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Navigating the Storm:
Exploring Corporate Responses to Backlash from Brand Activism

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Abstract

This thesis addresses a gap in the current research on brand activism by examining how companies respond to backlash triggered by their socio-political engagement. Previous studies have focused on identifying factors that reduce the risk of backlash but have not explored corporate strategies in response to such crises. To provide insights into this under-researched area, this study analyzes 14 cases of companies facing online firestorms due to their involvement in social and political issues. The thesis investigates whether companies retracted their stance, maintained their position, or chose not to respond to the criticism, and whether certain strategies were more effective than others in mitigating backlash.

The study's aim is to provide an overview of how companies have responded to backlash from brand activism in the past and to identify factors, such as the nature of the socio-political issue and the intentions of those involved in the backlash, that may influence the choice of response strategy. Additionally, the research assesses the applicability of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), a traditional crisis communication framework, in these contexts. The study found that companies facing backlash for brand activism employed different strategies based on the nature of the criticism. When defending core values like LGBTQIA+ rights, they reaffirmed their stance, expressed gratitude to supporters, and avoided dialogue with groups that rejected these values outright. If the backlash targeted the implementation rather than the values, companies often acknowledged misunderstandings and corrected mistakes to clarify their intentions. When core customers felt offended, companies tended to downplay the severity of the issue, aiming to retain customers by reframing the campaign while avoiding a full retreat. Each strategy reflected the specific type of criticism and the company's response to minimize damage. Furthermore, the analysis indicated that while companies employ various strategies, their effectiveness in mitigating backlash is limited. This finding suggests that responses often fail to alter public opinion.

This research contributes to the field by offering an initial understanding of corporate responses to brand activism crises and highlighting the importance of clearly defined corporate values. The study also points to limitations in current crisis communication theories when dealing with morally charged backlash, suggesting a need for new or extended frameworks to address these unique challenges. Future research should explore how different demographic groups perceive these strategies and further investigate ways to manage brand activism backlashes in an increasingly polarized social landscape.

Keywords: Brand Activism, Backlash, Crisis Communication, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

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1 Introduction

1.1 Context

In recent years, there has been a significant shift in how corporations engage with political and societal issues. Historically, companies were reticent to voice their opinions on such matters, primarily due to concerns about alienating key consumer groups (Hydock et al., 2019, p. 76; Korschun, 2021, p. 11). However, corporate silence on socio-political issues has become increasingly rare. It is now common to observe companies across various industries to publicly address emotionally charged, controversial socio-political topics (Korschun, 2021, p. 11). An increasing number of companies across a wide range of industries are publicly sharing their opinions on divisive social and political issues, ranging from #MeToo and Black Lives Matter to LGBTQIA+ rights and gender roles (Hydock et al., 2020, p. 1135; Nalick et al., 2016, p. 384). Such public commitment to socio-political issues is referred to as "brand activism" (Moorman, 2020, pp. 388–389; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 446) or "corporate sociopolitical activism" (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1). This activism can take different forms, including adjustments to product portfolios, the release of press statements, or the launch of media campaigns (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 16).

The contemporary social and political landscape is shaped by a multitude of movements and issues that resonate across global communities. These include the #MeToo movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, the fight for LGBTQIA+ rights, the ongoing challenge of racism, the complex issues surrounding immigration, and the evolving discourse on gender roles (Deloitte, 2020, p. 8; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 445). Due to the controversial nature of the issues, corporate socio-political engagement frequently incites backlash, particularly on social media platforms (Warren, 2021, p. 33). As these are often covered by traditional media, there is a high likelihood of these backlashes extending beyond the digital sphere, potentially resulting in considerable reputational damage and financial consequences (Rauschnabel et al., 2016, p. 382). Notable examples of failed brand activism initiatives include Pepsi's 2017 Black Lives Matter spot with Kendall Jenner (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 451) and Bud Light's collaboration with transgender influencer Dylan Mulvaney, causing the company to lose its title as the best-selling beer brand in the United States (Valinsky, 2023a). These are just two of numerous examples and studies demonstrating the high risks associated with corporate activism and indicating that negative reactions are not isolated incidents (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 17; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 444). This raises the question of why companies continue to speak out on socio-political issues regardless of the involved risks. Prior research has identified three main reasons for this.

The first reason is that a company's values are becoming an increasingly decisive factor in purchase decisions (Edelman, 2018, p. 5; Kotler et al., 2021, p. 62). The market is oversaturated in almost every product segment, meaning that there are numerous similar products that hardly differ in terms of their characteristics and tangible features. As a result, consumers tend to favor brands that align with their personal values, as these distinctions serve as a key differentiator (Edelman, 2018, pp. 9–12; Shetty et al., 2019, p. 172). Supporting this claim, Edelman's 2018 Earned Brand study found that a brand's stand is just as important to customers when making a purchase as the product features (p.17). For companies, this means that they can set themselves apart from their competitors through their commitment to a specific issue, thereby appealing to certain customer groups (Moorman, 2020, p. 390).

Second, the rise of Millennials and Generation Z as influential consumer groups further drives the trend of corporate activism. Born between 1981 and 2009, these generations are considerably more values-oriented and vocal about socio-political issues compared to previous generations (Deloitte, 2021, p. 2; Kotler et al., 2021, pp. 39–41). Their worldview has been shaped by a series of global crises, fueling heightened anxiety about issues such as climate change, inequality, and systemic racism (Deloitte, 2021, pp. 4, 16). For these consumers, a company's behavior regarding the environment and social issues matters more than it does for older generations (Deloitte, 2020, p. 13). Research by Deloitte (2020, p. 13) confirms that the purchasing decisions of Millennials and Generation Z are strongly influenced by their values. These generations expect companies to engage with socio-political issues and to use their influence to drive meaningful change (Deloitte, 2020, p. 13; Kotler et al., 2021, p. 41).

A third driver of corporate activism is the growing public disillusionment with political institutions. Surveys suggest that individuals are increasingly losing confidence in politicians and governments to address pressing societal challenges (Edelman, 2023, pp. 7–8). This loss of faith has led to heightened expectations that businesses, particularly large multinational corporations, will take a proactive role in effecting social change (Edelman, 2018, pp. 14–15). Various studies have found that CEOs, in particular, are expected to act as leaders in promoting social justice and addressing societal issues (Deloitte, 2020, p. 13; Edelman, 2018, p. 14, 2023, p. 31). The combined pressures of consumer expectations, generational values, and public disillusionment with traditional politics create an environment where companies are increasingly compelled to engage with socio-political issues, despite the potential risks involved.

Despite the growing pressures that drive companies to take public stands on socio-political issues, the reception of such activism is often fraught with challenges. While companies aim to align with consumer values or respond to the demands of younger, socially conscious generations, they face the complexities of an increasingly polarized and divided societal landscape. Societal tensions, fueled by political, economic, and ideological divides, complicate efforts to engage in activism without eliciting negative reactions from certain groups. In the following section, it will be examined how these societal dynamics contribute to the likelihood of backlash that frequently accompanies corporate socio-political engagement.

Today, companies operate in a very specific field of tension (Wannow et al., 2023). Studies suggest that societies worldwide are more divided than ever, with this division permeating all aspects of life (Kotler et al., 2021, p. 68). Economic crises fueling fears about the future, the growing gap between the rich and poor, and declining trust in politics and the media are all driving social division (Edelman, 2023, p. 3). The increasing use of social media and unconsciously staying in filter bubbles and echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs and attitudes, further exacerbates these divisions (Kotler et al., 2021, p. 76). These dynamics intensify polarization, particularly around political and religious issues (Kotler et al., 2021, p. 68). Different social groups are increasingly drifting apart in terms of their beliefs and world views. They strongly identify with a particular part of the political spectrum and also align their lifestyles accordingly (Edelman, 2023, p. 21; Kotler et al., 2021, pp. 53–55). This tendency is increasingly leading to hardened fronts, and a fact-based dialogue between groups of different religious or political beliefs is no longer possible, as the 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer illustrates. This study reveals that population groups are increasingly distancing themselves from each other, both spatially and in terms of communication (Edelman, 2023, p. 21). The strong identification of people with their worldview increases the risk that socio-political statements made by companies are often perceived negatively by certain population groups because they disagree with these statements (Hydock et al., 2020, p. 1136; Jungblut & Johnen, 2022, p. 1109; Nalick et al., 2016, pp. 385, 393).

To summarize, certain groups like Millennials and Gen-Z expect companies to engage in socio-political issues. While younger generations are particularly activist and hold companies to high standards, they are also critical of corporate practices (Deloitte, 2020, p. 13, 2021, p. 17; Shetty et al., 2019, p. 172). Almost every form of activism faces disapproval from some demographic groups, whether due to perceived inauthenticity, conflicting values, or insufficient action (Ciszek & Logan, 2018, pp. 122–123; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 451; Wannow et al., 2023). In a polarized society, brand activism frequently generates opposition, making it inherently risky (Wannow et al., 2023).

1.2 Problem Statement

This field of tension presents companies with a profound dilemma. On the one hand, corporate activism is likely to become a common business practice as large parts of society demand public stances on relevant social issues, and trust in political actors continues to decline. On the other hand, however, research and current political developments indicate that society will become even more polarized in the future, particularly in terms of moral values and political ideologies (Edelman, 2023, p. 3; Kotler et al., 2021, pp. 52–55). The existence of a multitude of differing world views, values, and political attitudes as well as the increasing difficulty for people to tolerate other opinions, favor potential backlashes in response to brand activism (Ciszek & Logan, 2018, pp. 122–123; Hydock et al., 2020, p. 1137; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022, p. 279). This polarization creates a scenario where any position a company takes will likely provoke criticism from one group, regardless of how carefully or thoughtfully the message is crafted.

In addition, another factor needs to be considered: the online environment where most brand activism takes place. In the current digital age, the Internet provides a convenient platform for critics to voice dissatisfaction with a company globally and instantaneously (Rauschnabel et al., 2016, p. 382). The phenomenon of filter bubbles and echo chambers has led to a situation where individuals are often surrounded by like-minded people, fostering an environment where individual comments quickly escalate into large-scale backlash or firestorms (Kotler et al., 2021, p. 76). Once a backlash has been triggered, it is often picked up by traditional media outlets, reaching a broader audience beyond those who actively engage on social media (Rauschnabel et al., 2016, p. 389). This further amplifies the negative attention, with substantial reputational consequences, as demonstrated by examples such as Bud Light, where sales declined significantly after their partnership with transgender influencer Dylan Mulvaney (Liaukonyte et al., 2024). It should be noted, however, that firestorms do not always have financial consequences. There may be non-monetary consequences as well. For instance, negative headlines and comments on social media channels such as X, Instagram or YouTube can still be found years later as well-known examples such as Pepsi's Kendall Jenner ad from 2017 or Gillette's Campaign against Toxic Masculinity from 2019 show (e.g. Guardian News, 2019).

Unlike traditional corporate crises, which are often caused by product defects or legal violations that can be corrected, backlash against brand activism often arises from ideological differences and values (Rauschnabel et al., 2016, p. 395). This places companies in a unique predicament. If companies withdraw their positions, they risk losing credibility in the eyes of their critics, which could lead to even more resentment. At the same time, supporters may also lose trust, which could possibly lead to this group also turning away from the company as well (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 785). The

company is therefore at risk of losing credibility and damaging its reputation among both its detractors and supporters, as well as the more neutral public, since such incidents are also picked up by the media (Rauschnabel et al., 2016, p. 389).

It is vital that research is conducted in this area as crisis communication plays a pivotal role in mitigating both financial and reputational harm. However, brand activism presents a distinctive challenge, where conventional strategies tend to be ineffective or insufficient. Companies are facing mounting pressure to engage with social issues, yet this involvement frequently results in backlash from the public, given the increasing polarization of society. It is therefore crucial to develop crisis communication strategies that address the complexities of brand activism. Despite its significance, this topic remains overlooked, leaving a crucial gap in understanding how companies can navigate these risks while maintaining credibility and public trust.

1.3   Research Objective and Thesis Outline

This thesis continues where research on brand activism has thus far ended, which is after companies receive a strong negative reaction due to their activism. The research so far has been limited to identifying factors that can reduce the risk of backlash but has not addressed potential corporate responses in the event of a backlash. The study aims to provide initial insights into this research gap. Therefore, it analyzes 14 cases from the past in which companies have faced an online firestorm as a result of their socio-political engagement. It identifies and analyzes the strategies employed by these companies in response to the criticism, exploring whether they retracted their position, remained steadfast in their engagement, or did not react to the backlash at all.

The objective of this thesis is to provide an overview of how companies have responded to criticism of their socio-political commitment in the past. It also aims to determine whether certain factors, such as the specific socio-political topic causing the backlash or the intentions of those participating in the backlash, could potentially influence the strategies companies adopt to address such criticism. Additionally, it explores the extent to which traditional crisis response strategies can be applied to an online firestorm resulting from brand activism. Finally, the study seeks to identify which strategies are perceived positively by critics and supporters and which are not. In brief, the following research questions are to be answered:

Research Question (RQ1): How do companies respond to backlash following engagement in brand activism?

Research Question (RQ2): Is there an indication whether a certain way of managing such crises mitigates them?

To be able to carry out the qualitative content analysis and answer the research questions, the theoretical background to brand activism backlashes and crisis communication strategies must first be clarified. Given that these are two distinct subject areas, the theoretical background is divided into two sections. The first part focuses on defining and identifying the key characteristics of brand activism as this is a new phenomenon and the core subject of this study. This clarification also serves to distinguish it from similar concepts, such as corporate social responsibility, with which it is often confused. Next, several reasons why brand activism often elicits negative responses that can result in a backlash on social media are presented. As the social media phenomenon of a backlash is an essential component of the research topic, the underlying mechanisms as well as intentions of people participating in it are also briefly explained. The second theoretical section explores the issue of backlash from a company perspective, outlining guidelines and strategies for effectively managing such situations. First, the type of crisis of brand activism backlash is clarified, justifying the use of crisis communication strategies. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is then presented, together with an explanation of its basic assumptions and response strategies, as this provides the framework for the following content analysis. Furthermore, the suitability of SCCT for the case of an online backlash is explored, as well as general crisis response strategies that companies would likely employ in the case of backlash triggered by brand activism.

The following section presents the methodology employed in this thesis, beginning with a rationale for selecting case studies as the primary research objects. The study then utilizes a two-step research design. The choice of a qualitative content analysis, conducted in accordance with Mayring's (2015, 2022) guidelines as well as a sentiment analysis based on Beham's (2015) approach to evaluate the success of responses is justified as the most suitable approach for addressing the research objective. In the next step, the criteria for case selection are discussed, emphasizing how the chosen cases meet specific conditions relevant to the study's objectives. The methodology also includes a detailed description of the coding and analysis process used to interpret the data systematically. Finally, the results are presented, discussed and integrated into the current state of research. Furthermore, implications for companies practicing brand activism and experiencing negative reactions are derived.

1.4   State of Research

The phenomenon of companies engaging in activism and making public statements on socio-political issues is not a new one, although it was rather unusual in the past (Korschun, 2021, pp. 11–12). Nevertheless, the extent to which this activity is currently being implemented and integrated into corporate strategy is new, with the result that brand activism is currently developing into a distinct field of research and is becoming increasingly relevant (Hoffmann et al., 2020, p. 156). This thesis examines the topic of "brand activism backlash" from the perspective of brand activism, drawing upon assumptions from crisis communication as a theoretical foundation. Therefore, this chapter provides a general overview of five main fields of research within brand activism, identifying a relevant research gap that this thesis addresses. The following chapter then presents a comprehensive literature review.

At present, research on brand activism focuses on a few thematic aspects. In recent years, a large number of conceptual papers have been published but little empirical research has been conducted (Hoffmann et al., 2020, p. 157). A key focus of research on brand activism is therefore the distinction between brand activism or corporate activism and similar concepts such as corporate social responsibility, cause-related marketing or lobbying. As brand activism is still a rather new concept, many papers are concerned with developing a definition and identifying distinct characteristics (e.g. Bhagwat et al., 2020; Korschun, 2021; Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Wettstein & Baur, 2016).

A second focus of the research is on the social context of brand activism and identifying reasons for its popularity as a corporate strategy. This area also explores the stances of different demographic groups and generations towards corporate activism. A particular focus is placed on Millennials and Generation Z, how they differ from older generations and why they are a driving factor behind the popularity of corporate activism (Deloitte, 2021; Kotler et al., 2021; Shetty et al., 2019). Furthermore, a number of papers and studies examine the extent to which demographic differences such as age, gender or income within these two generations affect perceptions of corporate activism(e.g. Edelman, 2018).

Another field of research on brand activism studies the economic consequences of brand activism as well as the impact on a company's reputation. Brand activism tends to be a controversial strategy, which is why numerous papers examine the financial impact of brand activism. Scholars such as Jungblut & Johnen (2022) explore whether activism tends to lead to economically positive or negative behavior, such as a buycott or boycott. Attempts are also made to identify factors that lead to either. These studies also examine the economic impact of such public positioning (e.g. market share or

stock market) and how shareholders react to activism (Chatterji & Toffel, 2019; Dodd & Supa, 2014; Hydock et al., 2020; Warren, 2021). Other scholars focus on the consequences brand activism has on the reputation and found that it is more likely to worsen a company's reputation than improve it (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

Finally, the last major field of research investigates factors that must be taken into account when implementing brand activism so that the activism is perceived and evaluated positively by the public. Various scholars such as Mirzaei et al. (2022), Vredenburg et al. (2020), and Wettstein & Baur (2016) developed specific guidelines to determine which aspects need to be considered during development and implementation in order for brand activism to be viewed as authentic. The aim of this particular field of research is to understand how the risk of a backlash can be reduced and how to prevent companies from being accused of woke washing. However, this is where a research gap exists, as there is no research on how to deal with backlash after it has been triggered. It merely identifies reasons why people reject certain socio-political positions of companies as well as how their anger or frustration is expressed on social media (e.g. Johnen et al., 2018; Jungblut & Johnen, 2022; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022; Romani et al., 2015; Wannow et al., 2023).

The state of research shows that research on brand activism mainly focuses on five main aspects. Thus, significant research gaps still exist regarding numerous aspects of corporate activism. An aspect that has hardly been researched in the past is the social and political impact brand activism has. At the moment, hardly any studies have looked at whether the activities and public statements of companies have led to legislative changes or to changes regarding societal consensus on an issue. One criticism of brand activism is that it is purely a marketing strategy which could be refuted with the help of studies on the political effects of corporate activism (Edelman, 2019, p. 7). Additionally, there remains a large gap concerning research into the psychological effects of brand activism. To legitimize the risks of corporate activism among the top management of companies and shareholders, it is essential to research whether campaigns or actions by companies can actually lead to people changing their opinions on controversial issues which in turn may result in people sympathizing with the company. The question therefore arises as to whether consumers are even willing to change their views or whether brand activism is more likely to only trigger people to express their own opinions without questioning their own views, as initial studies suggest (Ciszek & Logan, 2018, pp. 122–123).

Furthermore, the role of communication in brand activism, which goes beyond the mere content of the campaigns, has not been extensively researched to date. Thus far, brand activism has been largely considered in a rather isolated manner within research, with little or no reference to other related disciplines, with the exception of economics or psychology. The objective of this paper is to address

this research gap. This paper seeks to establish a link between brand activism, a relatively new area of research, and crisis communication, which has been a subject of research since the 1950s (Benoit, 1995, p. 9; Ulmer et al., 2023, pp. 24–29). The research begins at the point where previous studies on corporate activism have concluded, namely after a company's actions have been acknowledged and is being discussed on social media.

The topic of this paper bridges two areas of research and within the second (crisis communication), there is a notable gap in understanding how to effectively manage backlash triggered by brand activism as well. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) by Coombs (1998, 2007, 2015) with its crisis response strategies provides the theoretical basis for the qualitative content analysis in this thesis. The application of the various SCCT responses has already been the subject of research, although not in the specific case of backlash triggered by brand activism. Nevertheless, there are some relevant findings that provide valuable initial insights for hypotheses to be formulated and tested at a later stage.

The theory was initially developed for traditional crises at a time when social media and its fundamental effects on crisis communication were not yet foreseeable (Rauschnabel et al., 2016, p. 382). However, studies have demonstrated the applicability of SCCT and its crisis response strategies in managing social media crises and responding to negative word-of-mouth (Ott & Theunissen, 2015, pp. 98–101). However, findings of Rauschnabel et al.'s (2016, pp. 395–396) study suggest that SCCT is only applicable to a limited extend. They have conducted a study investigating the general triggers of backlashes and the potential reactions of companies to them. Their findings indicate that crisis management strategies developed for traditional crises are only partially effective in the context of online crises, such as backlashes. Furthermore, their research indicates that attempts to censor or ignore negative comments may actually intensify the backlash and lead to an increase in hate comments. Mukherjee & Althuizen's (2020, p. 785) findings build on this research. They have investigated the effects of brand activism and found that retracting positions or even apologizing does not lead to a reduced level of anger from critics. At the same time, it also caused negative reactions from those who had previously supported the company's stance. They advise remaining steadfast even in the event of a backlash and also communicating this steadfastness, as this will at least keep supporters on the company's side. Hauser et al. (2017, p. 305) add that there is no standardized approach to online crises that can be universally applied. The research indicates that the optimal approach must always be situation-specific and that the origin of the crisis and the intention of the participants in a backlash play a significant role in determining the most effective manner to address the situation. Liu et al. (2011, pp. 350–351) examined an often-overlooked aspect of crisis

communication: the role of the source (third-party or company) and the form (traditional media, social media, or word of mouth) utilized in crisis communication strategies. Their findings indicate that these two factors significantly impact the acceptance of such strategies. The study revealed that defensive and accommodative strategies were perceived differently depending on the medium and the source.

The findings of the aforementioned studies demonstrate that SCCTs can indeed be implemented in the online environment where backlashes occur although certain adaptations may be necessary. These adaptations might involve more dynamic response strategies, given the speed and visibility of online crises, as well as a nuanced approach to addressing the heightened emotional engagement of online audiences. This thesis provides new insights into the potential application of SCCT in the event of a brand activism backlash, along with an overview of the main response strategies employed. The particular characteristics of backlash triggered by brand activism make this study a valuable contribution to the field of crisis communication, offering practical implications for brands aiming to navigate the challenges of taking a stance on socio-political issues while maintaining consumer trust and loyalty.

