Sociopolitical activist brands

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to shed light on the emerging position of companies taking stances on sociopolitical issues and the impact this has on consumers.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper uses focus groups, interviews and consumer experiments in various countries, to provide insights as to why brands are taking sociopolitical stances.

Findings – Consumers expect brands to take a stance on sociopolitical issues. However, to be credible, a stance needs to be rooted in a long-term commitment that aligns with the brand's strategy and values. Perceived authenticity is key.

Research limitations/implications – Future studies should aim at broader generalizability and should address various industries.

Practical implications – Differentiating a brand through a sociopolitical stance requires a strategic approach. Brand managers need to identify which issues they should support, how to engage with them and the risks and opportunities involved.

Originality/value – While the impact of brands adopting a sociopolitical stance has been discussed in the mainstream media, there has been a lack of empirical evidence to support the arguments. The results of the four studies discussed in the paper provide insights and demonstrate the brand-related opportunities and risks of taking a sociopolitical stance.

Keywords Positioning, Politics, Focus groups, Activism, Interviews, Brands, Authenticity, Experiment, Sociopolitical activism

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In the autumn of 2018, Nike launched a communications campaign featuring National Football League (NFL) player Colin Kaepernick and the statement "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything". In June 2020, in response to George Floyd's death and in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, Nike launched the "For once, Don't Do It" campaign. The story behind the first campaign lay in Kaepernick's racial inequality protest at NFL games when he would kneel rather than stand during the playing of the US national anthem, which then, among other factors, led to his exclusion from his team, the San Francisco 49ers. Nike's campaign was designed to express the ideals of Kaepernick and, by association, those of Nike as a brand, but – as social narrative stories can lead to different interpretations (Milfeld and Flint, 2020) – it strongly polarized opinions with some customers burning their Nike shoes in protest, while others celebrated the political signal. The second campaign, with its focus on the

problem of systematic racism in America, linked the Nike brand with justice and equality and also generated much-polarized discussion.

Nike is not the only brand using sociopolitical connotations in their communication. The rise of sociopolitical activist brands demonstrates the realization that brands can stand for a purpose beyond the product or service they offer (Hsu, 2017; Moorman, 2020). But what are the reasons for the growing importance of a brand purpose? Certainly, consumers seem to appreciate it (Milfeld and Flint, 2020; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020). Accenture (2019) reports that 62% of Americans want companies to take a stance on current issues, while 73% of millennials and 70% of Generation Z consumers claim they are willing to pay extra for brands that align with their values and engage with brands they feel make a difference. Furthermore, stakeholders expect firms to demonstrate their values by taking sociopolitical stances (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020; Hambrick and Wowak, 2019; Sarkar and Kotler, 2018). However, there has been a lack of published research as to the impact of this growing phenomenon and also the implication it has for brands. In line with Taylor (2014) and more recently Bhagwat *et al.* (2020), who identifies the transition from brands focusing

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on corporate social responsibility (CSR) to taking sociopolitical stances, this paper investigates this topic and provides insights into the corporate and consumer motivations behind brands becoming sociopolitically active (Oakenfull and Greenlee, 2005; Smith, 1994; Zwick *et al.*, 2007).

Research has explored how brands leverage sustainability (Ishaq and di Maria, 2020; Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2014; Paswan *et al.*, 2017; Vesal *et al.*, 2020; White *et al.*, 2019) and CSR (Guzmán and Becker-Olsen, 2010; Harrison *et al.*, 2019; Simmons and Becker-Olsen, 2006) in their positioning strategies to create secondary brand meanings for the customer, either by reinforcing or complementing current brand associations (Keller, 2003). Increasingly, consumers expect brands to adopt these strategies (Kim, 2019; Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020) and judge them on the basis of fit or congruency (Guzmán and Davis, 2017; Becker-Olsen *et al.*, 2006; Muniz *et al.*, 2019; Nan and Heo, 2007; Torelli *et al.*, 2012). A better understanding of the connection between the brand and the secondary source of meaning leads to higher levels of fit or congruency, which makes leveraging efforts more authentic. Research has also identified different types of fit (Bigné-Alcañiz *et al.*, 2009; Guzmán and Davis, 2017; Nan and Heo, 2007), which can lead to differentiated levels of perceived authenticity (Napoli *et al.*, 2014; Spiggle *et al.*, 2012) and has implications for the desired marketing outcomes (Alhouti *et al.*, 2016; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Napoli *et al.*, 2014). Nevertheless, in the context of sociopolitical activist brands, beyond Vredenburg *et al.*'s (2020) exploration, the importance of authenticity has to our knowledge not yet been scientifically analysed.

Given the growing consumer expectation of brands to behave in a purposeful way (Hunt, 2019; Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020), this paper explores the under-researched area of brands taking a sociopolitical stance and using this positioning strategy as a source of leverage for brand meaning. While mainstream and business media provides plenty of commentary and discussion on brands and their political stances (Ruggs and Avery, 2020; Duarte, 2020), there is, as Bhagwat *et al.* (2020), Hambrick and Wowak (2019), Koch (2020) and Moorman (2020) note, very little in the way of academic studies – especially pertaining to the events of recent years. This is surprising, as "polit-brands" or "sociopolitical activist brands" can influence consumer attitudes either by building up strong ties between organizations and consumers that agree with the firm's stance (Koch, 2020; Stoeckl, 2014) or by impairing existing brand stakeholder relationships with those who disagree (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020). In line with Bhagwat *et al.* (2020, p. 1) we define sociopolitical activist brands as those that make a "public demonstration (statements and/or actions) of support for or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue". Our purpose, therefore, is to better understand why brand owners adopt a sociopolitical stance, how they should act if taking a sociopolitical stance and the impact that this has on consumers.

This introductory section is followed by a literature review focusing on why and how brands engage with sociopolitical causes. Building on this, a section called "methodology and results" then explains the scientific approach of our research which is based on the use of mixed methods and presents the results of four studies. Last but not least, the findings of the study are discussed, conclusions are drawn and implications for

further research and for the practice of brand management are offered.

