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BRAND ACTIVISM: THE FUTURE OF MARKETING?

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DIFFERENT LEVELS OF CONGRUENCE AND ADVERTISING APPEALS IN BRAND ACTIVISM AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON TODAY'S CONSUMER.

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Abstract

More than ever brands are speaking out on key socio-political issues, such as Black Lives Matter or climate change. Brand activism, as it is called, is an emerging marketing strategy where brands take a public stance in order to stand out in the market and meet the demands of the modern consumer. However, the actual success and impact of this strategy on the consumer is still unclear. The aim of this research is to analyse the effects of different levels of congruence between a brand and the cause it supports on the modern consumer. More precisely, the different levels of congruence on perceived brand sincerity and trust, brand choice and consumer impression formation, and consumers' willingness to become active themselves are analysed. Additionally, the role of the personality trait 'openness', as well as emotional advertising appeals is taken into account.

For this research, a 3 (level of congruence: low vs. medium vs. high) x 2 (openness to experience: low vs. high) x 2 (emotional appeals: humour vs. guilt) online quasi-experimental design was chosen. A quantitative research study was conducted, for which an online survey with closed- ended question items was designed. Before the study started, respondents (N = 272) were randomly divided into six conditions. In each condition, participants were presented with a background story of a fictional clothing brand that was either completely, moderately, or incongruently related to three presented Instagram posts that contained either humorous or non-humorous appeals. After the stimulus material was presented, all participants had to answer the same set of questions. Responses were analyzed using two two-way ANOVAs and an additional linear regression.

Results revealed that solely the perceived congruence between a brand's values and the cause it supports seems to be highly relevant when choosing brand activism as a marketing strategy. Manipulation of congruence only revealed significant effects on perceived brand sincerity and trustworthiness. It was also shown that the use of humour in brand activism, as opposed to non-humorous appeals, has a negative effect on consumers' first impressions of a brand.

Overall, this study provides new theoretical implications on the topic of brand activism as a marketing strategy. The practical implications ensuing from these findings concern the future of marketing. Lastly, since there is still a big research gap on the topic, findings of this study can serve as a first guide, or impetus, for future research.

Table of Content

Introduction

In 2018, the brand Nike decided to put American NFL star Colin Kaepernick at the centre of its 30th anniversary "Just Do-it" campaign, leading to an outrage (Abad-Santos, 2018). In 2016, Kaepernick knelt during the playing of the national anthem before an NFL game in protest of racial injustice and police brutality in America, which many Americans perceived as disrespect for the flag and the country. For his act, Kaepernick's career was cut short as no team wanted to sign him the following season (Streeter, 2020). With the slogan "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything. Just Do It.", Nike took a stand and publicly took the NFL player's side. In response to Nike's 30th anniversary campaign, some Americans decided to boycott the company and even publicly destroy their clothing on social media (Sport, 2020). Yet, the campaign was a huge success. Despite the backlash in the wake of Nike's endorsement deal with Colin Kaepernick, the brand had a 31% increase in online sales (Martinez, 2021).

Today more than ever, brands are speaking out on important social and political issues such as 'Black Lives Matter', 'Climate Change' or 'Social Distancing'. Brand activism, as it is called, is an emerging marketing strategy where brands take a public stance in order to stand out in the market and meet the demands of the modern consumer (Moorman, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). Yet, a public stance of this kind has never been so divisive - or risky, as the example of Nike shows. In general, it is crucial for brands that engage in activism to be perceived as authentic. when consumers become aware that brands just use central issues to sell more of their products, their motives are being questioned, as well as the actual impact of the activism attempt (Edelman, 2019). Furthermore, according to Lim, Ting, Bonaventure, Sendiawan, and Tanusian (2013), when consumers recognize that a brand is not behind their claims, mistrust, more cautious future buying behaviour and negative WoM increases. This can seriously harm a brand's reputation. But why are more and more brands taking on that risk? Simply, the demands towards brands have changed over the years. These days, especially younger consumers are increasingly willing to put their money behind brands that show transparency and that use their power to promote central issues and influence positive change (Rehkopf, 2018).

To date, there has been little empirical research on the role of congruence between a brand and the cause it supports when engaging in brand activism. A study by Mukherjee and Althiuzen (2020), for example, analyzed the general effects of brand activism on consumer attitudes. Kubiak and Ouda (2020) rather focused on the role of authenticity in brand activism

and its influence on consumer trust. Another study by Manfredi–Sánches (2019) further focused on creating a conceptual framework to first determine the overall characteristics of brand activism. The theoretical approach by Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, and Kemper (2020) was one of the first to look at the role of authenticity and different levels of congruence in brand activism, identifying "optimal incongruence", meaning that a brand's values are not fully aligned with the cause they are supporting, as an important boundary condition for brands. However, the significant transition into practice is missing. Further research involving consumers and finding out the role "optimal incongruence" plays in brand activism is therefore needed.

Therefore, this explorative study, employing a quasi-experimental design, aims to analyse the effects of different levels of congruence in brand activism (fully congruent vs. moderately congruent vs. incongruent), as proposed by Vredenburg et al., on the modern consumer. More specifically, focus is set on the influence of different levels of congruence on perceived brand sincerity, trust, brand choice and consumer impression formation, as these aspects are important drivers of sales and thus for brand success. Furthermore, in order to find out whether brand activism also has an impact on consumer behaviour, it was decided to analyse whether different levels of congruence influence consumers' willingness to become active themselves. In addition, it is analysed whether there is a moderation effect of the personality trait "openness", as well as emotional advertising appeals.

As there has been no research so far on this specific topic, this study aims to provide new insights into the future of marketing and may also serve as a guide, or impetus, for future research on the topic of brand activism.

Based on this, the following research question is formulated:

"To what extent does the level of brand activism congruence influence brand personality perception, consumer impression formation, and consumer's willingness to become active themselves?"

This research is divided into multiple sections. In the beginning, a theoretical framework is presented in which first the role of perceived congruence in brand activism is elaborated. Thereafter, an introduction to the variables brand sincerity and trust, consumer impression formation and brand choice, consumer's willingness to become active, emotional advertising appeals, and the personality trait openness, is provided. Based on the theoretical framework, hypotheses are formulated and combined in a conceptual model. Following, the research methodology and designs are elaborated, followed by the results and findings of this study. Subsequently, the main findings are discussed, and the implications and limitations of this research are presented. In closing, a conclusion of this study is provided.

Theoretical Background

In the following, the different variables of this study are introduced. First, the role of congruence in brand activism is elaborated. Then, the dependent variables perceived brand sincerity and trust, consumer impression formation and brand choice, as well as consumers' willingness to take actions are presented along with the hypotheses that have been put forward. Finally, the two moderator variables 'emotional advertising appeals' and 'openness' are introduced.

The changing role of congruence between a brand's values and its actions

Within brand activism, different forms can be undertaken such as creating powerful marketing statements or showing prosocial corporate practices in real life. Indeed, according to Kotler and Sarkar (2020), a combination of both forms is essential to be perceived as authentic in brand activism. Brands need to "walk the talk" to avoid a possible perception of woke-washing. Woke washing refers to inauthentic brand activism in which brands marketing messages about a central socio-political issue are not congruent with the purpose, values, or corporate practice of the brand (Sobande 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Consequently, brands should show meaningful actions and provide consistency in their statements. This is also in line with literature on cause-related marketing (CRM). In CRM, brands choose to promote topics or issues that are highly aligned with their values (Kuo & Rice, 2015). In the past, cause-related marketing has been proven to be a highly successful marketing strategy because it does not only positively impact purchase intentions (Lafferty & Edmondson, 2009) and brand attitudes (Lafferty & Goldsmith, 2005), it also allows consumers to support social causes while meeting their own consumption needs (Eikenberry, 2009). Hereby, especially the degree of fit between a brand and the cause it supports has been shown to positively influence the effectiveness of CRM campaigns (Kuo & Rice, 2015).

Nevertheless, the decisive questions arise: Should brands nowadays remain silent and not speak out on socio-political issues because they don't quite fit their image or values? Is that still in keeping with the times? In fact, today's consumers want brands to take a stand on issues like racial discrimination and social justice instead of staying silent (Komiya, 2020). A study by Opinium Research (2020) showed that 71% of Americans believe that brands should respond to the problem of racial injustice and police brutality. Additionally, 6% said they would boycott a brand that would remain completely silent.

More and more brands find themselves put on the spot by society and their stakeholders. According to Chatterjee (2020), taking a stand is not about marketing any longer, it is about showing compassion for the people affected as a brand, people that can be customers, employees, or other important stakeholders. It shows the human side of a brand, and since people attach importance to brands whose values align with their own (Voorn, van der Veen, van Rompay, Hegner, & Pruyn, 2020), it may even be highly appreciated when a brand takes a clear stand, regardless of whether it is fully congruent with the brand's values or not. After all, values can be changed. In terms of stakeholders, Ellen (2006) states that a moderate fit in CSR activities in particular can have a more positive impact, as stakeholders may see the CSR activity as a more conscious and greater effort. As a result, investment in the brand is higher, which has also been shown to be a relevant variable of perceived brand sincerity and credibility (Folse, Niedrich, & Grau, 2010). Cornwell, Howard-Grenville, and Hampel (2018) further state that 'optimal incongruences' can also be beneficial, and help brands to stand out in the market. This is because perceived congruence is not as remarkable as small incongruences and, therefore, more unlikely to trigger extensive cognitive elaboration. Optimal incongruence encourages consumers to elaborate and process more deeply, leading to potentially stronger reactions to a brand (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989).

Yet, for 'optimal incongruence' to successfully work as a marketing strategy, different factors need to be taken into account. For example, according to Cornwell et al. (2018), it must be ensured that the perceived incongruity is not too high, creating a logic or information gap which is too wide for consumers to make sense of. Furthermore, Warren and McGraw (2015) identified three important factors for optimal incongruences to work as a brand activism strategy. First, the activism message should not deviate too much from the norms that apply either to the social cause or to the brand's reputation and its values. Secondly, optimal incongruence should not threaten consumers identity or normative belief structures. Lastly, the consumer needs to perceive the activism message as a welcome violation of social norms, leading to satisfaction.

All in all, the effectiveness of moderate congruence in brand activism is yet to be explored. The aim of this study is therefore to provide a first impetus and find out which level of congruence in particular (full congruence vs. moderate congruence vs. incongruence) is most convincing to consumers when exposed to brand activism.

Perceived Brand Sincerity and Trust

One important aspect to look at in brand activism is brand personality. Brand personality is defined as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker, 1997, p. 347) and is critical to brands. Not only does a brand's perceived personality influence consumer beliefs and distinguish brands from their competitors (Plummer, 2000), brand personality also drives brand attitudes and preference (Ansary & Hashim, 2017), determines brand equity, and is an effective means of creating meaningful consumer-brand relationships (Sung & Tinkham, 2005). Brand personality is created and developed through any type of brand contact, e.g., advertising, WoM, packaging, and consumer experience (Shank & Langmeyer, 1994).

According to Aaker (1997), five dimensions of brand personality can be identified, namely sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness, which can help explain the relationship between consumers and brands. For example, Aaker (1999) shows that people tend to choose brands with specific personality dimensions to "highlight" certain aspects of their own personality in different situational contexts. This research in particular focuses on the role of brand sincerity in brand activism.

Brand Sincerity

A brand that is sincere can be described as being down-to earth, wholesome, honest and cheerful (Aaker, 1997). Moreover, sincere brands share family-related associations, high morals, and create positive service experiences that meet the expectations of the consumers (Maehle, Otnes, & Supphellen, 2011). Brand sincerity is also an important aspect of CSR credibility. It refers to stakeholder's perception of how sincere a brand is in upholding their norms to be socially responsible (Du & Vieira, 2012). In general, being perceived as sincere is a goal that every type of brand wants to achieve. Smaller companies, for example, aim for sincerity to be perceived as more warm, caring and considerate than their larger competitors. Larger brands on the other hand aim for sincerity to try to appear more down-to-earth (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004). Conversely, according to Maehle et al. (2011), brands that are not perceived as sincere are often associated with unethical business practices, consumer deception, or are simply too exclusive for the average person. Most often, non-profit organisations such as UNICEF or the Red Cross are identified as sincere because they display high moral values and are known for helping people in need, two important factors for brand sincerity (Ozar, 2008).

When it comes to brand activism and the perceived congruence between a brand's values and the cause it supports, it can be assumed that if the level of congruence is low (incongruent), the brand is perceived as dishonest with low morals. As mentioned in the

beginning, if consumers perceive the brand activism as inauthentic, mistrust and negative WoM increases (Lim et al. 2013), and a brand's motives are being questioned (Edelman, 2019). Hence, if a brand's values are fully incongruent with the cause it supports, consumer might feel deceived or fooled and perhaps even starts questioning the socio-political issue the brand promotes. However, if the level of congruence is moderate, it may already have a positive impact on consumers as they see brand activism as a greater effort, which may lead to higher investment, which has also been shown to be a relevant driver of perceived brand sincerity (Folse et al., 2010). Based on this, the following is hypothesized:

H1: *The higher the level of congruence between a brand's values and the cause it supports, the more positive the effect on perceived brand sincerity*

Brand Trust

According to previous research, brand personality dimensions, especially sincerity, are significant drivers of consumer trust in a brand (Sung & Kim, 2010). According to Sung and Kim, consumer trust can be identified as the confidence in a brand providing quality performance in a sincere and honest manner. In addition, previous literature also defines consumer trust as beliefs that a brand is reliable, consistent, competent, responsible, helpful, fair and honest (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). A brand itself can be considered trustworthy if it consistently delivers what has been promised (Erdem & Swait, 2004). Being perceived as trustworthy brings many advantages for brands in the market. It facilitates consumer relationships and brand loyalty (Fournier, 1998; Morgan & Hunt, 1994), increases purchase intentions, particularly when consumers feel uncertain or insecure about their decision (Gefen & Straub, 2004; Doney & Cannon, 1997), and enhances perceived brand equity (Ambler, 1997).