2   Literature Review

This chapter addresses the core topic of this paper, brand activism, and examines the backlashes that often result from brands engaging in such activities. As this is a new phenomenon with no universally accepted definition, a selection of the most referenced definitions in literature is presented first, followed by an outline of the similarities and differences between these definitions. The second part of this chapter focuses on the phenomenon of backlash, specifically in the context of brand activism. It outlines the characteristics, triggers and intentions involved.

2.1   Brand Activism: Definition and Differentiation

Before engaging in the examination of brand activism, it is crucial to acknowledge the diverse terminology found in the literature to describe this concept. While these terms differ in emphasis and nuance, they collectively refer to the involvement of companies or brands in socio-political discourse.

This thesis will use the terms "brand activism" and "corporate activism" to refer to the phenomena of companies taking a stance on socio-political topics, often through their brand. The preference for these terms is based on two reasons that render them more suitable for the scope of this study. First, by using the term "activism", this thesis acknowledges the complexity and interrelated nature of the issues companies address, which can encompass both social and political dimensions (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 2). Second, corporate activism is frequently expressed through brands. As conveyers of identity and culture, brands have the potential to communicate a more nuanced set of values than large corporations, which facilitates more precise and targeted socio-political engagement. In addition, brands act as the public-facing element of a corporation, creating more direct and targeted interactions with consumers (American Marketing Association, n.d.; Davis, 2000, p. 4). They allow companies to take clearer, more pronounced stances on issues, which may resonate with particular consumer groups or social movements. However, it is also important to recognize that the distinction between brands and companies is not always straightforward. While brands represent specific products or identities, they are often deeply intertwined with the company's overall mission and values. Therefore, the terms "brand activism" and "corporate activism" are used somewhat interchangeably in this study, reflecting the reality that corporate activism is often executed through brands, which serve as a natural extension of the company's broader socio-political positions.

Literature on this business practice introduces various similar terms, including brand political activism (Moorman, 2020), corporate sociopolitical activism (Bhagwat et al., 2020), corporate political advocacy (Hoffmann et al., 2020) , corporate social advocacy (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Wettstein

& Baur, 2016) or sociopolitical involvement (Nalick et al., 2016). Additionally, Mirzaei et al. (2022) use the terms "woke branding" and "woke brand activism", but it should be noted here that the term "woke" has a strong negative connotation in the right-wing, where it is used to criticize movements related to social justice and political correctness (Allen, 2023, p. 84). Using such terminology risks framing activism in a specific, ideologically charged way, which this thesis seeks to avoid. For this reason, more neutral terminology, such as "brand activism" is preferred.

Two of the most prominent scholars in the field of brand activism are Kotler & Sarkar (2017). They were among the first to propose a comprehensive definition of brand activism, which has subsequently been referenced in numerous studies in this field. According to them, brand activism can be described as comprising "business endeavors to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the intention of facilitating or hindering social improvements" (Kotler & Sarkar, n.d.). Additionally, they posit that brand activism is characterized by the pursuit of "justice and a fundamental concern for the biggest and most urgent problems facing society" (Kotler & Sarkar, n.d.). Contrary to other definitions, the fight for justice, which companies pursue with brand activism, is a central motive in the view of Kotler and Sarkar. They argue that the objective of activism is to facilitate social and political change (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). Furthermore, the two scholars are the only ones to differentiate between progressive and regressive forms of brand activism. The most common form of brand activism today is liberal, progressive brand activism, which seeks to solve social problems and improve people's lives (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). According to Kotler & Sarkar (2017), in regressive brand activism, regulations are promoted that are harmful to the common good. A historic example of this are tobacco companies denying the negative effects of cigarettes and deliberately harming the health of their customers (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017).

Bhagwat et al. (2020) utilize the term "corporate socio-political activism", however, it is essentially synonymous with brand activism in terms of both concept and purpose. They define corporate socio-political activism as "a firm's public demonstration (statements and/or actions) of support for or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue" (p.1). This definition focuses more on the communicative aspects of brand activism. It is explicitly stated that socio-political engagement can take a variety of forms, including written statements and physical actions, and that it is directed towards the general public (p.16). Moreover, they argue that brand activism can be executed by any representative of the firm or via the firm's brands. A company may therefore communicate its position on a given issue directly or indirectly through its brand (p.16). Hence, Bhagwat et al. (2020) use the term "corporate social activism" instead of "brand activism". Furthermore, the scholars refer to the concept as a firm strategy, which indicates that they do not perceive corporate social activism as mere

marketing measures but as a far-reaching strategy (p.16). This implies that the entire company is orientated towards socio-political engagement.

Another definition is proposed by Moorman (2020), which, however, draws heavily on Bhagwat et al. (2020). The author defines brand political activism as "public speech or actions focused on partisan issues made by or on behalf of a company using its corporate or individual brand name" (pp.388 – 389). The term "partisan issues", which is often employed in the literature on brand activism, is used by Moorman (2020, p.389) to highlight the emotional and controversial nature of the subjects under discussion as well as the lack of consensus in society. Furthermore, Moorman (2020, p.388) emphasizes that companies act transparently in brand political activism on behalf of the company or brand which distinguishes it from lobbying, for instance. One could assume that they do so in order to make use of their influence, but also so that the political commitment is closely linked to the brand or company in people's minds.

A frequently cited definition of brand activism in the literature is that of Vredenburg et al. (2020). Drawing on Moorman (2020), they define it as "a purpose- and values-driven strategy in which a brand assumes a non-neutral stance on institutionally contested socio-political issues, with the objective of instigating social transformation and achieving marketing success" (p. 446). Thus, Vredenburg et al. (2020, p. 448) classify brand activism as a clearly calculated strategy driven by corporate value and emphasize that the company must take a clear stance on a socio-political issue, either representing progressive or conservative values. Moreover, they link brand activism with marketing success. Vredenburg et al. (2020, p. 446) argue that companies pursuing brand activism have two primary objectives: firstly, to enhance societal wellbeing and drive social change for the common good, and secondly, to achieve financial gain. They therefore argue that companies aim to ensure that their activism has not only a positive impact on society but also company performance, suggesting that they do not engage in brand activism purely for altruistic reasons. Vredenburg et al. (2020) propose a second definition that focuses specifically on authentic brand activism. They define it as "a strategy in which brands have clear purpose- and values-driven communication around an activist stance on sociopolitical issues while also engaging in prosocial corporate practice" (p.449). This definition emphasizes the aspect of corporate practice that has not yet been mentioned in other definitions. It can be assumed that by this they mean that companies must also implement internally what they advocate externally.

2.1.1 Key Characteristics of Brand Activism

As illustrated above, there is great diversity in the conceptualization of brand activism or corporate activism, with alternative terminology used by some scholars. Nevertheless, there are notable similarities between the definitions regarding the characteristics of brand activism, which are outlined below:

1.   **Initiatives are transparent and take place in public**
2.   **Topics that are emotionally charged and controversial**
3.   **Spontaneous reactions embedded in long-term strategy**
4.   **Twin goals: Social and Financial Objectives**

Brand activism encompasses public actions or initiatives by companies that can be realized in various forms (written or spoken) and through a wide variety of channels (Moorman, 2020, pp. 388–389). These actions can include statements about political decisions, TV commercials, adapted fashion collections or product portfolios, business activities in certain regions or neighborhoods (for example, where social minorities are particularly represented), social media campaigns, or specially created hashtags (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 16; Korschun, 2021, p. 11). It is particularly noteworthy that a company publicly positions itself on a socio-political issue as this is what differentiates it from other political activities such as lobbying (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1; Korschun, 2021, p. 11).

In the context of brand activism, companies adopt positions on polarizing and emotionally charged socio-political issues or protest movements (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 446). Therefore such initiatives are likely to provoke strong emotional responses, varying from agreement to strict disapproval (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 446). The predominant topics are LGBTQIA+ rights, immigration, racism, equality, misogyny, patriarchy, abortion rights, gun laws and movements such as #METOO, Black Lives Matter, the Yellow Vests and the Extinction Rebellion (Deloitte, 2020, p. 8; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 445). The controversial nature is a crucial point in which brand activism differs from the similar concept of corporate social responsibility (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 773).

In literature, opinions differ with regard to the time frame and the integration of brand activism campaigns into long-term corporate strategies. Both short-term actions and a company's long-term commitment to a particular cause can therefore be categorized as brand activism (Ahmad et al., 2024, p. 3). In most cases, however, brand activism actions are a rather spontaneous response to current events such as court rulings (e.g. on abortion laws), the simmering conflict in the Middle East, or protest movements such as the Black Lives Matter or #METOO movements, which are not planned

over a long period of time (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 773). However, these should not be isolated actions or one-off statements but part of a long-term strategy (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 16; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 446). Otherwise, the commitment will appear insincere.

Ideally, a company decides to speak out on an issue because it strongly supports it and is convinced that there is a need for action in terms of the political or societal acceptance (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019, p. 348). However, various scholars suggest that most corporate activism initiatives are calculated actions with which companies pursue at least two key objectives. The primary goal is to promote political reforms or a shift in societal attitudes, while the secondary goal is to provide a boost to the company's performance. The aim is to generate attention and increase brand awareness among a target audience of consumers who align with the company's values and are therefore more likely to purchase its products (Korschun, 2021, p. 15; Kotler & Sarkar, n.d.; Vredenburg et al., 2020, pp. 445–446). Dodd & Supa (2014, p. 1) found that brand activism plays a significant role in purchasing decisions. Consumers are more likely to purchase from a brand with which they align on values and positions.

To sum up, in this study, brand activism is defined as the commitment of companies to socially relevant and emotionally charged issues, with initiatives carried out in a transparent and public manner. These initiatives can be spontaneous reactions to current events or planned as part of a long-term strategy. The brand activism activities may be enacted in a variety of forms and via a range of channels and senders. Overall, companies pursuing brand activism have two main objectives: driving social change and achieving financial success. This definition and set of characteristics provide the criteria for selecting case studies for the study of this thesis.

2.1.2 Distinction between Corporate Social Responsibility and Brand Activism

Brand activism is frequently linked to related concepts such as lobbying and cause-related marketing. However, since brand activism is most often confused with corporate social responsibility (CSR), the differences between the two concepts are explained below. Coombs & Holladay (2012) define CSR as "the voluntary actions that a corporation implements as it pursues its mission and fulfills its perceived obligations to stakeholders, including employees, communities, the environment, and society as a whole" (p.8). There is disagreement in literature as to whether brand activism is a completely new approach or a further development of CSR. Most scholars consider brand activism to be an evolution of corporate social responsibility (CSR), which explains why the distinction is not always straightforward (e.g. Sarkar & Kotler, 2017; Vredenburg et al., 2020, pp. 446–447). Nevertheless, there are three main factors in which there is a clear distinction between corporate social responsibility and brand activism:

1. **Type of issues addressed**
2. **Form of the initiatives**
3. **Timing of initiatives**

The main difference between the two strategies is the nature of the issues they address. Brand activism refers to the practice of companies expressing their views on socially controversial topics and protest movements. These topics often challenge moral values and elicit strong emotional responses, leading to a range of reactions, including both negative and positive feedback. In contrast, corporate social responsibility (CSR) tends to avoid emotionally charged issues and does not directly challenge the ideologies or values of specific groups, which often leads to more moderate public reactions. CSR actions include initiatives for the common good or environmental protection projects that cannot be criticized objectively and do not offend any demographic groups (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 3; Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 20). It is therefore a strategy that is associated with less risk. Consequently, these campaigns also receive significantly less attention than brand activism initiatives (Hydock et al., 2020, p. 1136).

Furthermore, brand activism and CSR differ in terms of the methods and strategies used to address issues. While brand activism frequently takes the form of public statements on social media, press releases, or other publicly visible campaigns, CSR primarily focuses on taking action. CSR initiatives often involve adjusting business practices as well as engaging in activities such as participating in or donating to social or ecological projects (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 21).

As previously outlined, brand activism initiatives are often not strategically planned in advance but rather emerge as spontaneous responses to current political and social developments. This distinguishes them from corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities, which are the result of a corporate strategy that goes beyond legal requirements with regard to the ecological, social, and economic responsibility of companies. For the most part, they are not realized as spontaneous reactions to current events but rather part of a commitment to long-term social and ecological problems (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 7; Varadarajan & Menon, 1988, as cited in Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 773). It should be noted, however, that the two concepts are not easily distinguishable in this regard.

2.2 Conceptualizing Brand Activism Backlash

After defining the concept of brand activism in the previous section and establishing its distinguishing characteristics, this chapter takes it a step further and examines the negative reactions that often follow a company's socio-political involvement. To do so, it will first be clarified when a backlash is defined as such, how it emerges and develops. Afterwards, reasons will be identified as to why brand activism frequently triggers such intense negative emotions and anti-brand actions. By gaining a deeper insight into the background and underlying causes of such backlashes, it will be easier to comprehend the rationale behind the response strategies applied in each specific situation.

2.2.1 Anti-Brand Actions and Backlashes

A number of studies have indicated that taking a stance on controversial topics represents a significant risk, with a greater likelihood of eliciting negative reactions from recipients than positive ones (Jungblut & Johnen, 2022, p. 1108). One reason for this is that when a company is perceived to be responsible for a negative occurrence, strong emotional reactions are often the result (Coombs, 2007, p. 169). In particular, feelings of anger and schadenfreude may arise (Coombs, 2007, p. 169). For people who reject the topic or brand activism for a variety of reasons, this is precisely the case.

 A negative attitude towards a company can then lead to anti-brand actions. This term refers to behavior in which disgruntled consumers feel the need to communicate their frustration with a company. This can take the form of spreading negative word-of-mouth on social media and thereby discrediting the company or even attempting to initiate an organized boycott (Pfeffer et al., 2014, p. 118). In the current digital age, this often takes place on social media platforms (Kähr et al., 2016, p. 25). The potential for a single negative post to rapidly develop into a bigger movement is significant, given the ability of social media to enable the sharing of opinions with people all over the world in real time (Pfeffer et al., 2014, p. 120).

The result can be a phenomenon for which there are different terms, such as "collaborative rand attack" (Rauschnabel et al., 2016, pp. 381–382), "shitstorm" (Beham, 2015, pp. 1–2), "online firestorm" (Pfeffer et al., 2014, p. 118) or "backlash" (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 775). The latter two are used in this thesis, as synonyms. There has been limited research into the specific case of backlash in response to brand activism. Therefore, it is not possible to provide a definition that differs from the general definitions of a backlash or online firestorm. Pfeffer et al. (2014) define an online firestorm as "the sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative word-of-mouth (WOM) and complaint behavior against a person, company, or group in social media

networks" (p.118). It is crucial to emphasize the content and tone of these messages. They frequently display anger yet fail to provide a clear rationale. Additionally, they typically lack factual evidence, instead reflecting the subjective opinion of the user (Pfeffer et al., 2014, p. 118). The language used is often characterized by anger and aggression, with insults and profanity utilized to verbally attack the company (Pfeffer et al., 2014, p. 118).

Johnen et al. (2018, pp. 3141-3142) suggest that backlashes are often driven by underlying social dynamics and are guided by moral values. This appears to be the case in backlashes that occur in response to brand activism, as the stance on sensitive issues frequently conflicts with the moral beliefs of specific demographic groups. According to the scholars, the aim of the participants is to publicly set themselves apart from the rest of society and at the same time receive recognition from like-minded people (Johnen et al., 2018, pp. 3141–3142; 3156).

In addition to the rapid spread of information, social media also provides the opportunity to connect and interact with people from all over the world. This global connectivity enables individuals to easily share their dissatisfaction with a company's behavior online and spread this sentiment among other (potential) consumers. This phenomenon is known as negative electronic-word-of-mouth (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012, p. 131). Before the advent of social media, people could only share information, including negative experiences with a company, with a limited number of individuals. Consequently, negative word of mouth was more localized and slower to spread. However, with social media, the dynamics of information exchange have drastically changed. This transformation has led to a significant shift in the balance of power between companies and consumers (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022, p. 279; Rauschnabel et al., 2016). A single person can now cause significant uproar in a short amount of time, potentially inflicting substantial reputational or even financial damage on a company through allegations and public accusations.

Another characteristic of online firestorms is that they are often triggered by a specific event and then develop dynamically. The nature of social media enables such backlashes to develop within a few hours (Pfeffer et al., 2014, p. 120). Companies have no means of stopping the sheer flood of negative reactions. This could result in a loss of control over the narrative and overall situation (Lappeman et al., 2018, p. 3). Furthermore, backlashes are often covered by traditional media outlets, thus reaching a broader audience beyond those active on relevant social media platforms (Rauschnabel et al., 2016, p. 382). While these firestorms typically have a relatively short duration, they can nevertheless cause long-term reputational damage (Rauschnabel et al., 2016, p. 382).

The concept of negativity bias, a phenomenon researched in psychology and communication science, provides another explanation as to why brand activism often triggers a rapidly spreading backlash, which then quickly gets covered by the news media (Warren, 2021, p. 34). It states that people perceive negative information more intensely and therefore find it more interesting than positive information (Rozin & Royzman, 2001, as cited in Jungblut & Johnen, 2022, p.1108). Hence, media headlines consist predominantly of bad news and positive news receive little attention. This theory can also be transferred to brand activism to explain why brand activism initiatives receive so much attention and why they spread particularly quickly on social media (Hydock et al., 2020, p. 1149). In this particular case, certain groups of people perceive statements or activities by companies with which they disagree as negative information. This then sparks their interest in the incident, which subsequently motivates them to engage with it and share their opinion. Hydock et al. (2020, p. 1149) found that individuals who reject the company's stance tend to respond more strongly to brand activism initiatives due to the negativity bias than individuals who align with it.

To summarize, the literature demonstrates that given the complex nature of such firestorms and their tendency to evolve rapidly, the timeframe for action is limited. It is therefore crucial for companies to maintain close monitoring of their social media channels, enabling swift response when necessary (Koch et al., 2021, p. 2).

2.2.2 Key Triggers

A requirement for an adequate analysis of corporate responses to a backlash triggered by a company's public socio-political stance is an understanding of the reasons why people react to such actions negatively. Studies on the reception of brand activism have shown that the causes are manifold and can be due to contradictory corporate practices, demographic or psychological factors of the recipients as well as social media etiquette. In the following, the main causes will be examined in more detail.

1. Brand Activism is Perceived as Inauthentic

One of the most common reasons for a negative response to brand activism is that it is perceived as inauthentic or even solely as a marketing strategy. For instance, according to the 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer, 56% of the participants stated that they believe companies are only speaking out on social issues for marketing purposes (Edelman, 2019, p.7). Given that brand activism addresses foundational social issues, it is viewed negatively when companies adopt a certain stance solely for opportunistic reasons.

The reasons why brand activism is often perceived as a mere marketing strategy are numerous and complex. In many cases, there is criticism regarding the discrepancy between the company's publicly stated values and its actual actions (Korschun, 2021, p. 16). It is essential that companies only speak out on matters that are aligned with the established corporate culture and practices in order to avoid accusations of inauthentic brand activism or hypocrisy (Mirzaei et al., 2022, p. 9; Wettstein & Baur, 2016, p. 211). An example of a backlash with hypocrisy being the main accusation is Gillette. In its 2019 viral campaign, "The Best Men Can Be", the company advocated for the rejection of patriarchal values and toxic masculinity. However, at the same time, it sold its women's razors for a significantly higher price than equivalent products aimed at men (a phenomenon commonly referred to as the pink tax) (Mirzaei et al., 2022, p. 8; Ritschel, 2019).

Similar to this, socio-political engagement is perceived as inauthentic if no discernible strategy is evident and the company makes a one-off statement on a multitude of topics simply because they are widely covered in the media at that moment It would be more advisable for companies to campaign for the same or similar issues over a longer period of time. This would demonstrate to the public that the issue is a serious concern for the company (Wettstein & Baur, 2016, p. 211).

Despite the growing number of studies indicating that an increasing proportion of the population believes that companies should be committed to the common good of society, not all members of the public share this view. Some reject brand activism in principle, arguing that companies should not become involved in social or political issues, while others believe that a company's image should not be associated with a particular cause (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022, p. 263).

2. Brand Activism is Perceived as Simplifying Complex Issues and Lacking Impact

Another potential explanation for the backlash against corporate activism is that the general public does not perceive the commitment to be sufficiently purposeful and effective (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022, p. 263). As previously stated, individuals have high expectations of companies when it comes to their involvement in socially relevant issues as they believe that politicians fail to address issues in a timely manner. However, if corporate campaigns on specific issues fail to address the underlying problem or are perceived as mere marketing initiatives, this can lead to frustration among those who believe in the potential influence of businesses (Edelman, 2019, p. 7; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022, p. 273; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 444).

Another related aspect that can lead to brand activism activities being viewed negatively is the trivialization or inadequate depiction of serious issues. In such instances, it is not the commitment to

a socio-political issue that is the primary focus of criticism; rather, it is the practical implementation of the initiatives that is subject to scrutiny. The typical allegations include a suboptimal selection of testimonials, tone-deafness or an inappropriate discussion of the topic (Victor, 2017; Watters, 2017). An illustrative example for this is the Pepsi campaign featuring Kendall Jenner at the time of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2017. It received a big backlash for portraying the protests too light-heartedly and for simplifying structural problems regarding racism and police violence (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 451).

3. People Have Opposing Political Views

As social divisions widen, another potential trigger for negative reactions to brand activism is gaining attention in research. A number of studies indicate that negative reactions to corporate activism can be largely attributed to the political attitudes of the recipients (Ciszek & Logan, 2018, pp. 122–123; Hydock et al., 2020, p. 1137; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022, p. 279).

As previously outlined, the world today is more divided than ever and studies show that people today are less willing to tolerate and respect other opinions. Population groups with different beliefs are moving further and further apart, both spatially and communicatively, so that a dialog or an objective discussion hardly seems possible (Edelman, 2023, p. 21). It is increasingly evident in society that "ideology becomes identity" (Edelman, 2023, p. 21) and people identify so strongly with their political views and consider them to be the only correct ones. As a result, they tend to reject all other world views and opinions (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, p. 773). Mirzaei et al. (2022, p. 2) add heated debates on controversial social issues are often based on the political ideology of the conflicting parties, even if the actual matter is non-political. This provides an explanation why socio-political initiatives by companies frequently provoke negative reactions that are then shared on social media.

