about postal voting. The company has also been accused of failing to stop foreign influence in connection with the 2016 presidential elections."*³²

At times, the media itself was also the recipient of criticism. A news media organisation is a brand as any, and the sampled data used in the analysis contained criticism towards the media in the form of articles and reader comments.

Political aspects

The fact that political aspects were brought up when commenting on the news about brand activism was not unexpected, considering the biased nature of brand activism as it often involves taking a stand on a socio-political issue. Particularly American politics were discussed in some of the articles as well, however, remarks regarding national politics occurred as well, for example involving societal debates about matters concerning the Saami's, who are indigenous people living mostly in the Northern regions of Finland.

³¹ In Finnish: "Nimekkäät brändit keskeyttävät mainonnan Facebookissa, taustalla kansalaisjärjestöjen boikotti", Written by Laura Kukkonen and Joonas Aaltonen, HS, 23.6.2020.

³² Section in Finnish: "Kansalaisoikeusjärjestöt ovat esittäneet kritiikkiä Mark Zuckenbergia kohtaan muun muassa siitä, miten yritys ei ole puuttunut Yhdysvaltain presidentin Donald Trumpin päivityksiin, joissa on näytetty kannustavan väkivaltaan tai esitetty vääriä tietoja postiaänestämisestä. Yritystä on moitittu myös siitä, ettei se onnistunut tyrehdyttämään ulkomaista vaikuttamista vuoden 2016 presidentinvaalien yhteydessä.", Written by Laura Kukkonen and Joonas Aaltonen, HS, 23.6.2020.

Several political aspects were brought up in articles discussing Facebook and the #StopHateForProfit-campaign directed at the social media giant, which started partly because of Facebook not taking action to flag former president Donald Trump's posts that contained hateful speech and encouraged violence. For example, a reader mentioned a boycott of American-produced goods due to political reasons in an article discussing the advertising boycott against Facebook, published on June 27th, 2020. This reader criticised both the Trump regime and other populist regimes without mentioning any names, and suggested that a large-scale consumer boycott of products produced in these countries could help change political atmosphere:

“Money talks. The use of money is one of the strongest means by which the individual could influence global trends. That’s why I’m not buying anything Made In USA until the administration changes over there. The same applies to other populist regimes. My purchases are meaningless but [buying or not buying] in great numbers globally can change things. When the dissatisfaction with populist regimes so great, I wonder how this means of pressure is not already widely used.”³³

As stated by Alemany (2020) and Curry (2020), as well as confirmed by Ferguson (2020), conscious consumers are using their purchase power to steer companies in the right direction. Chen investigated politically motivated consumer behaviour and activism in his 2020 study, which this could be an example of. Here, the motive for boycott for American products might be at least partly nationalistic. However, reasons for consumer activism also includes activism for the greater good, as the next comment implies to, when debating the case of ‘Eskimo’ ice-cream changing its name:

“It is worth remembering that during this performance, Pingviini ice-cream [brand under Froneri Finland] remains a part of Nestlé, which has made its profits from the resources of poor countries (especially water that has been dug, for example, in places where there are shortages in it) exploiting and paying slave wages to its workers, including drilling groundwater wells empty, leaving entire villages without water, after which they sold bottled water from Nestlé to the same village...”

³³ Reader quote in Finnish: *”Money Talks. Rahan käyttö on vahvimpia keinoja jolla yksilökin voisi vaikuttaa globaaleihin suuntauksiin. Siksi en osta mitään Made In USA ennen kuin hallinto siellä vaihtuu. Sama koskee muita populistihallintoja. Tyytymättömyys populistien hallintoihin on niin suurta että ihmettelen miten tämä painostuskeino ei ole jo laajasti käytössä.”*

Not all of Nestlé's abuses, even here, can be listed because of their ridiculous number, but in many cases what they have in common is that they often took place in Africa and countries whose natural resources are easy to steal with a few bribes, and there is a lot of forced (cheap) labour available.

So, don't stray, optics are more important than content in the world of corporatism and Nestlé's actions have consistently been exploiting the weak in the front of a bigger bag of accounts."³⁴

As Bhagwat et al. (2020) argued, brand activism can have long-term effects. Consumers do not easily forget a company's misdeeds, which was highlighted on several occasions. Nestlé is a multinational corporation (MNC) that has gone through numerous scandals and been a target of several consumer-initiated boycotts over the years, so it is not surprising that conscious consumers remember the MNC's wrongdoings even in cases that may not specifically relate to this case.

5.3 Conclusions of the empirical study and comparing the articles and the responses

By investigating the media and its effects one can observe how the public responds to social phenomena. This study aimed to find out what brand activism is, why companies are engaging in it, how brand activism is covered and framed in the Finnish media, as well as how the audience responds to the news coverage on the phenomenon. Studying brand activism from a media perspective made it possible to see past the polished facades of a brand's marketing and communication and the attitudes of the individual consumer which allowed the exploration of the phenomenon through a wider lens. This critical lens helped in conceptualising the risks that brand activism involves for a company and the extensive changes it brings for the company, the industry, the society as well as the individual.

³⁴ Reader comment in Finnish: "On hyvä muistaa, että tämän päälipuolisen performanssin aikana, että Pingviini jäätelöt ovat osa Nestleä, joka on tehnyt voittonsa köyhien maiden resursseja (etenkin vettä, jota ovat kaivaneet mm. paikoista joissa on vesipulaa) hyväksikäyttäen ja maksaen orjapalkkaa työntekijöilleen, mm. porannut pohjavesikaivoja tyhjäksi, jättäen kokonaisia kyliä ilman vettä, jonka jälkeen myynyt nestlen pullotettua vettä samaan kylään... Nestlen kaikkia väärinkäytöksiä ei edes tässä voi luetella niiden naurettavan määrän takia, mutta monissa tapauksissa yhteistä on se, että ne tapahtuivat usein Afrikassa ja maissa, joiden luonnonresurssit on helppo varastaa muutamien lahjusten kera, ja jossa on tarjolla paljon pakotettua (halpaa) työvoimaa. Joten älkää hairahtako, optiikka on tärkeämoää kuin sisältö korporaatioiden maailmassa ja Nestlen toiminta on ollut johdonmukaisesti heikko-osaisten riistoa isomman tilipussin eteen. Tällainen julkinen ulostulo parantaa yhtiön imagoa, kun samalla voidaan jatkaa samoja vanhoja toimintatapoja."

The agenda set by the media may affect our perception of the delivered piece of news. It is acknowledged that the media has a significant role in influencing the public's thoughts and opinions on societal issues. Not even politicians and other decision-makers, such as business leaders escape the media's influence. Hence, it is vital to inspect the delivery of the news through a critical lens and understand the power of nationwide newspapers and other major media outlets have. Investigating this effect from a business perspective is important because the media's portrayal of financial news will ultimately affect the businesses themselves by either strengthening or tarnishing their reputation, which can bring positive or negative consequences for the business entity. Whether marketing efforts such as engaging in brand activism aims for making an impact and spark change in society, or it is only engaged in in hope of larger profits, it usually is a hot topic to cover in news media, at least if the brand is well-known and the matter is highly opinionated and strength of the stance the company has taken is particularly strong. Therefore, the agenda media sets and the frames they use when covering brand activism has an impact on the receivers and ultimately the company behind the brand itself.