Consumer trust is a key factor in the success of marketing activities and therefore a key driver of consumer response to brand activism. If a brand's values and the cause it supports are completely incongruent in terms of activism, it can be assumed that the brand will be perceived as unreliable or inconsistent, reducing the overall perception of trust. However, Vredenburg et al. (2020) also identified authentic brand activism as a purpose-driven strategy. In this context, the researchers note that four key characteristics can be distinguished within authentic brand activism, including not being afraid to directly address an important socio-political issue and freely addressing any socio-political issue that a brand likes. The last characteristic in particular corresponds with what was already said in the

7

previous section about "optimal" incongruities in brand activism. Based on this, it can be assumed that as long as the perceived incongruence is not too high, consumer trust will increase. Hence:

H2: *The higher the level of congruence between a brand's values and the cause it supports, the more positive the effect on perceived brand trust*

Consumer Impression Formation and Brand Choice

Consumer Impression Formation

More and more brands are becoming aware that social responsibility has become an important factor in brand personality (Madrigal & Boush, 2008). Ethical, sustainable and CSR-related activities are nowadays even used as point of difference against competitors, with brand managers positioning and marketing their brands as morally superior alternatives (Brunk & de Boer, 2020). In order to be perceived as socially responsible and morally superior, the consumer's very first impression of the brand already sets the course. Brand impressions are formed within seconds and can influence consumers' selection criteria and the general evaluation of a brand (Naylor, Lamberton, & West, 2012). Therefore, it is important for marketers to understand the importance of first encounters with a brand and how it influences impression formation and brand perception. Brand perception can be defined as the interpretation and integration of stimuli into a meaningful overall impression (Pickens, 2005). Non-verbal cues in particular, such as pictures or symbols, have a decisive influence on the formation of first impressions (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993).

When it comes to consumer impression formation, there are two important models to consider, namely the continuum model of impression formation and the algebraic model of impression formation. Based on the continuum model by Fiske and Neuberg (1990), consumers form impressions along a continuum, ranging from a quick snap or instant categorization of a brand to an effortful integration of all the provided information. Impression formation itself is hereby based on the motivation and/or ability of the consumers. As building blocks of the impression formation process, consumers use salient features of a brand, either as simple category labels or as attribute information (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). According to previous research on consumer impression formation and persuasion, the congruence between perceived brand attributes and the context in which they are placed is important and even influences the impact of brand personality (e.g., Aaker & Sengupta, 2000; Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991). When there is a clear mismatch between brand and setting,

the impact of brand personality is considerably smaller (Fennis & Pruyn, 2007). As opposed to the continuum model of impression formation, the algebraic model by Anderson (1991, 1996), states that impressions are built using a bottom-up approach. This means that consumers evaluate each piece of information independently and then balance and combine them to form an overall impression (Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010). Hereby, especially corporate misconduct and misbehaviour by brands have a negative impact on consumer impressions formation. If, on the other hand, brands engage in pro-social or CSR activities, consumer evaluations go up (Auger, Devinney, Louviere, & Burke, 2008; Trudel & Cotte 2009; Xie, Jia, Meng, & Li, 2017).

In the case of brand activism, it can be assumed that its effectiveness on impression formation is stronger if the situational context, i.e., the socio-political issue a brand promotes, is consistent with the key association the brand evokes than if it is completely inconsistent. In other words, if the perceived values of a brand are congruent with the central issue the brand promotes, it can be assumed that positive impressions are formed. Therefore, the following is proposed:

H3: *The higher the level of congruence between a brand's values and the cause it supports, the more positive the effect on consumer impression formation*

Brand Choice

Brand choice can be described as a selection of brands that the consumer is considering buying in the near future (Roberts & Lattin, 1991). As stated previously, brand impression is from importance here as it drives brand evaluation and final selection (Naylor et al., 2012). Previous literature has established that consumer brand choice is based on two steps, namely formation of brand considerations, and brand evaluation from the consideration set leading to the choice (Shocker, Ben-Akiva, Boccara, & Nedungadi, 1991).

According to a research study by Haller, Lee, and Cheung (2020) about the "2020 consumers", today's consumers can be divided into four categories namely value-driven, purpose-driven, brand-driven, and product-driven consumers. Brand-driven consumers choose brands that fit their lifestyle, whereas product-driven consumers are not really tied to any brand in particular. Interestingly, the study found that most consumers today are either value-driven, meaning they choose brands based on price and convenience, or purpose-driven, meaning they choose brands based on how well they align with their personal values and based on whether they are willing to walk the talk when it comes to behaviour change and the

salient issue of sustainability. Indeed, the study further revealed that six in ten consumers are willing to change their shopping behaviour to reduce their impact on the planet. Furthermore, eight out of ten respondents stated that sustainability is important for them (Haller et al., 2020). These are all important aspects to consider when analysing the brand choice of the modern consumer. In the past, Devinney, Auger, Eckhardt, and Birtchnell (2006) already identified that consumers make more and more conscious and deliberate brand choices based on personal and moral beliefs. They refer to it as 'consumer social responsibility'.

Applied to brand activism and this study in particular, it can be assumed that a high level of congruence between a brand's values and the cause it supports has a positive influence on consumers' brand choice. According to Barone, Miyazaki, and Taylor (2000), if a brand engages in cause-related marketing activities, consumers' choice of brand products and services increases. Yet, choice is only generated when consumer perceive that the primary motivation for brands' use of CRM is positive, e.g., providing support for the cause, rather than negative, e.g., exploit the cause as a means of generating profit. In contrast, Ballantyne, Warren, and Nobbs (2006) also found that brands that stand out from their competitors, i.e., through eye-catching or even quirky marketing strategies, are likely to attract attention and provoke choice as well. This can also be attributed to Meyers-Levy and Tybout's (1989) assumptions about optimal incongruence and how it encourages consumers to process information more deeply, leading to potentially stronger reactions and engagements with a brand. This seems realistic given that many brands compete for consumer attention and consideration. In the case of brand activism, it can therefore be assumed that as long as the brand's values and the cause it supports are not completely incongruent, brand choice is facilitated. Hence:

H4: *The higher the level of congruence between a brand's values and the cause it supports, the more positive the effect on brand choice*

Consumers' willingness to become active themselves

Activism nowadays can take different forms, such as online and offline activism. Especially with the development of the internet and peoples' increased online presence, a generation of "slacktivists" has emerged. Slacktivists can be characterized as people who will engage in token support, meaning that they engage in rather superficial support for a specific cause instead of making a more meaningful contribution (Morozov, 2009). Especially on social media, slacktivists often show their support for socio-political issues through a simple change

of their profile picture or by liking and sharing certain content. The lower cost and ease of participation in particular may be one reason why people are often more likely to participate in slacktivism than in more meaningful actions (Kristofferson, White, & Peloza, 2013). In contrast, genuine activists can be characterized as individuals who want to make truly significant contributions that require real effort or behavioural change in a way that makes a tangible contribution to the cause (Kristofferson et al., 2013). Van den Broek (2016) compared individuals and their online protest motivations using the Elaboration-Likelihood Model. This showed that genuine activists are more likely to take the central route when processing information, i.e., they pay more attention to the provided arguments, whereas 'slacktivists' pay more attention to superficial cues, i.e., the peripheral design cues of a campaign, when processing information.

For brands, social media in particular can be a powerful tool when engaging in activism. According to Du and Vieira (2012), social media helps overcome scepticism towards CSR activities as individuals appreciate the openness and transparency of a brand more. Especially the use of two-sided messages and factual arguments helps overcome stakeholder scepticism and gain legitimacy for CSR activities (Handelmann & Arnold, 1999). Two-sided messages contain both positive and negative information about a brand (Du & Vieira, 2012). Admitting past mistakes, for example, often shows that a brand is willing to change for the better in the future. Of course, this can also inspire consumers to take meaningful actions themselves. Past research has already shown that including some kind of negative information in a brand's message can be more effective than just including all positive information (Pechmann, 1992). It leads the receiver of the message to conclude that a brand has honest intentions and is telling the truth (Crowley & Hoyer, 1994; Du & Vieira, 2012). The use of factual arguments further increases the credibility of CSR communication. In particular, arguments about the essential aspects of a brand's CSR commitment, its obligations and the social impact of its CSR initiative are the most convincing (Du & Sen, 2010).

Applied to brand activism and this study in particular, it can be assumed that strong arguments in the communication process are key to influencing meaningful behaviour change. More precisely, it can be assumed that individuals who use the central route when processing information are more likely to be convinced and take meaningful actions when a brand's arguments are strong and congruent with their values. In other words, since individuals who choose the central route are more likely to question the information provided, a high level of congruence could be the key here to provoke behaviour change. Conversely, if the values and

statements of a brand are not congruent, it can be assumed that individuals are more prone to slacktivism. Since such individuals only pay attention to superficial cues, e.g., the design of a campaign, they may not question the arguments provided by a brand and whether they are fully congruent with the values - they may not even notice. Hence the following is hypothesized:

H5: *The higher the level of congruence between a brand's values and the cause it supports, the more positive the effect on consumers' willingness to engage in meaningful actions*

Emotional advertising appeals and the personality trait 'openness' as moderators

In this study it is further assumed that emotional appeals in advertising, in particular humorous and non-humorous appeals, would influence the relationship between different levels of congruence in brand activism on consumer responses. In addition, it is assumed that an individual's level of openness will influence their willingness to engage in meaningful actions following exposure to brand activism. In the following, the two moderator variables 'emotional advertising appeals' and 'openness' are presented along with the hypotheses that have been put forward.

Emotional advertising appeals in brand activism

Humour Appeals

Humour appeals have long been used in advertising. Humour can be characterised as a psychological response that consists of amusement and results in laughter (Martin & Ford, 2018). The use of humour in advertising can bring many opportunities for brands. For example, it can lead to less ad intrusiveness, as entertainment is more likely to be welcomed by individuals (Li, Edwards, & Lee, 2002). In addition, humorous ads, as opposed to unhumorous ads, attract more media attention to the message, are more likely to shift public opinions, and improve consumers' attitudes (Eisend, 2008; Gulas & Weinberger, 2006; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014).

In the context of serious socio-political issues though, advertisers still seem to hold themselves back. Thereby, prior studies have already established that humour can be a powerful tool. According to Polk, Young and Holbert (2009), for example, if conflicting messages in political content include humour appeals, consumers are less likely to counterargue or disagree. This is because, first, after working to understand the joke consumers have less cognitive energy or ability to counterargue with the humour, and second,

after enjoying and being entertained by the humour consumers lack motivation to pick apart any contradictory claims present in the jokes. At the same time though, the type of humour may be a key determining factor as to whether consumers work to engage in more effortful message processing (Yeo, Anderson, Becker, & Cacciatore, 2020).

The use of satire in political humour has proven effective in influencing consumer attitudes and behaviour. Satire can be defined as "artful political criticism" (Caufield, 2008) because it combines criticism of despicable targets with the playfulness of humour. Brewer and McKnight (2017) further found that satiric humour on the topic of climate change in TV shows, bolsters existing views and the overall belief in global warming, particularly among individuals who are less interested in climate change. Research on the effects of satirical content about climate change also suggests that satire might be a helpful tool in raising greater awareness and facilitating a more civil public discourse (Boykoff & Osnes, 2019; Feldman, 2013).

Consequentially, it can be assumed that the use of high humour appeals in brand activism can be an effective tool. Furthermore, since the use of humour in contradictory messages in political content, for example, distracts consumers so that they are less likely to disagree or contradict, it can be assumed that humour is particularly effective when a brand's values are only moderately congruent with the cause it supports. Humour may distract viewers from the fact that the brand activism post may not be entirely congruent with the brand's values. Therefore, it can be argued that humour is, overall, a crucial factor which influences the relationship between moderate brand activism congruence and its effect on the consumers.

Non-Humorous Appeals

Non-humorous appeals such as guilt appeals are often used in advertising and persuasive communication (Bennett, 1998; Huhmann & Brotherton, 1997). This is because guilt appeals are more likely to result in positive responses towards an ad and create empathy (Bennett, 1998). In general, people feel guilty for failing to accept or carry out their responsibilities (Izard, 2013). This can also be transferred to brands.

In this study, guilt appeals are applied to the brand itself. It is assumed that a brand that has no purpose, values or associated history of pro-social corporate practices in support of a particular socio-political issue can, through the use of guilt appeals, hide this fact and even generate empathy in consumers and increase brand choice. According to Batra and Ray (1986), using emotions, whether positive or negative, can change consumers attitudes and behaviour which can also reduce the state of tension they are in, e.g., state of tension when

confronted with a brand's activism post which is not aligned with the brand's values. Furthermore, the higher the sense of guilt, the stronger the consumer's attitudes towards the brand (Jimenez & Yang, 2008), the message (Bennett, 1998) and purchase intention (Coulter & Pinto, 1995).