Research also suggests that liberals and conservatives perceive and process information differently and consider different motives to be negative (Jost, 2017, pp. 513–514). As a result, they respond differently to socio-political messages. The vast majority of brand activism initiatives promote a liberal, progressive society. This appears to be reason enough for people from the conservative political spectrum to reject the initiatives and content. Hence, Pöyry & Laaksonen (2022, p. 279) recommend avoiding certain trigger words in brand activism initiatives in order to attract less attention from political opponents.

4. People Have Opposing Moral Views

Closely related to political ideologies are moral principles and values that each individual has defined for themselves in line with their social background. Such values serve people as a guideline in life as to what is considered right or wrong (Haidt, 2003, p. 852). They are therefore also referred to as a "moral compass" (Johnen et al., 2018, p. 3144). Wannow et al. (2023) have identified moral principles as a key factor influencing how individuals perceive and respond to socio-political statements from companies. These statements are considered as either positive or negative and therefore trigger certain emotions.

If a company publicly criticizes certain values in its brand activism initiatives, recipients may perceive this as a personal attack if they hold these values themselves and live their lives according to them (Romani et al., 2015, p. 659). Naturally, this triggers negative emotions such as anger or shame and, in many cases, the need to communicate this resentment publicly (Romani et al., 2015, p. 662). Studies conducted by Ciszek & Logan (2018, pp. 123–124) and Pöyry & Laaksonen (2022, pp. 277–279) suggest individuals who feel angry may also feel the need to defend their own values against anyone who may challenge them.

2.2.3 User Intentions

Now that the causes of negative reactions and hate comments on social media as a result of brand activism have been identified, it is important to understand the objectives of those engaging in this behavior, as this provides initial indications of how to respond appropriately to such a firestorm.

In an ideal scenario, consumers still sympathize with a company despite criticizing its socio-political commitment and seek to re-establish a positive relationship with it (Kähr et al., 2016, p. 38). By voicing criticism, consumers seek to ensure that the company corrects errors in its content or adjusts it and, if necessary, withdraws its commitment (Holloway and Beatty, 2003, as cited in Hogreve et al., 2013, p. 522).

However, there is a second type of person who participates in and drives online firestorms. They oppose the company and its brand activism for reasons explained in the previous chapter and feel the need to express this resentment publicly or cause real damage to the company. In general, they have little or no interest in re-establishing a good relationship with the company. Kähr et al. (2016) refer to this as "bridges are burned" (p.27). This group is often ideology-driven and tends to have no interest in initiating a dialogue with the company in question or in reconsidering its views on controversial topics (Ciszek & Logan, 2018, p. 123). Within this group, the objectives vary considerably again.

The first phenomenon that can be observed is venting negative emotions and spreading negative word of mouth. The haters are primarily interested in sharing their opinions and their frustration or disapproval. This behavior is referred to as "venting", as the objective is not to engage in a discussion of the content, but merely to release frustration and leave negative comments (De Matos & Rossi, 2008, p. 587). Furthermore, the comments are rather a spontaneous emotional response rather than a well-considered opinion (Sweeney et al., 2005, as cited in De Matos & Rossi, 2008, p. 587; Kähr et al., 2016, p. 27). These people often feel encouraged by other users who have already left similar comments in the comment sections and are looking for social recognition. Often specific hashtags are used on various social media channels to connect with individuals who share their opinion about a company's socio-political stance (Johnen et al., 2018, p. 3156; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022, p. 279).

In addition to the need to spread their own ideologies, the aim of many haters is to deliberately harm the company's reputation and inflict economic damage. In this context, critics frequently call for a boycott of the company and its products in the comment sections. It should be noted, however, that in many cases this call arises from a group dynamic and the users as a group want to publicly distance themselves from the values/positioning of the company (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022, p. 278). As a result, the call for a boycott often has only a symbolic character and words are not always followed by deeds. The critics see the defamation/strategy as justified, as they view the company as a political opponent due to its socio-political positioning (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022, p. 278).

Kähr et al. (2016, p. 26) also identified a group of individuals who they refer to as "brand saboteurs". These individuals have a clear intention to cause damage to the company, including through social media activities. This approach differs from the others in that the individuals have significantly more hostile feelings towards the company and therefore plan their actions strategically. These actions are often "ideology-inspired" as well (p.38). In such instances, Kähr et al. (2016, p. 39) recommend either offering an apology or responding in a confrontational manner and denying the allegations in question.

3   Theoretical Framework

The previous chapter examined the characteristics of a backlash that arises as a result of brand activism. In addition, the reasons behind such a backlash were identified and assumptions were made as to why people communicate their rejection of brand activism initiatives on social media. This chapter considers the backlash from the company's perspective and presents the theoretical framework for managing and responding to such backlash. First, however, it is important to clarify the extent to which a backlash can be considered a crisis in order to demonstrate the applicability of crisis communication strategies.

3.1   Conceptualizing Crises and Crisis Communication

Coombs (2015) describes a crisis as "an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues, and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (p.3). He emphasizes that a crisis is "unpredictable but not unexpected" (p.3), which applies to the case of brand activism backlash. Hence, a backlash following brand activism activities can be classified as a crisis. As previously stated, given the increasingly polarized nature of society, companies should be aware of the likelihood that activism will provoke negative reactions, at least among certain groups of individuals. Thus, while the occurrence of a backlash is not unexpected, its intensity and course are unpredictable (Rauschnabel et al., 2016, p. 388). In light of the ever-increasing prevalence of social media, however, Coombs identifies a need to differentiate between traditional crises and social media crises (Coombs, 2015, p. 22). He posits that the primary distinction between the two lies in the nature of the crises themselves. Traditional crises, according to him, tend to be physical crises that may pose a threat to public safety or lead to production disruptions (Coombs, 2015, p. 22). In contrast, a social media crisis is caused by issues related to the company's reputation (Coombs, 2015, p. 22). Such a crisis occurs "when disgruntled stakeholders strike a responsive chord and connect with other stakeholders online" (Coombs, 2015, p. 13). This is precisely the behavior that can be observed when individuals feel triggered and angered by a company's activism. This can then develop into an online firestorm or backlash, as discussed in chapter 2.2.1. Consequently, a brand activism backlash can be categorized as a social media crisis or as a crisis amplified by social media. An even more detailed definition of the type of social media crisis that a backlash is and its implications for crisis communication follows in chapter 3.4.

The negative reactions to brand activism have been demonstrated to be a crisis or social media crisis specifically; therefore, it is evident that crisis communication strategies should be deployed to limit

the negative effects. As defined by Fearn-Banks (2017) crisis communication is "the dialogue between the organization and its public(s) prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence" (p.2). The main goal of crisis communication is to protect stakeholders from potential threats and rebuild trust. Secondly, crisis communication aims to limit negative reports about the company and thus protect the company's reputation, which in turn could have longer-term financial consequences (Coombs, 2015, pp. 136–137). In instances where brand activism leads to negative reactions from consumers, the objective is to mitigate the level of frustration among commenters and subsequently reduce the number of negative comments Beham (2015, p. 32).

3.2 Key Aspects of Crisis Communication

Although crises vary in terms of their causes, parties involved and consequences, crisis communication researchers have identified a number of fundamental principles that should be adhered to regarding the formalities of the response.

The advent of social media has fundamentally transformed the way people communicate and exchange information. Nowadays, anyone can create content and disseminate information in a very short time on social media platforms (Coombs, 2015, p. 17). However, this information is not always truthful, considering the rise of fake news. This development also has a fundamental impact on the emergence and dissemination of information about crises (Coombs, 2015, p. 17). Given the ability of individuals to spread misinformation in a very short period of time, Coombs recommends that companies should always make a statement about a crisis in which they are involved. This allows them to influence the framing and narrative of a crisis and to present their view of how events unfolded. This is especially important because these frames are picked up and disseminated by the traditional media (Coombs, 2015, p. 28).

Given today's fast-paced world, a timely response to the crisis is also essential in order to be able to influence the course of the crisis. Posting a statement on social media platforms such as X (Twitter), Facebook and Instagram is the easiest way to do this (Coombs, 2015, pp. 130–131; Fearn-Banks, 2017, p. 69). Coombs (2015, p. 28) adds that the statement on the crisis should be published on the same social media platform on which the crisis was triggered. Beham (2015, p. 29) suggests that this reduces the likelihood of previously unaware individuals becoming aware of the incident.

The content of such responses should be fact-based and accurate, as this signals credibility to stakeholders and victims of the crisis (Coombs, 2010b, pp. 28–29; Fearn-Banks, 2017, p. 71). Companies should also speak with one voice and send a consistent message across different channels

and spokespersons (Coombs, 2015, p. 133). It is important to note that such reactions on social media are primarily about signaling that the company is aware of the users' concerns and criticism rather than offering concrete information and solutions. (Coombs, 2015, p. 22).

There are different opinions in the literature with regard to the tonality of such responses. Coombs (2015, p.29) recommends that companies maintain a professional and polite demeanor. It is advised that they refrain from engaging in hate speech, as this could potentially exacerbate the crisis. Beham (2015, p. 27) on the other hand, suggests using language that is adapted to the social media tonality, as this appears more authentic and enhances the company's likeability.

3.3   Situational Crisis Communication Theory

The literature on crisis communication offers a variety of approaches and strategies on how companies can deal with unforeseen situations in terms of communication (Ulmer et al., 2023, p. 24). The following section provides a concise overview of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory by Coombs, which forms the theoretical basis for the subsequent analysis of corporate responses to a backlash following brand activism.

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), as proposed by W. Timothy Coombs, represents one of the most prominent theories in the field of crisis communication (Rauschnabel et al., 2016, p. 383; Ulmer et al., 2023, p. 25). It is an evidence-based framework that aligns crisis type and crisis responsibility with suitable crisis responses (Coombs, 2007, p. 163; Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 166). The term "crisis response strategies" refers to how companies behave and communicate with their stakeholders during and after the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 166). The objective of the strategies is to protect a company's reputation during a crisis and to maintain relationships with stakeholders (Coombs, 2007, p. 166, 2015, pp. 136–137). Given that the narrative surrounding a crisis is also adopted by stakeholders, the aim is to influence the framing in traditional and social media through the implementation of suitable communication strategies (Coombs, 2007, p. 171).

In developing this theory, Coombs drew upon approaches from prior crisis communication research. In particular, it is based on the assumptions of the attribution theory, which posits that individuals consistently seek to understand the causes of behaviors and identify the parties responsible for something (Ulmer et al., 2023, p. 25; Weiner, 1972, p. 203). Applied to corporate crises, Coombs argues that individuals consistently seek to understand the origins of crises and identify the parties involved (Coombs, 2007, p. 166).

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory therefore argues that the optimal response to a crisis depends on the crisis type and the extent to which the company is perceived as responsible for it. In this context, "optimal" denotes a communication strategy that is aimed at minimizing and, where possible, repairing any reputational damage that may have been caused by the crisis (Coombs, 2007, pp. 166–168).

A company's reputation is a valuable asset, reflecting how the company is perceived by the public (Coombs, 2007, p. 4; Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 167). It significantly influences consumers' purchasing decisions. From a company's perspective, reputation differentiates it from competitors in the market (Fombrun & Riel, 2004). According to Fombrun & Riel (2004, pp. 2–5), a company's reputation can be conceptualized as a magnet that attracts a variety of resources, including employees, customers, investors, and positive press coverage. Consequently, it is vital for companies to strive for a positive reputation.

A company's reputation can be damaged by crises or unforeseen events (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 166). Such a crisis can result in a loss of trust in the company and in the linking of negative associations and information with the company, which affects the reputation (Coombs, 2007, p. 164). When the public assigns responsibility for a crisis to a particular company, there is an elevated risk of reputational harm. As the degree of responsibility attributed to the company by the public increases, so does the intensity of negative reactions and the potential for reputational damage (Coombs, 2007, p. 169).

As outlined before, companies facing a crisis need to assess the reputational threat in order to select an effective crisis strategy. In a two-step process, the crisis type, crisis history, and the company's previous reputation are evaluated (Coombs, 2015, p. 150).

The first step consists of identifying the crisis type as this influences how the crisis is portrayed in media and thus perceived by the public (Coombs, 2007, pp. 166–167). In order to do so, it is assessed to what extent a company is considered to be responsible for the crisis by the public (Coombs, 2015, p. 150). Coombs distinguishes between three crisis types and therefore developed three crisis clusters, each cluster representing a different level of crisis responsibility. In the victim cluster, the company's responsibility, if any, is perceived as minimal. Instead, the company is regarded as a victim of a crisis beyond their control by the stakeholders (e.g. natural disasters, rumors). The risk of reputational damage is therefore very low (Coombs, 2015, p. 150). The second cluster is referred to as the "accidental cluster" as it encompasses crises that were caused by an unintentional error on the part of the company. An unintentional crisis may arise from a variety of sources. One example could be a

production error that leads to a product recall. In such instances, the company is held only slightly responsible by those affected, and the risk of reputational damage is considered to be moderate (Coombs, 2007, pp. 167–168). The third category of Coombs' clusters is the preventable cluster, in which companies deliberately expose individuals to risk or cause them harm through negligent actions or failures. Consequently, the company is held fully accountable for the crisis, which may result in significant reputational harm (Coombs, 2015, p. 150).

In the second step, according to SCCT, companies need to assess two potential factors that can influence the public's perception of the crisis, as well as the attribution of responsibility and risk of reputational damage. Coombs refers to these as intensifying factors (Coombs, 2007, p. 168). Firstly, the company's previous history is a significant factor. This encompasses whether the company has previously been involved in crises and, if so, how frequently (Coombs, 2007, p. 167). If it has already attracted negative attention in the past due to its involvement in crises, it would appear negligent and would most likely be classified by stakeholders as being involved or in the crisis again (Coombs, 2004, p. 271; 2010a, p. 39).

The second intensifying factor is the prior relationship reputation. This refers to the quality of the relationship between the company and stakeholders before the crisis occurred (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 169). A positive and robust relationship can function as a mitigating factor, helping to maintain the company's reputation. Conversely, a weak or negative prior relationship can intensify the situation, leading to more severe criticism and greater reputational harm (Coombs, 2007, p. 169).

Once the type of crisis has been identified, along with the associated attribution of responsibility and the likelihood of damage to the company's reputation, an appropriate crisis response strategy can be selected. These strategies are intended to mitigate the negative reactions of the public and thus prevent a long-term deterioration in reputation (Coombs, 2007, p. 170). Implementing these strategies demonstrates that it is receptive to and responsive to the allegations or concerns expressed by stakeholders and victims. (Coombs, 2007, p. 168).

The field of crisis communication has been examining crisis response strategies for several decades. SCCT contains a list of common crisis response strategies, which are based on those of Benoit's (1995) image restoration theory. They are divided into four clusters (denial, diminishment, rebuilding and bolstering strategies) and differ in the extent to which the company takes responsibility for the crisis (Coombs, 2007, p. 170). Coombs (2015) provides a concise explanation of the key distinction between the four clusters, noting that they differ in their intention to either "change perceptions of the crisis or of the organization in crisis" (p.146).

As the clusters and crisis communication strategies serve as categories in the qualitative content analysis of this paper, an overview of SCCT crisis response strategies and the contributions of other scholars to the list of response strategies is provided below. Given the emergence of new types of (digital) crises and the increasing prevalence of social media in crisis communication, researchers such as Ham & Kim (2019), Lee & Song (2010), Liu (2010), Liu et al. (2011) proposed additional strategies to supplement Coombs' framework. Therefore, these are included as well. Table 1 provides an overview of all strategies and descriptions.

1. Denial Strategies

The strategies that fall into this cluster are characterized by a defensive position, whereby companies deny any responsibility or connection to the crisis (Coombs, 2007, p. 171). With these strategies, companies attempt to distance themselves from the crisis and redirect attention to other parties involved to avoid reputational damage (Coombs, 2007, p. 171). In the Attacking the Accuser strategy, for instance, the company directly confronts the critics or accusers and exerts pressure on them (Coombs, 2015, p. 145). The company is not interested in finding a solution that satisfies both the company and the accuser and often threatens consequences, including legal action (Coombs, 2015, p. 145). With this strategy, companies intend to present themselves as victims in order to gain sympathy from outsiders who are not involved in the crisis (Coombs, 2015, p. 147). According to Coombs, this approach is best suited to rumor crises (Coombs, 2015, p. 147). The second strategy in this cluster is Denial, in which the company denies the very existence of the crisis. The company's response often contains a justification as to why it believes the accusations are wrong or why it believes the crisis does not exist (Coombs, 2015, p. 145). As with the previous strategy, this approach is also suitable for addressing rumors (Coombs, 2015, p. 147). The final strategy proposed within this cluster is Scapegoating. This involves the company identifying an external person or group as the clear scapegoat and cause of the crisis, with the aim of deflecting responsibility (Coombs, 2015, p. 146). Regardless of the crisis in question, Coombs (2015, p. 147) asserts that this approach should be avoided.

Similar studies on online crises included an "Ignore / No Action" strategy in this cluster (Lee & Song, 2010, p. 1075; Liu, 2010, p. 342), despite the fact that research on crisis communication has largely rejected this approach (Coombs, 2010a, p. 28; Ulmer et al., 2023, p. 48). However, these studies have demonstrated that in practice companies indeed chose to ignore some crises. When applying this strategy, companies do not comment on the crisis at all and do not take any mitigating measures. With

this, they may attempt to avoid giving the crisis any additional relevance and thus emphasize their innocence.

2. Diminishment Strategies

The Diminishment cluster consists of the Excuse and Justification strategies. With these strategies, companies acknowledge the existence of the crisis and their co-responsibility but attempt to reduce their perceived control over the crisis and its consequences (Coombs, 2015, p. 147). For this reason, these strategies are only suitable for crises in which the company's involvement and responsibility are indeed low (Coombs, 2015, p. 147). By framing the crisis as unintentional or caused by accident, the Excuse strategy seeks to minimize the perceived responsibility for causing the crisis. The aim of the Justification strategy, on the other hand, is to ensure that the damage caused by the crisis is perceived as minor by the public. In their statements, the companies typically emphasize that no people were seriously injured by the crisis and that there was only minimal material damage (Coombs, 2015, p. 145).

Liu et al. (2011, p. 347) also suggest a "Separation" strategy to be added to this cluster, where the company clearly names the person responsible for the crisis and publicly distances itself from them. This communicates that only one individual is to blame and that the other employees are also wrongly accused. In statements, companies can then announce that they are parting ways with the person at fault and emphasize that the individual does not reflect the company's values and practices.

3. Rebuilding Strategies

The Rebuilding strategies attempt to improve the company's reputation by taking full responsibility for the crisis, showing remorse, and asking for forgiveness. Moreover, in order to rebuild trust that has been eroded by the crisis, they actively reach out to those affected. Therefore, the strategies in this cluster are applicable to all types of crises, though they are particularly suited to situations in which it is evident that the company is the primary cause of the crisis (Coombs, 2015, p. 147). The first strategy in this cluster is Compensation, in which the company compensates the victims of the crisis financially or materially in order to counteract the negative events (Coombs, 2015, p. 145). Another strategy that is particularly focused on the victims of a crisis is to demonstrate Sympathy. In expressing their sympathy for the victims, they acknowledge the harm that has been done to them (Coombs & Holladay, 2008, p. 253). Corrective Actions, which are measures taken by organizations to address the underlying causes of a crisis, fall into this cluster as well. By implementing these measures, companies aim to demonstrate to their stakeholders that they have recognized their mistake

and that a similar crisis is highly unlikely in the future (Coombs, 1998, p. 180; Lee & Song, 2010, p. 1079).

The most common yet potentially expensive strategy in a crisis is a public apology. Given its applicability across a variety of crises, crisis communication research places significant emphasis on this strategy (Coombs & Holladay, 2008, pp. 252–253). However, issuing an apology is a complex and multi-layered undertaking, as acknowledging responsibility for a crisis can have severe legal consequences (Coombs, 2015, p. 148). Furthermore, a study conducted by Staubach & Wannow (2024, p. 30) illustrates that poorly worded or poorly timed apologies can exacerbate the situation. With regard to a potential lawsuit, scholars distinguish between a full apology and a partial apology as these differ in terms of content and liability (Coombs, 2015, p.148). In a full apology the company accepts full responsibility, shows remorse and promises not to repeat the mistakes. By acknowledging the error and accepting responsibility, the company can be held legally accountable for damages or financial compensation. For this reason, Coombs recommends exercising caution when utilizing the terms "apology" and "apologize" in a crisis (Coombs, 2015, p. 148). In a partial apology, however, companies do not address the origin of the crisis and thus do not acknowledge responsibility (Coombs, 2015, p. 148). Kellerman (2006, p. 76) emphasizes that there is no universal formula for crafting an apology. The optimal approach depends on a variety of factors, including the specifics of the situation, the nature of the crisis, cultural considerations, and the sender's individual characteristics. As a general rule, however, research findings suggest that an effective apology should include four key points. Those are "an acknowledgment of the mistake or wrongdoing, the acceptance of responsibility, an expression of regret, and a promise that the offense will not be repeated" (Kellerman, 2006, pp. 76–77). Staubach & Wannow (2024, p. 24) have developed a framework for apologies specifically on social media, highlighting the significance of phrases such as "we apologize". This effectively categorizes a statement as an apology. Furthermore, they advise that an offer of reparation should be included. This could take the form of financial compensation for the victims or corrective actions that have contributed to the crisis (Staubach & Wannow, 2024, p. 25).

Furthermore, Liu (2010, p. 344) and Liu et al. (2011, p. 347) identified "Transcendence" to be a common strategy and added it to the rebuilding cluster. They draw upon Benoit (1997) and describe the strategy as an attempt to "shift the focus away from the immediate crisis to a larger issue such as combating global terrorism or achieving national unity" (p.347).