A quote by journalist Laura Kukkonen in an article published June 22nd, 2020 led: "*the anti-racism movement, particularly in the U.S., has also awakened companies and brands. Several brands have stated that their visual appearance or name no longer works.*"³⁵ In 2020, brand activism was distinguished by substantial support for the Black Lives Matter-movement which sparked a debate across the globe, including Finland, that ranged from calling out the hypocrisy of the brands engaging in brand activism and pointing out issues relating to language and the words spoken, to applauding brands who finally took action against systematic racism, discrimination, and inequality.

This case study provided an insight in the media effects and audience responses of brand activism in a Finnish context. Although the case study focused on an individual newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS), it remains the largest and most frequently read in the country. During 2020, HS published 44 articles covering brand activism that

³⁵ In Finnish: "*Rasminvastainen liikehdintä erityisesti Yhdysvalloissa on herättänyt myös yritykset ja tuotemerkit. Useat brändit ovat todenneet, että niiden visuaalinen ilme tai nimi ei enää toimi.*", Laura Kukkonen, HS, 22.6.2020

received hundreds of comments. Yet, it is not possible to draw general conclusions about attitudes towards brand activism from this data sample, but the content analysis showed interesting thoughts and opinions about activism exercised by commercial brands.

This qualitative content analysis of articles and comments discussing brand activism showed that the main themes of both articles and the comments correlated to a large extent, although the commentators often brought up various societal problems that the articles did not mention. To sum up the analysis and to make some conclusions from this study, I can suggest, that the media is able to trigger a heated debate about brand activism regardless of if the company had engaged in it intentionally or unintentionally. Brunberg's decision to renew its product packaging from depicting a sad caricature from the past to illustrating the town the sweets are manufactured in is an example of unintentional brand activism, as the company made claims that the decision was not made due to accusations of the company being racist but due to the desire to highlight company values and emphasise on local production. When HS chose to highlight the brand renewal by writing an article about it, which had a strong emphasis on replacing controversial characters with a landscape, it resulted in a heated debate. I doubt that the matter would have been given public attention at this scale if the media had not brought up Brunberg's package renewal in the first place.

The study found that the publication of articles about brand activism in HS had a particularly high pace during the summer of 2020, during which time occurred numerous mass demonstrations against racism, inequality, and discrimination in the wake of the increased influence of the BLM-movement. The actions companies took to respond to the demands of the public was one of the most frequently recurring themes in the analysed data. The analysed newspaper mainly used a neutral tone emphasising on facts when covering brand activism, but a mixed tone was not uncommon. The frame analysis concluded that the responsibility frame was most favoured by HS, although the consequence, human interest, and morality frames were frequently used as well. The main themes found in the qualitative content analysis of the articles focused on BLM or racism in general, marketing activities, criticism, company values and societal change. The main themes among the responses were similar, and comprised of racism, marketing tricks, profitability, political aspects, and

linguistic issues. The BLM / racism theme was most referenced to in both the articles and the responses and is therefore declared the main theme in this study. The theme was brought up in three quarters of all analysed articles and was referenced to at 91 instances in the comments section of 16 articles. Matters relating to racism was brought up repeatedly in articles covering brand activism over the course of 2020, even prior to the uprising of the BLM-movement in the summer of 2020. The articles highlighted both global and Finnish companies that at the time were struggling with backlash from having products with racist connotations. The readers often strongly responded to the news coverage and were both for and against the brand reformations. Several outright racist comments were discovered in the comments section of a number of articles, but commentators were also defending the brands decisions' to renew themselves and explained how outdated product design and brand names maintain the status quo and shows an acceptance towards racist dialogue in society, and that companies who fail to notice that the public discourse is changing and chooses to not take part in the dialogue has ultimately far more to lose than companies who make changes accordingly to the public agenda.

Company values and societal change were other main themes that the articles brought up, often simultaneously as emphasising criticism directed at the brand or the company. Yet, as an increasing number of societal actors including companies and their brands take a progressive stand for issues regarded as partisan, it might help in shaping the public opinion on the matter. Still, as marketing tricks and the profitability aspect were common themes among the comments, the readers of HS might not view brand activism as an authentic effort to inflict change. Accusations of woke-washing and hypocrisy were common in the analysed responses to the articles, and several commentators made remarks on the profitability of various activism initiatives for the company, either in terms of returns or publicity. Another issue that especially commentators focused on, but that was also mentioned in the articles on a few occasions, was issues regarding language and word-usage. This was often accentuated upon together with the main theme: racism. Political aspects often regarding U.S. politics were also discussed in both the articles as well as among the responses at a number of times, and the former Trump administration was heavily criticised by the readers of HS.

To conclude, the newspaper's way of narrating brand activism as a marketing effort as a means of changing society was generally not received well by the audience, maybe due to the newspaper simultaneously emphasising on criticism the brand or company had been a target of. Thus, it can be proposed that the media has a role in commencing consumer activism and boycotts. However, it must be noted that the newspaper often brought up criticism towards the companies or brands discussed in the articles, which might be an influential factor to the resentment of the responses.

5.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter, the empirical findings of the qualitative content analysis were analysed and discussed. The case study provided an insight in the media effects and audience responses of brand activism in a Finnish context. The qualitative content analysis showed that the main themes of the articles and the responses correlated to a large extent, but the comments were more critical towards brand activism compared with how the newspaper framed and portrayed the issue. The newspaper narrated brand activism as a marketing effort that brings societal change. The audience did not approve of this narrative, and at times slandered the media itself, but was more critical towards the authenticity of the brand activism itself.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This is the final chapter for this thesis. In this chapter, the research questions in this thesis are answered. Furthermore, managerial implications and recommendations for practitioners will be presented. Finally, a critical overlook of the thesis is discussed and suggestions for further research are presented.

6.1 Discussing the research questions and objective

This subchapter answers the first three of the research questions asked in chapter 1.2 and the main objective of the thesis is discussed. The fourth and final research question is answered in the next section. As the aim of this thesis was to gain a deeper understanding of brand activism as an emerging phenomenon by studying the frames media uses and the tone of voice in reader responses to reveal what the audience thinks about the practice. In short, the theoretical aim of the thesis was to answer the following question:

RQ1: What is brand activism and why are companies taking a stand on socio-political issues?

The answer to this question was sought after in the literature review, particularly in section 2.2. When defining brand activism, I used the help of previous definitions developed by Vredenburg et al., 2020, Moorman, 2020, Bhagwat et al., 2020, Dodd and Supa, 2014, and Kotler and Sarkar, 2017. The definition developed for this thesis follows: brand activism consists of business efforts (public speech or actions) to support or oppose a socio-political issue that is considered biased in society and has uncertain consequences for the company and/or brand.