By trying to gain empathy (i.e., asking the consumer to put themselves in a brand's shoes), it is possible to evoke feelings of guilt without a reaction phenomenon occurring (Basil, Ridgway, & Basil, 2007). Another strategy that brands can use to create feelings of guilt and increase empathy perception is two-sided advertising. Similar to two-sided messages, as mentioned previously, in two-sided advertising both negative and positive elements are implemented in an ad. According to Kamins and Assael (1987), two-sidedness is effective in source derogation. Furthermore, when individuals are confronted with negative features of a brand, they are less likely to come up with counterarguments themselves (Fransen, Verlegh, Kirmani, & Smit, 2015), and less likely to generate negative elements (Fennis & Stroebe, 2013).

Applied specifically to this study, the use of guilt appeals can be expected to have a significant impact on the brand activism-congruence relationship, especially when a brand's values are not fully congruent with the cause it supports. Again, brands can gain empathy through guilt appeals or the use of two-sidedness, showing that they are aware of the fact that they have done wrong in the past but are now willing to do something about it. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the higher the sense of guilt generated, the stronger the consumer's attitude towards the brand and its message.

All in all, it can be assumed that the use of emotional appeals such as humour and guilt in brand activism can have a positive effect on consumers, especially when the values of a brand and the cause it publicly supports are not fully aligned. Hence:

H6: The use of emotional advertising appeals in brand activism strengthens the effect of moderate congruence on consumers' responses towards the brand

The influence of the personality trait 'openness'
In this study it is further assumed that the personality trait 'openness' moderates the relationship between brand activism congruence and consumers' willingness to become active. According to Omoto, Snyder, and Hackett (2010), different features of motivations and personality traits can predict activism and civic engagement. Curtin, Stewart, and Duncan (2010) further stated that personality traits assessing an individual's cognitive and emotional

investment in political spheres should predict the tendency to act. This study in particular focuses on the personality trait 'openness' from the big five (agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness, and extraversion). The big five personality traits are used as consistent predictors of human behaviour in various situations (McAdams & Pals, 2006).

Openness indicates that someone is intellectual, independent, and open to experience (John & Srivastava, 1999). Furthermore, individuals with a high level of openness prefer new and exciting experiences (McCrae 1996), and value imagination (Dollinger, Leong & Ulicni, 1996). Previous studies have shown that individuals characterised as open are more likely to change their attitudes and beliefs when confronted with new information or experiences (Digman, 1990), and are more adept at diverse thinking (McCrae, 1987). This can impact people's willingness to become active themselves. According to McCrae (1996), openness plays an important role in understanding social and political attitudes and personalities. The researcher suggested that openness affects how people understand the world and process information, which, in turn, affects values and social interactions. Furthermore, according to McCrae (1996), people with high levels of openness are also more likely to personalise socio-political events. This process of personalization can further intensify personal meaning and thus the experience of these events. This is also in line with the assumption made by Curtin et al. (2010), that people with a high level of openness also examine socio-political issues more closely and tend to feel more personally affected by it.

Based on the above, it can be assumed that people with a high level of openness, when confronted with brand activism, are more likely to engage with or at least think more deeply about the issue a brand is promoting than people who are less open-minded. This could further increase overall willingness to become active. Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that open people who come into contact with brand activism and attach personal meaning to it, or even begin to personalise a protest because of an activism post, are also more likely to engage in meaningful actions themselves as a positive experience is created. Hence the following is hypothesized:

H7a*: Individuals with a high level of openness, as opposed to a low level of openness, are more likely to engage in meaningful actions after exposure to brand activism*

H7b: *Individuals with a low level of openness, as opposed to a high level of openness, are more likely to engage in slacktivism after exposure to brand activism*

In the following, a summarised overview of the hypotheses put forward is presented (table 1). In addition, a research model was created based on the hypotheses, which is depicted in Figure 1.

Table 1

Overview of Hypotheses

Hypothesis	
H1	The higher the level of congruence between a brand's values and the cause it supports, the more positive the effect on perceived brand sincerity
H2	The higher the level of congruence between a brand's values and the cause it supports, the more positive the effect on perceived brand trust
H3	The higher the level of congruence between a brand's values and the cause it supports, the more positive the effect on consumer impression formation
H4	The higher the level of congruence between a brand's values and the cause it supports, the more positive the effect on brand choice
H5	The higher the level of congruence between a brand's values and the cause it supports, the more positive the effect on consumers' willingness to engage in meaningful actions
H6	The use of emotional advertising appeals in brand activism strengthens the effect of moderate congruence on consumers' responses towards the brand
H7a	Individuals with a high level of openness, as opposed to a low level of openness, are more likely to engage in meaningful actions after exposure to brand activism
H7b	Individuals with a low level of openness, as opposed to a high level of openness, are more likely to engage in slacktivism after exposure to brand activism
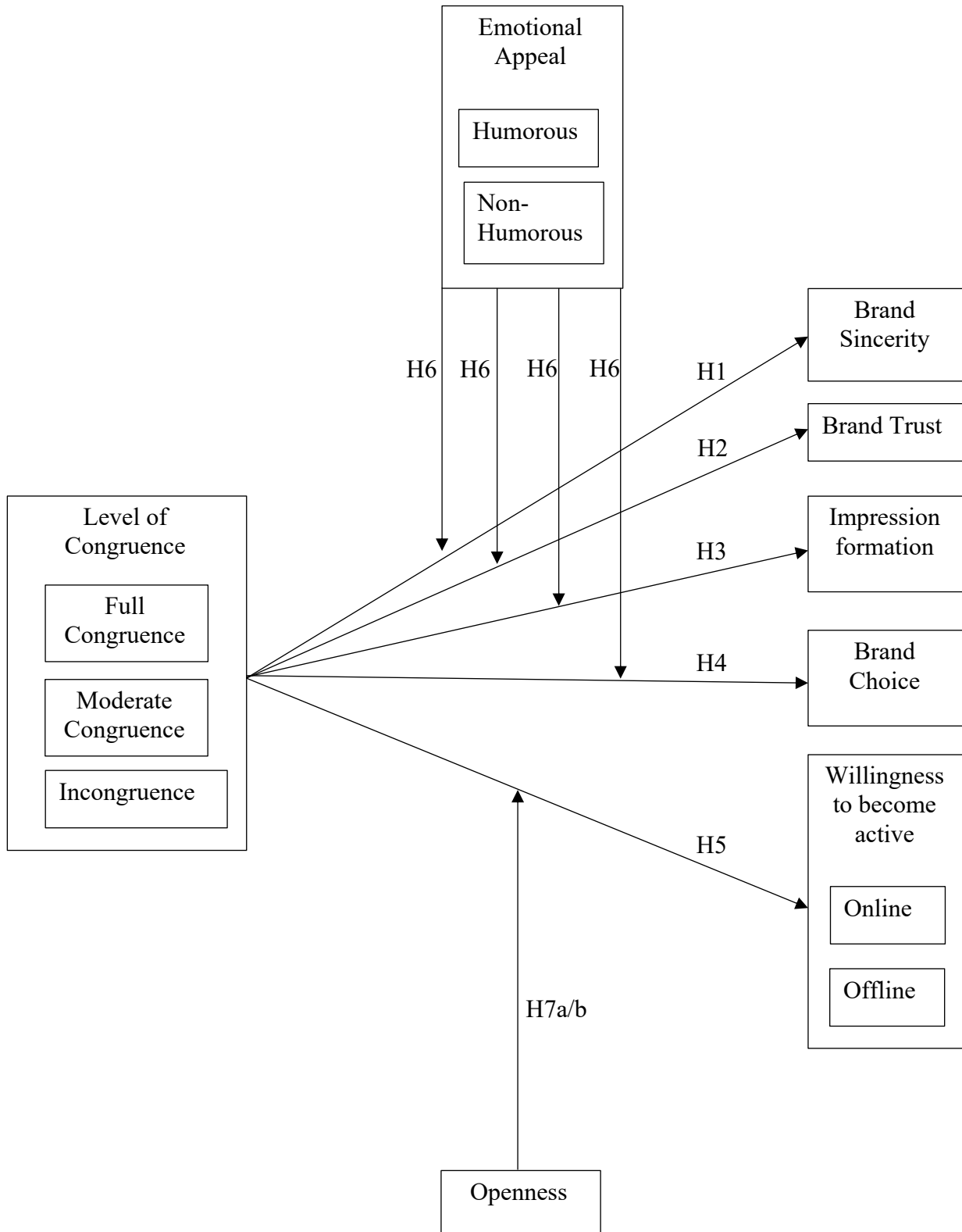
Figure 1. Research Model.

Method

In the following, the chosen method of the present study is presented. First, a general overview of the study design is given, followed by a description of the chosen stimulus material and the conducted pre-study. Subsequently, the procedure of the main study is described, and the used measurements together with the sample characteristics are depict. Lastly, the results of the manipulation check are presented.

Study Design

To study the effects of brand activism congruence on the perceived brand sincerity, trust, consumer impression formation, brand choice, and consumers' willingness to become active, a 3 (level of congruence: low vs. medium vs. high) x 2 (openness to experience: low vs. high) x2 (emotional appeals: humour vs. guilt) between-subjects quasi-experimental design was chosen for this research. A quantitative research study was conducted, for which an online survey with closed- ended question items was designed using the tool Qualtrics.

For the sampling procedure, a convenience sampling method in combination with a snowball sampling method was applied. Furthermore, as the purpose of this research is to get a comprehensive overview of the publics' opinion on the effects of brand activism, the only exclusion criterion for participants was whether they were minors. In addition, to exclude any language barriers and reach as many people as possible, the survey was completely conducted in English and shared on social media platforms, as well as on SONA, which is a participant management software for universities.

To avoid any bias due to the influence of prior attitudes towards a specific brand, for this research a fictitious clothing brand named UKIYO was created. Furthermore, to analyse whether different levels of congruence between the brand's values and its activism statements have an effect on consumers, three different brand stories (fully congruent, moderately congruent, and incongruent) were created. To get a good first impression of the brand in the stories, the purpose of the brand was introduced, as well as its mission, vision and values. More details about the chosen stimulus material can be found in the next section.

Lastly, in this study focus is set on brand activism in the fashion sector, more specifically on sustainable fashion and the central issue of climate change. In the past two years the topic of climate change has become more and more severe, mainly due to the young activist Greta Thunberg who started school strikes to raise more awareness for climate change in 2018 and sparked the 'Fridays For Future' movement, the largest youth movement in history (de Freitas Netto, Sobral, Ribeiro, & Soares, 2020). As a result, more and more

fashion brands decided to go green. Yet, the fashion industry alone is responsible for 10% of the world's carbon emission and for 20% of all water pollution worldwide. If the fashion industry does not change its current practices, it will produce 26% of the world's carbon footprint by 2050 (Putting the Brakes on Fast Fashion, 2018). Sustainability in general has become a crucial shopping factor for consumers nowadays. As the study by Haller et al. (2020) has shown, 50% of millennials and 41% of Gen Z in 170 countries have stopped or are reducing the purchase of fast fashion.

Consequently, to protect the planet and meet the demands of the modern consumer, the fashion industry needs to change. Fast fashion no longer attracts the consumers, they want to shop sustainably and with a good conscience. Luckily, many fashion brands such as H&M or Zara have noticed this shift in their consumers already and are now "going green". The created fashion brand for this study will also set their focus on sustainable fashion. More detailed information about the fictitious brand UKIYO can be found in the following.

Stimulus Material and Pre-Study

The brand UKIYO

For this study, the fictitious clothing brand "UKIYO" was created. The Japanese term was chosen by the researcher as it stands for "floating" and the urban lifestyle and culture, which was fitting the context of a new fashion brand ("Ukiyo," 2021). Subsequently, the visual identity for UKIYO was designed. Hereby the focus was set mainly on colour. According to Tavassoli and Han (2002), colour is a powerful tool that drives brand recall and recognition. Singh (2006) further states that colour is a critical communication tool that is used to deliver a brand image with persuasive power by appealing to consumers emotions. The aim of colour marketing is to promote brands and attain competitive advantages in the market by matching a brand's products and services across different marketing platforms (Panigyrakis & Kyrousi, 2014). In this context, three different colours were chosen to emphasise the differences between the three different brand identities.

For the brand identities that would communicate a high and a moderate environmental awareness and passion for sustainability, it was decided to choose the colours green and brown (see figure 2). Earthy tones such as brown have often been used as a marketing tool to promote a notion of eco-friendliness (Chu & Rahman, 2010). The colour green further communicates quietness, naturalness, and sustainability (Davey, 1998), which was ideal for the brand identity that would be fully congruent.

For the brand identity that would communicate no environmental awareness or a passion for sustainability, it was decided to use the colour black, as a contrast. The colour black is often associated with negative images such as darkness or death (Aslam, 2006). Furthermore, it communicates closure and shutdown, sadness and regret (Wills, 2006). According to the Japanese fashion designer Yohii Yamamoto "Black is modest and arrogant at the same time. Black is lazy and easy – but mysterious." Since this is precisely what was planned to be communicated to the consumer for the incongruent brand identity, the colour black was chosen.