4. Bolstering Strategies

Bolstering strategies aim to restore positive associations by providing new, positive information about the company, thereby influencing public perception and restoring trust (Coombs, 2007, p. 172). However, Coombs advises that these strategies should only be employed as supplementary measures alongside strategies from the three other clusters as it focuses on emphasizing positive aspects of the company. Otherwise, these strategies can have the opposite effect and the company appears tone deaf. (Coombs, 2015, p. 149). The first strategy in this cluster, is the Reminder strategy, whereby companies attempt to remind the public of their previous successes and positive actions, thus mitigating the negative effects of the crisis (Coombs, 2015, p. 172). This approach is particularly suitable if the company had a positive image before the crisis (Coombs, 2015, p. 148). The second strategy, Ingratiation, seeks to restore trust among stakeholders through praising them (Coombs, 2007, p. 172). This may entail expressing gratitude for their support and loyalty, as well as demonstrating acknowledgment of their concerns and problems. This strategy demonstrates a company's willingness to maintain a positive relationship with its stakeholders while also diverting attention from the crisis (Coombs, 2015, p. 148). Coombs (2015, p. 148) suggests that this approach is particularly effective when support from external groups is crucial to overcome the crisis. When a company outlines that it is a victim of the crisis itself and emphasizes that the causes are beyond its control in order to gain sympathy, it is pursuing a Victimage strategy (Coombs, 2007, p. 172; 2015, p. 145). This strategy is appropriate if the crisis is a natural disaster or a cyberattack over which the company has limited control (Coombs, 2015, p. 148).

Furthermore, Liu (2010, p. 345) identified the strategy "Endorsement" for this cluster. Here, companies signal the support of reputable external parties or public figures in their statements to rebuild credibility and trust among the public. In addition, positive characteristics of external parties can be associated with the company and thus positively enhance its image.

Table 1: Overview of Crisis Response Strategies

Cluster	Crisis Response Strategy	Description
Denial	Attacking the Accuser	The crisis manager addresses the accuser, which may include a legal threat (Coombs, 1998, p. 180).
	Denial	The crisis manager asserts that no crisis exists and might provide an explanation (Coombs, 1998, p. 180).
	Scapegoating	The crisis manager blames an external person or group for the crisis (Coombs, 2007, p. 170).

	Ignoring/No Action	The crisis manager declines to comment on the allegations to distance from the negative events (Liu, 2010, p. 342).
Diminishment	Excuse	The crisis manager attempts to minimize the organization's responsibility by denying harmful intent, lack of control, or both (Coombs, 1998, p. 180).
	Justification	The crisis manager downplays the crisis impact by claiming no serious damage occurred or that victims deserved the outcome (Coombs, 1998, p. 180).
	Separation	The company distances itself from the person within the company who caused the crisis (Liu, 2010, p. 343).
Rebuilding	Compensation	The company provides financial compensation and gifts to the victims (Coombs, 2015, p. 145).
	Full Apology	The crisis manager publicly acknowledges its wrongdoings, accepts full responsibility for the crisis seeks forgiveness and promises not to repeat the mistakes (Coombs, 2015, p. 145; Kellerman, 2006, pp. 75–77).
	Partial Apology	The company shows remorse but does not address the origin of the crisis (Coombs, 2015, p. 148).
	Corrective Actions	The crisis managers aim to repair the damage and implement measures to avoid recurrence (Coombs, 1998, p. 180).
	Sympathy	The company expresses its concern for the victims of the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2008, p. 253).
	Transcendence	The company redirects attention from the crisis to larger issues (Liu et al., 2011, p. 347).
Bolstering	Reminder	The company highlights its past good deeds to stakeholders (Coombs, 2015, p. 145).
	Ingratiation	The company takes actions to win stakeholder favor, e.g. by praising them (Coombs, 1998, p. 180, 2015, p. 145).
	Victimage	The crisis manager points out that the organization is also a victim of the crisis (Coombs, 2007, p. 170).
	Endorsement	The company highlights its third-party supporters (Liu, 2010, p. 345).

3.4   Implications for the Study

This chapter aims to synthesize the key insights derived from the literature review and theoretical framework and establish the expectations for the empirical study. In doing so, particular attention will be paid to the applicability of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) to accommodate the specific context of backlash triggered by brand activism.

As previously outlined, a backlash can be classified as a social media crisis, requiring companies to respond using established crisis communication strategies. Coombs (2015, p. 67) takes this concept further by distinguishing between different types of social media crises. Of particular relevance to brand activism backlashes is the "Challenges" crisis type. This type describes situations in which stakeholders claim that an organization "is operating in an inappropriate manner" (Coombs, 2015, p. 67), often accusing the company of hypocrisy or irresponsibility (Coombs, 2015, p. 67). This mirrors the common criticism faced by companies engaged in brand activism, where stakeholders believe a gap exists between the company's stated values and its actions. These critics may fundamentally disagree with the company's position or feel that its activism is inconsistent with its internal practices. While Coombs did identify the specific case of an online crisis based on value violations or discrepancies as challenges, there is no particular approach recommended for these in terms of strategies. However, due to its characteristics, this type of crisis falls into the preventable cluster, and the company is likely being held responsible for the incident. The SCCT suggests that rebuilding strategies, such as apologies and corrective actions, are an optimal response in these instances. By acknowledging responsibility and taking steps to address the situation the SCCT posits that disgruntled individuals will be appeased. Beham (2015, p. 9) also suggests issuing timely apologies to prevent the situation from escalating.

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is one of the most common crisis communication strategies. Although it was originally developed before the rise of social media, SCCT has already proven its applicability in the context of social media crises (Rauschnabel et al., 2016, pp. 395–396). Still, the findings of various studies that examined the application of crisis responses to different types of crises and communication channels indicate that crisis response strategies may need to be expanded depending on the subject of the crisis (e.g. Ham & Kim, 2019; Lee & Song, 2010; Liu, 2010; Liu et al., 2011). Therefore, it is likely that companies react to a brand activism backlash with strategies that are currently not included in the SCCT list of crisis response strategies. For instance, one potential strategy in this context would be to maintain a consistent stance while acknowledging the concerns and dissatisfaction expressed by many people.

As identified in chapters 2.2.2 and 2.2.3, there are several reasons for criticizing brand activism and correspondingly different goals that users pursue by writing negative comments. The literature indicates that it is not only customers who take part in backlashes and anti-brand actions, but also groups who merely want to harm the company. Due to these differences within the term "backlash", it can be assumed that companies use different strategies to address the various accusations.

Based on an analysis of the extant literature and prior research on crisis communication, it is possible to derive hypotheses concerning the most used response to an online firestorm resulting from brand activism. It can be assumed that there are three main approaches:

> **Hypothesis 1 (H1):** The company acknowledges the brand activism initiative as flawed and withdraws it, thereby winning back the support of critics. However, it may lose credibility as the activism could be perceived as a marketing ploy or because it is obvious that the company is not genuinely supportive of the cause.
>
> **Hypothesis 2 (H2):** The company stands up for its beliefs and brand activism initiatives. It demonstrates steadfastness and does not yield to external pressures. The brand activism initiative will not be withdrawn.
>
> **Hypothesis 3 (H3):** The company is attempting to find a balance between continuing its support for the brand activism initiative and addressing the concerns of critics by modifying the campaign without withdrawing it entirely.

Nevertheless, reputational harm appears to be an inevitable consequence of a backlash as it was, to some extent, deliberately provoked by the activism of the companies because they decided to engage in brand activism. As previously stated, the likelihood of reputational damage is significantly greater when the company is held entirely accountable for a crisis (Coombs, 2015, p. 150). Therefore, the main aim is to calm the backlash quickly and reduce the amount of negative comments (Beham, 2015, p. 32). Additionally, literature suggests that the effectiveness of crisis response strategies is often challenging to assess, as such shitstorms have both monetary and non-monetary effects that are difficult to attribute precisely to the incident of the backlash (Beham, 2015, p. 16). Heath (2010, pp. 11–12) proposes that a crisis can be regarded as a success once control over the situation and the narrative has been re-established. Beham (2015, p. 32) recommends monitoring the social media comments in order to be able to evaluate the reactions to the responses and thus the success of the chosen strategies. As an indicator, Beham proposes the proportion of positive comments under subsequent social media posts, i.e. posts that were posted after a response was published.

4 Methodology

The preceding chapter presented the theoretical background to the topic of brand activism as well as the typical characteristics of a brand activism backlash. Additionally, the conceptual framework for the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) was discussed, as this theory serves as the foundation for the following quantitative content analysis. The study of this thesis seeks to merge these two areas of research by applying SCCT to real-world cases of brand activism backlash. It examines strategies companies use to respond to such online firestorms and whether the existing list of crisis response strategies may need to be expanded.

This chapter outlines the research design, the data collection method, and analytical procedures used to address the research objectives. The chosen methodology of combining a qualitative content analysis of corporate responses and a sentiment analysis of comments in order to assess the effectiveness of those responses is intended to ensure a systematic approach to answering the research questions and testing the hypotheses.

4.1 Research Method

Given that the examination of case studies and third-party data is a prevalent methodology in crisis communication for both the development of hypotheses and theory, this approach is well-suited to exploring brand activism backlashes (Coombs, 2010a, p. 33). In this context, the term "case studies" refers to instances where companies have faced backlash as a result of their brand activism activities and have subsequently issued a response. The material, i.e., the corporate responses that are analyzed, is derived from two sources: the companies' communication channels and public social media accounts (X, Instagram and LinkedIn) as well as indirect sources such as news articles and reports on the backlash. In other words, only publicly accessible material is used to gather and analyze information (Coombs, 2010a, p. 33). The cases, statements, and background information were obtained through online search engines using relevant search terms. It should be noted that no direct contact with the respective companies is made and that no internal information or materials are analyzed.

The method of choice for the analysis of the available material is a structured qualitative content analysis according to Philipp Mayring (2015, 2022, 2023). The method utilizes a systematic approach to identify and classify the content of texts by assigning specific codes to text passages (Mayring, 2022, p. 61). It was selected due to its prevalence in communication research as a means of examining material originating from fixed communication (Mayring, 2015, p. 11). In order to define these codes,

two approaches can be considered: deductive and inductive category formation. Deductive category formation is the process of defining the codes in advance based on existing literature. Conversely, inductive category formation involves deriving the codes from the material during the analysis. Furthermore, it is possible to combine deductive and inductive categories. The objective of this method is to analyze the material in question within its communication context, in order to gain insights into the sender's intentions as well as the effect that the message has on the intended recipient (Mayring, 2015, p. 13, 50). In order to achieve this, the material is not only analyzed in terms of its content, but also in relation to its origin and the circumstances under which it was created (Mayring, 2015, p. 50).

Mayring (2015, p.123) further emphasizes the significance of adhering to specific quality criteria so that the method fulfils social science standards. These quality criteria are objectivity, reliability and validity (Mayring, 2022, p. 70). The criterion of objectivity is defined as the ability of the analysis to produce consistent results regardless of the individual conducting the analysis. In the context of qualitative content analysis, this is also referred to as intercoder reliability. To fulfill this, a clearly defined procedure that leaves no room for interpretation is essential. Validity is the quality criterion that ensures the selected method is appropriate for the object of research and can address the research questions (Mayring, 2023, p. 119). The last criterion is reliability. For this criterion to be met, it is necessary that measuring conditions remain consistent throughout the study (Krippendorf, 2019, as cited in Mayring, 2023, p. 173)

To fulfil these requirements, the analysis has to be rule-based, systematic and theory-driven, according to Mayring (2015, pp. 12–13; 50–53). Moreover, it is conducted in the context of existing theoretical frameworks and aims to contribute to the advancement of knowledge within the field, building upon previous research (Mayring, 2015, p. 13). Thus, the initial step in the analysis is the development of a detailed workflow according to which the material is analyzed (Mayring, 2015, pp. 50–51). The analysis is then conducted according to explicit rules and on the basis of categories, which ensures transparency and comprehensibility to others (Mayring, 2015, pp. 12–13).

The second part of the research has a supporting function. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of corporate responses and address Research Question 2, a qualitative content analysis in the form of a sentiment analysis was selected. This approach is based on the method proposed by Beham (2015, pp. 32–33) to evaluate the success of corporate responses to online firestorms, which suggests monitoring social media comments to evaluate the reactions to responses and assess the success of chosen strategies. This entails analyzing comments published on X, Instagram and LinkedIn under new posts by the company experiencing a backlash, starting from the time of the response. The

comments are classified as positive, neutral, or negative in order to ascertain the overall sentiment expressed. The percentage of comments containing each sentiment is then calculated. Beham (2015, p. 33) suggests a value of at least 40% positive comments as an indicator that the company's response has been accepted. Additionally, the analysis identifies whether there is a direct reference to the content of the backlash and whether the comment addresses the content of the response. This method was selected because measuring the success of crisis response strategies is a challenging task due to the complex nature of crises and their far-reaching effects. This method illustrates when companies regain control of their comment sections and when they are no longer flooded with hate comments. The approach is in line with Heath's (2010, p. 11) classification of strategies as successful when control over the situation and the framing of the crisis in the media are regained.

4.2   Research Design

The study employs a two-phased analysis to explore how companies are responding to the online firestorm caused by brand activism, and whether there is any evidence that certain strategies mitigate this backlash.

4.2.1 Phase 1: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Corporate Responses

In this section, the procedure for obtaining material and the analysis process will be outlined. It is based on the guidelines proposed by Mayring (2015, p. 62) for a qualitative content analysis.

1. Selection of Material (Criteria and Formal Characteristics)

The initial stage of the analysis entailed the selection of 14 cases in which companies have been subjected to backlash as a consequence of their direct or indirect engagement with controversial socio-political issues. The requirement was that the company or any other person involved had to have responded to a firestorm with a statement addressing the situation. The material was collected from online sources in the period from 15/06/2024 – 13/08/2024. The sample size of 14 cases was chosen because this paper is intended to provide an initial overview of the strategies employed by companies in such contexts and to identify initial patterns, which should serve as a foundation for further research. Therefore, the cases are also not restricted to specific industries or socio-political issues. However, the cases have been selected according to a specific set of criteria.

The first criterion was the time period in which the brand activism and online firestorm took place. To ensure the relevance and topicality of the study, only incidents that occurred within the last 10 years were considered. Analyzing recent cases provides insights into current trends and strategies in

dealing with online crises, which are of particular importance to companies in the current digital age. This temporal limitation ensures that the results of the analysis are both timely and relevant to practice.

The second criterion was that only cases in which global companies engage in brand activism and subsequently experience a backlash were selected for the qualitative content analysis. The potential negative consequences are significantly more severe for large companies than for small companies or value-oriented start-ups, due to their higher fall height (Hydock et al., 2020, p. 1148). Consequently, they are under greater pressure to react to the backlash. These cases are therefore more illustrative and potentially more generalizable, as they serve as exemplary cases that smaller companies can utilize as a point of reference for their future actions.

As only incidents that had occurred in the past were selected, the third criterion was that sufficient material needed to be available for the analysis. The statements therefore had to be available on the official company accounts, the public accounts of the individuals involved, the corporate websites or the media outlet websites to which an interview or statement was given. If this was not the case, material from third-party sources reporting on the statements was also allowed to be included.

An overview of the selected case studies, together with the relevant background information, can be found in chapter 4.3.

2. Direction of the Analysis

This study aims to analyze the statements and announced actions of companies in response to a brand activism backlash. To this end, they are categorized into the four clusters (denial, diminishment, rebuilding, bolstering) containing crisis response strategies of the SCCT framework.

The objective of this study is to determine which strategies companies typically employ in this particular case of a social media crisis. This entails the identification of the strategies that are most frequently utilized, as well as the circumstances and socio-political issues for which they are most commonly deployed. If possible, an indication should be provided as to which strategies are most effective in mitigating the backlash.

The material to be analyzed and assigned to the SCCT framework consists of social media posts on Instagram, X and LinkedIn as well as statements on company websites or corporate blogs. These posts and statements were published by the respective company following a wave of negative comments on social media. The content is examined in terms of its choice of words, tonality and intention in order to assign it to a SCCT crisis response strategy. As in some crisis situations

companies chose to ignore allegations, cases where companies do not comment at all are included as well. In addition, the source of the response as well as the channel where it was published is identified. It is investigated whether the postings and statements originate from the company social media account or if they are made by a specific representative of the company.

Furthermore, the context of the creation and publication of the material is taken into account in a qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2015). This is particularly relevant in the case of brand activism, as it involves positioning on controversial socio-political issues that are subject to constant change in societal opinion. It can be assumed that corporate responses are also strongly influenced by cultural norms and the prevailing societal opinion on the topic (Kellerman, 2006, p. 75). This should be taken into account in the analysis when evaluating a corporate response.

3. The Analysis Technique

A structured content analysis was chosen as the method, as the material needs to be categorized and specific aspects such as content, tone, and intent are to be examined (Mayring, 2015, p. 68). Therefore, an initial coding guideline was developed, wherein the categories were defined and anchor examples were selected (Mayring, 2015, p. 97). In some instances, it was not possible to identify anchor examples from other case studies. In these cases, the examples were formulated without reference to existing material.

In addition to the structured analysis, the communication context of the material was also examined as part of a qualitative content analysis to gain deeper insight into the sender's intentions (Mayring, 2022, pp. 61–62). Consequently, the source or spokesperson of the statement is also identified in writing during this analysis, along with the communication channel or platform used to disseminate the response. The selection of these metrics is based on Beham's (2015, pp. 27–30) approach.

4. Definition of the Categories

Categories are formed both deductively and inductively, meaning that it is a mixed form. A category system consisting of categories deductively derived from the list of crisis response strategies included in Coombs' (1998, 2007, 2015) SCCT serves as the starting point for the analysis. The crisis response clusters form the main categories, while the crisis response strategies form the sub-categories to which material components of the statements are assigned. The definitions of the subcategories (i.e., the strategies within a cluster) were adapted based on Coombs' original definition of the categories to accommodate the particular context of a backlash resulting from brand activism. Moreover, as previously stated, a backlash resulting from brand activism represents a distinct social media crisis, presumably prompting specific corporate responses that are not yet included in the SCCT framework.

Consequently, the option of adding further categories that are derived from the material was chosen (Mayring, 2015, p. 85).

5. Definition of the Units of Analysis

The coding unit is the smallest text unit that can be assigned to categories (Mayring, 2015, p. 61). For this study, a single word was defined as a coding unit, as this contains sufficient information regarding the intention to assign it to a category. The context unit comprises the largest section of text "that can fall within one category" (Mayring, 2022, p. 64) and provides the context for the interpretation of the coding unit. For this study, the statements and postings in their entirety were defined as context units. This avoids misunderstandings caused by words or sentences taken out of context.

6. Sample Coding & Revision of Categories and Coding Guidelines

A sample coding including material from six case studies was then conducted for the purpose of reviewing the categories. According to Mayring (2015, pp. 97–99), the category system should be revised after such preliminary coding if additional categories are required. As this was the case, the categories listed in Table 2 below were added to the category system. Furthermore, the coding guidelines were then reviewed and anchor examples were added containing examples from the case studies. In instances, where there was a relatively minor distinction between different categories, decision rules were established to facilitate precise classification (Schreier, 2012, pp. 102–103).

Table 2: Inductive Categories

Denial	Diminishment	Rebuilding
Rejecting Accusation	Downplaying the Seriousness	Communicating Core Values
	Explaining the Intent / Message	Emphasizing the Commitment
	Reasoning for Engaging in Brand Activism Backlash	Accepting Responsibility for Mistakes
	No Explicit Mentioning of the Backlash / Trigger	Rebuilding Relationship with the Backlash Participants
		Learning

7.   Final Coding

After the categories that were inductively derived from the material were added to the category system, the material of the remaining cases was coded according to the coding guidelines and assigned to the categories. The finalized coding guidelines can be found in Appendix A. As this is a master's thesis, it is not possible to conduct a reliability test. For the purpose of coding, the software MAXQDA was utilized.

4.2.2 Phase 2: A Sentiment Analysis of Social Media Comments

The second part of the study, which serves a supporting function, aims to identify whether there is an indication that certain strategies in the responses help to mitigate the backlash. To this end, a sentiment analysis of comments on X, Instagram and LinkedIn, that companies received after their responses were published, is conducted.

1.   Selection of Material (Criteria and Formal Characteristics)

This analysis included the same cases that were used for the previous content analysis. The prerequisite for conducting the analysis was the availability of posts from the time of the response to the backlash on Instagram, X or LinkedIn. However, this did not apply to all previously selected case studies. Consequently, only 7 cases were subject to analysis. All comments are analyzed if there are fewer than 20 and otherwise a maximum of 20 comments were posted under the response posts and the following three posts.

2.   Direction of the Analysis

The objective of the analysis is to determine whether the sentiment expressed in the comments changes after a response has been published. By doing so, initial conclusions can be drawn about the effectiveness of the applied strategies in the responses in mitigating the backlash. Therefore, the content of the comments is categorized as positive, neutral or negative. Additionally, the analysis identifies whether there is a direct reference to the content of the backlash in the comments.

3.   The Analysis Technique

As with the analysis of the corporate responses, a structured qualitative content analysis was used to assign the comments to one of three categories: positive, neutral, or negative. Therefore, an initial coding guideline was developed, wherein the categories were defined, anchor examples selected, and coding rules formulated (Mayring, 2015, p. 97). To ensure the analysis was limited to comments that addressed the companies' socio-political commitments or their responses to criticism, any comments lacking a clear reference to these topics were excluded beforehand.

4. Category Formation

The comments are divided into three possible categories that were developed prior to the analysis. Positive refers to comments in which the expresses approval of the company's socio-political commitment or its response to criticism. Comments are classified as negative if they explicitly convey disapproval of the socio-political engagement or the response to it. Comments are classified as neutral if they address the backlash or response but fail to meet the criteria for a definitive classification.

5. Definition of the Units of Analysis

As with the previous analysis, a single word was defined as a coding unit, as this contains sufficient information regarding the intention to assign it to a category. The context unit provides the context for the interpretation of the coding unit. For this study, the comments in their entirety were defined as context units.

6. Sample Coding & Revision of Categories and Coding Guidelines

A sample coding of half of the material was then performed. According to Mayring (2015, pp. 97–99), the category system should be revised after such preliminary coding if necessary. As this was not the case, no new categories were added. However, anchor examples were added to the coding guidelines containing examples from the cases analyzed. Afterwards, the remaining cases and their comments were also coded in accordance with the established coding guidelines. The coding guidelines can be found in Appendix B.