The second part of the first research question aimed to find out the reasons for why companies take stances on partisan issues. The answer to this question was found in section 2.2.6 Reasons for brand activism. It was found that brand activism is engaged in due pressure from shareholders and stakeholders alike, as well as due to the attitude shift among business executives regarding the purpose of a company. Stakeholders, including non-governmental organisations and conscious consumers want companies

to take responsibility for their impact on the environment and society. Brand activism is appealing to stakeholders who agree with the stance, but at the same time, it offends them who hold opposing views. Particularly millennials and gen Z'ers are not shying away from using the power of their social media feeds and their wallets to shape company behaviour to their liking. Putting up a shiny façade or a smokescreen is increasingly difficult in the digital era, where every press release and social media post leaves a trail of evidence for the woke consumers to follow in case of doubt of the brand's true intentions.

Although brand activism is a risky activity to engage in, the possible rewards are tempting. Shareholders reward companies that produce successful marketing campaigns which aligns with their political ideologies, and other benefits include rise in sales, elevated reputation, and brand equity, as well as attention from the media. However, the risk for punishment is always present. Shareholders and stakeholders alike punish the brand for activism that misaligns with their views, including boycotts, drops in stock prices and even legislative drawbacks. Yet, as the spike in brand activism campaigns over the course of 2020 proved us, engaging in activism is worth the risks, because the rewards can be lavish in the best-case scenario, and no brand can afford to lose its reputation and be called racist and discriminative in the post-BLM era.

RQ2: How is brand activism covered and framed by Finnish media?

The second research question focused on the empirical part of the thesis and aimed at finding out on how brand activism was portrayed in Finnish media (daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*). The answer to this question required a deeper look into mass communication theories and previous research on media framing and agenda-setting (see section 2.3). With the help of a qualitative content analysis, an analysis of tone of writing (agenda-setting) and a frame analysis was conducted on 44 articles about the research subject that were published in *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS) during 2020. The most frequently used tone of writing was neutral that focused on facts and showed neither positive nor negative aspects for the company. However, a significant minority of the articles were written with a mixed tone, meaning that they emphasised on both positive and negative aspects for the company. As a result of the frame analysis, it was

found that brand activism was mainly framed by responsibility (36%) in HS during 2020, but 23% of the articles were framed by consequence, and 18% by human interest and by morality respectively. The least used frame was conflict (5% of the articles). HS articles covering brand activism emphasised on *change* and promises companies and/or brands had made to initiate that change. Furthermore, articles discussed the responsibility of companies as societal actors and often underlined a brand's values. Brands were narrated as social-justice warriors that take on the responsibilities of the society. Although the main focus for the news coverage was the phenomenon's occurrence in the U.S. in the summer of 2020, HS also brought up brand activism conducted by Finnish companies almost as much.

RQ3: What are the responses of the public to the media coverage on the phenomenon?

The third question focused on the audience responses of the media coverage on brand activism. To find the answer to the third and final research question, a framework was developed by combining the agenda-setting setting effect by Sullivan (2013) and parts of the moral authority framework by Hoppner and Vadakkepatt (2019). This was done to find out the public agenda of brand activism, as well as the reception and interpretation of a piece of news about the phenomenon among the public. The framework can be viewed in figure 4 which is found in section 2.4. The findings of the qualitative content analysis showed that the news coverage on brand activism in HS caused mostly negative and/or mixed responses by the audience (i.e., readers and subscribers to said newspaper). Two thirds of the responses were either negative or mixed in tone, whereas a third of the responses were either positive or neutral in tone. The newspaper's preferred narrative emphasising on responsibility was not approved by the audience, who were mostly sceptical towards the practice and called out hypocrisy and accused brands of woke-washing in the comments section. Personal factors, such as cynicism and personal ideologies of the commentators as well as and calls for boycott stood out among the responses. Nonetheless, the not all responses were negative, as several reader responses applauded brands for acting against racism, discrimination, and inequality.

6.2 Managerial implications and recommendations

In this subchapter, the final research question is answered. The fourth question sought to find out possible practical implications of brand activism as well as give some recommendations for practitioners and managers who wish to engage in brand activism. The possible managerial implications of this thesis are mainly linked to the theoretical part of the thesis, even if the empirical study can give an insight in how media chooses to portray news about brand activism. Furthermore, the responses to that news coverage could hint towards the general attitude towards the practice of brand activism itself. However, the following managerial recommendations focus on findings that were observed from previous studies on the subject, partly elaborated upon in the literature review (chapter 2). These findings can be useful for practitioners and executives that want to engage in brand activism.

Given the results of Ferguson's (2018) survey on purchase behaviour among the younger generations in the U.S., executives should consider having their brands taking part in activism as a marketing effort, due to the young generation's increased interest in socio-political and environmental issues. As Luoma-Aho, Uskali, Heinonen & Ainamo (2010) in Carroll (2010) suggested, there is an ongoing Americanisation of the Finnish culture, so a similar trend may likely in Finland as well. As concluded in the literature review, brand activism is a risky practice to engage in due to its controversial nature but staying silent may not be the solution anymore either as a company and/or brand can get a conservative stamp unless it speaks up about current issues. The status quo on companies' societal responsibility changed in 2020 at the latest, when both multinational and local companies hurried to condemn inequality, violence, and discrimination after the Black Lives Matter-movement had resurfaced and sparked massive demonstrations globally.

Yet, companies should tread with care when addressing polarising issues in society to avoid accusations of woke-washing (see definition in section 1.5). Moorman (2020) stated that it is important for companies to understand the theory about brand activism, particularly in cases where a company does not have a clear political mission before

speaking out. The tools to achieve this comprise of looking at prior decisions of involvement or non-involvement within the company and mapping actions in relation to outcomes in order to find out which kind of activism works for the brand. For example, digital marketing has many opportunities and can be used to run small scale experiments to find out how different approaches affect consumers and the brand itself. The performance of these experimental approaches can be measured by “likes” and click-through rates. Tests can be performed by using different messages for different markets, e.g., in one market the company sticks to its usual brand positioning while in another market the brand can try pushing its role. Having done these types of experiments, new activities can be retained over time, that will eventually expand the view of the brands’ role in the marketers’ and executives’ minds as well as among the public. (Moorman, 2020)

As Bhagwat et al. (2020) remarked, managers should pay attention on how much their stances diverges from their customers’ values, due to the long-term reactions from customers and investors alike, who may continue to either reward or punish the company long after taking a stand for or against a polarising issue. The existence of long-term punishments directed at misbehaving brands was also confirmed in the empirical study. Therefore, the values of the customers should be carefully considered before deciding to engage in brand activism. Moreover, as brand activism is public and exposes the company’s values to the public, it may have a long-lasting impact on the company’s future decisions related to its overall purpose, reputation, and the management of stakeholder relationships. Managers should be confident in their stance and their decision to publicise it even if it may have lasting financial consequences. (Bhagwat et al., 2020) As the empirical study suggests, it seems that progressive brand activism is likely to result in some consumers announcing a boycott of the brand and/or company, which might seem threatening if the declarations for boycott are several. However, it might just as well be that the vast majority approves of the stance but stays silent. Managers should expect that their brand’s engagement in activism will upset some stakeholders, but they should also recognise that a progressive stance may be approved by the silent majority.