To further emphasise the different brand identities, it was decided to show the participants three important values of UKIYO. For the fully congruent brand identity, it was chosen to add the values 'Reducing CO2', 'Water Saving', and 'Clean Dyeing'. For the moderately congruent brand identity, the values 'Consumer Focuses', 'Transparency', and 'Reducing our Ecological Footprint' were added. Lastly, to accentuate the incongruent brand identity, it was decided to add values such as 'Forward Fashion', 'Individuality' and 'Passionate' (see figure 2.).
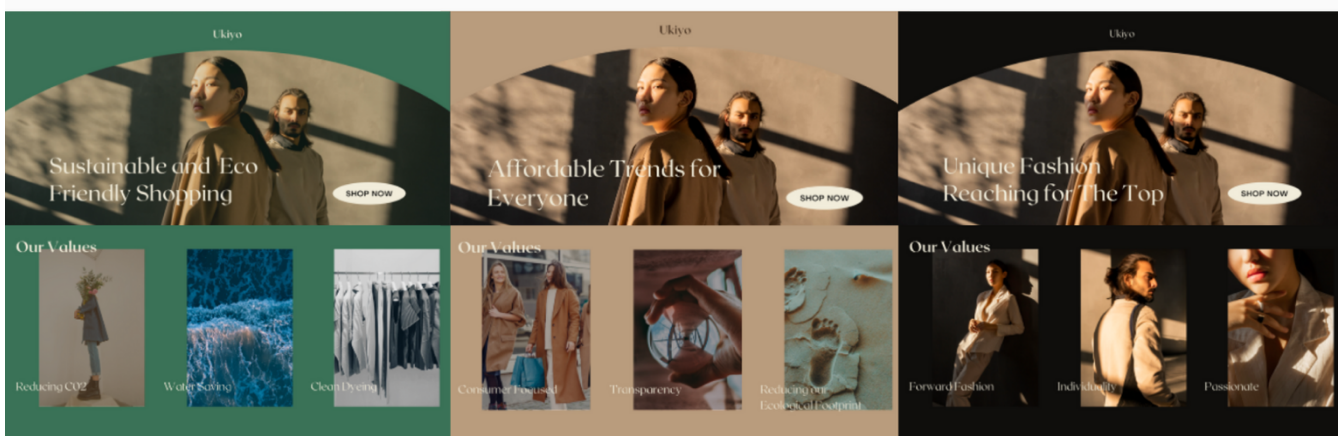
Figure 2. UKIYO Visual identity: Fully Congruent, Moderately Congruent, Incongruent.

The brand stories

After the visual identity was created, three different brand backstories, one fully congruent, one moderately congruent, and one incongruent, were designed to communicate the purpose of the brand as well as its mission, vision and values.

For the story that would be fully congruent with the chosen topic of climate change and sustainable fashion, the brand Nu-in served as inspiration. Nu-in is a fully sustainable driven fashion brand, founded in 2019 with the aim to be an alternative to the bigger brands producing unsustainably (nu-in, 2019). Based on the background of Nu-in, the fictitious brand

UKIYO claims in the fully congruent story, for example, that it "is born out of necessity and with responsibility to protect our planet and its inhabitants.", and that "Having the lowest possible impact on the environment underpins every decision made. It's simply a given."

In the moderate congruent brand story, it was communicated that UKIYO "offers fashion design and services that allow people to be inspired and express their own personal style", and that the brand was founded "because we believe that through fashion everyone should be able to make a statement." Hereby the fashion brand H&M and especially the statements about the H&M Group (H&M, 2021) served as an inspiration. In addition, to make the brand story only moderate congruent with the topic of climate change, a big statement was added to the brand story at the end: "As the central issue of climate change becomes more and more severe, we recently got inspired by all the young climate activists and are from now on only using recycled and organic materials in our collections. We are sure, together WE can shape the future of our planet." To set the focus particularly on the statement, another colour for the font was chosen. The statement itself was also made up by the researcher, inspired by the young activists in the Fridays For Future Movements in Germany.

For the incongruent brand story, the description of the brand Calvin Klein by PVH (n.d.) served as an inspiration. In the story that would be fully incongruent with the topic of climate change and sustainable fashion, UKIYO claimed for example that it was founded because "we believe that people should be more inspired and encouraged to realize the full potential of what fashion has to offer", and that "We've designed every part of our business to reach a globally iconic status. With a focus on the trends of the future, we want to set a statement in the fashion industry and show everyone how it's done." Importantly, in the incongruent brand story the topic of climate change or sustainability was never mentioned. The final brand stories can be found in Appendix A.

Instagram Posts

After the brand stories were created, a total of six brand activism Instagram posts were designed (see figure 3). Hereby three posts contained humour appeals in the form of Memes, and three posts contained non-humorous appeals in the form of real-life images about the damage of the fashion industry on the environment and society. Additionally, all Instagram posts showed the same numbers and facts about pollution in the fashion industry, e.g., '750 million people do not have access to drinking water', and '2,700 litre of fresh water are used to produce 1 new T-Shirt'. The numbers and facts were all derived from different sources,

e.g., an article by Charpail (2017), a story published by the UN in 2018 called "Putting the brakes on fast fashion", and the Instagram Account @sustainablefashionmatterz (2020).

For the final Instagram posts, it was also decided to show three posts instead of one to create a better illusion of a typical brand campaign and to give the participants somewhat better insights into the topic of climate change and sustainable fashion. Furthermore, it was not decided to not post the pictures from a verified brand account to create the image for UKIYO as a small company that is now trying to make their way in the business. Finally, to make the posts even more believable, small details such as the number of likes, hashtags, and a reference to the IGTV feature were added. In addition, it was decided to keep the commentary section out to avoid any distractions and to direct the focus of the participants exclusively to the pictures and the statements of the brand.

More detailed information about how the final Instagram posts and the brand stories were chosen can be found in the following pre-study section.

Figure 3

Instagram Posts non-humorous
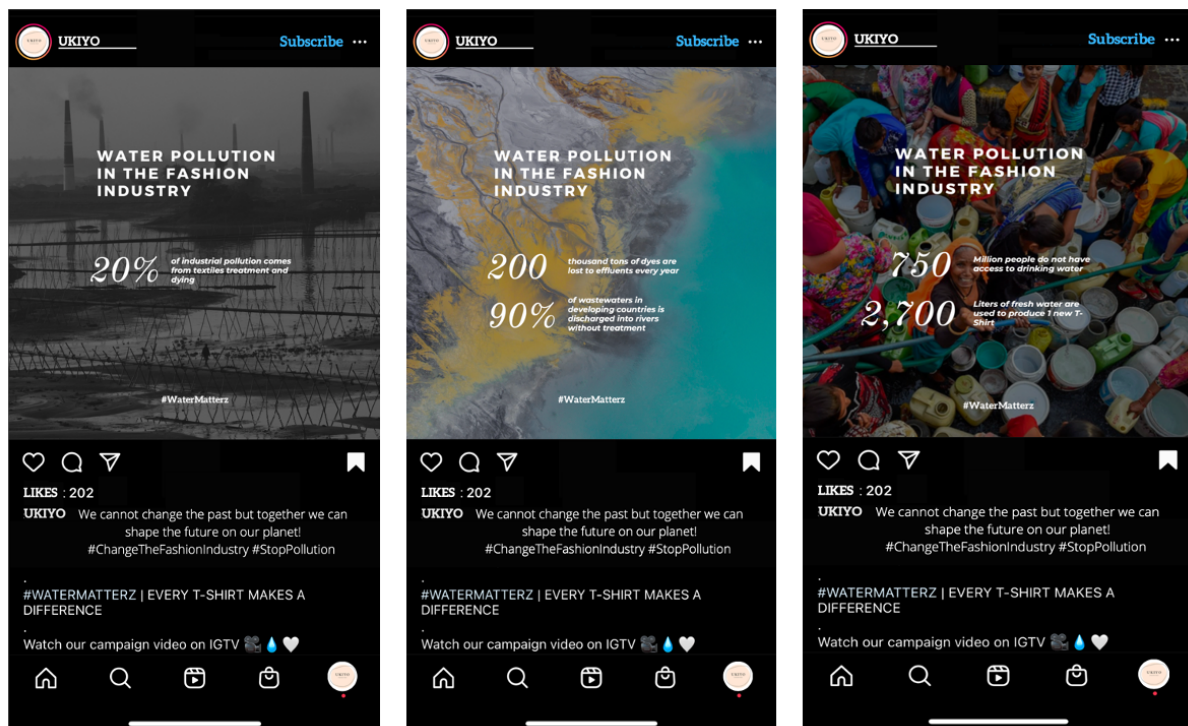
| 1 | 2 | 3 |

Instagram Posts humorous
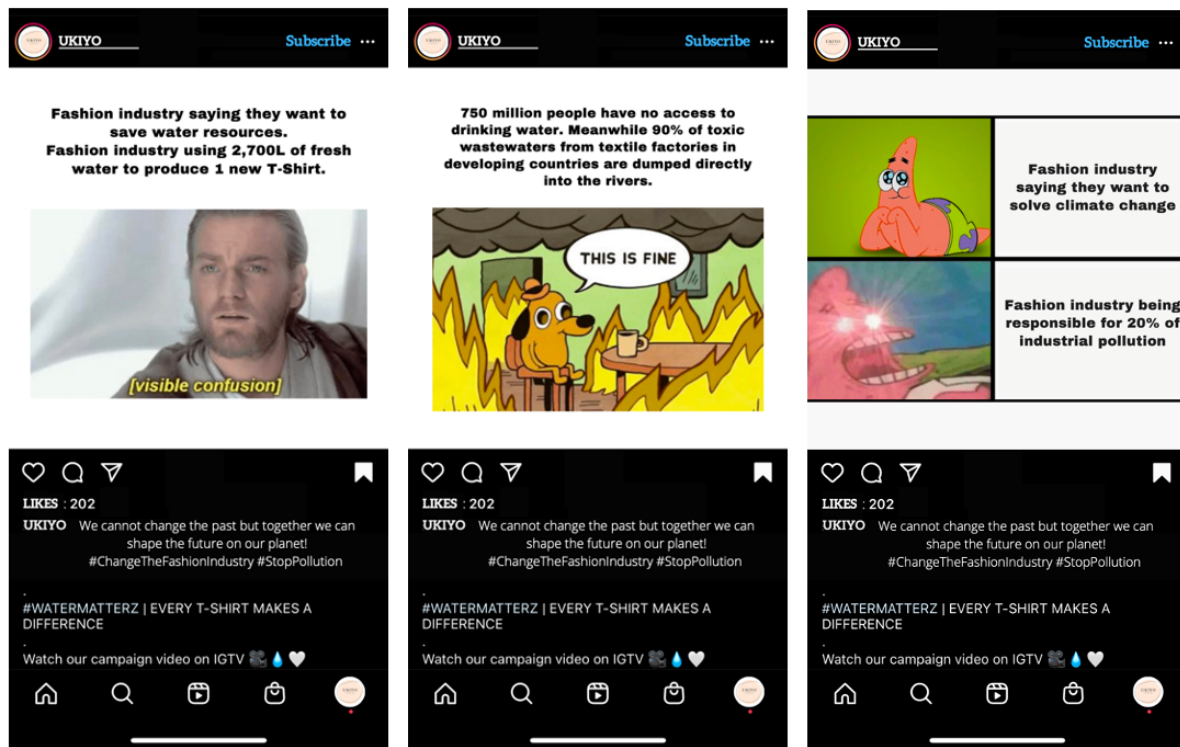
| 1 | 2 | 3 |

Pre-Study

A pre-study was conducted to test the manipulations of the independent variables 'level of congruence' and 'level of humour appeal'. To do so, an online survey with closed-ended question items was created using the tool Qualtrics. For data collection, a convenience sampling method was used. In addition, the pre-test was completely conducted in English to obtain a more diverse and larger sample. The pre-test consisted of a total of six questions that were repeated over again. Hereby, two items were made up by the researcher, e.g., 'The post is humorous', and four of the question items were derived from the Cause Brand Congruence Scale created by Goldsmith and Yimin (2014). Further example items would be: 'The Instagram post and the brand story go well together' or 'The Instagram post is inconsistent with the brand story'. All question items had to be answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 5 = 'strongly agree'. Lastly, the final sample consisted of 14 participants, 5 male and 9 females, aged between 19 and 26 years.

Procedure and Results

For the procedure, the participants ($N = 14$) were first asked to read the brand story that is aimed to be fully congruent with the topic of sustainable fashion. After reading the brand story, participants were shown three different Instagram posts containing non-humorous appeals. After every post, participants were asked to answer a total of six questions, as mentioned in the beginning. Thereafter, the three Instagram posts containing humour appeal were presented. Again, after every post, participants had to answer the same six questions, measuring the perceived level of humour and the congruence between the brand story and the Instagram posts. In the next round, the brand story that would be moderately congruent was presented, together with the Instagram posts and the same question sets, followed by the brand story that would be completely incongruent. At the end of the study, participants had the chance to give feedback.