4.3 Case Study Selection

The following section provides a brief overview of the selected case studies. As stated in chapter 2, both the brand activism campaigns as well as the triggers and points of criticism of a backlash are a reflection of society. Since a qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2015, 2022, 2023) analyzes the material in its communicative and social context, this is particularly relevant for the following analysis and the interpretation of the reactions to the backlash. Thus, background information and reports on the cases regarding the main triggers were gathered from a variety of news sources.

The analysis is based on 14 cases of brand activism that received significant online attention as a result of their actions, which took place between 2015 and 2023. To ensure a certain degree of comparability, only global, listed companies and brands were selected that received particular attention from news outlets. This approach was taken to ensure that sufficient material is available for analysis. The selection of case studies reflects how society, and therefore brand activism, has

changed over the past 10 years in terms of the socio-political issues considered relevant. As a result, the selected case studies differ thematically and in terms of their positioning. At the same time, however, this offers the opportunity to identify potential patterns in the choice of strategies depending on the brand activism topic.

In the selected cases from 2015-2019, companies took a stance on changing gender roles, beauty ideals, structural racism and police violence. The main point of criticism was the poor implementation of the activism and trivialization of significant socio-political issues. For instance, Pepsi's TV spot featuring Kendall Jenner, which was published during the Black Lives Matter protests in 2017, was perceived as tone deaf and inappropriate, trivializing the issue (Victor, 2017; Watters, 2017). Starbucks' "Race Together" campaign in 2015, in which Starbucks employees were asked to discuss the issue of race with customers, initiated by handwritten messages on the cups, was also largely perceived as misguided and inappropriate, as it trivialized the importance of the issue (Crellin, 2015; Shah, 2015; Starbucks, 2015).

The Dove shampoo bottles launched in 2017, which were designed to reflect the diverse body shapes of women (see Figure 1) and thereby promoting body positivity, were also criticized for being inappropriate to address a sensitive topic for many women. The objective was to improve women's body image through

Figure 1: "Body-Shaped Bottle" Campaign (Dove UK, n.d.)

representation; however, the campaign was accused of body shaming and inappropriateness (Craik, 2017; Dove UK, n.d.). The reason for the backlash directed at Gillette's "The Best Men Can Be" in 2019, however, was the fact that the campaign was perceived as offensive towards its male target group and hypocritical at the same time (Baggs, 2019; King, 2019; Mirzaei et al., 2022, p. 2). In the ad, the company advocates against toxic masculinity and for equal rights, yet it placed a pink tax on its own women's razors which raises the price significantly. During the 2017 Super Bowl, Audi also engaged in a campaign advocating for equal rights and called for wages to be paid on a gender-neutral basis (Audi Mauritius, 2019). But the company itself has been accused of failing to meet these standards, making the ad seem hypocritical and like a marketing ploy (Kauflin, 2017).

In 2017, the candy brand Skittles (known for its colorful packages) made a statement in support of LGBTQIA+ rights by launching an all-white special edition because they believe that only the colors of the LGBTQIA+ rainbow matter during pride (Hoffman, 2017; Sampathkumar, 2017). However, at

a time when the Black Lives Matter movement was at its height and racism was a prominent issue, the color white was perceived as highly inappropriate. The brand was accused of racist attitudes and tone-deafness (Adams, 2020; Hoffman, 2017).

Since the 2020s, however, it has mainly been instances in which companies have expressed support for the LGBTQIA+ community or have collaborated with transgender people or drag queens that have resulted in significant backlash on social media. Given the current prevalence of this topic in brand activism triggering online firestorms, the study's sample of case studies includes an inordinate number of backlashes related to LGBTQIA+ activism.

As prior research has shown, society is increasingly divided between liberals with a progressive worldview and conservatives with traditional values (e.g. Iyengar & Westwood, 2015, pp. 691–692). It may be that this growing divide is the reason why brand activism on LGBTQIA+ rights is increasingly the cause of intense online firestorms. The criticism is not of the campaign's content or the company's ulterior motives. In these cases, the mere support of the LGBTQIA+ community and the promotion of progressive values is disliked. Often, the company is accused of "going woke", a term used by the right when a commitment to progressive values is perceived as negative or inauthentic (BBC, 2023).

One recent example for this is US beer brand Bud Light's collaboration with transgender influencer Dylan Mulvaney. In this instance, the influencer promotes the brand with a personalized Bud Light can and posts the video on Instagram (Dylan Mulvaney [@dylanmulvaney], 2023; Holpuch, 2023). While this example is not a direct form of brand activism, as the company is not publicly speaking out in support of LGBTQIA+ rights, the collaboration between a prestigious beer brand and a transgender influencer can be seen as a statement in support of these rights. The reactions to this collaboration also display the typical characteristics of a brand activism backlash, including accusations of being "woke" and calls for a boycott of the brand (BBC, 2023). Therefore, this case has been selected for analysis.

A similar backlash occurred in response to The North Face and Hershey's initiatives. The North Face's "Summer of Pride" campaign, which featured drag queen Pattie Gonia, was the primary target of criticism. The outdoor company was also criticized for its progressive views and faced calls for a

Figure 2: "HER for SHE" Campaign (Hershey's Canada, n.d.)

boycott. Even notable figures from the U.S. right wing participated in the backlash (Ring, 2023). Hershey's Canada, on the other hand, partnered with trans activist Fae Johnstone for its "HER for SHE" campaign to celebrate International Women's Day (Brend, 2023). The choice of featuring a transgender woman instead of a biological woman sparked negative reactions on social media (Washburn, 2023). Starbucks India also released a social media spot as part of its 2023 "#ItStartsWithYourName" campaign, which advocates for the acceptance of transgender people. A father places an order for a cup of coffee using his child's new female name (Mollan, 2023). In addition to the criticism that Hershey's was "going woke", many users also found the campaign inappropriate, given that Starbucks' baristas are known for frequently misspelling its customers' names (Starbucks India [@StarbucksIndia], 2023; Venkatraman, 2023).

Burger King Austria's Pride Whopper was met with backlash not for its general support of the LGBTQIA+ community, but for the specifics of the initiative. It was criticized for being perceived as offensive to members of the LGBTQIA+ community (Burger King [@burgerkingaustria], 2022a; Cooban, 2022; Suciu, 2022). Target's 2023 Pride collection caused a particularly hate-filled backlash, which spilled over into the real world. Some Target employees were specifically threatened in stores (Target, 2023). The outrage was mainly triggered by clothing items specifically aimed at trans people. However, misinformation spread that these are aimed at children (Wile & Lavietes, 2024). The accusations in the case of Kohl's Pride collection were very similar but the company indeed sold babies and children clothing that was LGBTQIA+ themed. The company was accused of trying to impose certain values on young children (Raiken, 2023).

The conflict between Israel and Palestine is another that has divided society for decades. After the outbreak of the most recent war in 2023, the ice cream brand Ben & Jerry's decided to discontinue its sales in the Israel Occupied Palestinian Territory. The company wanted to express its support for Palestine and draw attention to the situation in the region. As a result, the company was accused of anti-Semitism. So, in this case, the company's general political stance and values were criticized (Ben & Jerry's, n.d.-a).

In conclusion, the selection of these 14 cases of brand activism (see Table 3) demonstrates the evolving landscape of socio-political engagement by global companies over the past decade. The shift in focus from issues like gender roles and structural racism to more recent and polarizing topics such as LGBTQIA+ rights and the Israel-Palestine conflict reflects broader societal changes and an increasing polarization of public opinion. The selection of cases therefore ensures the relevance of this study.

Table 3: Overview of Selected Case Studies

Company	Year	Campaign/Initiative (Available at)	Topic	Reason for Backlash
Starbucks	2015	Race Together (Starbucks, 2015)	Racism	Hypocritical (opportunistic), Inappropriate campaign
Audi	2017	Daughter (Audi Mauritius, 2019)	Gender Equality	Hypocritical
Pepsi	2017	Campaign with Kendall Jenner (Marketing The Rainbow, 2020)	Black Lives Matter	Trivializes the issues
Skittles	2017	All-White Skittles (Sampathkumar, 2017)	Pride/ LGBTQIA+	Racism
Dove	2017	Body Shaped Bottles (Dove UK, n.d.)	Body Positivity	Inappropriate campaign, Accusation of body shaming
Gillette	2019	The Best Men Can Be (Guardian News, 2019)	Fighting Toxic Masculinity	Hypocritical, Offensive campaign
Target	2023	#takepride	Pride/ LGBTQIA+	Conservatives reject values, False accusations/rumors
The North Face	2023	Summer of Pride (The North Face [@thenorthface] & Pattie Gonia [@pattiegonia], 2023)	Pride/ LGBTQIA+	Conservatives reject values, Company "goes woke"
Burger King Austria/ Jung von Matt Donau	2023	Pride Whopper (Burger King [@burgerkingaustria], 2022a)	Pride/ LGBTQIA+	Conservatives reject values, Offensive towards LGBTQIA+ community

Bud Light (Anheuser Busch)	2023	Partnership with Dylan Mulvaney (Dylan Mulvaney [@dylanmulvaney], 2023)	LGBTQIA+	Conservatives reject values, Company "goes woke"
Kohl's	2023	Pride Collection	Pride/ LGBTQIA+	Conservatives reject values, False accusations
Starbucks India	2023	#ItStartsWithYourName (Starbucks India [@StarbucksIndia], 2023)	Transgender Inclusivity	Conservatives reject values, Company "goes woke" Inappropriate
Hershey's Canada	2023	HER for SHE (Hershey's Canada, n.d.)	Transgender Inclusivity, Women Rights	Conservatives reject values, Company "goes woke"
Ben & Jerry's	2023	Stopped Sales in Occupied Palestinian Territory (Ben & Jerry's, n.d.-b)	Israel/Palestine Conflict	Anti-Semitism

5 Results

This chapter outlines the findings, evaluates the hypotheses and provides answers to the research questions. In order to answer the main research question of how companies respond to such a backlash, 14 case studies that took place between 2015 and 2023 were subjected to examination. To achieve this objective, four aspects of the responses were examined: the source/spokesperson, the channel on which the response was published, the crisis response strategy used and the general tone of the responses. The sources of the statements that were included in the study are provided in full in Appendix C. A complete overview of all statements containing the statements and applied strategies can be found in Appendix D. Appendix E provides a detailed overview of which text passages were assigned to which strategy. In order to assess how effective these strategies were, comments posted on social media after the response was published were analyzed. This was possible in seven cases. An average of 15 comments from social media were analyzed for each case study. Appendix F contains an excerpt of the comments that were analyzed to illustrate the procedure.

5.1 Findings

In this chapter, the findings from the qualitative content analysis examining the companies' responses to a backlash following brand activism as well as the qualitative content analysis analyzing social media comments that were posted after the responses were published will be presented. The sections first highlight the most important patterns and figures and then illustrate them with concrete examples.
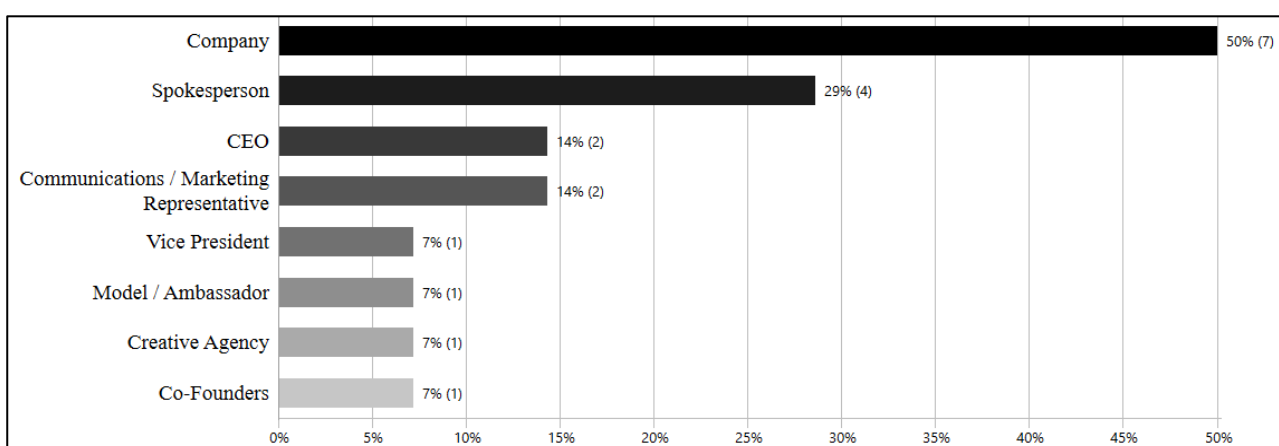
1. Source

Figure 3: Breakdown of Statement Sources

The analysis identified eight distinct individuals or entities who responded to the backlash. This included senior-level figures such as the CEO, founder, and Vice President of Global Communications and Advocacy, as well as those involved in the creative execution, including the creative agency, models, and unspecified spokespeople (see Figure 3). In many instances, statements from multiple sources could be identified, indicating that several individuals involved in the same brand activism initiatives spoke out about the backlash. Consequently, the total number of sources exceeds the number of case studies. This was observed with Bud Light, Dove, Starbucks US, Hershey's and Burger King. Notably, statements from representatives of the same company were generally consistent in content, tone, and voice. The only significant variation was seen in Burger King Austria's "Pride Whopper" campaign. While the fast-food chain posted a brief one-sentence statement on Instagram, the creative agency responsible, Jung von Matt Donau, issued a detailed apology to the LGBTQIA+ community on LinkedIn. The contrast in response strategies (Burger King Austria's brief Instagram statement versus the more elaborate response from Jung von Matt Donau) highlights how different parties may perceive the backlash as a threat to varying degrees.

In 50% of the cases, the company released a statement on behalf of the entire organization without mentioning or attributing it to a specific individual responsible for the campaign. In these instances, the company used its official name and referred to itself with the pronoun "we", demonstrating unity. The analysis revealed that spokespersons made up the second largest group of respondents, accounting for 29% of the statements. This was particularly noticeable when the statements were published on news portals, indicating that the request may have originated from the news portals themselves. Moreover, it is noteworthy that individuals involved in the creative implementation also addressed the backlash. This occurred in some instances as a direct response to the backlash, and in others as a more delayed reaction, weeks or months later.

The variation in the sources of statements (from top executives to creative agencies) suggests that a company's response strategy may depend on its internal structure and how it assesses the severity of the backlash. When senior leadership is involved, it signals the issue is taken seriously at the highest level, whereas statements from creative agencies or spokespeople may indicate an effort to shift responsibility.

2. Channels
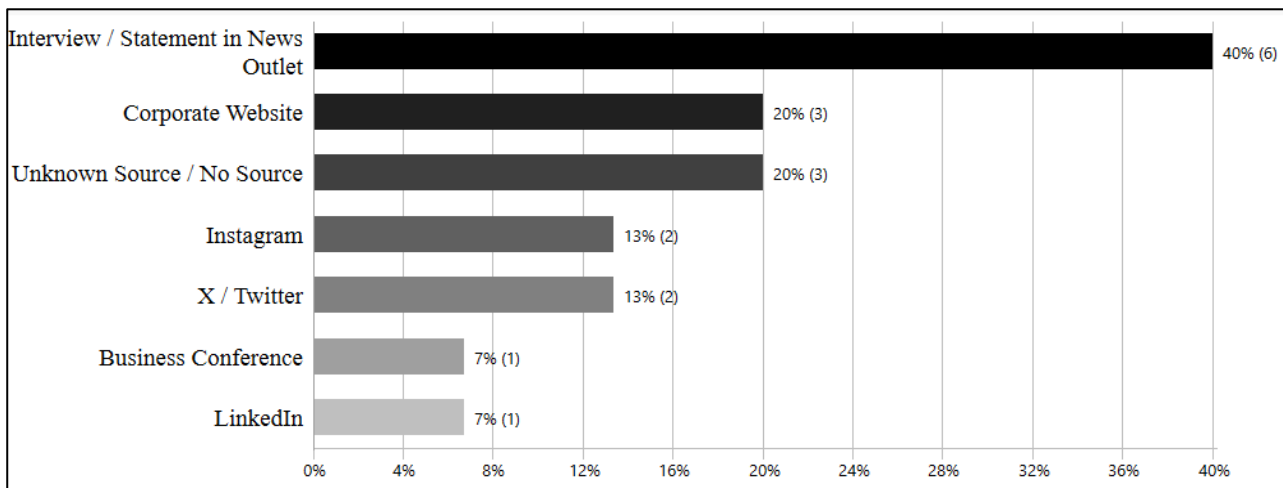
Figure 4: Breakdown of Communication Channels Usage

The analysis identified six different channels through which a response was published. These included the company's own corporate social media channels, such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and LinkedIn. Additionally, the responses were disseminated via press releases on the corporate websites and via various news outlets. Furthermore, statements from company representatives were published in news articles (see Figure 4).

In 40% of cases, companies responded via news articles, often providing standardized statements to multiple media outlets, as seen with The North Face. However, it remains unclear whether these responses were initiated by the companies or requested by the media. 4 of the 14 companies (Ben & Jerry's, Dove, Target, and Bud Light) published their statements on their respective corporate websites or newsrooms. Social media platforms, X and Instagram, were only the third and fourth most frequently used channels. For example, Anheuser-Busch, Bud Light's parent company, posted the same statement from CEO Brendan Whitworth on both platforms. LinkedIn was only used by the creative agency Jung von Matt Donau to address the backlash surrounding Burger King Austria's Pride Whopper campaign.

The choice of platform, whether through traditional news outlets, corporate websites, or social media, reflects that companies may tailor their responses based on the intended audience and the scope of the backlash.

3. **SCCT Strategies**

The qualitative content analysis revealed that the crisis response strategies proposed by Coombs (1998, 2007, 2015) in the context of SCCT are insufficient to cover all procedures for responding to brand activism backlash. As a result, 11 strategies had to be added inductively to the coding guide. These are primarily strategies for defending a company's position and commitment. Furthermore, the analysis found that strategies that are not part of SCCT were predominantly used.

Overall, the analysis of the responses revealed that strategies from all four crisis response clusters (denial, diminishment, bolstering and rebuilding) were utilized, however, not to the same extent. With the two exceptions, all companies utilize strategies from two to three different clusters. This means that within a statement, different phrases were used that had different intentions and could therefore be assigned to different strategies. It indicates that the companies had various objectives in mind when issuing these statements. In most cases, companies used statements in their responses that can be assigned to the Rebuilding Cluster, often in combination with strategies from the Bolstering Cluster. The most common strategy utilized by the companies was an explanation of intent in order to clarify the idea behind the campaign or to justify the brand activism. In contrast, Coombs' original Denial strategies, the announcement of compensation from the rebuilding cluster, as well as Excuse, Separation, and Justification from the Diminishment cluster were not employed. Furthermore, it is notable that companies utilize the same strategies in varying ways. This section presents an overview of the similarities, differences, and distinctive approaches to the most common strategies.

Denial Strategies

The only three companies that use strategies from this cluster are Kohl's, Audi and Ben & Jerry's. Kohl's is the only company that did not offer a comment on the backlash and has therefore applied the Ignore/No Action strategy. Audi, on the other hand, provided a firm denial of the accusations of hypocrisy and offered evidence to support this claim. However, the company decided not to respond to a specific question from a news outlet about adjustments to gender-based salaries. Ben and Jerry's also refuted allegations of racism and anti-Semitism, pointing to the company's fundamental principles as the basis for their stance (see Table 4).

	Example
Rejecting Accusation	"Speaking and acting on our values is neither anti-Israel nor antisemitic." (Ben & Jerry's, n.d.-b)

Table 4: Example of the "Rejecting Accusation" Strategy

Diminishment Strategies

None of SCCT's original Diminishment strategies were used. During the content analysis, two strategies that fall into the Diminishment cluster were identified that were frequently practiced by companies. The most prevalent strategy was explanation of intent, followed by Downplaying the Seriousness. In contrast, the strategy of Separation, or publicly distancing oneself from individuals responsible for brand activism initiatives, was not observed.

One of the overall most common strategies utilized by the companies was Explaining Intent which was used to clarify the idea behind the campaign or to justify the brand activism. This strategy was primarily used in instances where the implementation of the brand activism initiative was met with criticism and allegations of trivializing a significant issue were raised, or when the campaign was considered offensive.

In the Downplaying the Seriousness strategy, companies use certain words or phrases that diminish the scope of the initiatives and reduce their perceived importance. Examples found in the analyzed cases include terms like 'a few,' 'some,' 'just,' or 'a bit'. For instance, Starbucks CEO stated clearly that the purpose of this initiative was to initiate a public debate on the subject and did not claim any ability to effect change (see Table 5). Aside from Bud Light, this strategy was only identified in cases unrelated to LGBTQIA+ activism. Notably, this approach was primarily employed when the companies had alienated their main target audience with the initiative, as seen in the cases of Gillette, Dove, and Bud Light.

	Example
Explaining Intent	"The intended message of the Pride Whopper was to spread equal love and equal rights." (Burger King [@burgerkingaustria], 2022b) "Just like women, we wanted to show that our iconic bottle can come in all shapes and sizes, too." (Dove UK, n.d.)
Downplaying the Seriousness	"We're not saying all guys are bad." – Damon Jones/Gillette (King, 2019) "the cups were always "just the catalyst" for a broader conversation" (Starbucks, 2015) – Howard Schultz/Starbucks (Associated Press, 2015)

Table 5: Example of the "Explaining Intent" and "Downplaying the Seriousness" Strategies

Rebuilding Strategies

In the Rebuilding cluster, the inductively added categories were predominantly used. It should be noted, however, that the term "Rebuilding" is somewhat misleading when referring to the new categories, as in most cases there is no attempt to re-establish a positive relationship with the critics. In regard to the added categories, Rebuilding refers more to companies' efforts to uphold their position and commitment, aiming to be perceived as authentic. This, in turn, can enhance their reputation among supporters.