2. Literature review

2.1 Why brands engage with sociopolitical causes

Today, a brand is an assemblage of human and nonhuman actors (Price and Coulter, 2019), including the sociopolitical stances and values of the brand and consumers. Brands deliver value through functional, emotional and self-expressive benefits (Aaker, 1996) that extend beyond the attributes of the product or service into a broader context (Holt, 2004; Salzer–Mörling and Strannegård, 2007) where culture and brand culture become indistinguishable (Banet-Weiser, 2012). In this environment, brands help consumers to extend their selves (Belk, 1988) by constructing their identities through consumption that embraces broader values (Guzmán *et al.*, 2017; Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020). Consumers use brands that relate to or contribute directly to, their identity by providing relevant cultural elements that reinforce their sense of self (Guzmán and Paswan, 2009; Holt, 2002) and that help them create their social personas (Baalbaki and Guzmán, 2016) through symbolic consumption (Solomon, 1983).

The decision by a brand owner to take a stance on an issue has often been presented as a duality (Lawton *et al.*, 2014). Brands can adopt a sociopolitical stance either because they perceive an opportunity to create a point of difference and enhance goodwill to the primary benefit of shareholders (Friedman, 1970) or because managers recognize that brands exist in a social context and should deliver value to different stakeholders (Freeman *et al.*, 2007; Svensson and Wood, 2008). It has been argued that the adherence to the latter, often reflect the beliefs of a founder or leader (Chatterji and Toffel, 2018; Hambrick and Wowak, 2019) such as Yvon Chouinard at outdoor clothing brand Patagonia, Javier Goyeneche at a fashion brand, Ecoalf (both of which are B Corporations) and Emmanuel Faber at food group, Danone (which is an Enterprise à Mission). These conscientious brands (Ind and Iglesias, 2016) typically embed their purpose and values at the core of their businesses, recognise the importance of all stakeholders and are able to demonstrate ethical and responsible behaviour consistently over time (Du *et al.*, 2007; Mishra and Spreitzer, 1998). From this ethical perspective, Singer (2011) argues that individuals give greater moral approval to acts, which demonstrate a concern for the welfare of others or a conscious desire to do what is perceived as right, than to acts rooted in self-interest. Acting in alignment with purpose and values, even if it costs something, may lead to a positive perception of various dimensions of a brand's personality (Freling *et al.*, 2011; Batra *et al.*, 1993).

However, whether organizational approaches to social responsibility are shareholder or stakeholder-driven, the perspective is more nuanced in that consumers can sometimes react positively to self-centred motives that are strategic and other-centred motives that are driven by the organization's values (Ellen *et al.*, 2006). Sarkar and Kotler (2018) put forward the idea that activist brands promote the common good by trying to change society and benefit in terms of differentiation and purpose-driven engagement, which results

in enhanced brand equity. In turn, Banet-Weiser (2012) argues that a binary view of companies' commercial and non-commercial motives is too simplistic. Brand culture is ambivalent, in that it can be both self-interested and socially valuable. Progressive brands such as Levi's and Nike combine sociopolitical and regulatory activism and social and environmental engagement with sustained corporate success. As Lawton *et al.* (2014) note, the symbolic capital and reputation of a brand can be increased by leveraging its economic, cultural and social capital for a political purpose. These perspectives illustrate the way in which commercial intent can co-exist with a commitment to a sociopolitical cause (De Vries *et al.*, 2015). However, the partisan quality of sociopolitical activism raises the level of risk and uncertainty beyond that of traditional CSR activities (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020) and emphasises the importance of an authentic alignment between the company and the cause (Lawton *et al.*, 2014).

2.2 The importance of alignment and authenticity

While sincerity is referenced in the context of why companies choose to adopt certain sociopolitical causes (Yoon *et al.*, 2006), most writers focus on authenticity. As Trilling (1972) argues, sincerity has lost its former status because of its focus on truth to self only as a means, not an end and authenticity has become dominant by indicating "a more strenuous moral experience" (p. 11). Although there might be several meanings of authenticity, the construct, understood as "a true expression of core beliefs" (O'Connor *et al.*, 2019), suggests truth to self with a wider reference to the world beyond and one's place within it. In this way, authenticity relies not only on consistency and continuity with the truth of purpose and values (Schallehn *et al.*, 2014) but also on a valid and ethical engagement with others (Taylor, 1991).

In the context of brands, authenticity resides not only within the properties of the product or service but in the way that ideas of truth are socially constructed (Czarniawska, 2004; Beverland, 2006). Morhart *et al.* (2015) argue that brand authenticity emerges to the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful and true towards itself and its consumers and support consumers being true to themselves. They posit that perceived brand authenticity is comprising continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism. This is similar to the authenticity attributes of stability and continuity, originality, reliability, genuine and/or natural, suggested by Bruhn *et al.* (2012). Similarly, Beverland and Farrelly's (2010) research suggests the authentic is the desire for the real, true and genuine.

That brands have connected to issues is not new. From Lucky Strike's campaigning for the freedom of women to smoke to Pepsi-Cola's adoption of the counter-culture in the 1960s (Wu, 2016), brands have co-opted causes for their own benefit. This was particularly notable with the rise of cause-related marketing, whereby CSR activities, often in conjunction with non-governmental organizations, were promoted by brand owners as a means of commercializing their commitments and building positive secondary associations (Grau and Folse, 2007; Demetriou *et al.*, 2010; Liu and Ko, 2011). Secondary associations are those associations linked to another entity that can change the meaning of the brand in the eyes of consumers either by reinforcing or complementing current brand associations (Keller, 2003; Bergkvist and Taylor, 2016). Whether, such associations are perceived as authentic and can, therefore, help leverage the brand though, depends on fit or congruency (Becker-Olsen *et al.*, 2006; Cha *et al.*, 2016; Guzmán and Davis, 2017; Muniz *et al.*, 2019; Nan and Heo, 2007) and the length of commitment – rewarding organizations that support a cause over time and being more critical of those that engage due to pressures from customers (Ellen *et al.*, 2006).

Higher levels of fit or congruency allow consumers to more easily understand the connection between the brand and the secondary source of meaning (Guzmán and Becker-Olsen, 2010); this higher level enables consumers to view these leveraging efforts as more authentic or as true brands with a purpose (Iglesias and Ind, 2020). Nonetheless, it should be noted, how the fit is delivered is also important. Beverland *et al.*'s (2008) study of Trappist beer advertising shows the dangers of promoting authenticity overtly, as this may undermine its credibility, while Holt (2004) argues that brands cannot simply take elements from a social or political issue and re-package them without demonstrating a nuanced insight into the idioms and codes and by demonstrating fidelity to the underlying beliefs of the issue. As an illustration of this, take Pepsi-Cola's 2017 advertisement featuring celebrity endorser, Kendall Jenner, which used the context of political protests, to present the message that an ice-cold Pepsi delivered to a police officer by Jenner would somehow reduce conflict. The advertisement was strongly criticized and then promptly withdrawn by Pepsi-Cola, both because it belittled real causes such as Black Lives Matter and because it lacked the authenticity shown by other brands – such as Nike and Colin Kaepernick (Campbell, 2019). As Vredenburg *et al.* (2020) would argue, the fact that the message lacked alignment with the brand's prosocial corporate practice made it seem inauthentic.