6.3 Critical review of the thesis

Although the study conducted in this thesis provided some valuable insights about the framing of brand activism in Finnish media and the stakeholder attitudes towards the news coverage and practice itself, there are still things that could have been done differently to achieve better results. The research method of my choosing was qualitative. A more case-specific approach could have been more insightful than looking at the phenomenon through a single medium's perspective, as the acquired data sample was quite small. A comparison of the framing of brand activism between several media organisations could not be made, even if I had first initiated so, as conducting a qualitative content analysis comprising of news articles and numerous reader comments was a lot more time-consuming than I had anticipated. Moreover, I could have taken a quantitative approach to researching this phenomenon as well, and for example, sent out questionnaires to individuals to examine their attitudes towards specific cases of brand activism. This way, the case study may have also focused on a limited number of examples of brand activism. By studying mass media output and audience responses in the online platform of a single newspaper during a year worth of articles and comments as I did, the individual cases of brand activism remain rather shallow and generic and could not be inspected in full detail. However, as brand activism has recently been recognised by business researchers as an emerging marketing tactic (e.g., Vredenburg et al., 2020), further studies of the phenomenon are highly relevant.

Additionally, because this study only looked at an individual newspaper and its readers' responses, and although the said newspaper is the dominating in the country, it is not possible to generalise my findings to account for Finnish attitudes towards brand activism. Moreover, it needs mentioning that probably only a fragment of the readers chooses to voice their opinion in the comment section of the digital platform of a newspaper, and therefore means I probably studied only a fragment of various opinions about brand activism among the readers of *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS). Another noteworthy consideration of criticism is subjected toward the data collection method, theoretical sampling. The article search feature on hs.fi proved to be difficult to use, and the categorisation (i.e., the tags used by HS to categorise articles by topic and content) was non-consistent, so I cannot be sure if I managed to sample all articles

covering the phenomenon in my data sample. Additionally, it is mentioned on the newspaper's webpage that the newspaper exercises moderation in the comments section, it might occur that not all published comments were analysed in this study.

6.4 Suggestions for future research

Due to lack of time and resources, the initial idea of investigating this phenomenon from a Nordic or even a European perspective (by analysing several newspapers in various languages) had to be changed. However, a broader analysis could give a better notion of the attitude towards brand activism in both Finland and the Nordic countries, as the results of this study only give us a hint of the attitude towards brand activism among the readers of HS and can therefore not be generalised.

As brand activism is a highly opinionated activity that divides stakeholders by their political ideologies and moral beliefs, I think that studying the attitudes towards the practice is particularly interesting. Therefore, the phenomenon could be studied from a corporate perspective by investigating managers' attitudes towards the practice, and another approach could be by investigating the reasons for someone becoming a consumer activist, perhaps in the manner Chen did in his study from 2020, but in a Finnish or Nordic context.

6.5 Chapter summary

In the last chapter of the thesis, the research questions were answered, practical implications were presented, a critical review of the thesis was pondered, and future research areas were suggested. It was concluded that brand activism is a risky marketing tactic engaged in due to the changed attitudes of the consumers, business leaders and other stakeholders in society. The main findings of the empirical study indicates that the Finnish media frames brand activism by emphasising the companies' or society's responsibility. The responses to the news coverage on brand activism was mainly negative, and the readers of the newspaper Helsingin Sanomat were clearly sceptical towards the practice. As the study focused on one newspaper, general conclusions could not be drawn, but another approach to the topic might have given more tangible results. It was noted that the study remained rather shallow due to it not focusing on individual cases but inspected the phenomenon through media output. A

case study of one or several individual cases might have given a deeper insight into the attitudes towards the practice, and a study of attitudes among business leaders or consumers would be particularly interesting.

7 SUMMARY IN SWEDISH

7.1 Inledning

Vi såg en våg av aktivistmeddelanden från företag runt om i världen sommaren 2020, då protester för Black Lives Matter (BLM) -rörelsen antände en explosion av aktivitet bland företag, som skyndade sig för att släppa pressmeddelanden där de hänvisade till behovet av "solidaritet" och "förändring" i efterdyningarna av George Floyds tragiska död (Curry, 2020). Ett betydande antal företag gjorde monetära donationer till organisationer som stöder BLM-rörelsen, men företagen gjorde även löften om att se över sina interna riktlinjer mot fördomar och anställningsrutiner inom företaget. Dock så visade det sig att inte vara riskfritt att uttala sig för att stödja anti-rasismkampanjer, vilket flera företag fick bevittna genom starka motreaktioner på grund av uttalandena, bland dem sociala medieplattformen Facebook som utsattes för både arbetarstrejk och storskalig bojkott som satts igång av dess intressenter.

Konsumenterna förväntar sig i allt högre grad att företag och deras varumärken tar ställning i aktuella samhällspolitiska frågor (Curry, 2020) men samtidigt kan aktivistmeddelanden som upplevs negativa påverka affärsintäkter och varumärkeskapitalet negativt. Aktivism kan användas för att visa omsorg för aktuella sociopolitiska frågor i samhället, som kan exempelvis handla om systematisk rasism, sexuella trakasserier, reproduktiva rättigheter, sexuella minoriteters rättigheter, invandring, vapenkontroll samt klimatförändringar. Behovet av solidaritet och förändring har trätt fram i dagsljuset och fått stor mediauppmärksamhet i kölvattnet av BLM- och #Metoo-rörelserna, och slutligen har även Trump-eran visat det framväxande fenomenet i företagssammanhang. Denna avhandling fokuserar på begreppet varumärkesaktivism som en framväxande marknadsföringsstrategi. Fenomenets komplexitet skildras genom befintlig forskning i ämnet samt genom att använda fallexempel.

7.2 Avhandlingens syfte och forskningsfrågor

Syftet med denna avhandling är att få en djupare förståelse av varumärkesaktivism som fenomen genom att undersöka attityder till praktiken och genom att studera de

ramar som media använder och tonen i svaren. Forskningsfrågorna som besvaras i denna magisteravhandling lyder:

Vad är varumärkesaktivism och varför tar företag ställning i samhällspolitiska frågor?

Hur omfattas och ramas varumärkesaktivism in av finska medier?

Hur förhåller sig allmänheten till mediebevakningen av fenomenet?

Som den fjärde forskningsfrågan kommer rekommendationer att ges till företag som önskar att utöva varumärkesaktivism.