The main aim of this pre-study was firstly to analyse whether individuals could clearly identify the different levels of congruence of the brand stories, and secondly to measure the perceived emotional appeals of the IG posts. Results revealed that the pre-created brand stories were very evident. All participants could clearly identify which story was fully congruent, which moderately congruent, and which completely incongruent with the topic of sustainable fashion the provided Instagram posts. Therefore, no further changes, besides some small spelling mistakes, needed to be made for the final study. Participants also had a clear opinion on the question of which posts had the highest and lowest humour appeal. Hereby, an Instagram post with a Spongebob meme was voted funniest by nine participants (see figure 3 post 3). For the lowest humour appeal, post number 2 in figure 3 won among ten participants. Lastly, based on the feedback of the participants and after another feedback round with two experienced researchers, it was further decided to use the same captions for all posts, and to slightly adapt the images that were chosen last as most or least funny. The Instagram posts from the pre-study can be found in appendix B.

Procedure Main Study

Before the main study started, an opening statement was presented to the participants in which the purpose of the study and information on risks and data protection was provided. The participants were told that the aim of this study would be to analyse peoples' first impressions towards a campaign of the new fashion brand Ukiyo. At the end of the opening statement, the participants were asked to give consent for their participation in this research.

After consent was given, demographic data had to be specified, including gender, age, nationality, highest completed level of education and current employment status. Then, the main study started.

Participants were then randomly divided into six conditions and presented with the stimulus material. Importantly, participants in each condition were presented with either the fully congruent, moderately congruent, or incongruent version of the fictional brand's story. Additionally, participants in each condition were shown either the 3 Instagram posts that contained humour appeal or non-humour appeal. After the stimulus material was presented, all participants had to answer the same set of questions. First, participants had to state their general impression of the brand, followed by the perceived sincerity and trustworthiness. Then brand choice, emotional advertising appeals and the participants' willingness to take action themselves had to be indicated. Here, participants were asked both whether they would take action online and offline. Subsequently, the perceived congruence between the brand story and the Instagram posts, as well as possible greenwashing perceptions had to be indicated. Lastly, the personality trait openness was measured, followed by the participants' general environmental awareness.

Measurements

In this study, nearly all items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1= 'strongly disagree', to 7= 'strongly agree'. Exceptions are mentioned within the specific constructs below. Furthermore, to avoid any complications in the later analysis process, values such as 'strongly disagree' were coded as 1, whereas values such as 'strongly agree' were coded with the highest number 7. In addition, items with a negative wording were re-coded as well. The final online survey entailed a total of 72 questions, excluding the demographics. For the measurements of the variables mainly existing scales were used, only a few question items were slightly re-phrased or adapted by the researcher to fit the context of this research. An overview of the complete survey can be found in Appendix C.

Consumer Impression Formation

The first construct 'consumer impression formation' was measured using a total of five items derived from the brand attitude scale developed by Spears and Singh (2004). Items that were included here were, for example, 'In my opinion the brand is appealing', or 'In my opinion the brand is unpleasant'. The scale was chosen here because it would give a clear overview of the participants' first impressions towards the fictitious clothing brand. The scale is however

short, but very precise. To arrive at a general 'consumer impression formation' measure, all items were summed and averaged. The final scale has a Cronbach's alpha score of α = .91.

Brand Sincerity

Brand sincerity was measured using six items derived from the brand personality scale by Aaker (1997). The scale was chosen because it has already been used in many studies and is therefore very trustworthy. Question items here would include, for example, 'The brand is down-to-earth', or 'the brand is wholesome'. Responses on the individual brand sincerity items were summed and averaged with a Cronbach's alpha score of α = .88.

Brand Trust

Brand trust was measured using a total of six items which were derived from definitions out of literature. According to existing literature, a brand is classified as trustworthy if it delivers what has been promised (Erdem & Swait, 2004), and if consumers believe that a brand is reliable, consistent, competent, responsible, helpful, fair and honest (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Based on that, items included, for example, 'the brand is consistent', or 'the brand delivers what it promises'. It was chosen to focus on definitions out of literature because no suitable scale could be found. Again, responses to the individual trust items were summed and averaged (α = .88).

Brand Choice

Consumer's brand choice was measured using the overall brand equity scale (OBE) by Yoo and Donthu (2001). The scale entailed a total of five items which were slightly adapted to fit the context of this study. Items included here were, for example, 'I would definitely choose Ukiyo for buying new clothes', and 'Even if another brand has the same values as Ukiyo, I would prefer to buy clothes from Ukiyo'. Since there are very few scales that directly measure consumer brand choice, it was chosen to adapt items from a brand equity scale. After all individual items were summed and averaged to measure 'brand choice', the Cronbach's alpha is α = .84.

Emotional Advertising Appeals

Humour appeal in brand activism (humorous vs. non-humorous) was measured using twelve items, thereof three made up by the researcher, e.g., 'I think the Instagram posts of the brand are shocking '. The other items were derived partially from the humour scale by Zhang (1996)

and the attitude towards the advertisement scale (Aad) by Mitchell and Olson (1981). Further items included here were, for example, 'I think the Instagram posts of the brand are humorous', or 'I think the Instagram posts of the brand are irritating'. Again, individual items measuring this construct were summed and averaged ($\alpha = .79$).

Online Activism

Online activism was measured using seven items, thereof one made up by the researcher. The other six items were derived from the Slacktivism Engagement Scale by Seifert, Ohme, Hagen, and Helm (2014), and included, for example, 'I would like the posts', 'I would share the posts', or 'I would comment on the posts'. The item added by the researcher was an open question for the participants, namely 'I would take different actions online, for example…'. Again, responses to the individual items measuring online activism were summed and averaged ($\alpha = .83$).

Offline Activism

Offline activism was also measured using seven items, thereof one made up by the researcher. The other six items were derived from the Activism Orientation Scale by Corning and Myers (2002) and were slightly adapted to fit the context. Example items would be, 'I would take part in a protest march', or 'I would boycott a brand for the reasons stated in the Instagram posts'. Again, the item added by the researcher was an open question for the participants, namely 'I would take different actions offline, for example…'. Individual item ratings were summed and averaged ($\alpha = .86$).

Perceived Congruence

The construct perceived congruence was measured using four items. Hereby, three of the items were derived from the cause-brand-congruence scale by Goldsmith and Yimin (2014), including, for example, 'The brand story and the Instagram posts match well', and 'The brand story and the Instagram posts are compatible with each other'. In addition, to ultimately find out whether the participants perceive the story of the brand as congruent with the Instagram posts or not, one question was added by the researcher namely 'The brand story and the Instagram posts are fully congruent'. To arrive at a general 'perceived congruence' measure, individual items were summed and averaged ($\alpha = .92$).

Openness Perceptions

The personality trait openness was measured using ten items derived from the Big Five Inventory scale (BFI) by Goldberg (1993). Question items in this section included 'I see myself as someone who is original, comes up with new ideas', 'I see myself as someone who has an active imagination', or 'I see myself as someone who prefers work that is routine'. Again, to measure the construct openness individual items were summed and averaged (α = .73). In addition, a median split was applied here to create two groups for later analysis purposes: low level of openness and high level of openness.

Environmental Awareness

The construct of environmental awareness was added to get an overview of the participants' opinion and attitude towards socio-political issues in general and whether this would influence their choices. To do so, six items were added by the researcher including, for example, 'I am concerned about climate change', 'I make sure to only buy sustainably and fairly produced fashion', and 'I am concerned about racism'. All individual items measuring environmental awareness were summed and averaged. For this construct the Cronbach's alpha is α = .82.

Since all constructs achieve a sufficient Cronbach's Alpha value over and above .7, it can be concluded, according to Tavakol and Dennick (2011), that all constructs can be considered highly reliable.

Sample Characteristics

For this study, a total of 369 participants completed the online survey. However, 49 people had to be excluded from the sample due to incomplete responses. In addition, a further 47 participants were excluded from the final sample because they did not take enough time, i.e., no more than 15 seconds to read the brand's story and no more than 10 seconds to look at the Instagram posts.

The final sample consisted of 272 participants, of which 29% were male, 70.6% female and 0.4% other. The mean of the participant's age was M = 22.16, SD = 4.15. As a convenience sampling method was used for the data collection, 63.6% of the participants were German and 22.4% Dutch. However, responses were also collected from participants all over Europe and even from Asia and Africa. The sample consisted mostly of students, in fact 241, followed by 16 full-time and 13 part-time employees. In terms of the highest level of

education attained by participants, 71.3% reported having at least a high school diploma or equivalent, followed by 23.5% with a Bachelor's degree and 4.0% with a Master's degree.

At the end of the survey, participants were further asked to specify their environmental awareness and their general caring for socio-political issues. This was important to identify possible biases within the participants, as it can be assumed that people who already show a high interest in socio-political issues would also correspond more positively to the sustainable fashion brand. In this context, 51.8% of the participants said that they do not pay attention to buying only sustainably and fairly produced fashion, while 35% said that they do. In addition, 94.9% stated that they are concerned about climate change and racism, 89.3% about Gender Equality, and 86.8% about LGBTQIA rights. Finally, a total of 75.7 % of the participants stated that they consider themselves as someone who generally shows a high interest in socio-political issues, only 15.8 % stated that they do not.

An overview of the spread of the participants in the different conditions can be found below in table 2.

Table 2

Distribution of sample characteristics in the different conditions

		Fully Congruent	Moderately Congruent	Incongruent
Humour Appeal		N= 46	N = 38	N = 48
	Age [a]	M = 21,42 / SD = 2,36	M = 22,61 / SD = 2,99	M = 21,63 / SD = 2,28
	Gender [b] Male	35%	Male 29%	Male 23%
	Female	65%	Female 71%	Female 77%
	Educational level [c] 1)	83%	1) 55%	1) 75%
	2)	13%	2) 32%	2) 21%
	3)	4%	3) 13%	3) 4%
	4)	0%	4) 0%	4) 0%
Non-humour Appeal		N = 42	N= 45	N = 52
	Age [a]	M = 22,29 / SD = 3,70	M = 22,04 / SD = 3,71	SD = 22,96 / SD = 7,13
	Gender [b] Male	31%	Male 36%	Male 23%
	Female	69%	Female 64%	Female 77%
	Educational level [c] 1)	69%	1) 71%	1) 71%
	2)	29%	2) 24%	2) 25%
	3)	2%	3) 0%	3) 2%
	4)	0%	4) 5%	4) 2%

a)   *Mean + SD of self reported age*
b)   *Percentage division Male / Female*
c)   *Percentage: 1)=Low, high school or vocational level / 2)=Bachelor level / 3)=Master or doctorate level / 4)=Other*

Manipulation Check

To identify whether the manipulation of the sample was sufficient and whether the congruence and humour manipulation indeed results in the perception that the Instagram posts were (in)congruent with the brand and (non)humorous, two one-way ANOVAs were conducted. Hereby the condition variables 'level congruence' and 'level humour' were set independently as fixed factors and 'perceived congruence' and 'perceived humour appeal' were set as dependent variables.

Manipulation of congruence

There was a significant effect of the condition variable 'level of congruence' on general congruence perception (F (2.269) = 8.39, p < .001), indicating that participants who were shown the incongruent brand story also perceived the story as less congruent with the Instagram posts (M = 4.18, SD = 1.54) than participants who were shown the moderately congruent brand story (M = 4.76, SD = 1.25), and the fully congruent brand story (M = 5.00, SD = 1.40). A further post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni criterium indicates a significant difference between incongruent and moderately congruent levels (p = .020), and incongruent and fully congruent levels (p < .001). There was no significant difference between fully congruent and moderately congruent levels (p = .789). The mean scores also revealed that the participants who were shown the fully congruent and incongruent brand stories did not identify the brand stories as such. Furthermore, most participants in the two conditions did not have a clear opinion on whether the brand story shown was congruent with the Instagram posts or not, their answers remained neutral. In addition, there was almost no difference in the mean scores for participants in the moderately congruent and fully congruent condition. Based on this, it can be argued that the manipulation was not successful.

Manipulation of emotional advertising appeals

There was a significant effect of the condition variable level of humour appeal on general humour perception (F (1.270) = 153.85, p < .001), indicating that participants who were shown the humorous Instagram posts also scored higher on humour appeal (M = 4.64, SD = 0.89), than participants who were shown the non-humorous Instagram posts (M = 3.53, SD = 0.56). However, mean scores also revealed only small differences between the participants in the conditions. It was shown that participants again mainly stayed neutral with a tendency to rate their Instagram posts as somewhat funny or somewhat not funny. Manipulation was therefore not very strong.

Results

Hypotheses Testing

To determine the effectiveness of the independent variable 'level of congruence' and the moderator variable 'level of humour appeal' on the dependent variables 'consumer impression formation', 'brand sincerity', 'brand trust', and 'brand choice', a two-way ANOVA was conducted. Hereby 'level of congruence' and 'level of humour appeal' were set as fixed factors. In addition, to analyse the effectiveness of the independent variable 'level of congruence' and the moderator variable 'level of openness' on the dependent variables 'online activism' and 'offline activism', another two-way ANOVA was conducted. Hereby 'level of congruence' and 'level of openness' were set as fixed factors. The results can be found below. In addition, a summarised overview of all hypotheses accepted and rejected is presented at the end in table 3.