To help ensure that consumers perceive brand actions as authentic and to overcome scepticism towards socially responsible initiatives, organizations need to ensure that their involvement is seen as genuine (Ellen *et al.*, 2006; Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013). Pirsch *et al.* (2007) distinguish this type of approach as institutional, in that corporate social responsibility is treated in a comprehensive way touching all aspects of the organization. This strategic orientation, which they argue meets the organization's social and moral obligations and helps to build connectivity with customers, is supported by other research that indicates the importance of a clear link between non-market strategy (which recognizes the social and political nature of businesses) and business strategy (Baron, 2001; Lawton *et al.*, 2014) and the alignment of the brand's strategy with its branding activities (Guzmán and Becker-Olsen, 2010; Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020). When these links are not in evidence such as when a brand espouses a position in public for reputational purposes, while pushing its business strategy in another direction, then it undermines authenticity (Lyon *et al.*, 2018).

2.3 Can brands not be sociopolitical?

There is a sense in which all consumption is sociopolitical because brand cultures are sociopolitical spaces (Banet-Weiser, 2012) and because brands can contribute to people's identity

projects through primary and secondary associations (Holt, 2004). In line with self-identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), consumers can be motivated to express their sociopolitical orientation and belonging, through ethical behaviour that includes both boycotting and promoting products (Shaw and Shui, 2002; Stolle *et al.*, 2005). Whether such actions are individual or collective, they reflect a social and normative context, where the politics behind the products becomes central (Micheletti, 2003). It has been argued that such action is niche – confined to consumers interested in virtuous brands (Vogel, 2007) – but sociopolitical consumption is on the increase as consumers take into account the impact of their choices on society and the environment (Shaw and Shui, 2002; Caruana *et al.*, 2016). As a result, even if there remains a gap between consumer intention and action (Govind *et al.*, 2019), brands are more willing to put sociopolitical associations to the fore (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020; Moorman, 2020). For example, the advertisement from Anheuser-Busch (the makers of Budweiser) that aired during the 2017 Super Bowl about the German immigrant founders of the company, could be read as the story of the American Dream – and indeed the end caption of the advertisement was "when nothing stops your dream". This was the claimed intended message, but the advertisement also featured an anti-immigrant message as Adolphus Busch arrives in the country ("You're not wanted here. Go back home"), that could be read as a statement about contemporary immigration rhetoric in the USA (Chandler, 2017). Not surprisingly, the advertisement, in line with what Bhagwat *et al.* (2020) and Milfeld and Flint (2020) suggest, was attacked and applauded along partisan lines, making the consumption of Budweiser a sociopolitical choice. As Peretti and Micheletti (2017, p. 127) note, "consumption becomes political when consumers assess products through the eyes of citizens".

As society becomes more politically polarized (Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015; Tucker *et al.*, 2018) and as social media amplifies polarization through ideological echo chambers (Shepherd *et al.*, 2015; Barberá *et al.*, 2015), consumers become more aware of the sociopolitical nature of consumption (Simon, 2011). In a study embracing three countries, Stolle *et al.* (2005) observed that not only did consumers act politically through consumption, they also believed that they could influence society through their actions. Frank (2003) argues that consumer actions, in trying to effect change, increase as the influence of politics and politicians diminishes. Indeed, as trust in the political system has eroded and an anti-political culture has emerged, so there has been a concurrent focus on issues and citizen-led activism (Hay and Stoker, 2009). This argues that there is an opportunity for organizations to embrace sociopolitical issues as a way of meeting peoples' desires for participation and as a mechanism for enhancing brand equity (Naidoo and Abratt, 2018). CSR activity certainly impacts brand equity mainly because of improved brand loyalty (Muniz *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, some brands such as Patagonia, Ecoalf and anti-slavery chocolatier, Tony's Chocolonely, are explicit in incorporating their sociopolitical positions as an integral component in the building of brand equity (Leleux and Van der Kaaij, 2019).

Various researchers argue that brands want to avoid highly politicized issues because of the potential to alienate consumers. Banet-Weiser (2012), for example, argues that companies adopt causes that are safe and avoid those that alienate or offend such as pro-choice, LGBTQ and immigration. Similarly, Simon argues that brand managers do not want to become involved in contentious issues (Simon, 2011). However, this caution may be changing, as some brands are willing to countenance disruption by adopting, pro-choice (Yelp, H&M, Lush), LGBTQ (Burger King, Honey Maid, IKEA) and pro-immigration causes (Starbucks, Levi Strauss, Chobani, Edeka). This both reflects a shift of these causes into the mainstream and the willingness of more brands to fill a sociopolitical space, led by more activist CEOs (Chatterji and Toffel, 2018). Nonetheless, given that not all consumers share the same values or have the same concerns, managers still perceive supporting sociopolitical issues as a risk (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020).

The CMO Survey (Deloitte, 2018) found that only 21.4% of marketing managers in the US believed their brands should take a stance, with the most highly cited reason being, "It shows their company cares about more than making profits" (75.8%). The most highly cited reason for not doing so was, "would have a negative effect on the company's ability to attract and retain customers and partners" (67.8%). Certainly, Nike's Kaepernick campaign divided opinion, with angry customers posting videos of themselves burning their Nike products, while the company received plaudits from others. However, certain factors played in Nike's favour. Firstly, millennial consumers – Nike's core target market – are more receptive to cause marketing and are more likely than non-millennials to purchase products associated with a specific cause (Barton *et al.*, 2014). Secondly, those of a liberal orientation show a stronger preference for social change and equality than conservative consumers (Jost *et al.*, 2009). Thirdly, the non-market message aligned with Nike's values and its position as a supporter of non-establishment positions, which, in turn, creates a sense of authenticity. Finally, the campaign connects to peoples' needs to construct their identity through consumption: "Colin Kaepernick has a dream and selling dreams is Nike's business" (Hunt, 2018).