7.3 Teori

De flesta varumärken har historiskt sett använt sig av marknadsföringsverktyg som poängterar positionering och prestandaegenskaper för att nå sina kunder, med slogans i stil med "vår produkt är bäst på marknaden", eller "vår produkt ger dig det bästa resultatet" enligt Mukherjee och Althuizen (2020). Kotler och Sarkar (2017) hävdar att positionering inte längre räcker till på högt konkurrensutsatta marknader. Företag samarbetar med välgörenhetsföreningar för att visa att de 'bryr sig'. Syftet med orsaksrelaterad marknadsföring (Cause-Related Marketing, CRM) är att förbättra resultatet samtidigt som man hjälper ett 'värdigt' ändamål. Företag engagerar sig i CRM-verksamhet för att förbättra sin image och konsumenternas attityder till sitt varumärke, eftersom en lyckad CRM-kampanj kan påverka både konsumenternas uppfattningar om företaget och kundernas villighet till att köpa dess produkter. Företagens samhällsansvar (Corporate Social Responsibility, CSR) är en verksamhet som ett företag ägnar sig åt för att i slutändan kunna gynna samhället (Abitbol, 2016), som i allmänhet anses vara fördelaktigt och brukar även förbättra företagets rykte och försäljning. Trots att intressenter hävdar att de vill veta mer om goda gärningar företag gör kan de lätt bli misstänksamma mot motiven bakom marknadsföringen av dessa CSR-ansträngningar. CSR-kommunikation kan leda till bakslag då intressenterna blir tveksamma och främst observerar ett yttre motiv i dessa ansträngningar. (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010)

Förutom CRM- och CSR-aktiviteter har företag deltagit i politisk verksamhet genom tiderna. Det kan handla om kampanjbidrag, donationer till politiska aktionskommittéer och deltagande i lobbyverksamhet. Enligt Bhagwat et al. (2020) är syftet att påverka

politiska förfaranden till företagets egen fördel och kunna få policybaserade konkurrensfördelar, enligt Lux, Crook och Woehr (2011). Denna praxis är partisk till skillnad från CRM eller CSR, eftersom företaget ämnar för att främja ett specifikt mål med direkta ekonomiska utbetalningar snarare än att stödja ett samhällsproblem eller ett 'värdigt' syfte för att putsa upp sitt rykte. Ett utmärkande drag för företagens politiska åtgärder (Corporate Political Activity, CPA) är att det vanligtvis utövas i all tystnad och inte är avsett att offentliggöras. Lobbying utövas 'varsamt och diskret' enligt Lawton, McGuire och Rajwani (2012).

Varumärkesaktivism kan beskrivas som en utveckling av CSR enligt Vredenburg et al. (2020). Företag som intar en politisk åsikt offentligt riskerar att väcka missnöje hos vissa kunder eller anställda, som kan provocera fram ett oppositionellt beteende i form av strejker och bojkotter enligt Smith och Korschun (2018). Autentiska varumärkesaktivistmeddelanden kräver en balans i varumärkets syfte, företagspraxis, liksom dess värderingar återspeglar de aktivistiska marknadsföringsmeddelanden som varumärket engagerar sig i. Det har undersökts att aktieägare straffar företag då dess aktivism skiljer sig stort från intressenternas värderingar, men att aktieägare också tenderar att belöna företag för aktivism som överensstämmer med intressenternas värderingar. Att förutsäga effekten av varumärkesaktivism på företagets värde på förhand är osäkert, vilket gör det till en riskabel aktivitet att engagera sig i. (Bhagwat et al., 2020)

Massmedier har förmågan att påverka den allmänna opinionen, och media kan ses som ett viktigt instrument för att lära sig om världen. Carroll (2010) inspekterade teorin om agendasättning i förhållande till nyhetsmediernas påverkan på företagets rykte. För att uppnå ett rykte och varumärkesigenkänning måste företagen få allmänhetens uppmärksamhet. Carroll hävdade att nyhetsmedierna kanske inte lyckas tala om för allmänheten vad de ska tycka om ett visst företag, men att de bättre lyckas med att tala om för allmänheten om vilka företag de ska "tänka på". Media sätter agendan för nyheterna enligt agendasättningsteorin (Agenda-Setting Theory). Enligt teorin kan agendasättningen vara avsiktlig eller oavsiktlig, vilket i sin tur påverkar hur viktiga nyhetshändelser och frågor i nyheter uppfattas. Teorin om agendasättning kan tillämpas inom medieforskning genom att analysera tonen som används i text. Hur medier presenterar vissa frågor och dess effekter på allmänheten kan studeras genom

så kallad 'nyhetsinramning' (framing). Studier har visat att media kan påverka hur människor tolkar nyheterna och de slutsatser de drar efter att ha tittat på eller läst nyheterna (t.ex. Perse, 2001, s. 106). Inramning sker då media väljer vissa aspekter av en upplevd verklighet för att göra dem mer framträdande i en kommunicerande text. Entman (1991) identifierade fem ramar som medierna använder för att presentera nyheter, som Semetko och Valkenberg (2000) byggde vidare på. Dessa är (1) konflikt, (2) mänskligt intresse (3) (ekonomisk) konsekvens, (4) moral och (5) ansvar.

7.4 Metodval

Akademisk forskning är i allmänhet kvantitativ eller kvalitativ, kvantitativ forskning fokuserar på siffror och statistik, medan kvalitativ forskning lägger tonvikten på användningen av ord och innebörden av dem. Kvalitativ fallstudiemetodik gör det möjligt för akademiker att genomföra en fördjupad undersökning av komplexa fenomen i ett specifikt sammanhang. Det övergripande syftet med kvalitativ forskning är att få förståelse för vissa sociala fenomen. Den mest använda kvalitativa forskningsmetoden är fallstudier enligt Rashid et al. (2019), och en fallstudiemetod är lämplig när man studerar samtida fenomen till skillnad från historiska händelser. Eftersom syftet med denna studie är att undersöka det sociala fenomenet varumärkesaktivism, är en fallstudiemetod av hög relevans och lämplig för den planerade studien. Det fall som valts ut och granskats i denna studie är den finska dagstidningen *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS). Denna fallstudie fokuserar på hur varumärkesaktivism åskådliggjordes i tidningen under 2020 och hur läsarna reagerade på nyhetsartiklarna. HS valdes ut som undersökningsobjekt på grund av sin stora läsekrets som Finlands mest lästa tidning trots det regionala namnet på tidningen, samt för att jag hade tillgång till det digitala arkivet som prenumerant. Ett av forskningssyftena är att undersöka respondenters attityder, och det verkställdes genom att analysera läsarnas kommentarer i kommentarsfältet i dagstidningens digitala arkiv på webbplatsen <https://www.hs.fi>.