In instances where the stance on a socio-political issue was the subject of criticism rather than the implementation, it is noticeable that companies remain steadfast in their stance. In their statements, they express their unwavering support for the cause and emphasize the core values they stand for. This demonstrates that the strategies of Emphasizing Commitment and Communicating Core Values are used in conjunction with one another (see Table 6). A key aspect of the phrases is their emphasis on the future. In particular, remarks such as "We've learned our lessons" (Jung von Matt Donau, n.d.) were made to show that the criticism was understood and that internal changes would be made to prevent a similar situation from occurring again. However, there is an exception to this approach, which is Bud Light. In this case, the brand's socio-political stance conveyed through the collaboration with a member of the LGBTQIA+ community was met with criticism. However, the company's subsequent statement did not reiterate its commitment to this partnership. In fact, the opposite was true. The parent company, Anheuser-Busch, embraced rather conservative American values in its statement.

	Example
Emphasizing the Commitment & **Communicating Core Values**	"Our focus now is on moving forward with our continuing commitment to the LGBTQIA+ community and standing with them …" (Target, 2023) "Creating community and belonging in the outdoors is a core part of our values and is needed now more than ever." – The North Face (Rahman, 2023) "At Starbucks, we unequivocally support the LGBTQIA2+ community…" – Starbucks India (Venkatraman, 2023)

Table 6: Examples of the "Emphasizing the Commitment" and "Communicating Core Values" Strategies

Furthermore, classic crisis response strategies from the Rebuilding Cluster, such as Corrective Actions and Apology, could be identified in the statements as well. Following the Race Together initiative, Starbucks took corrective action in response to concerns that the initiative was insufficient to address structural racism in the United States. The company stated its intention to continue

advocating for this issue, but without the controversial handwritten messages on cups. With this, Starbucks responded to the criticism, but at the same time emphasized that the campaign with the cups would phase out as planned. Target, on the other hand, clearly stated that it was withdrawing the criticized items from the pride collection. The company justified the decision with the fact that the backlash had spilled over into the offline world and Target employees in the stores were specifically threatened (see Table 7). In its statement, Pepsi also announced that it would withdraw the Kendall Jenner spot and not distribute it any further, as it recognized the allegations of backlash as valid. This shows that this strategy is being used to mitigate the damage and allow the backlash to subside. However, Pepsi's use of other strategies also demonstrates that the companies do not seem to regret their socio-political commitment per se, but only the implementation of the specific initiative.

	Example
Corrective Actions	"Given these volatile circumstances, we are making adjustments to our plans, including removing items that have been at the center of the most significant confrontational behavior." (Target, 2023)

Table 7: Example of "Corrective Actions" Strategy

In the 14 cases examined, the terms "apology" or "we apologize" were used in only two instances. While Pepsi fully acknowledges that the campaign's implementation was a failure, the creative agency responsible for Burger King Austria's Pride Whopper, Jung von Matt Donau, softened the apology somewhat by including an "if" clause. Notably, both companies have used the colloquial phrase "we messed up" to acknowledge responsibility for their actions and to recognize their mistakes. Additionally, in both instances, the intention behind the brand activism is first explained, and the concrete apology follows in the next sentence. While Jung von Matt Donau covered all the points of a Full Apology, Pepsi's apology is more of a Partial Apology, as the company does not name the campaign in its brief statement, nor does it specify how the company has learned from the misstep. For the sake of brevity, excerpts from both apologies are presented in Table 8. The complete statements can be found in Appendix D.

	Example
Partial Apology	"Clearly we missed the mark, and we apologize." (Pepsi, 2017)
Full Apology	"Our strongest concern is if we offended members of the LGBTQ Community with this campaign. If this is the case, we truly apologize." (Jung von Matt Donau, n.d.)

Table 8: Examples of the "Partial Apology" and "Full Apology" Strategies

The Reminder strategy is employed in a number of instances, though the manner in which companies utilize it varies. Two distinct approaches can be identified. Especially in cases where the commitment to the LGBTQIA+ community was criticized, companies issued statements emphasizing their long-standing dedication to this cause. This approach can be seen in the cases of Target, The North Face, Hershey's, and Dove. The second variation of this strategy is that companies emphasize the well-established status of their brands. They focus on the image and influence their brands have on society. This approach is particularly evident with Bud Light/Anheuser-Busch (see Table 8).

	Example
Reminder	"Gillette is one of the largest male brands in the world." – Damon Jones/Gillette (King, 2019)
	"Anheuser-Busch employs more than 18,000 people and our independent distributors employ an additional 47,000 valued colleagues." (Whitworth, 2023)

Table 9: Examples of "Reminder" Strategy

4. Content & Tone

The study found that companies tend to employ strategies from the rebuilding cluster that demonstrate resilience in the face of criticism and express a renewed commitment to the values they uphold. In nearly all cases, companies reaffirm their values and views while also outlining their intentions behind brand activism campaigns that caused a backlash. While these strategies have been grouped under the Rebuilding Cluster, the name is arguably misleading as the categories are not designed to re-establish a positive relationship with individuals or entities that have previously expressed criticism. In the cases analyzed, these strategies rather serve to preserve the company's reputation among stakeholders by staying true to its core values and position.

Figure 5: Most Used Expressions in Statements

There were no cases where a stance on a certain socio-political issue was admitted to be a mistake and withdrawn altogether. However, in the case of Bud Light, this was indirectly communicated in a statement from CEO of the parent company Anheuser-Busch. The company did not distance itself from its collaboration with Dylan Mulvaney, but its statement, which is strongly patriotic in tone and character, is an expression of traditional American values. In terms of tone and message, the Anheuser-Busch CEO's statement is quite different from the other cases analyzed. Their statement is much more emotional, with many references to American values and traditions, and has a very unifying message (see Table 10).

	Examples
Patriotic Tone	"We're honored to be part of the fabric of this country. (…) We never intended to be part of a discussion that divides people." (Whitworth, 2023)

Table 10: Examples of Phrases Displaying a Patriotic Tone

Overall, the tone of the statements from the companies remains professional and polite. Although the backlashes are very aggressive and offensive in nature, the companies do not respond to the verbal attacks of the critics. While the backlash is not specifically named in any of the statements analyzed, the initiatives that led to it are mentioned most of the time, although there are exceptions such as Pepsi. It is notable that statements tend to have a positive tone and utilize terms that evoke a positive sentiment, particularly in instances where companies reaffirm their dedication to a socio-political cause. The use of powerful and unifying words such as peace, love, unity, diversity, and inclusion is prevalent, yet the specifics of these concepts are not elaborated upon (see Table 11).

	Example
Positive Tone	"Happiness, fun and inclusion are at the heart of who we are." – Skittles (Wong, 2017) "Pepsi was trying to project a global message of unity, peace and understanding." (Pepsi, 2017)

Table 11: Examples of Phrases Displaying a Positive Tone

The manner in which testimonials and models are addressed in the responses of the companies is noteworthy. The approaches vary significantly which provides initial insights into the seriousness of the socio-political commitment. For instance, in both statements by Bud Light and Anheuser-Busch, the collaboration with Dylan Mulvaney is not mentioned. In comparison with the other brand activism initiatives in which prominent testimonials were involved, this resembles clear distancing. Hershey's does not name the "HER for SHE" testimonial Fae Johnstone either and simply states, "We appreciate the countless people and meaningful partnerships behind these efforts" (The Hershey Company [@HersheyCompany], 2023). However, Johnstone also became the focus of the backlash as she was part of a campaign for Women's History Month as a transgender woman. Pepsi has issued a public apology to Kendall Jenner for the criticism she faced as a result of her involvement in the situation. Most appreciatively, The North Face thanks its testimonial Pattie Gonia and declares its full support (see Table 12).

	Example
Addressing the Model / Ambassador	"We are honored and grateful to support partners like Pattie Gonia who help make this vision a reality." – The North Face (Rahman, 2023)

Table 12: Example of a Company Appreciating its Ambassador

5. Effectiveness of Strategies to Mitigate Backlash

Comments that were posted simultaneously or after the publication of a response under the posts on the social media channels (X, Instagram and LinkedIn) were analyzed. The analysis was possible in 7 of the 14 cases, in the remaining cases no such comments were available as the backlash occurred too long ago. In each case, comments posted under 2-5 new posts were analyzed in order to be able

to observe a change in sentiment. The complete list of analyzed comments can be found in the second appendix accompanying this thesis, while excerpts from the analysis are included in Appendix F.

Overall, no influence of the responses on the comments and thus the course of the backlash could be identified, regardless of the strategies used. Therefore, it is not possible to assess whether certain strategies weakened the backlash. The majority of comments expressed negative sentiments and did not address the specific content of the response. In terms of content, the mere spreading of negative word-of-mouth and the announcement of boycotts were observed. A common theme was the use of insulting and accusatory language (see Table 13)

	Example
Hateful Comments	"We will never forget what you posted!!!" – Aimed at The North Face "You're full of sh*t! The only 'women' you celebrate are the fake ones" – Aimed at Hershey's "We will continue to boycott Woke Light until you apologize" – Aimed at Bud Light

Table 13: Examples of Hateful Comments Posted After Corporate Response

The only comments that exceeded the 40% positive threshold, which is the minimum required for a response to be classified as successful, were those from Jung von Matt Donau (80%) and The North Face (49,52%). With 80% positive comments Jung von Matt Donau's apology regarding the Pride Whopper overall had the highest percentage of positive comments. This is also the only case in which the commenters responded directly to the content of the response. At the same time, this was the only response that was published on LinkedIn, reaching a different audience than on X or Instagram. In the other cases, it could not be clearly demonstrated that the commenters had noticed the response, since the comments did not provide any indication that they had read or acknowledged the response. In the case of Bud Light, several commenters instead demanded an apology from the company and were dissatisfied with the "business as usual" approach taken on X. Comments like these show that the CEO's indirect apology, which was posted on Anheuser-Busch's corporate website, was not noticed by many disgruntled consumers. However, even those who read the statement did not find it to be an adequate response, calling it a "letter impersonating some kind of apology" (see Appendix F) for instance.

	Examples Jung von Matt Donau
Positive Sentiment	"Very good statement. One note: LGBTIQ+ people are not necessarily LGBTIQ+ diversity experts. But that's exactly the kind of people you need when creating such campaigns ;-)" (Jung von Matt Donau, n.d.)
Negative Sentiment	"IF we offended?! You already have, there's no if here, except for: if you actually wanted to apologise and take responsibility for a mistake, you would have." (Jung von Matt Donau, n.d.)

Table 14: Reactions to Jung von Matt Donau's Response

5.2   Addressing Research Questions

In regard to the first research question, which seeks to explore how companies respond to backlash resulting from their brand activism, the findings revealed a variety of approaches in how responses were communicated. This applies to both the form (source and channel) as well as the content. While there is a degree of variety in the strategies employed, certain patterns could be identified. These indicate that the choice of strategy is dependent on the socio-political issue being addressed and the brand fit between brand activism and the brand values. A total of three main findings were identified:

1. **Defensive Strategies in Hateful Backlashes**
2. **Accommodative Strategies When Criticism Targets Implementation**
3. **Diminishment Strategies When the Main Customer Group Feels Offended**

Regarding the source of the response and the channel, it was found that representatives from various management levels and departments commented on the backlash. In some instances, external parties involved in the implementation, such as creative agencies or models, also shared their perspectives on the brand activism initiatives and the subsequent backlashes. These statements were published most frequently in news articles by external media outlets. The companies' own social media accounts and websites were the second most utilized platforms for sharing statements.

Overall, however, it was noticeable that the responses tended to be an attempt to explain and justify the commitment and/or to demonstrate steadfastness. The majorities of companies analyzed in this study did not deviate from their values and attitudes, even in the face of criticism. The results support

Hypothesis H2, indicating that the majority of the companies studied did not deviate from their values and beliefs and maintained their brand activism initiatives despite criticism. As the qualitative content analysis demonstrated, the most common response from the companies was to justify and defend their initiatives without making significant concessions to the critics. The companies provided explanations and justifications for their involvement, and in most cases, they did not back down from their position. This supports the assumption that many companies maintain a stance of steadfastness and do not withdraw their initiatives, as proposed in Hypothesis H2. In none of the responses was the engagement for a socio-politically relevant topic referred to as a mistake. This was only communicated indirectly in one case. An apology, a focus of crisis communication research, was used by only two companies to respond to the backlash. However, the apologies were limited to the specific initiative and did not extend to the broader advocacy for the issue. In both cases, there was a previous accusation that the brand activism campaign was offensive towards the group that was actually supposed to be supported.

Furthermore, the qualitative content analysis revealed that in a few cases companies did actually withdraw their brand activism initiatives, thereby confirming the existence of the approach outlined in Hypothesis H1. However, this approach was less common in the cases analyzed than H2. The majority of withdrawals occurred when the content of the initiative was strongly criticized or when the safety of employees was threatened. In only one instance was the approach of Hypothesis H3 identified, whereby companies attempted to find a balance between addressing the concerns of critics and maintaining the support of those who favor the brand activism initiative. This was observed in the case of Bud Light.

With regard to the second research question, whether certain strategies calm the backlash, no clear findings were obtained. The sentiment analysis conducted in the second step of the study found no evidence that the type of statement companies' issue or its content had any impact on the trajectory of the backlash. In the majority of cases analyzed, it appeared that the participants in the backlash were not aware of the company's responses or chose to ignore it. This could be observed regardless of whether the responses were published on social media, the corporate website or in news articles as they did not address the content of the company's statement in the subsequent social media posts.

6   Discussion

In this chapter, the findings of the study are interpreted in the context of the research question, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of the results. It contextualizes the research findings, examining their relevance and implications for brand activism and crisis communication.

Historically, the standard practice has been to maintain a clear separation between business and politics. However, recent developments have shown that this approach may not be as valid anymore as it once was. In light of declining confidence in politicians' willingness to take action and an increasingly tense global situation with ever-new crises, it is becoming increasingly important for companies to take a stand and get involved in combating social problems. However, in view of an increasingly divided society in terms of ideologies, world views, and moral concepts, such socio-political engagement by companies is not always well received. The media is increasingly reporting on backlash associated with brand activism. This is where research has ended so far.

This thesis commenced at that point and analyzed the reactions of companies to a backlash concerning a spokesperson, place of publication, as well as content and strategies that were employed in the response. A qualitative content analysis of responses from 14 case studies from 2015 to 2023 was conducted, along with a sentiment analysis of comments posted by users concurrently and after the responses were published on social media (X, Instagram and LinkedIn). The objective was to gain an overview of how companies respond to such backlash, thereby connecting the research areas of brand activism and crisis communication. The results were also intended to provide initial insights into the effectiveness, if possible.

The study revealed that while the responses of companies to a brand activism backlash differ in terms of sender and form, there are significant similarities in their approaches to the content of their responses. It was found that companies predominantly apply Rebuilding and Diminishment strategies, often in combination with Bolstering strategies. Furthermore, the strategies selected were found to depend on the socio-political topic addressed by the company and the trigger of the backlash.

6.1   Interpretation of Findings

According to Coombs, Denial strategies are used to deny either the mere existence of crises or a company's own involvement in them. However, in the context of brand activism backlash they are rather unsuitable, given that neither the initial actions that triggered the backlash nor the backlash itself can be denied. As brand activism initiatives are largely posted on social media by the companies, themselves they are available there. Of the companies analyzed in this paper, only Kohl's, Audi and Ben & Jerry's have implemented strategies from the Denial cluster. It should be noted, however, the strategies employed were not part of Coombs' (1998, 2007, 2015) SCCT framework but were added by other scholars (e.g. Lee & Song, 2010, p. 1075; Liu, 2010, p. 342. While the "Ignore/No Action" strategy is typically advised against in crisis research, it was employed by companies in this study. For instance, despite requests from several news outlets, Kohl's declined to comment on the backlash regarding Pride flags on children's clothing, thus utilizing the "Ignore/No action strategy". Audi also chose not to comment on all aspects of the hypocrisy allegations. It is possible that the company feared giving the backlash new relevance and provoking further negative media coverage. However, this passivity could be misinterpreted by the public as approval of the accusations or ignorance of important issues. There is also a risk that control over the narrative of the crisis in the media will be lost, and that false information will be perceived as accurate if it is not corrected. Presumably, all other analyzed companies have reacted to the accusations for these reasons. Given the serious, emotionally charged nature of brand activism backlash, it is unsurprising that most companies are eager to clarify their positions on the matter and responding to the accusations seems advisable. This was the case with Ben & Jerry's as they firmly rejected accusations of racism and anti-Semitism. So, in a way, Ben & Jerry's is using a Denial strategy here, but not denying the backlash or its decision to stop sales per se, but only the accusations that resulted from it. For this reason, the inductively added strategy "Rejecting Accusation" was included in the Denial cluster, despite not fully aligning with the original SCCT Denial cluster concept.

Diminishment strategies aim to reduce the perceived responsibility for a crisis. Strategies in this cluster were often used by companies in the cases analyzed, especially "Explaining the Intent" and "Downplaying the Seriousness". The fact that "Explaining the Intent" is one of the most frequently used strategies shows that companies often find themselves in need of an explanation during a backlash caused by brand activism. This strategy was mainly used when companies were criticized for trivializing fundamental issues, as in the case of the Pepsi campaign with Kendall Jenner or Dove's body positivity campaign. The companies used the strategy to explain misunderstandings related to the activism and to communicate what they wanted to achieve with the actions. However, it has to be noted that in cases where commitment for LGBTQIA+ rights has triggered a backlash, this strategy

has not been widely employed. Prior research indicates that individuals frequently utilize backlashes as a means of expressing their opinions or venting frustration, and are reluctant to reconsider their positions, particularly in regard to fundamental values and worldviews. It is possible that the companies analyzed have recognized that even an explanation of their intentions regarding the commitment or campaign will not appease or sway critics. Therefore, the use of the "Explaining the Intent" strategy seems to depend on the socio-political issue and the reason for the backlash. It appears that this approach may be more suitable for certain triggers of a backlash than for others.

Another noteworthy observation is the tendency to choose "Downplaying the Seriousness" in instances where the brand's actions may have offended and caused frustration among their target audiences. For example, Anheuser-Busch lnBev CEO Michel Doukeris highlighted in a statement "that this was one can, one influencer, one post and not a campaign" (Inside, 2023). Damon Jones, Vice President Global Communications and Advocacy at Proctor and Gamble, tries to reframe Gillette's statement on toxic masculinity by saying "we really wanted to shine a light on some of the bad behaviors that were happening in society, but more importantly on some of the good ones because that's where we know most guys are really at" (King, 2019). By downplaying the seriousness of the actions, the companies appear to seek to reestablish a positive relationship with the target group without completely distancing themselves from the actions and characterizing them as a mistake. It is also noticeable that these are brands from industries that are traditionally aimed at men (beer and razors). This could imply a tendency that different crisis communication strategies are more effective for men than for women, which requires further research.

According to SCCT, Rebuilding strategies are intended to rebuild the company's reputation. Regarding the use of the "Apology" strategy, the cases analyzed in the study are in line with the literature's recommendations for restraint in the use of the word apology (e.g. Coombs, 2015, p. 148)). Only in two cases, Jung von Matt Donau (Pride Whopper) and Pepsi, did the companies issue an apology, meaning that apologies do not appear to be a common approach in the case of brand activism backlash. In the two cases identified, the companies also only apologized for the execution of the brand activism campaign and the fact that they may have offended the group they were trying to support. They did not apologize for the commitment itself. However, it should be noted that it remains unclear whether Pepsi's commitment was to the Black Lives Matter movement or not. Even though the statements issued by Jung von Matt Donau and Pepsi vary significantly in length, both fulfill the aspects of an apology suggested by Kellerman (2006, pp. 76–77) and Staubach & Wannow (2024, p. 24) and can be considered as such. The situation is different in the case of Bud Light. While the statement by Anheuser Busch CEO Brendan Whitworth does not use the words "apology" or

"apologize" its tone is clearly apologetic and emotional. It is possible that these words were deliberately avoided in order to distance themselves from the cooperation and minimize potential legal consequences.

It is notable that Bolstering strategies are regarded as supplementary by the SCCT framework, yet they were used extensively in the responses, in some cases also for the most part within the statements. Two strategies were implemented with particular frequency: "Reminder" and "Endorsement". According to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, companies can use this crisis response strategy to remind the public of past successes and to evoke positive associations. The companies analyzed in this study use this "Reminder" strategy in different ways. On the one hand, they remind the public that the criticized brand activism campaign was not a one-off, but that the company has been committed to this cause for years. It can be assumed that by taking this approach, companies are seeking to demonstrate their conviction and serious commitment to the issue at hand, as well as their resilience. While not the primary reason for the backlash in these cases, companies are attempting to clarify that this is not merely a marketing campaign. Given that this is a common criticism of brand activism, this appears to be a valid point of emphasis in a response. The second approach to the "Reminder" strategy is to emphasize the company's status and reputation as well as positive deeds of the past. This approach is evident in the case of the beer brand Bud Light. In his statement, the CEO of the parent company emphasizes that Anheuser Busch is a renowned company with a 165-year history of providing employment to many thousands of Americans (Whitworth, 2023). This is expressed with particularly emotional and US-American patriotic wording. Anheuser Busch is likely attempting to underscore that this was a one-time collaboration with Dylan Mulvaney and to convey that the numerous positive contributions of the traditional brand to the American public outweigh any negative perceptions. In the context of brand activism, the Reminder strategy therefore offers two possible interpretations, the suitability of which appears to depend on the company's history and its intentions.

Furthermore, Bud Light utilizes a combination of the "Endorsement" and "Ingratiation" strategy within a single paragraph. It mentions the "thousands of partners, millions of fans" and a "proud history supporting our communities, military, first responders, sports fans and hard-working Americans everywhere"(Whitworth, 2023). It can be assumed that the brand is attempting to influence the perception of those who have expressed discontent by demonstrating that the company is still widely loved and supported by many Americans. Additionally, by evoking emotions, this statement is presumably intended to mitigate the anger of those who have expressed discontent. Given

the intense and widespread backlash against Bud Light, which included involvement from celebrities and politicians, this approach seems reasonable.

Another aspect that should be discussed in this context and requires further research is the general usefulness and effectiveness of responses to such backlashes. Prior findings regarding the motives of participants in backlashes as well as the results of the content analysis and sentiment analysis conducted in this study raise the question of the meaningfulness and success of responses such as those analyzed in this paper. A tendency could be identified that people who have a generally positive attitude towards the company and its messages are more receptive to responses and further statements during the backlash than critics. Disgruntled people or people who reject the brand activism actions because of the communicated values seem hardly susceptible to responses, at least in the manner in which the companies proceeded in the cases analyzed. Thus, the question arises as to whether responses fuel the backlash even more and give it new relevance or whether they have the potential to indeed mitigate the frustration of disgruntled people participating in a firestorm.