2.4 Research objectives

As stated before, this paper explores brands taking a sociopolitical stance as a source of leverage. Based on the literature review presented in the previous sections, we substantiate the research questions as follows:

RQ1. From a consumer's perspective, what constitutes a sociopolitically active brand and what are consumers' attitudes towards such a brand?

RQ2. From a business perspective, why do brands take an explicit sociopolitical stance and what are the perceived risks and rewards for brand managers for doing so on controversial issues that can polarize consumers?

RQ3. Does taking a sociopolitical stance pay off in terms of a more positive brand perception among consumers?

Our goal here is to establish the groundwork on the core issues through a set of studies that can be built upon by other researchers.

3. Methodology and results

While the impact of brands adopting a sociopolitical stance has been discussed in the mainstream media recently, there has been a lack of empirical evidence to support the arguments (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020; Moorman, 2020). Therefore, a process encompassing different methods to gain insights into the attitudes and motivations of consumers and managers was adopted. To generate a broad understanding of the phenomena, the research method encompassed four phases: consumer focus groups across three countries, an international online survey with senior managers responsible for brand management; an experiment in two countries with 206 consumers and an experiment with 208 consumers. An overview of the corresponding studies can be found in Table 1.

3.1 Study 1

3.1.1 Approach
To better understand people's beliefs about brands and their reactions to communication campaigns with a clear sociopolitical orientation, five focus groups were conducted in three countries: Two in Germany in October 2017, two in the UK in November 2017 and one in the US in August 2018. The researchers had an extensive exchange of thoughts and ideas between the focus groups to make sure that the quality of the facilitation continuously increased. Participants were mainly marketing and other business students between the age of 20 and 33, recruited by a call for voluntary participation, to whom a small bonus was offered (e.g. in the case of Germany, a 10-euro-Amazon-gift card, in the US, a class credit). College students were chosen for two reasons: Firstly, research suggests that younger people care more about secondary sources of meaning such as CSR and sociopolitical activity than other generations before (Krishnan *et al.*, 2014). Secondly, millennials seem to pay attention to misalignments of brand values over time (Pattuglia and Mingione, 2017), and brand authenticity is an important criterion for those assessing a brand with a sociopolitical stance. The groups discussed such brands as Nike and Pepsi-Cola and were shown various examples of sociopolitical marketing communications and asked to comment on them. To drive participants' engagement, examples were chosen that were recent and potentially known by the participants (e.g. Nike's campaign with Colin Kaepernick; see section 1). The groups' facilitators were careful over the use of language and used examples and visuals as prompts to explain what they meant. The discussions lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The results were recorded and transcribed and the data analysed in the following way: Firstly, the researchers interpreted the transcriptions by individually reading through the transcripts and discussing first impressions in various research meetings. Secondly, one of the researchers coded the text inductively, using the qualitative data analysis software atlas.ti. Across the five focus groups, 156 citations were coded. The final code list consisted of seven codes of

higher-order and 21 codes of lower order. Thirdly, with the aim to assess inter-rater reliability, and therefore to improve the rigour of the research approach, we gave a list of all citations and the code list to a researcher experienced in qualitative analysis but not involved in the research project, explained the research background and the code list to him and asked him to assign the codes to the citations. The analysis of his codings showed that – without being able to read the context of the citations - he was able to assign 51% of all the citations correctly to one of the codes. Even though "inter-coder agreement analysis is a controversial issue" (Friese, 2019, 265), this can be considered as a very good result, considering the fact that 21 codes needed to be correctly used in coding 156 citations and some citations were connected with multiple codes.

3.1.2 Findings
The overall findings of the five focus groups across the three countries were very similar. Participants recognize that companies adopt a sociopolitical stance both because of an internally driven set of beliefs or principles and because of the opportunity to tap into consumers' desire for an emotional connection to a brand. While companies can be driven by a mixture of the two, participants often can see a dominant trait, citing Patagonia, Lush, Ben & Jerry's and Chick-fil-A as principles driven and seeing Nike and Pepsi-Cola as more consumer-driven.

> ("When brands take a sociopolitical stance), there is certainly a PR idea behind it, but that does not necessarily mean that they are not following a good intention" (Germany). "There are brands like Chick-fil-A that stand for what they have always believed, while others like Dick's Sporting Goods that have adopted stances given the times and circumstances" (US). "(As a brand), it is important to show your own personality at the end of the day, also at the risk that people with a different opinion will distance themselves. As a result, the company just seems a little closer" (Germany).

Consumers in all focus groups understand that brands adopt causes as a way of creating a point of difference.

> I think that social responsibility and ethical issues are growing in our society. "But is that because we drive it more or the companies drive it as they react to us or we react to them"? (UK). "I think companies get forced into making these choices that are political" (UK).

This new expectation makes it easier for brands to be principles driven – especially niche brands. However, when principled niche brands are acquired by larger companies this raises scepticism about motivations (e.g. the acquisition of The Body Shop by L'Oréal and Innocent drinks by Coca-Cola). The issue becomes whether integrity can be maintained to the same degree in environments that are perceived to be more explicitly commercial.

However, the view is that a sociopolitical cause itself is not the sole factor in consumer choice. It has to be matched by the quality of the brand experience: "My buying decisions do not depend on the political opinion of the brand, but on the quality or performance of the product" (Germany). Participants also recognize the inconsistency of their own choices in buying products or services that they feel do not meet the ethical standards they aspire to.

> I wonder what would happen if really big players that we use every day, like Google or Facebook, positioned themselves in a political direction (that we do not support). "Would I then use Yahoo instead of Google or would I continue to use my previous standard services out of habit"? (Germany). "I am gay and obviously don't agree with Chick-fil-A's LGBTQ stance", but