Effects of level of congruence on brand sincerity

Level of congruence has a significant effect on perceived brand sincerity (F (2.266) = 5.73, p = .004), indicating that participants who were shown the incongruent brand story perceived the brand as less sincere (M = 4.59, SD = 1.14) than participants who were shown the moderately congruent (M = 4.70, SD = 1.17) and fully congruent brand story (M = 5.11, SD = 1.03). A further post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni criterium showed a significant difference (p = .005) between the mean scores for the participants in the fully congruent and incongruent condition, and a significant difference (p = .048) between the mean scores for the participants in the fully congruent and moderately congruent condition. There was no significant difference between the moderately congruent and incongruent condition (p = 1.00). Since participants who were shown the incongruent brand story also perceived the brand as less sincere than individuals who were shown the moderately congruent and fully congruent brand story, hypothesis H1 can be confirmed.

Effects of level of congruence on brand trust

Level of congruence has a significant effect on perceived brand trust (F (2.266) = 8.87, p < .001), indicating that participants who were shown the incongruent brand story perceived the brand as less trustworthy (M = 4.65, SD = 0.98) than participants who were shown the moderately congruent story (M = 4.68, SD = 0.96) and the fully congruent story (M = 5.16, SD = 0.86). A further post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni criterium showed a significant difference (p < .001) between the mean scores for the participants in the fully

congruent and incongruent condition, and a significant difference ($p = .003$) between the mean scores for the participants in the fully congruent and moderately congruent condition. There was no significant difference between the moderately congruent and incongruent condition ($p = 1.00$). Furthermore, as participants who were shown the incongruent brand story also perceived the brand as less trustworthy than individuals who were shown the moderately congruent and fully congruent brand story, hypothesis H2 can be accepted.

In addition, a comparison between the mean scores for brand sincerity and brand trust in the different conditions can be found below in figure 4.

Figure 4

Mean comparison brand sincerity and brand trust by level of congruence manipulation
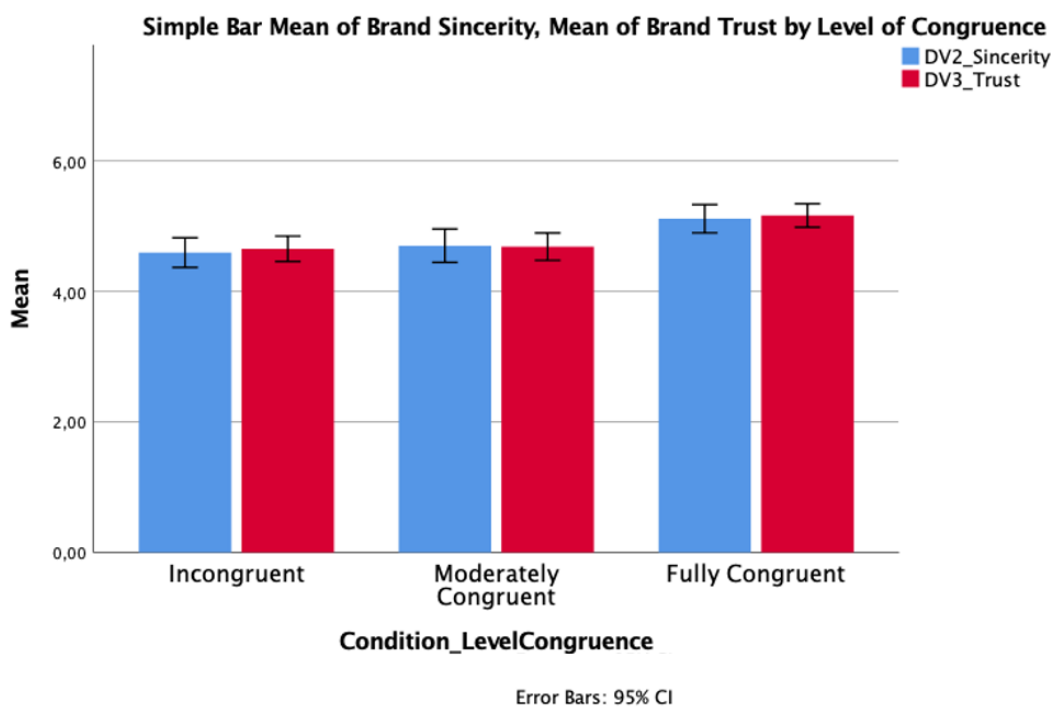
Effects of level of congruence on consumer impression formation

Level of congruence has no significant effect on consumer impression formation ($F (2.266) = 2.90$, $p = .057$). Therefore, hypothesis H3 has to be rejected.

Effects of level of congruence on brand choice

Results revealed no significant effect of level of congruence on consumer's brand choice (F (2.266) = 1.70, p = .185). Hence, H4 has to be rejected.

Effects of level of congruence on willingness to become active online and offline

Level of congruence has no significant effect on consumers' willingness to become active online (F (2.266) = 0.02, p = .982), and offline (F (2.266) = 1.02, p = .903). Therefore, H5 has to be rejected.

Moderation effect emotional advertising appeals

There was no significant interaction effect between level of congruence and emotional advertising appeals on brand sincerity (F (2.266) = 0.69, p = .505), brand trust (F (2.266) = 1.14, p = .322), consumer impression formation (F (2.266) = 2.51, p = .779), and brand choice (F (2.266) = 0.92, p = .401). Therefore, hypothesis H6 has to be rejected.

However, a significant direct effect of emotional advertising appeals on consumer impression formation could be identified (F (1.266) = 4.72, p = .031), indicating that participants who were shown the humorous Instagram posts had a more negative first impression of the brand (M = 5.17, SD = 1.17), than participants who were shown the non-humorous Instagram posts (M = 5.44, SD = 0.98).

Moderation effect level of openness

Results showed no significant interaction effect between level of openness and level of congruence on consumers' willingness to become active online (F (2.266) = 2.14, p = .120), and offline (F (2.266) = 0.20, p = .821). Furthermore, no direct significant effects of level of openness on consumers' willingness to engage in online (F (1.266) = 2.69, p = .102), and offline activism (F (1.266) = 1.28, p = .258) could be found. Hence H7a and H7b have to be rejected.

In the following, an overview of the accepted and rejected hypotheses is provided (table 3.).

Table 3

Overview of accepted hypotheses

Hypothesis		Accepted?
H1	The higher the level of congruence between a brand's values and the cause it supports, the more positive the effect on perceived brand sincerity	Yes
H2	The higher the level of congruence between a brand's values and the cause it supports, the more positive the effect on perceived brand trust	Yes
H3	The higher the level of congruence between a brand's values and the cause it supports, the more positive the effect on consumer impression formation	No
H4	The higher the level of congruence between a brand's values and the cause it supports, the more positive the effect on brand choice	No
H5	The higher the level of congruence between a brand's values and the cause it supports, the more positive the effect on consumers' willingness to engage in meaningful actions	No
H6	The use of emotional advertising appeals in brand activism strengthens the effect of moderate congruence on consumers' responses towards the brand	No
H7a	Individuals with a high level of openness, as opposed to a low level of openness, are more likely to engage in meaningful actions after exposure to brand activism	No
H7b	Individuals with a low level of openness, as opposed to a high level of openness, are more likely to engage in slacktivism after exposure to brand activism	No

Additional Analysis

An additional analysis was conducted to find out whether the perceived level of congruence, independent of manipulation, has an impact on brand sincerity, trust, consumer impression formation, brand choice, and consumers' willingness to take actions themselves. To do so, six simple linear regressions were performed.

Effects of perceived level of congruence

Results of the linear regression analyses indicate that the perceived level of congruence has a significant effect on brand sincerity (F (1.270) = 139.75, $p < .001$, R^2 = .341), brand trust (F (1.270) = 156.28, $p < .001$, R^2 = .367), consumer impression formation (F (1.270) = 143.74, $p < .001$, R^2 = .347), brand choice (F (1.270) = 92.24, $p < .001$, R^2 = .255), and consumers' willingness to become active themselves online (F (1.270) = 79.48, $p < .001$, R^2 = .227), and offline (F (1.270) = 33.27, $p < .001$, R^2 = .110).

A more detailed summary of the results of the different regression analyses including the coefficients and the 95% confidence interval levels can be found below in table 4.

Table 4.

Simple linear regression analysis summary for perceived congruence predicting brand sincerity, trust, consumer impression formation, brand choice, and consumers' willingness to become active themselves

Variable	B	95% CI	β	t	p
Brand Sincerity	0.46	[2.31, 3.05]	0.58	11.82	<.001
Brand Trust	0.40	[0.34, 0.46]	0.61	12.50	<.001
Consumer Impression Formation	0.44	[0.37, 0.51]	0.59	11.99	<.001
Brand Choice	0.37	[0.30, 0.45]	0.51	9.60	<.001
Willingness to become active online	0.39	[0.30, 0.47]	0.48	8.92	<.001
Willingness to become active offline	0.30	[0.20, 0.40]	0.33	5.77	<.001

Note: CI= Confidence Interval for B.

Discussion

In this research the topic of brand activism as a new marketing strategy and its impact on the modern consumer was introduced. Brands today increasingly see themselves forced by society and their stakeholders to take a stand on socio-political issues and use their power and influence to contribute to a better world. Yet, "simply" engaging in activism presents many challenges for brands. For example, it is important to be perceived as authentic to avoid possible perceptions of "woke-washing". If a brand is perceived as inauthentic when engaging in activism, this can quickly damage the reputation of a brand. In this regard, this study analysed whether different levels of congruence between a brand's values and the cause it supports influence perceived sincerity and trust in a brand, overall brand choice, consumers' impression formation and consumers' willingness to take action themselves. Additionally, the moderating role of emotional advertising appeals and the personality trait openness was investigated. As there is little research in the field of brand activism that truly engages the consumer, the aim of this study was to contribute to the field of marketing by providing greater insight into the true effectiveness of brand activism as a strategy and what it takes for brands to be successful when engaging in activism.

Based on the created theoretical framework, several hypotheses were formulated. The results of the main study showed that congruence level has a significant effect on perceived brand sincerity and trust, which is also consistent with previous studies. However, congruence level did not show a significant effect on consumers' impression formation, brand choice and consumers' willingness to take action themselves, which is rather contradictory to previous research findings of similar studies. In contrast, the results of the additional regression analyses showed results consistent with previous studies. It can therefore be assumed that the manipulation of the congruence level was not successful. Furthermore, no moderation effects of emotional advertising appeals or the personality trait openness could be identified, which was rather surprising.

The detailed results of this study are explained below, followed by the implications and limitations of this study and a final conclusion.

Findings and Theoretical Implications

The results of this study revealed a significant effect of level of congruence between a brand's values and its statements on social media on perceived brand sincerity and trust. Hereby, participants who were shown the incongruent brand story also perceived the brand as less sincere and trustworthy than participants who were shown the moderately and fully congruent brand story. These findings confirm the results of previous studies on the role of congruence in brand sincerity and trustworthiness. For example, according to Maehle et al. (2011), brands that are not perceived as sincere are often associated with consumer deception or unethical business practices. Since the incongruent brand story in this study never mentioned anything about sustainability and fair/green fashion, it can be assumed that the participants felt deceived or fooled by the brand, which reduced the overall perception of the brand's sincerity. When it comes to winning consumers' trust, a brand should be reliable, responsible, consistent, helpful, and honest (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Again, because there was no identifiable consistency or accountability between the incongruent brand story and the Instagram posts, it can be argued that participants also perceived this story as less trustworthy than the others. In this regard, Lim et al. (2013) and Edelman (2019) found that when consumers perceive a brand as inauthentic (low levels of congruence), distrust and negative WoM increase, and a brand's motives are questioned. It is likely that this was the case for participants who were shown the incongruent brand story.

Results also revealed no significant effect for level of congruence on brand choice, consumer impression formation and consumers' willingness to become active themselves. However, these results strongly contradict findings of similar studies presented in this framework. Yet, when looking at the results of the additional linear regression analyses, it was found that overall perceived congruence would significantly influence these factors. It can therefore be assumed that the reason for the contradictory results may be the manipulation of congruence. When looking at the manipulation check for the condition variable 'level of congruence' it was noticeable that the participants who were shown the fully congruent and incongruent brand stories did not identify the brand stories as such. Furthermore, most participants in the two conditions did not have a clear opinion on whether the brand story shown was congruent with the Instagram posts or not, their answers remained neutral. In addition, there was almost no difference in the mean scores for participants in the moderately congruent and fully congruent condition. Based on this, it can be said that the manipulation of congruence was not successful after all. This can also be attributed to the conducted pre-study in this research. In the pre-study, participants were only shown one brand story for each

condition, meaning that there was no opportunity for comparison. For future research, it may therefore be advisable to conduct a more extensive pre-study with different versions of the brand stories for each condition.