Undersökningen utfördes med hjälp av en kvalitativ innehållsanalys. Att hitta anslutningar, göra jämförelser, ställa frågor och hitta mönster i materialet är kärnan i kvalitativ innehållsanalys. Denna studie använde sekundärdata och källorna bestod av olika typer av massmedieproduktion och dokumentation, inklusive nyhetsartiklar,

kolumner, åsiktsstycken och reportage som handlar om varumärkesaktivism, samt kommentarfältets kommentarer. Datainsamlingen ägde rum under januari och februari 2021. Data samplades teoretiskt, vilket möjliggjorde bortsortering av irrelevant data i ett tidigt skede av undersökningen. Kodningen och den preliminära analysen av data gjordes i NVivo, ett datorprogram som ofta används när man utför en kvalitativ innehållsanalys. Resultatens giltighet, tillförlitlighet och överförbarhet betraktas i denna studie. Studien sker i ett finskt sammanhang. Finland rankas högt i World Press Freedom index som upprätthålls av Reportrar utan gränser. År 2020 kom Finland på andra plats efter Norge på första plats, Danmark på tredje plats och Sverige på fjärde plats (RSF, 2021). Från detta kan slutsatsen dras att den finska pressen är fri och opartisk, vilken gör den lämplig för akademisk undersökning, som i sin tur ökar studiens giltighet och tillförlitlighet, trots att studien inspekterar enbart en dagstidning.

7.5 Presentation av empiriska data

Under 2020 skrevs det 44 artiklar om varumärkesaktivism i HS, av varav tre fjärdedelar, 32, publicerades under juni och juli. Två artiklar blev publicerade januari (1) och i mars (1), och resten under av artiklarna publicerades i augusti (5), september (2), oktober (1), november (1) och december (1). Tonen i artiklarna var huvudsakligen neutral. 27 artiklar (61%) av de analyserade artiklarna var neutrala till tonen. Dessa artiklar och hade varken positiva eller negativa toner kopplade till varumärkesaktivismen som diskuterades i dem, och tog i första hand upp faktabaserade iakttagelser om företagen och dess aktivism. Tio artiklar (23%) var skrivna med en blandad ton, dvs. lyfte fram både negativa och positiva aspekter av varumärkesaktivism. Sju artiklar (16%) hade en positiv ton och lyfte fram gynnsamma aspekter av varumärkesaktivismen. Noll artiklar hade en negativ ton, vilket innebar att ingen artikel presenterade varumärkesaktivismen eller företaget på ett uteslutande ogynnsamt sätt.

Ramanalysen gjordes med hjälp av kriterierna för populära rammar som används av media och kallas ramarna för moralitet, personligt intresse/personifiering, konflikt, ansvar, och (ekonomiska) konsekvenser. Den största delen (16/44) av de analyserade artiklarna var presenterade ur ramen för ansvar som utgjorde 36% av samplet. Tio artiklar (23%) presenterades ur ramen för ekonomiska konsekvenser, åtta (18%) från

ramen för personligt intresse/personifiering, åtta (18%) från ramen för moralitet, samt två (5%) från ramen för konflikt. Det visade sig att HS använde sig minst av ramen för konflikt då de skrev om varumärkesaktivism under 2020. Konflikt-ramen tilldelades artiklar som tydligt underströk en konflikt mellan två parter. Tio artiklar ramades in av (ekonomiska) konsekvenser, då de i synnerhet lyfte fram varumärkesaktivismen som en konsekvens till en händelse, som till exempel att ett företag designade om sitt varumärke som resultat för att ha fått kritik för sitt varumärke. Ramen fokuserade även på ekonomiska konsekvenser för företaget eller varumärket, som ekonomiska förluster på grund av en bojkott mot varumärket. De flesta artiklar som använde ramen för ekonomisk konsekvens var neutrala och informativa. Åtta av 44 artiklar använde sig av ramen för personligt intresse. Dessa artiklar berättade om fenomenet varumärkesaktivismen genom att visa upp en mänsklig sida eller ett känslomässigt perspektiv. Artiklarna som använde denna ram strävade till att väcka känslor hos läsaren. Lika många artiklar använde sig av moralramen, åtta av 44. Ramen tilldelas i första hand åsiktsstycken och analytiska kolumner. Den gemensamma nämnaren för dessa artiklar var att de ofta hade en betydligt mer kritisk attityd mot varumärkesaktivismen än flera andra ramar. Skribenterna moraliserade varumärkesaktivism eller företag genom att ställa retoriska frågor eller genom citat från företagets intressenter. Majoriteten, dvs. 16 av 44 artiklar använde sig av ramen för ansvar, vilket innebär att majoriteten av artiklarna om varumärkesaktivism betonade förändringar och löften som företag och/eller varumärken gjort för att införa förändring. Vidare diskuterade artiklarna med denna ram ofta företagets ansvar som samhällsaktörer och betonade ofta företagets och deras varumärkes värderingar.

32 av 44 artiklar fick respons i form av läsarkommentarer. Totalt fick artiklarna 562 kommentarer vilket innebär att varje artikel fick i genomsnitt 12,77 läsarkommentarer. Det högsta antalet kommentarer till en enskild artikel var 86 st. Av 562 kommentarer analyserades 423. De kommentarer som inte analyserades saknade relevans för artikelinnehållet och kunde därav inte analyseras. Kommentarer analyserades enligt tonläge för att få reda på läsarnas inställning till varumärkesaktivismen som diskuterades i artiklarna. Det framgick att den mest förekommande tonen bland kommentarerna var negativ eller blandad. 145 kommentarer visade en tydlig negativ ton mot varumärkesaktivismen som diskuterades i artikeln (145 kommentarer, 34%).

140 kommentarer (33%) hade en blandad ton, som innebär att kommentaren varken var enbart negativ eller positiv. 78 kommentarer (18%) hade en tydlig positiv ton som hade en godkännande attityd mot företaget och varumärkesaktivismen som diskuterades i artikeln. 60 kommentarer (14%) hade en neutral ton. Då framgick det inte om kommentatorn hade en tydligt positiv, negativ eller blandad inställning mot varumärkesaktivismen som diskuterades i artikeln.

7.6 Diskussion

Det publicerades enbart två artiklar om varumärkesaktivism under årets fem första månader men i juni och juli steg siffran markant. Anledningen till detta var stora protester som ordnades världen över för att sympatisera med Black Lives Matter (BLM)-rörelsen och protestera mot polisvåld, systematisk rasism och social ojämställdhet i efterskalvet av George Floyds tragiska död. De företag som kvickt reagerade och dömde övervåldet på sociala medier blev snabbt ställda till svars av intressenter som krävde handling till de taktfulla utlåtandena. Konkreta exempel på företagens handlingar kan läsas i inledningskapitlet till avhandlingen, och BLM samt anti-rasismrörelsen visade sig även att bli ett av huvudtema för denna avhandling, eftersom en stor del av aktivismen som företag och varumärken engagerade sig i under året 2020 handlade om att ta ställning mot ojämlikhet och diskriminering.