Table 1 Overview of research phases

Phase	Methodology	Research objective	Characteristics of the sample	Analysis
1	Focus groups	From a consumer's perspective, what constitutes a politically conscious brand and what are consumers' attitudes towards politically conscious brands?	• 5 Groups with an average of 10 participants each • Conducted in Germany, the UK and the USA • Participants were college students between the age of 20 and 33 • Discussions lasted between 60 and 90 minutes	• Reading of all focus group transcripts by all researchers • Discussion of first conclusions in research meetings • Inductive coding of data by one researcher in atlas.ti • Check for reliability (inter-coder-agreement)
2	Online survey	From a business perspective, why are brands taking a political stance and what advantages and disadvantages can brand management expect from taking a stance on a controversial topic?	• $n = 33$ brand managers out of the researchers' LinkedIn-networks were interviewed via an online questionnaire containing mainly open questions • 10 participants based in Germany, 3 in the UK and 20 in the USA • Average job experience: >13 years • Sample position: director of brand management, marketing manager, chief commercial officer	• Individual coding of core themes by one researcher • Discussion of the coding scheme by all researchers
3	Experiment	Does taking a political stance pay off in terms of a more positive perception of the brand?	• $n = 99$ business students in Germany, collected in classrooms at a large public university • $n = 107$ business students in the USA, collected through a research pool at a large public university	• Quantitative analysis (descriptive analysis, t-tests and process analysis) with SPSS and Hayes process
4	Experiment	How does a politically conscious brand impact consumers' use of products?	• $n = 208$ respondents in the USA, collected through Qualtrics	• Quantitative analysis (descriptive analysis, t-tests, process analysis) with SPSS and Hayes Process

their sandwiches are delicious and the best "Chick-Filled-Hate" I've ever had (US).

Participants are not always convinced that adopting a sociopolitical stance pays off for the brand at the end of the day, but they do nonetheless understand the value of it.

> "I also see it as extremely positive that companies now have the courage to position themselves politically no matter in which direction. How I react to it is up to me" (Germany). "In some way, you think brands should be brands like business is business. Stick to what you do. But I think I do quite enjoy living through the story of a brand and kind of having an emotional connection" (UK).

Yet, in adopting a cause they also see the potential for division in that there is the danger to alienate some consumers. There is a perceived associated risk in pushing a brand too far and in the end discriminating against another viewpoint.

> "I think it (the brand) should stand up for what it believes in, but I think at the same time it shouldn't discriminate against what they're opposing too" (UK). "A brand like Dick's Sporting Goods must understand that by not selling firearms anymore some people will be upset with them" (US).

In sum, across all focus groups, authenticity arose as the key factor for brands taking sociopolitical stances. Brands like Patagonia, Lush and Chick-fil-A not only market a cause but carry it through everything they do and say over time. The cause and principles they stand for are central to their activity, creating both a feeling of connectivity and trust regardless of the consumer agreeing or not with the stance.

> "I would say it's fine for a brand to have a point of view [...] but only if it's something that they truly believe in and they're not just trying to jump on something that's current and that everybody else feels strongly about [...] something that's not core to themselves" (UK). "No matter which direction you go, as a brand you should consistently stand behind it" (Germany). "A brand like Ben & Jerry's has always been outspoken, this is who they are, what they're all about. The problem is when a brand like Pepsi tries to be woke by trivializing something as important as Black Lives Matter. Not only was this poorly executed but it wasn't authentic" (US).

3.2 Study 2

3.2.1 Approach

To determine whether there is alignment between consumers' perceptions and the motivations of brand managers, 33 experienced brand managers from Germany, the UK and the US participated in an online survey that included open questions about their experiences in the context of sociopolitically active brands (Appendix 1). The objective was to uncover both attitudes and actions relating to the perceived opportunities and risks of taking an explicit stance. Responses

were analysed to extract the essence from the empirical material, reduce the volume of comments to a manageable level and generate ideas on the basis of the data while avoiding the influence of existing presumptions and theories.

3.2.2 Findings

Overall, managers believe that brands can benefit from taking a sociopolitical stance – indeed according to some respondents, they must take a stance in what some see as an intensely sociopolitical environment where actions are seen through a sociopolitical lens and where the failings of other institutions are taken up by brands. "There's more distrust in institutions and brands have become a substitute for trust and orientation" (Head of Brand Management, Germany). Managers argue that a sociopolitical stance helps differentiate a brand, attract new customers, build emotional and self-expressive benefits, boost brand image and generate loyalty by becoming part of consumers' lives.

> "There is such an oversupply of the same products offered by different brands that these companies [...] have started to not only sell a product but also to take a stance on certain social or political topics [...] consumers are realizing more and more that with every purchase they vote" (Brand Marketing, Germany). "Brands emotionalize products and services. Political opinions and social responsibility polarize, but they also hit the nerve of certain target groups and generate exactly those emotions" (Manager Brand Communication, Germany).

Brand managers are also conscious that consumers and other stakeholders have become more conscientious, which puts pressure on them to state what they believe in and act accordingly. Many recognize that sociopolitical neutrality is more difficult in a context where communications and actions are interpreted from distinctive viewpoints.

> Brands are much more conscious of their consumers being better educated, more environmentally aware and concerned about moral and political issues that affect life now and in the future (Director of Brand Management, UK).

> Consumers are increasingly demanding from their brands. Not only do they expect brands to meet their functional and emotional needs but they expect the brands to have a purpose and stand for something (Senior Marketing Director, US).

> Not saying anything says a lot about who you are as a brand. Consumers expect brands to have values and be clear about them. At the same time issues that weren't political in the past have been politicized, making it more complicated for brands to simply do what's right without appearing to take political sides (Senior Director of Marketing, USA).

It is clear, however, that brands need to do more than adopt a stance by remaining true to it over time. Values and beliefs must be translated into actions that have meaning for consumers. Managers believe that consumers want authentic brands and can spot those that adopt a superficial sociopolitical stance.

> I feel that authenticity is even more difficult to "fake" in the era of social media and Wikipedia. Brands cannot get away with their public-facing statements (or employees) representing anything in contrast to what the brand stands for (Director Business Unit Operations, USA).

In total, 13 of the respondents noted that their organizations had taken a sociopolitical stance versus 20 that had not. Interestingly, many of the managers that support taking a sociopolitical stance, work for organizations that do not practice it. In some cases, there was a clear alignment between a manager's views and the organizational commitment.

> Absolutely! My company has always been very outspoken about political/ social issues, especially around equality and fairness [...] we also stand behind our environmental efforts [...] we engage stakeholders who at first appear to be in opposition to our views. We seek collaboration and peaceful discussion versus conflict (Director Business Unit Operations, USA).

In other cases, the primary reason given to not adopt an explicit sociopolitical orientation was that it did not match the organization's values and beliefs or did not align with the profile of the organization's core target audience. Many managers perceive the risks involved are too high.

> Absolutely there are risks. You alienate people. For a B2B brand like ours, it isn't worth it and we're very careful. For consumer brands, the upside is probably greater and the downside may be less, as your consumers may already have a lot of shared views [...] it's worth the risk if it intensifies brand affinity and loyalty at such scale that the benefits outweigh the costs [...] if they miscalculate they won't be doing it for very long though! (Marketing Director, USA).