When it comes to emotional advertising appeals, results of this study have shown that there is no moderating effect on the relationship between moderate congruence and consumer responses towards the brand. These results are again contrary to the findings of previous studies mentioned in the theoretical framework (e.g., Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014; Bennett, 1998). When looking at the manipulation of emotional advertising appeals in this study, it was shown that participants in both conditions only identified the Instagram posts as somewhat humorous and somewhat non-humorous. Additionally, the differences in the mean scores for participants in both conditions were rather small. Therefore, it can be argued that manipulation was again not fully successful which may be a reason for the insignificant results. However, one significant direct effect of emotional advertising appeals on consumer impression formation could be found, indicating that participants who were shown the humorous Instagram posts had a more negative first impression of the brand, than participants who were shown the non-humorous Instagram posts. It has already been shown in the past that the use of humour in advertising is not always successful. In addition, failure to be perceived as funny as a brand can even cause negative feelings among consumers (e.g. Beard 2008; Flaherty et al. 2004) and lead to confusion (Veatch 1998). Since the participants in this study perceived the humorous Instagram posts not as fully humorous, it can be assumed that the negative first impressions of the brand may be based on the "failure" of the brand to be funny. It must also be kept in mind that every individual has a different kind of humour. Therefore, it can be assumed that for some participants the humour used in the Instagram posts might have been too aggressive, inappropriate or even irritating. This could also be the reason why the non-humorous Instagram posts, in contrast to the humorous ones, lead to a more positive first brand impression of the participants.

Results also showed that an individual's level of openness has no influence on the relationship between level of congruence and consumer's willingness to become active. Moreover, the personality trait openness was found to have no influence on consumer's willingness to become active themselves online or offline. According to Omoto et al. (2010), different characteristics of motivations and personality traits can predict activism and civic engagement. However, according to the findings, this seems not to be the case for openness. This research contradicts previous findings on openness and activism. Curtin et al. (2010), for example, found that openness is a significant predictor of activism among young and middle-

aged adults. According to McCrae (1996), openness in particular plays an important role in understanding social and political attitudes and personalities. It influences how people understand the world and process information, which in turn affects values and social interactions. Yet, the results showed no influence on such actions. As it can be seen, prior research on the personality trait openness and willingness to become active was quite some time ago. Most of the studies were from 2010 so the results may no longer be up to date. Therefore, this research contributes to literature on openness and activism motivation as it provides new insights into today's consumers. As it was shown, it takes more for GenZ and Millennials to become active nowadays. A brand's Instagram posts, and a supporting story is not convincing enough.

Looking at the theoretical implications of this study it can be said that the findings contribute to a clearer understanding of the effectiveness of brand activism. Even though most of the hypotheses put forward were rejected, this study still provides new theoretical insights into the relationship between the perceived level of congruence, consumers' willingness to become active, and emotional advertising appeals in brand activism. The results expand the previous literature on the topic of brand activism, as earlier studies did not even consider factors such as emotional appeal or openness. Furthermore, as one of the first studies to analyse the impact of brand activism on actual consumers, the results can also be used as further theoretical impetus. Findings of this research also contribute to the existing literature on the use of emotional appeals in advertising and the influence of openness on individuals' willingness to become active by providing more up-to-date insights into the behaviour and thoughts of today's consumers. In addition, specifically the results of the additional study conducted contribute to the existing literature on the role of congruence in CSR and cause-related marketing. This is not surprising since, according to Kotler and Sarkar (2020), brand activism is a new strategy that has evolved from the concept of CSR.

Results of this study also support previous findings on brand activism. For example, Manfredi-Sanchez (2019) has found that consumers seem to remain sceptical about the credibility of brand activism. This can be traced back to the issue of greenwashing, especially in the fashion industry. In recent years, consumers have become more and more aware of greenwashing attempts by brands, which means that consumers have also become more cautious (Aji & Sutikno, 2015; De Jong, Harkink, & Barth, 2017). This may also be a reason why the congruence manipulation was not successful in this study, and even why there were no other moderation effects in this study. It cannot be ruled out that some of the participants were biased regardless of the congruence manipulation or emotional appeals used in the

Instagram posts. Participants may have perceived the brand's activism act as just another way to make profit. In this regard, Kubiak and Ouda (2020) also found that consumers have difficulty seeing brand activism as something truthful, as they often feel deceived by brands' communications. Consumers still do not trust marketing and advertising and do not care about such communication when they know what the real purpose is (Kubiak & Ouda, 2020). The results of the linear regression analyses, however, contradict the claims of Kubiak and Ouda here and therefore provide new theoretical implications. It was shown in the additional analysis that a high perception of congruence in brand activism also leads to a higher perception of brand sincerity, trust, choice, consumer impression formation, and a higher willingness among consumers to become active themselves. So, as long as the brand's activism act is perceived as fully congruent and truthful, it can be a successful marketing strategy. However, this assumption can be left open for future research.

Practical Implications

This research provides new insights and future directions for brand activism as a marketing strategy. In the age of the conscious consumer, brands are forced to speak up and take responsibility for their actions. If they don't, brands risk losing an entire generation of customers. Customers who not only want good products, but also a good brand that has the same values as they do. To meet the demands of the conscious consumer, more and more brands are choosing activism as a marketing strategy. However, engaging in activism without having certain values or a history in support of a socio-political issue can quickly result in negative consumer responses.

This study has revealed that, above all, the perceived level of congruence between a brand and the cause it supports seems to be crucial for success in brand activism. It was shown that with each one-unit increase in perceived congruence levels, consumer responses towards the brand also increase. This is an important finding which should be kept in mind. However, as more brands begin to use activism as a marketing strategy, marketeers may consider focusing more on moderate congruence as a differentiation strategy in the marketplace to stand out and increase consumer awareness. In doing so, however, brands should "walk the talk". This means that a brand should demonstrate meaningful, prosocial corporate actions in real life and not just claim to care about a certain issue. Overall, when planning an engagement in activism, it may be advisable for brands to first focus on how consumer perceptions can be influenced and perhaps even manipulated. To ensure to start on the right foot.

It was also shown that the use of non-humour appeals in brand activism campaigns have a positive effect on consumer impression formation. The main reason for this could be that activism in general is always about serious issues. And brands should focus on communicating this seriousness in the right way. Using too much humour can always quickly lead to people thinking that the brand is ridiculing the issue. Therefore, it may be advisable for brands engaging in activism to leave out humorous messages and show rather alarming numbers and statistics in combination with images about the real impact of the issue on society and/or the planet. This can lead to a more positive first brand impression, which is also crucial for generating profits.

Furthermore, it could be advised for brands to specialise their target group more when engaging in activism. Even though it was revealed that an individual's level of openness has no influence on the effects of brand activism, previous research has shown that high levels of environmental concern, for example, lead to high levels of activism motivation among individuals (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In line with this, a study by Fielding, McDonald, and Louis (2008) revealed that in the case of environmental activism, people who feel strongly about environmental activism also show greater intentions to engage in this behaviour. Therefore, if a brand wants to use brand activism as a strategy to contribute to real change, it may be advisable to target primarily consumers who are genuinely concerned about a particular socio-political issue, rather than the average consumer. Further research, however, is needed to explore this assumption.

Lastly, it must be taken into account that the sample of this study consisted mainly of European Millennials and GenZs. Therefore, these recommendations apply primarily to brands in Europe and a younger target audience. In addition, it was looked at brand activism specifically in the fashion industry – an industry that is closely watched by consumers nowadays due to recent greenwashing scandals (e.g., Segran, 2019; Gandhi & Gandhi, 2019). Therefore, fashion brands in particular should ensure to walk the talk and be transparent about their goals when engaging in activism. Even though it is difficult for brands with conflicting backgrounds and values to choose brand activism as a marketing strategy, it is not impossible. In general, it can be advised to be fully transparent about your goals and actions. For starters, brands can use two-sided messages in their activism campaigns, admitting their past mistakes and promising to contribute to a better future. Followed, of course, by real actions. As past research has already shown, including some kind of negative information in a brand's message can even be more effective than a just including all positive information (Pechmann, 1992). It simply makes a brand more believable and human by being transparent and

admitting, for example, that mistakes were made in the past but that you are willing to do something about it in the future, it leads the receiver of the message to conclude that a brand has honest intentions and is telling the truth (Crowley & Hoyer, 1994; Du & Vieira, 2012). If a brand adheres to this, the chances of brand activism working successfully as a marketing strategy could increase. Future research, however, is definitely needed.

All in all, it can be said that brand activism does have potential as a marketing strategy and that it is even necessary for brands to become activists in order to meet the demands of modern consumers. Even though more research is needed to get a broader, long-term perspective of brand activism, marketeers should take the results of this study into account when considering brand activism as a strategy to convince today's consumers.

Limitations and Future Research

Like any other research study, this one is not free of limitations. Firstly, it was decided to use a fictitious clothing brand instead of a real brand in this study to avoid possible participant bias. However, this created a very artificial situation that led to problems for some participants. When asking for feedback on the study, a few participants indicated that they had struggles judging a brand that they don't know. Some of the participants would have liked more background information or even examples of clothing items the brand sells to get a better impression of the brand. For future research, it can therefore be considered designing a website with fashion items and add it as stimulus material to create an even better, more realistic picture of the fictitious brand. It cannot be advised for future research to choose a real clothing brand, as pre-defined attitudes can never be ruled out.

As for the stimulus material chosen, it was decided to use three Instagram posts containing either humorous or non-humorous appeals. This was done to create a better image of a typical brand campaign among the participants and to make the situation look more realistic. However, it cannot be ruled out that some participants were cognitively overwhelmed by the various Instagram posts. Although the humorous and non-humorous Instagram posts all contained the same information, the information was spread across three different posts, each with a different background image. It was decided to use this type of presentation for this study because it was thought that the interaction of text and three different background images would reinforce the message and attract the reader's attention even more. However, this may have caused even more distraction for some participants. Therefore, for future research, it may be advisable to show only one Instagram post that the participant can focus on completely.

Results of this study also showed that the manipulation of the different brand stories was rather unsuccessful. To avoid this in the future, it may be advisable to conduct a more extensive pre-study with different versions of the brand stories for each condition. In this pre-study it was chosen not to add different versions of the stories as the study was already very extensive and long for a pre-study. It can also be advisable for future research to do several pre-studies, one for testing the perceived level of congruence and one for the perceived emotional appeals.

For future research it can also be thought of using another sampling method. For this study in particular, a convenience sampling method in combination with a snowball sampling method was chosen. The aim of this study was to get a broad overview of today's consumers, in all age groups, around the world. The results of this study, however, cannot be generalised to the entire population. Due to the sampling methods chosen, there was a clear overrepresentation of female participants from Germany in their 20s. For future studies, the use of a simple random sample or even a systematic sample can therefore be considered.

Another limitation is the time that was taken for data collection. For this study, data was collected within one month, resulting in a total number of 369 participants. Although the number of participants was sufficient for statistical measurement, a larger sample size might have provided more diversity and maybe even more interesting results. Since brand activism is a new marketing strategy that is still trying to find its way, it would also be interesting in the future to conduct a long-term study over several months or even a year and track consumer's responses towards brand activism.

Lastly, for this study a quantitative research method was chosen. Even though through quantitative research a larger sample size can be generated, and it is simply faster and easier to run, it has its disadvantages. Not only are participants constrained by the answer specifications in a survey, but participants' answers may not represent their behaviour or attitudes in real life. As brand activism is a new marketing strategy and little is known about it so far, consideration can be given to conducting a qualitative research study in the future to explore consumer attitudes and behaviour more in-depth. This may also help to gain an even better understanding of how brand activism can be applied as a strategy in the future.

Conclusion

More than ever brands are speaking out on key social and political issues, such as 'Black Lives Matter', 'Climate Change', or 'Social Distancing'. Brand activism, as it is called, is an emerging marketing strategy where brands take a public stance in order to stand out in the market and meet the demands of the modern consumer. Yet, a public stance of this kind has never been so divisive - or risky. As soon as consumers recognize that a brand is not behind their claims, mistrust, more cautious future buying behaviour and negative WoM increases. This can of course seriously harm a brand's reputation. Yet, in the age of the conscious consumer, brands have not much of a choice but to speak up and take responsibility for their actions. If they don't, brands risk losing an entire generation of customers. Customers who not only want good products, but also a good brand that has the same values as they do (Haller et al., 2020).

Since there is little research in the field of brand activism that truly engages the consumer, the aim of this study was to contribute to the field of marketing by gaining better insights into the actual effectiveness of brand activism as a strategy and what it takes for brands to be successful when they engage in activism. To do so, this study examined the influence of different levels of congruence in brand activism on today's consumers. More precisely, the different levels of congruence on perceived brand sincerity and trust, brand choice and consumer impression formation, and consumer's willingness to become active themselves are analysed. Additionally, the role of the personality trait 'openness', as well as emotional advertising appeals were taken into account.

It was shown that the perceived congruence between a brand's values and the cause it supports is highly relevant when choosing brand activism as a marketing strategy. The higher the perceived congruence, the more positive the influence on perceived brand sincerity, trust, choice, consumers' first impressions, and willingness to become active themselves. For brands, it can therefore be advisable to focus on how consumer perceptions can be influenced and perhaps even manipulated. In addition, as more brands begin to use activism as a marketing strategy, marketeers may even consider focusing more on moderate congruence as a differentiation strategy in the marketplace to stand out and increase consumer awareness. It has also been found that the use of non-humorous appeals in brand activism campaigns has a positive effect on consumer impression formation. Therefore, it may be advisable for brands to avoid humorous messages and instead show concerning numbers and statistics on a socio-political issue. The practical implications ensuing from these findings concern the future of marketing.