Overall, companies seem to have recognized the importance of value-driven brands and companies that customers can identify with and the resulting brand activism. The fact that CEOs and other senior executives respond to the firestorms that are sparked by activism shows that they are aware of the potential impact and the potentially far-reaching negative consequences, such as lasting reputational damage or loss of sales. Furthermore, the fact that companies apologize, when necessary, for any mistakes in implementation, but not for the general commitment to certain socio-political issues, suggests that companies have recognized how important it is for consumers that companies stand up for their beliefs. It also suggests that in these cases the brand activism is genuine and authentic and not just a marketing ploy.

To summarize, backlash against brand activism can be seen to reflect many of the social dynamics and typical social media behavior. It can be assumed that companies have recognized that brand activism often triggers a backlash for various reasons and that the users posting negative comments in this context are pursuing different goals. In online firestorms where venting and spreading negative word of mouth seems to be the goal, companies tend to confirm their commitment and not respond to the backlash. However, when the content or implementation of a specific action is criticized, companies tend to engage in dialogue with the disgruntled individuals and demonstrate a willingness to reconsider or withdraw their actions. Additionally, it is notable that such social media crises are taken seriously by companies, as evidenced by the swift responses to backlashes, which often originate from high-ranking individuals within the company.

6.2   Theoretical Contributions

This chapter explores the theoretical implications of the study results. As multiple research streams were synthesized in this study, the results provide further insights into existing theoretical approaches in the field of brand activism backlashes and the intentions of the participants in such online firestorms as well as crisis communication for online firestorms.

The study of this paper advances beyond the existing research on brand activism by examining how companies respond to online crises triggered by their brand activism efforts, providing preliminary insights and identifying certain patterns in these responses. It thus contributes to research gaps in the field of brand activism and crisis communication. The study also provides additional insights related to crisis communication in the event of a politically motivated online firestorm. A finding of the study was that while the SCCT framework is applicable to online crises and in particular brand activism backlashes, the clusters and crisis response strategies need to be adapted and expanded. The study thus supports the criticism of Rauschnabel et al. (2016, pp. 395–396) regarding the limited applicability of SCCT to online backlashes. With regard to the field of crisis communication, this demonstrates that there is a need to expand the SCCT list of crisis response strategies in order to adapt it to new types of corporate and communication crises or even to develop a new independent guideline for politically motivated or value-based backlashes. The findings of this thesis are also consistent with the conclusions of Rauschnabel et al. (2016, pp. 395–396) that a backlash differs greatly from other crises in terms of its characteristics and objectives, as it is often based on an attack on fundamental moral values.

Furthermore, the SCCT framework places a strong focus on the use of Rebuilding and Bolstering strategies designed to repair the company's public image and avoid lasting reputational damage. However, this study's examination of crisis response strategies reveals that, when faced with a brand activism backlash many companies are not interested in improving their image among the disgruntled groups. Because doing so, may result in a shift away from the organization's established moral stance and potentially disappoint those who align with the company's principles, if the brand activism commitment is genuine and aligned with the company's core values. Thus, in this aspect, the findings also differ from the assumptions of the SCCT.

With regard to the topic of negative online reactions, the results of the study are consistent with previous research. The sentiment analysis of user comments revealed that the majority of comments did not address the content of the response. Regardless of the strategies chosen in the response, there was no evidence that it resulted in a change in the number of positive or negative comments. This aligns with previous studies (e.g., Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Kähr et al., 2016; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022), which found that online backlashes often serve as platforms for venting dissatisfaction rather than engaging in constructive dialogue. The study of this thesis was thus able to confirm that common characteristics and social dynamics of online firestorms can also be found in backlashes triggered by brand activism actions. In instances where companies have expressed support for the LGBTQIA+ community, critics appear to be primarily focused on communicating their rejection of what they refer to as "woke" companies and what caused them to boycott those companies. Regardless of the form and content of a corporate response, these types of commenters seem to have no interest in engaging in a constructive dialog with the company or reconsidering their stance on the LGBTQIA+ community. It appears that social media channels are merely being used to insult and harm the company. This reinforces earlier conclusions about the limitations of corporate attempts to address deeply held oppositional stances through public apologies or clarifications (Ciszek & Logan, 2018, p. 123).

This paper makes a further contribution to insights about brand activism backlashes by linking the SCCT and brand activism. It offers an explanation of why such strong negative reactions are triggered. As has been demonstrated by Coombs & Holladay (2005), individuals tend to react unfavorably to circumstances that have been intentionally created by companies and for which they are solely responsible. This is the case for brand activism campaigns. From the perspective of those who oppose such actions, companies deliberately incite negative responses and deserve them. According to Coombs and Holladay, emotions such as schadenfreude or anger are triggered, which can also be observed in instances of backlash. These two emotions motivate individuals to react in a certain manner (Coombs & Holladay, 2005, as cited in Coombs, 2007, p. 169).

6.3   Practical Insights

The findings of this study offer practical insights for companies that choose to engage in brand activism, providing valuable guidance on how to navigate the complexities of aligning corporate values with socio-political stances, managing public perception, and responding effectively to potential backlash. These insights can help companies not only implement more authentic and strategically sound activism initiatives but also prepare for and mitigate risks associated with engaging in highly polarized socio-political issues.

In regard to crisis communication, the study suggests that companies should anticipate potential backlash if they choose to engage in brand activism. Given the unique nature of such crises, both in terms of their motives and triggers, it is crucial to develop tailored strategies even before launching an initiative. This allows companies to address potential online backlash and offline physical threats in a thoughtful and controlled manner, avoiding emotionally charged responses under pressure. The cases analyzed in this study demonstrate that similar factors related to implementation or socio-political positioning often trigger negative reactions, allowing companies to prepare in advance. However, since the course of such crises remains unpredictable, it is important to consider a variety of approaches for different scenarios. It is also advisable to designate a spokesperson in advance to address the backlash, as this can influence the perceived importance and impact of the message. It communicates not only to critics but also to supporters that brand activism is a serious and authentic concern of the company from which it will not deviate. If more than one person is making a statement, it is advisable to use consistent wording and content to demonstrate unity. Inconsistent statements or multiple spokespeople with different messages can lead to confusion and give the impression that the company's commitment is not genuine. It is therefore advisable to pursue a clear and consistent line of communication in order to maintain credibility. While this is a general guideline for crisis communication, maintaining a consistent and transparent message regarding the company's core values is crucial in these specific situations. In order to avoid alienating both supporters and critics, responses to an online firestorm need to be clearly positioned. Failure to do so may result in former supporters becoming disgruntled, as illustrated by the case of Bud Light. Here, the combination of the partnership with Dylan Mulvaney, which represented a poor brand fit, and the way the backlash was handled presumably has led to a sharp drop in sales (Liaukonyte et al., 2024; Valinsky, 2023b).

In view of the evolving socio-political landscape, a clear and consistent approach that aligns with the company's values and resonates with the target audience appears to be the best strategy. Given the growing polarization in Western societies between liberal and conservative ideologies and the increasing influence of value-oriented and activist generations, particularly among Millennials and

Gen Z, it can be assumed that brand activism will remain a relevant and challenging endeavor. It is probable that certain values communicated in brand activism will continue to elicit a negative response from a specific demographic. From a reputational and financial standpoint, it appears to be a strategic decision for companies to align themselves with a particular political and ideological stance and to communicate this clearly in both their brand activism campaigns and their responses to external parties. By taking this approach, the company is able to align itself with a specific group while avoiding the potential negative consequences of having multiple groups dissatisfied with its actions. This then highlights clearly defined corporate values that are of significant importance in the modern business environment. It is essential for companies to proactively determine their socio-political direction by clarifying whether they align with conservative or progressive values. Such clear positioning provides guidance for their brand activism campaigns and helps them to maintain authenticity in crisis situations.

Moreover, it is crucial for companies to recognize that the participants in a backlash are often not interested in a dialogue and are unlikely to forgive the company or attempt to comprehend the company's stance. It is therefore important for companies to consider carefully whether it is appropriate to respond to criticism. If the criticism is based on a rejection of the moral values or worldview expressed by brand activism, and if the intention of the commenters is solely to spread hate, it may not be effective to respond, as this group can rarely be reached. In such cases, it is advisable to refrain from responding so as not to escalate the situation further. Instead, companies should demonstrate resilience and emphasize the support of their loyal customers. Only if the backlash is due to misleading aspects of the campaign or the implementation has clearly failed should companies proactively address the issue. It is recommended that companies consider responding if they regret specific aspects of their brand activism, such as the timing, tone, alignment with brand values, trivialization of societal issues, or offensiveness to their target audience.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study offers valuable insights into the appropriate responses of companies to a brand activism backlash, it is important to consider the limitations of the methodology and the theoretical challenges that could influence the understanding of the results. The following section will explore these specific limitations in more detail and assess their potential impact on the outcomes. At the same time, it will highlight opportunities for further research to build on the insights gained in this study.

While Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) has long served as a foundational framework for crisis communication due to its general applicability and extensive range of strategies, it was developed at a time when social media and the fast-paced nature of online campaigns were not as influential as they are today. As a result, applying SCCT to modern online backlashes (often characterized by their speed, emotional intensity, and unpredictability) poses significant challenges. The content analysis of the case studies revealed that many responses did not fit neatly into the original SCCT categories, as the framework was not specifically designed to address online firestorms caused by brand activism. Some crisis responses required the introduction of new, inductively derived categories, which could only be partially grouped under SCCT's established clusters, such as denial, diminution, rebuilding, or bolstering. This process highlights a key limitation: the existing clusters within SCCT are not fully adequate to cover the complexity and nuances of online backlash situations, especially those stemming from brand activism. Moreover, the original SCCT strategies were formulated in rather vague terms which inevitably resulted in a certain degree of subjectivity when implementing them. Additionally, adapting these strategies to fit the specific context of online backlash required redefinitions that may have slightly diverged from Coombs' original intent. This suggests that while SCCT remains a valuable approach for understanding diverse crisis response strategies, it requires further adaptation to effectively address crises in the digital age, particularly those involving social media and brand activism.

The research subject being brand activism backlash also presented challenges. The lack of a clear definition of an online firestorm or backlash led to difficulties in selecting suitable cases for the qualitative content analysis. This is due to the fact that nearly every socio-political stance taken by a company will elicit responses from both supporters and those who oppose the stance. However, critics are often more vocal, as they feel the need to express their disapproval on social media. Therefore, it is likely that social media comments only reflect the actual reception of a brand activism campaign to a limited extent.

Another challenge was identifying suitable material, specifically social media posts and statements from company representatives commenting on online firestorms that occurred several years ago. It is possible that companies may have already removed any responses to criticism in order to prevent them from becoming relevant again at a later date. It is therefore not possible to guarantee that the material examined in the analysis reflects a complete response of a company to a backlash. In cases where material is incomplete, third-party data was used to supplement it. This included media reports that reported on the backlashes or in which the companies' issued statements. Nevertheless, it is possible that only certain aspects of these statements were emphasized in the news reports and that they may have been shortened. This should be taken into account when evaluating the results.

Given the limited number of 14 cases examined, it can be assumed that there is a certain degree of cultural and representational bias present in the results. Due to the limited availability of English-language material, the analysis only encompasses reactions to backlash from the USA and Canada, with the exception of India and Austria. As brand activism is significantly influenced by the social and cultural norms in which it is practiced, it can be assumed that the style of communication and the manner of reacting to an online firestorm are in line with these norms as well. It would therefore be interesting to see if results differed if the study were to be repeated with mostly cases from other regions of the world, such as Asia. This suggests promising directions for future research in this area. For greater comparability and thus generalizability, the study could be repeated with cases that all originate from a similar culture. Furthermore, a larger-scale replication of the study, with a comparison of the responses of global corporations and value-based start-ups, would be a valuable addition to the existing findings. Further research could also examine whether companies in different sectors respond differently to an online firestorm. Additionally, the study's limited sample size means that the results merely offer an initial indication of how companies might respond to backlash from brand activism, without representing all potential outcomes. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized. The conclusions drawn regarding companies' intentions and objectives are speculative, based solely on publicly available material. No internal documents were analyzed. To further validate the hypotheses presented, future studies could benefit from interviews with company representatives or the analysis of internal reports, offering a more comprehensive understanding of their strategies in mitigating reputational and economic damage.

Since this is a master's thesis and the coding was conducted by only one individual, there is a potential for subjective bias in the interpretation of the texts. As a result, the quality criterion of intercoder reliability could not be achieved. This limits the study's compliance with social science research standards. Consequently, biases in the interpretation of categories and text passages may have

occurred, with certain nuances potentially being overlooked or overemphasized. It would therefore be advisable to conduct the study again on a larger scale and with multiple coders to ensure valid and more reliable results. With regard to quality criteria, however, it is important to note that the other criteria, such as transparency and objectivity, consistency and validity were met, according to the author's assessment. In addition to the comprehensive description of the procedure, the documentation and disclosure of the study and its results contribute to this.

The sentiment analysis is of limited significance as well since it was restricted to comments on the companies' social media accounts (X, Instagram and LinkedIn). This approach may not fully capture the breadth of responses, particularly given that backlashes often spread across various social media platforms, frequently appearing under a specific hashtag on X. However, the analysis did not include comments found under specific hashtags on X, which could have provided additional insight. Furthermore, it proved challenging to determine with certainty whether specific comments were published before or after the company's response. This was due to the fact that some companies issued multiple statements via various media outlets, and that some cases dated back between five and nine years. Due to the aforementioned circumstances, it was not always possible to determine with certainty when reactions to the response could be reflected in the comments. For reasons of comparability and feasibility, the sample size for the sentiment analysis was limited to a small subset of comments. The manual approach to content analysis used in this study proved inadequate for fully capturing user perceptions and reactions. For example, Bud Light's first two posts on X, which followed the CEO's statement, had 31,000 and 25,000 comments, respectively (Bud Light, 2023). The method used in this thesis therefore only provided a preliminary indication of sentiment trends rather than a comprehensive assessment. To obtain more significant results, the study should be conducted again, preferably using specialized tools that can record and classify a larger number of comments.

Finally, another substantial aspect of brand activism research that has yet to be fully explored is the implementation of these campaigns in terms of communication and content. This includes examining how political messages are conveyed (e.g. the motifs, terms, or messages used) and whether different communication channels affect the reception of these messages. Future studies could investigate whether statements on topics like racism, migration or LGBTQIA+ issues provoke stronger reactions compared to other topics, helping companies understand the underlying causes of backlashes. Moreover, by understanding how their messages and the channels they use influence reactions, companies can adjust their communication strategies accordingly. This may not only help to reduce the likelihood of backlash, but also improves the overall effectiveness of their campaigns.

7 Conclusion

In today's society, characterized by increasing social divisions and polarized political attitudes, companies are facing growing expectations to actively engage with social issues. However, they frequently underestimate the complexity of these issues or misunderstand the expectations of their stakeholders. Such mistakes can lead to well-intentioned initiatives facing a negative backlash, which in turn damages the company's reputation and erodes consumer trust. This thesis addresses a significant research gap by examining how companies respond to backlash triggered by brand activism. While previous research has primarily focused on the causes of such backlashes, this study provides initial insights into the strategies employed by companies and their effectiveness in mitigating the impact of these backlashes.

The objective of the two-phased study was to provide an overview and initial understanding of the responses of companies to backlashes triggered by brand activism. The aim was to identify strategies and certain patterns in these responses. Furthermore, the study examined whether there is an indication that certain strategies for handling such backlashes can positively influence or even mitigate their impact. By analyzing 14 cases through structured qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2015, 2022) and 7 cases through sentiment analysis according to Beham (2015), the findings reveal that the choice of response strategy is influenced by the nature of the backlash, including the underlying moral values, the specific topic of activism, and the target audience involved. Although all cases examined fall under the broad category of brand activism backlash, the strategies vary based on the unique context of each incident. Several notable patterns in corporate response strategies were observed:

1. Defensive Strategies in Hateful Backlashes

When brand activism advocates for fundamental beliefs, such as LGBTQIA+ rights, companies often face hostile backlashes from groups that reject these values outright. In these cases, companies employ defensive strategies, reaffirming their stance and standing firm in support of the values they promote. The companies try to clarify their positions and explain the importance of these values and related issues. They also reaffirm their commitment and demonstrate steadfastness, despite media backlash. There is no attempt to improve the relationship with participants in the backlash, as they fundamentally reject the values, and no possibility of dialogue seems to exist. Instead, companies focus on expressing gratitude to supporters, often leveraging endorsements from public figures in sports, entertainment, or politics.

2. Accommodative Strategies When Criticism Targets Implementation

If the backlash is primarily driven by accusations such as hypocrisy, offensiveness, or trivialization of issues, it appears to be less a result of a fundamental rejection of the company's position on this issue and more a consequence of the implementation process failing to achieve the desired outcome for a variety of reasons. In these cases, companies tend to respond by elaborating their intentions, addressing misunderstandings, and, where necessary, acknowledging and correcting mistakes. Furthermore, companies frequently attempt to clarify the intent or rationale behind their actions to illustrate that they had no malicious intent but may have made an unintentional misstep.

3. Diminishment Strategies When the Main Customer Group Feels Offended

The decision to employ a particular strategy may also be influenced by whether brand activism has caused a negative reaction among the company's primary customer base. When the backlash involves the company's core customer base feeling alienated or offended, companies often downplay the severity of the situation while also explaining their intention, assumingly to minimize perceived damage and to reduce responsibility for the backlash. These findings indicate that the companies are attempting to communicate that the campaign has been overinterpreted and taken too seriously. The goal here appears to be to retain disgruntled customers by reframing the campaign in a less threatening light, while avoiding a complete withdrawal from the original position.

Furthermore, the study found no evidence that responses influenced the trajectory of the backlash or even mitigated it. The people who left comments on the companies' X and Instagram accounts after a response to the backlash had been posted did not address the content of the response. Therefore, it can be assumed that the responses were either not noticed or that there was no interest in reconsidering their opinion.

Overall, the study offers valuable insights for companies on how to navigate a potential online firestorm resulting from brand activism. The study highlights the significance of clearly defined corporate values and a well-defined socio-political stance. It is crucial for companies to be transparent about their values, whether conservative or liberal, to effectively navigate controversial issues and potential backlash. A well-defined crisis communication strategy is essential to prepare for negative reactions. Companies should take a clear stance and maintain authenticity, rather than attempting to please all sides. This is particularly important in today's increasingly polarized society, where customers prefer brands that align with their values.

In addition, the study has demonstrated that the Situational Crisis Communication Theory has limited applicability to backlashes triggered by brand activism. Unlike most crises, these are often based on fundamental moral differences, which the SCCT framework does not fully address in its present state. It is recommended that the SCCT framework be extended or that a new guideline be developed in order to provide more suitable response guidelines to this type of crisis.

As this is a qualitative study with a limited sample size, third-party data used and no intercoder reliability, it is not possible to generalize from these findings. Instead, the results merely represent an initial overview of how companies respond to a backlash triggered by brand activism and the effectiveness of mitigating this backlash. Further interviews with company representatives could confirm or refute assumptions regarding the objectives pursued with the strategies as well as state whether the desired goals of the company have been achieved with the responses.

The study also identifies several areas for future research. Further investigation could explore how different demographic groups, such as varying political or gender identities, perceive and respond to different crisis response strategies in brand activism. Given the growing influence of Generation Z and Millennials and the increasing polarization of societies, companies will likely continue to face significant pressure to engage with social and political issues. Understanding how to navigate these challenges effectively will be essential for managing reputation and maintaining trust in an evolving social landscape.

In conclusion, this thesis provides a foundational understanding of how companies respond to backlash triggered by brand activism, offering insights into the varying strategies used and their effectiveness in addressing public criticism. The findings reveal that while defensive, accommodative, and diminishment strategies are commonly employed, their impact on mitigating backlash remains limited. This study underscores the importance of companies clearly defining and transparently communicating their values to avoid escalating backlash, particularly in today's polarized societal landscape. Given the limitations of current crisis communication frameworks, such as the SCCT, in addressing morally and politically driven crises, further research is needed to develop more nuanced and effective strategies. Ultimately, as companies continue to face pressure to engage with social and political issues, understanding these dynamics will be critical in shaping future crisis management approaches and maintaining consumer trust.

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Overview of AI-Tools Used

Disclaimer: This paper was written by the author. The assistance of DeepL, DeepL Write and ChatGPT was used solely for linguistic formulation, stylistic revision and feedback on structural organization. All ideas, research, analyses, and conclusions presented are the original work of the author, and the artificial intelligence did not contribute to the intellectual content or substantive findings of the paper.