On the upside, brand managers talk about heightened consumer loyalty, but they also have to weigh the downside risks – which are seen to be pronounced when a cause is more contentious (e.g. abortion rights).

> Political statements have definitely lost us some people, but for loyal customers of the same belief, it's made their loyalty even stronger. We are also a vegan and cruelty-free company, although not political, this stance has definitely seen a positive ROI with a growing market (Programme Director, USA).

3.3 Study 3

3.3.1 Approach

Based on the prior results and in line with Bhagwat *et al.*'s definition (2020) of sociopolitical activist brands, we tested whether a sociopolitical activist brand is seen more positively versus one that is not, through an experiment (sociopolitically active vs non-sociopolitically active) featuring a fictitious organization (Boronczyk and Breuer, 2019; Diamantopoulos *et al.*, 2019).

H1. A brand taking a political stance will be viewed more positively when compared to a brand not taking a political stance.

The experiment had been piloted before with real brands (Pepsi and the German retailer Edeka) to test if the manipulation of sociopolitical activeness would work. Data in Germany ($n = 99$) were collected in classrooms and in the USA ($n = 107$) through a research pool at a large public university.

To assess the outcome of how brands were seen, existing and well-established scales for brand personality appeal (BPA) ($\alpha = 0.88$) (Freling *et al.*, 2011) and brand attitude (BA) ($\alpha = 0.90$) (Spears and Singh, 2004) were used. The BPA scale measures "a brand's ability to appeal to consumers through the combination of human characteristics associated with it" (Freling *et al.*, 2011, 393) and the BA scale measures attitude towards the brand as "a relatively enduring, unidimensional summary evaluation of the brand that presumably energizes behaviour" (Spears and Singh, 2004, p. 55). An exploratory factory analysis was performed with all items loading higher than 0.5 on their respective factor. Further, the BPA scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.90, CR = 0.95, AVE = 0.636) and the BA scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.90, CR = 0.89, AVE = 0.711) meet reliability requirements and are appropriate measures for our research objectives. To ensure content equivalence between the original scales in English and the ones used in

Germany, a back-translation-method (Cha *et al.*, 2007) was utilized.

Firstly, all respondents read a background story for the fictitious brand SNX – an American snack company created by an immigrant from Hungary in 1879. Next, respondents were shown one of two manipulations (sociopolitically active vs non-sociopolitically active) in the form of a press release from SNX; the manipulations were similar in structure and length (see Appendix 2). After being shown one of the manipulations, all respondents answered manipulation checks followed by items relating to respondent's perception of the brand's personality and feelings towards the brand. Finally, demographic questions were answered (see Appendix 3 for the English version of the questionnaire).

3.3.2 Findings.
While there was no difference between the samples with regard to SNX being perceived as an activist brand, the manipulation checks for both samples with regard to sociopolitical activeness were significant. Respondents viewing the sociopolitically active treatment viewed the SNX brand as being more sociopolitically active ($M_{Germany}$ = 4.16 vs 3.30, $p < 0.05$, n = 50) ($M_{U.S.}$= 4.00 vs 3.23, $p < 0.05$, n = 55) and more likely to promote or intervene in sociopolitical issues ($M_{Germany}$ = 4.46 vs 3.88, $p < 0.05$, n = 49) ($M_{U.S}$ = 4.24 vs 3.48, $p < 0.05$, n = 52) than respondents who viewed the non-sociopolitically active treatment. In support of H1, the results support that brand personality is seen more positively with a sociopolitically active brand (t = 2.83, $p < 0.01$) in Germany. Likewise, in the US and also in support of H1, brand personality is seen more positively with a sociopolitically active brand (t = 3.61, $p < 0.001$). Interestingly, the results from German respondents show that women are more likely than men to think positively about the sociopolitically active brand (t = 2.71, $p < 0.01$), which leads to an interaction between feelings and gender on brand personality (t = 2.58, $p < 0.05$). Similarly, women in the USA are more likely than men to think positively about the sociopolitically active brand (t = 2.20, $p < 0.05$), leading to an interaction between feelings and gender on brand personality (t = 2.02, $p < 0.05$) Table 2.

3.4 Study 4
3.4.1 Approach
Building on the results of study 3, this study seeks to determine the impact that a sociopolitically active brand has on consumers' use of products (Table 1). With a focus on the use of products – which captures how the product fulfills consumers' needs (Zaichkowsky, 1985) – we hope to explore consumers' true intention with a product – beyond commonly used outcome variables such as purchase intention, attitude towards the ad, brand loyalty or brand equity.

Therefore, we hypothesize:

H2. A brand viewed as politically conscious will have higher levels of product use than a non-politically conscious brand.

H3. Consumers with a positive view of same-sex marriage will use products of politically conscious brands more than consumers with a negative view of same-sex marriage.

As in study 3, a fictitious brand was used in an experiment (sociopolitically active vs non-sociopolitically active). Data were collected from a general population sample in the USA (n = 208, 51.4% female, M_{age} = 45.5, SD = 17.4) through Qualtrics.

To evaluate how a sociopolitically active brand impacts consumers' use of products, respondents were introduced to the fictitious brand Giuliana Orsini, a global luxury brand with a distinctive Italian identity, by reading one of two scenarios. The first manipulation was a non-sociopolitically active message that simply told the background of the brand. The second manipulation was a sociopolitically active message with the brand showing support for same-sex marriage. Next, respondents answered a manipulation check. Finally, respondents answered a series of questions about their potential use of the brand's products (see Appendix 4 for the manipulation and the questionnaire): How likely is it you will buy the product; how likely is it you will wear it at home; how likely is it you will wear it in public; how likely are you to recommend the brand to a friend; how likely are you to recommend to a neighbour. An exploratory factory analysis was performed on this product use scale with all items loading higher than 0.5 on product use. Further, the scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.89, CR = 0.88, AVE = 0.698) meets reliability requirements and is acceptable for this research.