This study also provides new theoretical insights into the relationship between perceived levels of congruence, consumers' willingness to take action and emotional advertising appeals in brand activism. In addition, the results contribute to the existing literature on the use of emotional appeals in advertising and the influence of openness on individuals' willingness to become active by providing more up-to-date insights into the behaviour and thinking of today's consumers. The results of the additional regression analysis also contribute to the existing literature on the role of congruence in CSR and cause-related marketing.

All in all, it can be said that brand activism does have potential as a marketing strategy and that it is even necessary for brands to become activists in order to meet the demands of modern consumers. Even though more research is needed to get a broader, long-term perspective of brand activism, marketeers should take the results of this study into account when considering brand activism as their next marketing strategy. What marketeers can also take away from this study is that, when engaging in brand activism: be bold, be transparent and get your brands out there. Today's consumers won't take silence any longer. Therefore, show your human side as a brand, admit to your mistakes in the past and provide new directions for a better future. Simply, walk the talk and show meaningful actions when engaging in brand activism – it is definitely here to stay.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Brand Stories

1. Fully Congruent

"WHO WE ARE!

Hey YOU!

We are Ukiyo, a fashion and lifestyle company in the heart of Berlin with the ambition to produce sustainable and affordable fashion.

Founded in 2017, Ukiyo is born out of necessity and with responsibility to protect our planet and its inhabitants. Having the lowest possible impact on the environment underpins every decision made. It's simply a given.

Starting a sustainable fashion label that puts the planet before profit wasn't a hard decision for us. Unlike the 2,700 litres of water it takes to produce 1 new cotton shirt, we focus on conserving our water resources and only use a variety of recycled, organic and regenerated materials in our collections!

We founded Ukiyo because we believe that if you wait for change, it won't come.

We've designed every part of our business around sustainability to show the fashion industry that it can be done; you can produce collections that people love without harming our planet.

Our Mission: "Re-Think Fashion To Save Our Planet!"

2. Moderate Congruent

WHO WE ARE!

Hey YOU!

We are Ukiyo, a fashion and lifestyle company in the heart of Berlin with the ambition to produce affordable and fashionable clothing pieces.

Founded in 2017, we offer fashion design and services that allow people to be inspired and express their own personal style.

Starting a fashion label that puts the needs of the consumers above profit wasn't a hard decision for us.

We started Ukiyo because we believe that through fashion everyone should be able to make a statement.

Our Mission: "Affordable Trends For Every Budget!"

NEWS: As the central issue of climate change becomes more and more severe, we recently got inspired by all the young climate activists and are from now on only using recycled and organic materials in our collections. We are sure, together WE can shape the future of our planet.

3. Incongruent

WHO WE ARE!

Hey YOU!

We are Ukiyo, a fashion and lifestyle company in the heart of Berlin with the ambition to design unique clothing pieces for the right crowd.

Founded in 2017, we offer fashion design and services that inspire people and allow them to express their own personal style. Through our bold, progressive ideals and sensual aesthetics, we strive for global recognition.

Starting a fashion label with a modern and minimalistic approach to design and an authentic connection to culture wasn't a hard decision for us.

We founded Ukiyo because we believe that people should be more inspired and encouraged to realize the full potential of what fashion has to offer.

We've designed every part of our business to reach a globally iconic status. With a focus on the trends of the future, we want to set a statement in the fashion industry and show everyone how it's done.

Our Mission: "Providing the fashion guidance you need to to get the attention you deserve!"

Appendix B: Instagram Posts used in Pre-Study
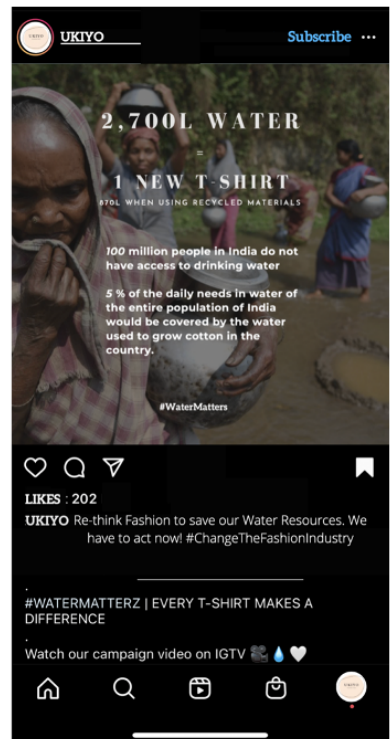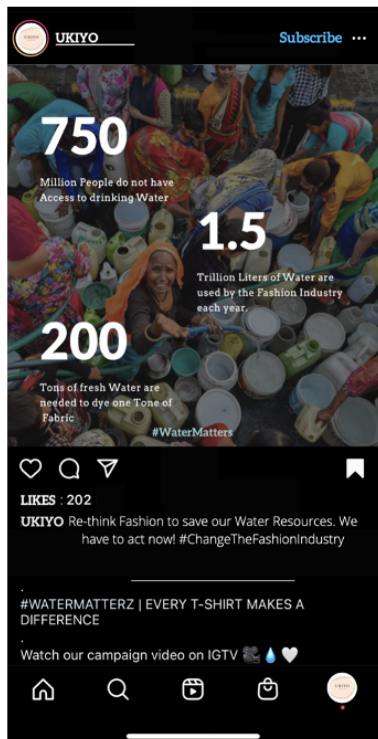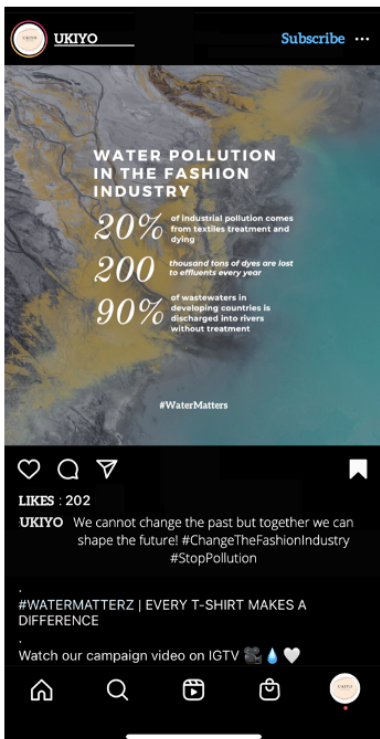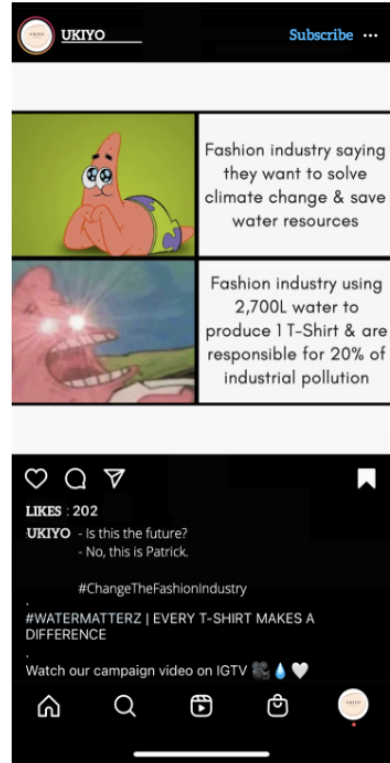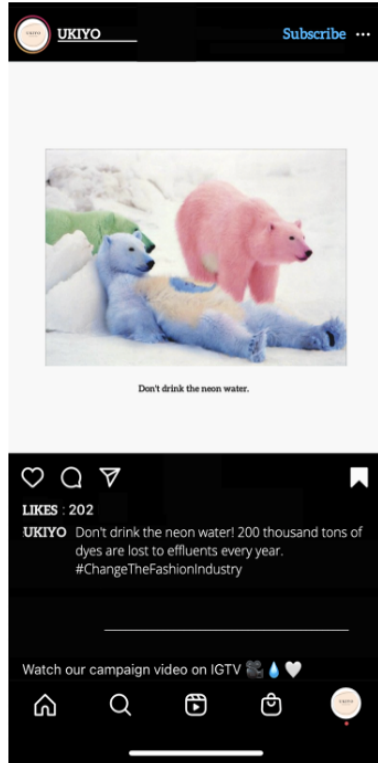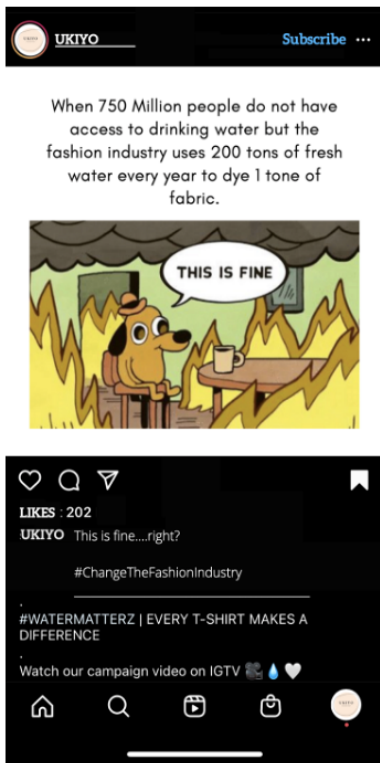
Appendix C: Online Survey

UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE.

Welcome!

You are being invited to participate in a research study titled "**Genuine Activists or just Consumer Pleasers? – Brand Activism as New Marketing Strategy**" This study is being done by Lara Sophie Walter from the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences at the University of Twente.

The aim of this research is to analyse people's first impressions towards a campaign of the new fashion brand Ukiyo.

The study will take you approximately **10 minutes** to complete. The data will be used for the researcher's master thesis.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. You are free to omit any question.

We believe there are no known risks associated with this research study. To the best of our ability your answers in this study will remain confidential. We will minimize any risks by storing the data offline and on a USB stick and by deleting it after use. Personal identifiable data will not be collected.

Study contact details for further information:

Name Researcher: Lara Sophie Walter
E-Mail: l.s.walter@student.utwente.nl

Please indicate below if you consent to taking part in this study.

○ I consent
○ I do not consent

→

Please state your demographics below.

Your gender

○ Male
○ Female
○ Other

Your age

[   ]

Your nationality

○ German
○ Dutch
○ Other
[   ]

Highest degree or level of education you have completed

○ High School degree or equivalent (Abitur)
○ Bachelor's degree
○ Master's degree
○ Ph.D or higher
○ No degree
○ Other
[   ]

Your current employment status

○ Student
○ Employed Full-Time
○ Employed Part-Time
○ Unemployed
○ Retired
○ Other
[   ]

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Based on the brand's story and the Instagram posts you've just read, please answer the following questions.

In my opinion the brand is

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Good	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Appealing	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Unpleasant	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Favourable	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Likable	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

→

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The brand is

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Down-to earth	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Real	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Sincere	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Dishonest	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Wholesome	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Original	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

→

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The brand

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Delivers what it promises	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Is unreliable	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Is competent	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Is irresponsible	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Is trustworthy	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Is consistent	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Please state.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I would definitely choose Ukiyo for buying new clothes	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
It makes sense to choose Ukiyo for buying new clothes instead of any other brand	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Even if another brand has the same values as Ukiyo, I would prefer to buy clothes from Ukiyo	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
If there is another brand as good as Ukiyo, I prefer to buy clothes from Ukiyo	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
If another brand is not different from Ukiyo in any way, it seems smarter to purchase clothes from Ukiyo	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

Brand Activism: The Future of Marketing?   Master Thesis by Lara Sophie Walter

67

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I think the Instagram posts of the brand are

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Humorous	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Funny	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Playful	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Amusing	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Dull	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Serious	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Shocking	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Likeable	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Irritating	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Enjoyable	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Eye-Catching	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Convincing	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

→

After reading the brand's story and seeing the Instagram posts, I would

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Like the posts	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Share the posts	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Comment on the posts	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Change my personal profile information based on the information in the posts	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Sign an online petition	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Not take any actions online	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

I would take different actions **online**, for example (only if applicable!)

After reading the brand's story and seeing the Instagram posts, I would

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Take part in a protest march	○	○	○	●	○	○	○
Purchase a T-shirt, poster etc. that endorses a clear political message	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Help organize a demonstration	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Boycott a brand for the reasons stated in the Instagram posts	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Try to change a friends or relatives mind about climate change and sustainable fashion	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Not take any actions offline	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

I would take different actions **offline**, for example (only if applicable!)

In my opinion the brand's story and the Instagram posts

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
match well	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
are compatible with each other	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
are inconsistent	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
are fully congruent	O	O	O	O	O	O	O

Based on the brand's story and the Instagram posts, I think that Ukiyo

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
attempts to enhance its reputation by presenting itself as environmentally aware	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
has hidden intentions and interests	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
wants to appear more environmentally aware than it actually is	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
truly cares about climate change	O	O	O	O	O	O	O

I see myself as someone who

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
is original, comes up with new ideas	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
is curious about many different things	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
is ingenious, a deep thinker	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
has an active imagination	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
is inventive	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
values artistic, aesthetic experiences	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
prefers work that is routine	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
likes to reflect	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
plays with ideas	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
has few artistic interests	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Lastly, please state.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I make sure to only buy sustainably and fairly produced fashion	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I am concerned about climate change	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I am concerned about racism	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I am concerned about gender equality	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I am concerned about LGBTQIA rights	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I consider myself as someone who generally shows a high interest in socio-political issues	○	○	○	○	○	○	○