HS använde sig till stor del av en neutral ton då de skrev om varumärkesaktivism år 2020. De flesta artiklarna var informativa och visade inte journalistens personliga åsikter eller dagstidningens politiska agenda. Varumärkesaktivism ramades främst in av ansvar, och 13 av 16 artiklar som använde sig av denna ram hade en neutral ton. 10 artiklar ramades in av ekonomiska konsekvenser, och även då var majoriteten av artiklarna, nio av tio, skrivna med en neutral ton. Det framgår att nyhetsrapporteringen om varumärkesaktivism fokuserade på fakta och ekonomiska aspekter, samt uppmuntrade företagen till att våga ta ställning i polariserande samhällsfrågor genom att betona ansvar hos regeringar, företag och individer. På delad tredje plats kom artiklar som ramades in av moralitet och mänskligt intresse, då respektive åtta artiklar ramades in av bägge kategorierna. Av de åtta artiklar som ramades in av moralitet hade sex en blandad ton. Det innebar att dessa artiklar hade en mer skeptisk inställning mot varumärkesaktivismen än de artiklar som hade en neutral ton. Av de åtta artiklar som

ramades in av mänskligt intresse, hade sex en positiv ton, vilket innebar att de hade en klart positiv inställning mot varumärkesaktivism.

Det mest förekommande temat var BLM / rasism, och togs upp mest både i artiklarna och i kommentarerna. Temat togs upp i tre fjärdedelar (31/44) av alla artiklarna, men diskuterades i kommentarsfältet i enbart en dryg fjärdedel (16/44) till alla publicerade artiklar. HS betonade sällan rasism i sig, men nämnde BLM-rörelsen som en startpunkt till händelserna som diskuterades i artikeln, medan kommentarsfältet diskuterade rasism som samhällsproblem. Eftersom det mest förekommande ordet bland kommentarerna var 'eskimå', omfattade en stor del av diskussionen kring rasism och språkliga frågor detta specifika ord. Ett stort antal läsare tyckte att varumärkesförnyelser på grund av rasistiska produktförpackningar (se till exempel Brunbergs kyssar i bilaga 3) gjordes enbart för att behaga minoriteter och var i allmänhet en överreaktion i allra högsta grad och utlyste bojkott. Dock så fanns det flera kommentatorer som försvarade företagen och prisade dem för att ha uppmärksammat minoriteters kamp för jämlikhet och gjort tidsenliga ändringar i sina varumärken.

Företagsvärderingar och samhällelig förändring var två andra teman som ofta betonades. Den empiriska studien visade en liknande trend som Moorman bekräftat i sin CMO-studie (2020), det vill säga, att företagsledares attityder till företagets syfte genomgår en förändring då allt fler företagsledare ser att företaget har en skyldighet till sina intressenter utöver investerarna. Varumärkesaktivismen porträtterades i hög grad som marknadsföringskampanjer och som varumärkesförnyelser i HS. Trots att dessa artiklar var främst neutrala i ton, höll inte läsarna med. Då HS skrev om kampanjer som varumärken gjorde i syfte att ta ställning till en polariserade samhällspolitisk fråga, ifrågasatte läsarna det bakomliggande syftet för kampanjerna. Därför blev marknadsförings- och PR trick samt lönsamheten stora teman bland svaren. Artiklarna tog fram språkliga frågor bara ett fåtal gånger, och detta inträffade i samband med rasismdiskussionen. Artiklarna lyfte även fram kritik mot diverse varumärken. Ofta lyftes kritiken fram som en bakgrundsorsak till att HS skrev om företaget eller händelsen. Tonen var ofta neutral och kritiken kom ofta fram i artiklar som ramades in av ekonomiska konsekvenser och ansvar, som en orsak till att varför företaget väckt uppmärksamhet i samhället och varför intressenterna var missnöjda

med företaget och/eller varumärkets handlingar. Även politiska aspekter fördes på tal av både dagstidningen och läsarna. Den kvalitativa innehållsanalysen av artiklar och kommentarer visade att huvudtemana i både artiklarna och kommentarerna korrelerade i stor utsträckning, även om kommentatorerna ofta tog upp olika samhällsproblem i en större utsträckning.

7.7 Slutsats och rekommendationer

Syftet med denna magisteravhandling var att få en djupare förståelse för varumärkesaktivism som ett framväxande fenomen genom att undersöka de ramar som media använder när de skriver om ämnet samt att studera tonen i svaren. Den första undersökningsfrågan löd: vad är varumärkesaktivism och varför tar företag ställning i samhällspolitiska frågor? Svaret till denna fråga letades efter i litteraturöversikten i denna avhandling, framförallt i kapitel 2.2. Jag använde mig av definitioner av tidigare forskning (Vredenburg et al., 2020, Moorman, 2020, Bhagwat et al., 2020, Dodd och Supa, 2014, samt Kotler och Sarkar 2017) för att komma fram till att definiera varumärkesaktivism som affärsinsatser bestående av offentligt tal eller åtgärder för att stödja eller motsätta sig en samhällspolitisk fråga som anses partisk i samhället och har osäkra konsekvenser för företaget och/eller varumärket. Den andra delen av den första forskningsfrågan hade som syfte att ta reda på orsaker till att företag tar sig an dessa frågor, som kan läsas i del 2.2.6. Företag engagerar sig i aktivism på grund av press från både aktieägare och intressenter, liksom på grund av attitydförändringen bland företagsledare till vad företagets syfte är. Intressenterna vill att företag ska ta på sig ansvar för sin miljö- och samhällspåverkan. Framförallt kunder som tillhör generationerna Y och Z vill se företag utföra konkreta handlingar, och då de yngres köpkraft blir allt starkare kan inte företag ignorera kraven på sikt. Trots att företagsaktivism är riskfyllt är de möjliga belöningarna frestande. Aktieägare tenderar att belöna företag som producerar framgångsrika marknadsföringskampanjer, och andra fördelar är ökad försäljning, bättre rykte och varumärkeskapital samt mediauppmärksamhet. Dock så finns risken för bestraffning närvarande ifall aktivismen inte korrelerar med intressenters och aktieägares ideologier, och straffen som följer inkluderar bojkotter, nedgångar i aktiekurser och till och med sämre lagstiftning för företagets intressen.

Den andra och den tredje forskningsfrågan fokuserade sig på den empiriska undersökningen, varav den första löd: hur omfattas och ramas varumärkesaktivism in av finsk media? Svaret på denna fråga krävde en djupare inblick i masskommunikationsteorier och tidigare forskning om medieramning och agendasättning (se kapitel 2.3) av fenomenet i media. Med hjälp av en kvalitativ innehållsanalys analyserades tonläget och inramningen av 44 artiklar om forskningsämnet. HS skrev om ämnet i en mestadels neutral ton som fokuserade på fakta och visade varken positiva eller negativa aspekter för företaget. Dock så skrevs en märkbar del av artiklarna ur en blandad ton, vilket innebär att både negativa och positiva aspekter lyftes delvis fram. Ramanalysen visade att varumärkesaktivism huvudsakligen inramades av ansvar (36%) av HS, men att ca en fjärdedel av samplet (23%) ramades in av ekonomiska konsekvenser, och en femtedel (18%) av mänskligt intresse samt en femtedel av moral (18%). Även om artiklarna mest betonade ansvar, användes de tre andra ramarna också flitigt. Den enda ramen som inte användes i större utsträckning var konflikt, som endast användes i två artiklar (5%). HS artiklar om varumärkesaktivism betonade förändringar och löften som företag och/eller varumärken hade gjort för att initiera förändring genom sina företagsvärderingar, och vidare diskuterades företagets ansvar som samhällsaktörer.