3.4.2 Findings
As with study 3, the manipulation check was successful, with the sociopolitically active manipulation viewed as more sociopolitical than the non-sociopolitically active version (M = 3.41 vs 2.95, p = 0.004). The results support H2 that sociopolitical activeness results in more positive levels of product use than a non-sociopolitically active brand (SE = 0.09, t(1,207) = 7.21, p < 0.001). When examining the outcome of product use on the sociopolitically active and non-sociopolitically active brand independently, we find that the sociopolitically active brand is significant on product use

Table 2 Summary results of testing in Study 3

Country	Variable	*t* value	*p*-value
Germany	Brand personality of the politically conscious brand	t = 2.83	<0.01
Germany	Women think more positively about the politically conscious brand	t = 2.71	<0.01
Germany	Interaction of feelings and gender on brand personality	t = 2.58	<0.05
USA	Brand personality of the politically conscious brand	t = 3.61	<0.001
USA	Women think more positively about the politically conscious brand	t = 2.20	<0.05
USA	Interaction of feelings and gender on brand personality	t = 2.02	<0.05

(SE = 0.14, t(1,107) = 2.03, p = 0.04) while the non-sociopolitically active brand is not (SE = 0.03, t(1,99) = 0.52, p = 0.59). Further, in support of *H3*, we find that consumers with a positive view of same-sex marriage have higher intentions of product use compared to consumers with a negative view of same-sex marriage (M = 3.32 vs 4.41, p = 0.02), with a smaller mean indicating a more positive view of same-sex marriage.

4. Discussion

The purpose of our research was to clarify what constitutes a sociopolitical activist brand, to uncover consumer attitudes and determine whether the perception of a brand as being sociopolitically engaged influences its personality appeal and intended consumer product use and to understand managerial perceptions and behaviour. Building on these research objectives, we argue that brands are increasingly using sociopolitical connotations in their communications. The reasons for this are manifold. Firstly, when societies become more politically polarized (Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015; Tucker *et al.*, 2018), consumers become more aware of the political nature of consumption (Simon, 2011). By taking a sociopolitical stance, brands offer consumers self-expressive benefits (Aaker, 1996). Secondly, a sociopolitical stance enables brands to leverage secondary sources of meaning to differentiate themselves from competitors (Keller, 2003). Thirdly, consumers and shareholders increasingly expect brands to engage sociopolitically (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020; Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020; Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020) and to solve social imbalances, by filling the void left by other established institutions (Edelman, 2020). Fourthly, by embracing sociopolitical issues that matter to people, brands can more closely connect with consumers' identity projects (Holt, 2004) and co-create brand meaning (Iglesias and Ind, 2020; Ind and Schmidt, 2019; Price and Coulter, 2019).

Should all companies take a sociopolitical stance? Inevitably, there is not a simple answer to this question. Our findings show that brands that take an authentic sociopolitical stance are perceived more positively by consumers compared with those that do not. On the downside, taking a sociopolitical stance has the potential to alienate some consumer segments, especially when the issue is contentious. Companies should be aware that the adopted political narrative can result in polarizing outcomes for the brand (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020; Milfeld and Flint, 2020) and that perceived authenticity is key (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020). Consumers with different political views might stop buying or using the brand and might even publicly engage in anti-brand behaviour. Companies can become trapped by their choices and issues can evolve in unexpected directions, especially if the execution of the communication does not fully meet the expectations of the target audience.

5. Implications for research and practice

5.1 Theoretical implications
The results of the four studies, in line with prior literature (Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Napoli *et al.*, 2014; Spiggle *et al.*, 2012), demonstrate the brand-related opportunities and risks of taking a sociopolitical stance and highlight the importance of authenticity. We argue that differentiating a brand through a sociopolitical stance requires a strategic approach (Guzmán and Becker-Olsen, 2010; Iglesias and Ind, 2020) and alignment with an organization's values to prevent consumers from viewing the action as opportunistic or inauthentic (Muniz *et al.*, 2019; Pirsch *et al.*, 2007; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020). Brands that take a stance on important sociopolitical issues can create strong emotional connections with consumers, but only if it is seen as more than just communication. This implies that commerciality and cause can co-exist, as long as the latter is not compromised by the former. Although past research assumes that authenticity is non-commercial (Napoli *et al.*, 2014), increasingly, consumers seem to accept the coexistence of profit and cause when the brand is true to itself and supports consumers being true to themselves (Morhart *et al.*, 2015). Yet, the concrete balancing of commerciality and cause is still unknown and this offers plenty of opportunities for future research. Therefore, future research should further explore how brands that take a sociopolitical stance can best align with the values and beliefs of the organization and the values of their core target audience to ensure their activism is not perceived as woke washing (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020).

There is also a lack of research elucidating how companies that have not been sociopolitically active in the past should approach this. Some authors suggest that consumers will favour brands that take sociopolitical stances aligned to their own (Guzmán *et al.*, 2017; Jost *et al.*, 2003; Kidwell *et al.*, 2013; Shepherd *et al.*, 2015) to generate self-expressive benefits. This leaves the question open how controversial topics can be best incorporated into a brand's communication and how brands with a huge and diverse fan base, like Coca-Cola, Nike or Apple, should best communicate their beliefs given the different belief systems and sociopolitical ideologies of their consumer base. Certainly, future research could investigate whether the kind of issue a brand takes a stance on (from more consensus-based issues to polarizing ones) affects consumer attitudes and behaviour.

5.2 Practical implications
Our results suggest that consumers expect brands to take sociopolitical stances. In this sense, the labelling of sociopolitical associations as "secondary" seems misplaced. Brand managers should be aware that such associations are valuable when they are strategic and integrated into a unified conception of the brand. Managers need to identify which issues they should support, how to engage with them and the risks and opportunities involved. In line with Vredenburg *et al.* (2020), our paper reveals that authenticity is a key issue for brands taking a sociopolitical stance, both in terms of intent and tone. Brands can be self-interested and socially valuable (Banet-Weiser, 2012), as consumers expect brands to act in alignment with their own values (Lawton *et al.*, 2014; Lyon *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, brand managers should deeply analyse the brand's past sociopolitical activities, choose the topics to engage with very carefully and strive for continuity of their activities over a long period of time.

6. Limitations and conclusion

Overall, our research offers multiple opportunities for future research in the field of brands taking a sociopolitical stance.

This can help to both extend the area of study and to overcome some limitations of our research caused by the following: Firstly, the focus groups (study 1) were conducted with students, primarily Millennials. Secondly, participants of the online survey (study 2) were recruited among the researchers' contacts, which may have influenced the overall tone of the results. Thirdly, each experiment (study 3 and study 4) focused on only one brand in one product category (snacks and fashion). Reflecting on this, future studies should aim at broader generalizability and should address various industries and product categories. It could make a difference if the brand taking a sociopolitical stance is a product brand or a corporate brand. The scope of corporate brands is usually much broader than that of product brands (Balmer, 2017), and therefore, various stakeholders, through the lens of their own sociopolitical ideology, could have different views on a brand's sociopolitical stance (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020). Finally, although authenticity was revealed as an important factor in our focus group (study 1) and an online survey (study 2), we did not measure or control for authenticity in our experiments (studies 3 and 4). Future studies should empirically test the impact of perceived authenticity (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020) on sociopolitical activist brands.

It may also be interesting to draw more attention to cross-cultural differences: In spite of our efforts to ensure consistency of the research methods across countries, our results are specific to the contexts analysed and cannot be transferred to other cultural environments. Even though we included three different countries in our studies, they are cultures that typically show individualistic characteristics. The use of samples from more collectivistic cultures, like China, South Korea or Vietnam, could lead to different results (Hofstede, 1984).

Our research demonstrates that consumers expect brands to be sociopolitically active and that brands that do so are better perceived, as long as the stance seems authentic. Moreover, it shows that brand managers are aware of consumers' expectations and the opportunities and risks of taking a stance. Considering both perspectives, brands that take a sociopolitical stance should be committed to it over time, ensure that it aligns with their strategy and values and be aware of the potential polarization their stance and sociopolitical activism might create.

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Further reading

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Appendix 1

Online Survey Questions (Study 2)

1   Why do you think we have seen brands in the past few years take open political stances on different issues?
2   Has your company/brand taken an open political stance recently?
3   If so, what prompted this decision?
4   Do you perceive any risks for a brand in taking political stances?
5   If so, why do you believe it's still (or not) worth taking the risk?

Appendix 2

Study Manipulation (Study 3)

Fictitious Brand Background Story

Please read carefully the following brand story:

SNX is a brand that is famous for its delicious chips. With their latest print ad, they introduce a new variety called "Hungarian Style". The ad shows a young man at the New York docks in the late 19th century in front of the shape of a sailing ship looking confidently towards the buildings of New York.

The headline of the ad says: Ready for new experiences? Welcome to our new delicious 'Hungarian Style' flavor.

The copy text says: Back in 1879, Levente Horváth, stepped on American soil for the first time, with his mother's recipe for chips in his duffle bag. He was confident that with a lot of hard work and some luck, he would make it in the USA. His dream came true. He created SNX: a brand with a rich heritage, that embraces new experiences.

Politically Unconscious Manipulation

Now, please read the Marketing Director of SNX explanation of the strategy behind the new campaign:

"Our campaign is about the American dream. We wanted to show how our courageous founder, trusted his instincts and worked hard to create a popular snacks brand. Now we are going back to our roots with the introduction of Hungarian style flavored chips. Levente Horváth believed if you gave people quality and encouraged them to try new things, you would succeed. That's still our message today."

Politically Conscious Manipulation

Now, please read the Marketing Director of SNX explanation of the strategy behind the new campaign:

"Our campaign is based on the belief that immigration is at the heart of America's success as a nation. Our founder brought ideas from his homeland in Hungary and built a very popular snacks brand. We are now celebrating Levente Horváth with the introduction of Hungarian style flavored chips and showing through our campaign the value of immigrants to our American culture."

Appendix 3

From what you know about the brand, to what degree can you support the following statement?

	I fully agree.					I fully disagree.	
SNX is a politically conscious brand.	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑

	I fully agree.					I fully disagree.	
SNX is an activist brand.	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑

	I fully agree.					I fully disagree.	
SNX is a brand that promotes or intervenes in political issues.	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑

Please describe your overall feelings about the brand's personality. The brand's personality is …

satisfactory	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	unsatisfactory
unpleasant	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	pleasant
attractive	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	unattractive
positive	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	negative
bad	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	good
poor	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	excellent
undesirable	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	desirable
common	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	distinctive
ordinary	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	novel
predictable	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	surprising
routine	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	fresh
unapparent	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	apparent
distinct	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	indistinct
obvious	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	not obvious
vague	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	well-defined
unclear	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	clear

Now, please describe your overall feelings about the brand. My feelings about the brand are …

unappealing	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	appealing
bad	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	good
unpleasant	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	pleasant
unfavorable	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	favorable
unlikable	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	likable

Last but not least, please indicate your gender:

Male	❑
female	❑
diverse	❑

Please answer the following question:
To what degree do you support the following statement about same-sex marriages?

	I fully agree.				I fully disagree.		
It is a good thing that same-sex marriages have been officially legalized in most western countries.	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑

The brand's story

Founded in 1879, Giuliana Orsini is a global luxury brand with a distinctive Italian identity. The brand is especially well-known for its 'haut couture' fashion items and stands for highest quality, ultimate luxury, an Italian lifestyle and aesthetics. Brand awareness is high, and the brand's logo has become a global fashion icon. Traditionally, and in line with many other luxury brands, the marketing and communication activities of Giuliana Orsini focus on the aforementioned brand values and show young and good-looking models in stylish environments wearing the brand.

[*Only for the experimental group:* But during the last year, with the arrival of a new CEO, traditional marketing has more and more been supported by diverse activities around social issues and by political engagement. One of the initiatives was the donation of 1 Million $ to the LGBT Foundation, a national charity delivering advice, support and information services to lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans communities. This engagement was communicated on diverse social media channels and through a print ad in one of the national papers.]

Recently, Giuliana Orsini created a new style of polo shirts which, among classy fashion lovers, was received very well and gained a lot of public exposure. Below is an example of one of the polo shirts:

> Author asked to remove figure 4 as they cannot provide copyright form

To what degree can you support the following statement?

	I fully agree.					I fully disagree.	
Giuliana Orsini is a politically conscious brand.	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑

Please answer the following questions:

How likely is it that you will buy a shirt from Giuliana Orsini for yourself?

Very likely	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	Very unlikely

A friend gives a Giuliana Orsini polo shirt to you as a present. How likely is it that you will wear it at home?

Very likely	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	Very unlikely

A friend gives a Giuliana Orsini polo shirt to you as a present. How likely is it that you will wear it in public?

Very likely	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	Very unlikely

How likely is it that you will recommend Giuliana Orsini to a close friend who asks you for shopping advice?

Very likely	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	Very unlikely

How likely is it that you will recommend Giuliana Orsini to a neighbor who just moved in next door and who asks you for shopping advice?

Very likely	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑	Very unlikely

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