Den tredje forskningsfrågan lade fokus på allmänhetens reaktioner på varumärkesaktivism och löd: hur förhåller sig allmänheten till mediebevakningen av fenomenet? För att få svar på denna fråga studerades kommentarsfältet på Helsingin Sanomat (HS) webbplats. Som hjälpmedel utvecklades en ram som kombinerade agendaställningseffekten av Sullivan (2013) och den moraliska auktoritetsramen av Hoppner och Vadakkepatt (2019). Ramverket hittas i sektion 2.4 (figur 4). Resultatet visade att nyhetsbevakningen om varumärkesaktivism i HS orsakade mestadels negativ och/eller blandad respons. Den bild som HS målade upp om varumärkesaktivismen som företags ansvarsfulla förfarande till att initiera samhällsförändring godtogs inte av majoriteten av läsarna, som förhöll sig skeptiskt till fenomenet och ofta anklagade företag för ”woke-washing” (kan översättas till vakentvätt) och hyckleri. Dock så var inte all respons negativ, då en tredjedel av de analyserade kommentarerna hade en neutral eller positiv ton mot aktivismen. Bland de positiva svaren visades uppskattning till varumärkena som vidtagit åtgärder mot rasism, diskriminering och ojämlikhet.

Som svar på den sista forskningsfrågan ges rekommendationer till branschen. Det föreslås att företag engagerar sig i varumärkesaktivism med eftertanke. Ställningstaganden som tas *ad hoc* kan snabbt få negativa konsekvenser om företagets praxis och värderingar inte är i enlighet med ställningstagandet. Företag bör träda försiktigt då de tar itu med polariserande frågor för att undvika anklagelser om ”woke-washing” (så kallad vakentvätt). Det verkar som om progressiv varumärkesaktivism kommer fortsättningsvis att uppröra vissa kunder som i sin tur utropar att hädanefter bojkotta varumärket och / eller företaget. Dock så finns det en chans för att de allra flesta godkänner aktivismen men inte uttrycker sig i ord om detta. Företag bör förvänta sig att deras varumärkes engagemang i aktivism kommer att uppröra vissa intressenter, men de bör också ta i beaktan att ett progressivt ställningstagande kan godkännas av den tysta majoriteten.

Slutligen granskas avhandlingen kritiskt och förslag till vidare forskning presenteras. Även om studien gav några värdefulla insikter om inramningen av varumärkesaktivism i media och intressentattityder mot nyhetsbevakningen av fenomenet, kunde ett mer fallspecifikt tillvägagångssätt hade kunnat ge mer exakta resultat, och eftersom mitt sampel var ganska litet och tittade på fenomenet från medias perspektiv och inte innehöll en opinionsundersökning, var det svårt att få fram exakta svar på forskningsfrågorna. Utöver det så gjordes ingen jämförelse med en annan dagstidning på grund av att den valda analysmetoden var mer tidskrävande än förväntat. En noggrann genomgång av alla specifika fall av varumärkesaktivism som togs upp av dagstidningen HS under 2020 var inte heller möjlig i denna avhandling. Eftersom denna studie analyserade en dagstidning och läsarnas svar, och trots att tidningen är den dominerande i landet, är det inte heller möjligt att generalisera attityderna i studien. Avslutningsvis ges förslag till fortsatt forskning om ämnet varumärkesaktivism. Den empiriska delen av denna avhandling fokuserade på hur varumärkesaktivism behandlades av en finsk dagstidning under året 2020. En bredare analys skulle kunna ge en bättre bild av inställningen till varumärkesaktivism i både Finland och exempelvis Norden. Eftersom varumärkesaktivism är en åsiktsdelande verksamhet som splittrar intressenter genom deras politiska ideologier och moraliska övertygelser, tycker jag att det är särskilt intressant att studera attityderna till denna kommersiella aktivism.

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Appendix 2: Identified themes and sub-themes in the analysed data.

Name of code	Description	Files	References
Article information		0	0
Author (hs.fi)		42	43
Date published		43	43
Heading		43	43
Ingress		42	42
No. of reader comments		31	31
Tag (hs.fi)		42	42
Content in article		0	0
Brand or marketing related activity		23	44
Brand renewal under debate		6	7
Brand responses to criticism		11	13
CEO activism or values		3	4
Company values		25	44
Competitive advantage		4	4
Brand boycotting other brand		10	15
Consumer-driven change		6	8
Criticism towards brand		10	13
Employee-driven boycott or change		4	7
Media criticises brand		3	3
Organizations criticises brand		6	9
Shareholder-driven consequences		5	6
Stakeholder boycotts brand		4	4
Black lives matter or racism in general'		31	51
Environmental and social issues		8	12
Influential event		14	17
Law-enforcement		1	1
Political consequences		9	12
Sexual or ethnical minorities		7	10
Societal change		11	20
Author comment		8	11
Brand history reference		10	14
Journalist brings up brand hypocrisy		2	2
Journalist brings up media framing		4	6
Quote in article		12	18
Entman's news frames			
Conflict		1	1
Consequence		13	13
Human interest - personalisation		6	6
Morality		8	8
Responsibility		16	16

Reader comment		
Companies driving change	2	2
Comparing article content with another issue	7	32
CSR activities	1	2
Culture or traditions	4	7
Discrimination	6	21
Equality or inequality	7	19
Freedom of speech	2	3
Generational differences	4	4
Historical reference	7	38
Humor reference	4	10
Indication to negative consequences	4	6
Initiation to boycott	9	24
Linguistic issues	6	35
Marketing or pr-related trick	16	66
Media criticism	10	23
Minorities vs. the majority	9	23
Not comprehending why it is an issue	2	8
Political aspect	12	40
Profitability (for company)	17	43
Racism	16	91
Right vs. wrong kind of activism	1	4
Social change	7	9
Woke citizenship or woke-washing	10	47
Comment tone mention		
Mixed tone mention	26	140
Negative tone mention	28	145
Neutral tone mention	22	61
Positive tone mention	21	78
Article tone mention		
Mixed tone mention	9	9
Negative tone mention	0	0
Neutral tone mention	28	28
Positive tone mention	7	7

Appendix 3: Old and new packaging of the sweet Brunberg's kiss.



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Retrieved April 9th, 2021 from: https://images.cdn.yle.fi/image/upload//w_1199,h_800,f_auto,fl_lossy,q_auto:eco/13-3-11236545.jpg