Appendix

Appendix A: Coding Guidelines for Corporate Responses

Category	Description	Anchor Example	Decision Rules
Denial			
Attacking the Accuser	The company attacks the participants in the backlash and may threatens to impose consequences.	"If these defamatory statements continue, we will consider all available legal options to protect our brand and hold those responsible accountable." (Author's own wording)	-
Denial	The company denies that a backlash exists.	"We want to clarify that there is no crisis within our organization. The recent claims or concerns are based on misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the facts." (Author's own wording)	-
Scapegoating	The company blames some person or group outside of the organization to be responsible for the backlash.	"We understand there are concerns being raised, but it is important to note that these issues are the result of specific actions taken by a small group within our organization." (Author's own wording)	-
Ignoring/No Action	The company does not comment on the backlash.	"The company did not immediately respond to a request for comment on this story." (Hoffman, 2017)	-

Rejecting Accusation	The company rejects the accusations expressed in the backlash and engages in direct confrontation.	"… we fundamentally reject the notion that it is antisemitic to question the policies of the State of Israel." (Ben & Jerry's, 2023)	Accusations are rejected without attacking or threatening the critics. Expressions such as reject, refute, claims are false, inaccurate, no evidence are used.
Diminishment			
Excuse	The company is trying to minimize its responsibility for the backlash and claims that it did not want to trigger a backlash or cause any damage.	"We never intended to be part of a discussion that divides people." (Whitworth, 2023)	-
Justification	The company attempts to minimize the perceived damage associated with the backlash.	"We understand there has been some concern regarding the recent issue. However, it's important to note that the situation is relatively minor and does not significantly affect our overall operations." (Author's own wording)	The focus is on downplaying the damage caused by the brand activism action or the backlash.
Separation	The company distances itself from the individuals who are responsible for the development of the initiative.	"We want to make it clear that the recent issue was caused by the actions of an individual who was not acting in line with our company's values or policies. We have taken immediate action to	-

		address this matter and have terminated our association with the person responsible." (Author's own wording)	
Downplaying Seriousness	The company attempts to downplay the impact and significance of a campaign and influence public perception.	"… the cups were always "just the catalyst" for a broader conversation." (Starbucks, 2015)	The focus is on downplaying the impact and seriousness. Expressions such as simply, just, a few, barely, merely are used.
Explaining Intent & Message	The company explains its intention behind the campaign and the values that it was trying to convey.	"The intended message of the Pride Whopper was to spread equal love and equal rights." (Jung von Matt Donau, n.d.)	Expressions such as wanted, intended or intention are used.
Reasoning for Engaging in Brand Activism	The company justifies why it has decided to engage in brand activism.	"… we really want to use the platform to advance a more modern, positive vision of what it means for men to be at their best." (King 2019)	-
Avoidance of Explicit Mentioning of the Backlash / Trigger	The company comments indirectly on the incident, neither the trigger nor the backlash is explicitly mentioned.	"We never intended to be part of a discussion that divides people." (Whitworth, 2023)	-
Rebuilding			
Compensation	The company compensates individuals or groups who have been harmed by the	"We are committed to addressing the concerns of those affected. As part of our efforts, we will be	-

	company's actions or the backlash.	offering a refund of to all customers impacted by the situation." (Author's own wording)	
Full Apology	The company apologizes, accepts full responsibility and asks for forgiveness.	"We at JvM Donau are proud of our queer community within our agency. Unfortunately, we still messed up and didn't check well enough with community members on different interpretations of the Pride Whopper. That's on us. The intended message on the Pride Whopper was to spread equal love and equal rights. Our strongest concern is if we offended members of the LGBTQ Community with this campaign. If this is the case, we truly apologize. We've learned our lesson and will include experts on communicating with the LGBTQ community for future work as promoting equal love and equal rights will still be a priority to us." (Jung von Matt Donau, n.d.)	-
Partial Apology	The company shows remorse but does not	"We deeply regret the situation and are	-

	address the origin of the crisis	committed to addressing it promptly." (Author's own wording)	
Corrective Actions	The company tries to correct the mistake that triggered the backlash.	"We are removing the content and halting any further rollout." (Pepsi, 2017)	-
Transcendence	The company tries to divert attention from the backlash and shift the focus to bigger problems.	"We will continue to use our voice to advocate for greater understanding on the importance of inclusion and diversity across the communities we serve around the world." (Starbucks India, 2023)	Expressions such as greater, world, global, issues, communities are used.
Sympathy	The company shows compassion to the individuals and groups who have been harmed by the activism or backlash.	"Our strongest concern is if we offended members of the LGBTQ Community with this campaign." (Jung von Matt Donau, n.d.)	Expressions such as offensive, concern are used.
Accepting Responsibility for Mistakes	The company admits that it has made a mistake in the implementation of brand activism.	"We recognize that we need to put our words into action." (King, 2019)	The remaining elements of a full apology are not used. Expressions such as "recognize, understand, accept, own up to, taking responsibility, regret, messed up" are used.
Rebuilding Relationship with the Backlash Participants	The company attempts to neutralize or improve the relationship with the critics or backlash participants.	"We've heard your voices and listened carefully." (Jung von Matt Donau, n.d.)	Expressions such as "resolving, listening, addressing, trust,

			improving, acknowledge" are used.
Emphasizing the Commitment	The company reaffirms its stance and declares its continued commitment to the issue. It also directs its focus towards the future.	"Our focus now is on moving forward with our continuing commitment to the LGBTQIA+ community and standing with them as we celebrate Pride Month and throughout the year." (Target, 2023)	Expressions such as "values, commitment, future, continue, committed, dedicated, supporting, ensuring, advocating for" are used.
Communicating Core Values	The company emphasizes its values in order to reject any accusations.	"Creating community and belonging in the outdoors is a core part of our values." (Rahman, 2023)	Expressions such as "inclusion, diversity, values" are used.
Learning	The company shares what it has learned from its commitment and the backlash.	"We've learned our lessons and will include experts on communicating with the LGBTQ community for future work." (Jung von Matt, 2023)	Expressions such as "reflecting, understanding, awareness, lessons, insights, changes, addressing, implementing, adapting" are used.
Explicit Mentioning of the Backlash / Trigger	The company explicitly mentions the campaign/action or the accusations of backlash.	"Our campaign in India, #ItStartsWithYourName …" (Starbucks India, 2023)	-

Bolstering			
Reminder	The company mentions positive deeds and achievements from the past	"For more than a decade, Target has offered an assortment of products aimed at celebrating Pride Month." (Target, 2023)	-
Ingratiation	The company expresses its gratitude to its stakeholders, with the objective of fostering a positive relationship with them.	"We stand with those who support our vision for a more inclusive outdoor industry." (Rahman, 2023)	-
Victimage	The company claims to be a victim of the backlash.	"… we've experienced threats impacting our team members' sense of safety and well-being while at work." (Target, 2023)	-
Endorsement	The company mentions its third-party supporters.	"We have thousands of partners, millions of fans and a proud history supporting our communities, military, first responders, sports fans and hard-working Americans everywhere." (Whitworth, 2023)	-

Appendix B: Coding Guidelines for Sentiment Analysis

Category	Description	Anchor Example
Positive Sentiment	Upbeat and encouraging, often expressing appreciation, admiration, or agreement. The tone is friendly and supportive, using words like "love," "amazing," or "great." It might include emojis such as smiles 😊, hearts ❤️, or thumbs up 👍 to reinforce the positive tone. (Author's own wording)	"Haters gonna hate. Thank you for your love to all, I love companies with a spine 🙏🌈✨" (The North Face, 2023)
Negative Sentiment	The tone can range from mildly dissatisfied to harsh, using words like "disappointing," "terrible," or "unacceptable." It may include expressions of disagreement, frustration, or even sarcasm. The comment might also highlight specific issues, such as "This isn't right" or "I expected better." Emojis like 😡, 👎, or 🥵 are commonly used. (Author's own wording)	"It's one thing to be greasy water that is impersonating beer. It's a whole different thing to sponsor a man who is impersonating women and in the process making a mockery of what women are. Then to issue a letter impersonating some kind of apology? No thanks @budlight" (Bud Light, 2023)
Neutral Sentiment	The tone is calm, often providing observations, information, or simple feedback. It might include phrases like "This is interesting" or "Thanks for sharing," and avoids emotionally charged language. Neutral comments may also offer suggestions or questions, such as "Can you explain more?" or "How does this work?" Emojis, if used, are typically neutral ones like 🤔 or 🙂. (Author's own wording)	"I'm just here for the comments." (Bud Light, 2023)

Appendix C: Overview Sources and Channels

Case	Source	Channel / Platform	Statement available at
Audi	Spokesperson & Marketing Director	Initial source unknown (News Outlet later reported about it)	Kauflin (2017)
Ben & Jerry's	Company & Co-Founders	Corporate Website, News Outlet	Ben & Jerry's (n.d.)
Bud Light (Anheuser Busch)	CEOs	Corporate Website, Instagram, Business Conference	Inside (2023), Whitworth (2023)
Burger King (BK) / Jung von Matt Donau (JvMD)	Company (BK) & Company (JvMD)	Instagram (BK), LinkedIn (JvMD)	Burger King (2022), Jung von Matt Donau (n.d.)
Dove	Company & Dove Global Brand Vice President	Corporate Website (UK)	Craik (2017), Dove (n.d.)
Gillette	Company & Vice President Global Communications and Advocacy Proctor and Gamble	Several News Outlets	King (2019), TODAY (2019)
Hershey's Canada	Company, Ambassador	X / Twitter, News Outlet	Marcus (2023), The Hershey Company [@HersheyCompany], (2023)
Kohl's	-	-	Raiken (2023)
Pepsi	Company	X / Twitter	Pepsi (2017)
Skittles (Wrigley)	Spokesperson	News Outlet	Hoffman (2017)

Starbucks	Spokesperson & CEO	Initial source unknown (News Outlet later reported about it)	Associated Press (2015)
Starbucks India	Spokesperson	News Outlet	Venkatraman (2023)
Target	Company	Corporate Website	Target (2023)
The North Face	Company	Several News Outlets	Rahman (2023)

Appendix D: Overview Statements and Strategies

Case	Statement	Applied Strategies (In Random Order)
Audi	"In defense, Audi spokeswoman Miranda Harper says the company signed the White House Equal Pay Pledge last year, and its graduate analyst program has a minimum requirement of 50% women. Marketing director Angelo says Audi ran an internal salary analysis, and after accounting for factors like "individual performance, experience, and tenure in the job," it determined that it now has "equal pay for equal work." But Harper wouldn't comment on whether Audi has made any gender-based salary adjustments over the past two years." (Kauflin, 2017)	Rejecting Accusation Ignoring / No Action
Ben & Jerry's	"We reject and repudiate all forms of hate and racism. Our decision to exit the OPT was based on our belief that it is inconsistent with our values for Ben & Jerry's to be present within an internationally recognised illegal occupation. Speaking and acting on our values is neither anti-Israel nor antisemitic." "Our co-founders Ben and Jerry said it best in an opinion essay for the New York Times: "The company's stated decision to more fully align its operations with its values is not a rejection of Israel. It is a rejection of Israeli policy, which perpetuates an illegal occupation that is a barrier to peace and violates the basic human rights of the Palestinian people who live under the occupation. As Jewish supporters of the State of Israel, we fundamentally reject the notion that it is antisemitic to question the policies of the State of Israel." (Ben & Jerry's, n.d.-a)	Communicating Core Values Rejecting Accusation Explaining the Intent / Message Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger
Bud Light (1)	"As the CEO of a company founded in America's heartland more than 165 years ago, I am responsible for ensuring every consumer feels proud of the beer we brew. Were honored to be part of the fabric of this country. Anheuser-Busch employs more than 18,000 people and our independent distributors employ an additional 47,000 valued colleagues.	Reminder Endorsement Ingratiation No Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger

	We have thousands of partners, millions of fans and a proud history supporting our communities, military, first responders, sports fans and hard-working Americans everwvhere. We never intended to be part of a discussion that divides people. We are in the business of bringing people together over a beer. My time serving this country taught me the importance of accountability and the values upon which America was founded: freedom, hard work and respect for one another. As CEO of Anheuser-Busch, I am focused on building and protecting our remarkable history and heritage. I care deeply about this country, this company, our brands and our partners. I spend much of my time traveling across America, listening to and learning from our customers, distributors and others. Moving forward, I will continue to work tirelessly to bring great beers to consumers across our nation." Brendan Whitworth CEO Anheuser-Busch (Whitworth, 2023)	Downplaying the Seriousness Excuse Communicating Core Values Rebuilding Relationship with Backlash Participant Learning
Bud Light (2)	"Today, AB lnBev CEO Michel Doukeris made a public statement about the cooperation of his company with transgender star Dylan Mulvaney. On a conference call with investors, he insisted that producing special Bud Light cans featuring Mulvaney's likeness was "one can" and "not a campaign"." "We need to clarify the facts that this was one can, one influencer, one post and not a campaign," he said." "The AB lnBev boss claimed 'misinformation' spreading on social media about the company's team-up with Mulvaney." (Inside, 2023)	Downplaying the Seriousness Victimage
Jung von Matt Donau	"We've heard your voices and listened carefully.	Endorsement

	The Pride Whopper is part of our client's engagement as official partner with Vienna Pride. The work also includes an influencer campaign with proud members of the Austrian LGBTQ community. We at JvM Donau are proud of our queer community within our agency. Unfortunately, we still messed up and didn't check well enough with community members on different interpretations of the Pride Whopper. That's on us. The intended message of the Pride Whopper was to spread equal love and equal rights. Our strongest concern is if we offended members of the LGBTQ Community with this campaign. If this is the case, we truly apologize. We've learned our lessons and will include experts on communicating with the LGBTQ community for future work as promoting equal love and equal rights will still be a priority for us." (Jung von Matt Donau, n.d.)	Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger Rebuilding Relationship with Backlash Participants Communicating Core Values Reminder Accepting Responsibility for Mistake Explaining the Intent / Message Sympathy Full Apology Learning Emphasizing the Commitment
Burger King	"We stand for equal love and equal rights! Mark a person with whom you would like to eat a Pride WHOPPER!" (German Original: „Wir stehen für gleiche Liebe und gleiche Rechte! Markiere eine Person, mit der du einen Pride WHOPPER essen möchtest!") (Burger King [@burgerkingaustria], 2022b)	Emphasizing the Commitment Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger
Dove (1)	"We use real women in all our campaigns because they represent the real beauty diversity in society. We wanted to take this a step further into the products themselves and have a bit of fun with them." "The custom bottles of different shapes and sizes reflect the beauty in diversity through visual representation and are designed to spark a lively debate and discussion about what real beauty means." (Craik, 2017)	Communicating Core Values Explaining the Intent Downplaying the Seriousness Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger
Dove (2)	"Every woman's version of beauty is different, and, if you ask us, these differences are there to be celebrated. That's what real beauty	Communicating Core Values Reminder

	is all about—the unique things that set us apart from each other and make us one of a kind. We've championed this version of beauty for the past 60 years, and celebrated diverse women in our groundbreaking real beauty campaigns. But we wanted to bring this to life through our products, too. That's why we've created a limited-edition range of Dove Body Washes, designed to show how beauty is diverse and diversity is beautiful. From curvaceous to slender, tall to petite, and whatever your skin color, shoe size or hair type, beauty comes in a million different shapes and sizes. Our six exclusive bottle designs represent this diversity: Just like women, we wanted to show that our iconic bottle can come in all shapes and sizes, too." (Dove UK, n.d.)	Explaining the Intent / Message Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger
Gillette	"We're not saying all guys are bad. We're not trying to misrepresent any one individual. What we're saying is, as a collective group let's have a little less bad behavior and more good. That's the big message behind it. We've had a lot of conversations with guys over the years, and sometimes we've not always held up the highest standards of communication. As we reflect on our own purpose, we recognize that we have a responsibility and obligation to step up and improve the language and the expectation that we were setting for ourselves and for guys. This ad is a way for us to do that. Gillette is one of the largest male brands in the world and we really want to use the platform to advance a more modern, positive vision of what it means for men to be at their best. Well, we did start with ourselves. It was not just about an ad campaign. We had to look at ourselves and say, 'Are we doing everything that would bring this intent to life - from a brand purpose point of view.' That's where our partnership with The Boys and Girls Club of American was born. We recognize that we need to put our words into action.	Downplaying the Seriousness Explaining the Intent / Message Learning Reasoning for Engaging in Brand Activism Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger Reminder Accepting Responsibility for Mistakes Rebuilding Relationship with Backlash Participants Rejecting Accusation Emphasizing the Commitment

	We really wanted to shine a light on some of the bad behaviors that were happening in society, but more importantly on some of the good ones because that's where we know most guys are really at. There are a few bad behaviors that we wanted to call out, so that we're all holding ourselves to a higher standard because we think that's better for guys, women and society. We are really saying, 'You know what? It's not okay to harass women. It's not okay to catcall. It's not okay to bully others.' There are some images that perhaps ruffle a couple feathers because they show guys not being at their best but the ad makes positive examples in the end. What we've asked people to do is to watch the advert in its entirety. Then take a minute to reflect. Obviously, we respect everyone's opinion, but encourage people to really take a minute to look at the message through the eyes of the future generation." (King, 2019)	
Hershey's Canada (1)	"We value togetherness and recognize the strength created by diversity. Over the past three years, our Women's History Month programming has been an inclusive celebration of women and their impact. We appreciate the countless people and meaningful partnerships behind these efforts." (The Hershey Company [@HersheyCompany], 2023)	Communicating Core Values Reminder Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger Emphasizing the Commitment Endorsement
Hershey's Canada (2)	"The reaction to my inclusion as a trans woman in Hershey's Canada's IWD campaign shows just how far we still have to go in the fight for feminist liberation and trans rights. I'm not going anywhere. I'm not shutting up. I will always stand up for women and girls, cis and trans." (Marcus, 2023)	Emphasizing the Commitment Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger
Kohl's	"The Independent has contacted Kohl's for comment." (Raiken, 2023)	Ignoring /No Action

Pepsi	"Pepsi was trying to project a global message of unity, peace and understanding. Clearly we missed the mark, and we apologize. We did not intend to make light of any serious issue. We are removing the content and halting any further rollout. We also apologize for putting Kendall Jenner in this position." (Pepsi, 2017)	Partial Apology Explaining the Intent / Message Accepting Responsibility for Mistakes Corrective Actions
Skittles (Wrigley)	"As a major advertiser we believe we have a responsibility to use our voice and the power of our brands to do good. This campaign allows us to have great fun with our brand while also raising awareness of an important issue. In an email to HuffPost, the Wrigley spokesperson shrugged off the controversy, and stressed that "diversity and inclusion are also key values for us." Pointing to the mostly "positive response" the campaign had received, the spokesperson added, "Happiness, fun and inclusion are at the heart of who we are ... Any suggestion that this support for Pride is in any way racist is clearly wrong." (Hoffman, 2017)	Reasoning for Engaging in Brand Activism Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger Explaining the Intent / Message Communicating Core Values Rejecting Accusation Ingratiation
Starbucks	"Company spokesman Jim Olson says the coffee chain's initiative to create discussion on diversity and racial inequality will continue without the handwritten messages, which are phasing out as originally planned". "A recently released memo from CEO Howard Schultz says the cups were always "just the catalyst" for a broader conversation, and the company will still hold forum discussions, co-produce special sections in USA Today and put more stores in minority communities as part of the Race Together initiative." (Associated Press, 2015)	Explicit Mentioning of The Trigger Corrective Actions Emphasizing the Commitment Explaining the Intent / Message Downplaying the Seriousness
Starbucks India	"A spokesperson for Starbucks said that despite the backlash, the company will continue to support the trans community."	Emphasizing the Commitment Explicit Mentioning or The Trigger

	"At Starbucks, we unequivocally support the LGBTQIA2+ community," the representative said. "Our campaign in India, #ItStartsWithYourName, shows how Tata Starbucks is committed to making people of all backgrounds and identities feel welcome. ... We will continue to use our voice to advocate for greater understanding on the importance of inclusion and diversity across the communities we serve around the world." (Venkatraman, 2023)	Explaining the Intent / Message Transcendence
Target	"For more than a decade, Target has offered an assortment of products aimed at celebrating Pride Month. Since introducing this year's collection, we've experienced threats impacting our team members' sense of safety and well-being while at work. Given these volatile circumstances, we are making adjustments to our plans, including removing items that have been at the center of the most significant confrontational behavior. Our focus now is on moving forward with our continuing commitment to the LGBTQIA+ community and standing with them as we celebrate Pride Month and throughout the year." (Target, 2023)	Reminder Explicit Mentioning of The Trigger Victimage Corrective Actions Emphasizing the Commitment
The North Face	"The North Face has always believed the outdoors should be a welcoming, equitable and safe place for all. We are honored and grateful to support partners like Pattie Gonia who help make this vision a reality. The Summer of Pride series, now in its second year, has helped foster a more accessible and welcoming environment for individuals from all backgrounds to gather and experience the joy of the outdoors. Creating community and belonging in the outdoors is a core part of our values and is needed now more than ever. We stand with those who support our vision for a more inclusive outdoor industry." (Rahman, 2023)	Communicating Core Values Endorsement Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger Reminder Emphasizing the Commitment Ingratiation

Appendix E: Coding of Statements

The following is an overview of how the various statements were coded. It shows which codes were used and how they are distributed within each statement. Further material is provided in the additional appendix. Where several statements per case were included, the sources were added for better identification.

1. Audi (2017), Daughter Campaign

2. Ben & Jerry's (2023), Sales Stop in Palestine

3. Bud Light (2023), Partnership with Dylan Mulvaney

Source Upper Section (1-12): CEO Anheuser-Busch Brendan Whitworth

Source Lower Section (13-19): Anheuser-Busch InBev CEO Michel Doukeris

4. Burger King / Jung von Matt Donau (2023), Pride Whopper Campaign

..Rebuilding Relationship with Backlash Participants — 1 We've heard your voices and listened carefully.

..Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger — 2 The Pride Whopper is part of our client's engagement as official partner with
..Endorsement — 3 Vienna Pride. The work also includes an influencer campaign with proud members
..Endorsement — 4 of the Austrian LGBTQ community. We at JvM Donau are proud of our queer
..Communicating Core Values — 5 community within our agency. Unfortunately, we still messed up and didn't check
..Reminder — 6 well enough with community members on different interpretations of the Pride
..Accepting Responsibility for Mistakes — 7 Whopper. That's on us. The intended message of the Pride Whopper was to spread
..Explaining the Intent / Message — 8 equal love and equal rights. Our strongest concern is if we offended members of
..Sympathy — 9 the LGBTQ Community with this campaign. If this is the case, we truly apologize.
..Apologizing (Full Apology) — 10 We've learned our lessons and will include experts on communicating with the
..Learning — 11 LGBTQ community for future work as promoting equal love and equal rights will
..Emphasising the Commitment — 12 still be a priority for us.

..Emphasising the Commitment — 13 German: Wir stehen für gleiche Liebe und gleiche Rechte! Markiere eine Person, mit der
..Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger — 14 du einen Pride WHOPPER essen möchtest!
..Emphasising the Commitment — 15 English: We stand for equal love and equal rights! Mark a person with whom you would like
..Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger — 16 to eat a Pride WHOPPER!

Source Upper Section (1-12): Jung von Matt Donau

Source Lower Section (13-16): Burger King Austria

5. Dove (2017), Body Wash Campaign

..Communicating Core Values	1	Every woman's version of beauty is different, and, if you ask us, these
	2	differences are there to be celebrated. That's what real beauty is all about—the
	3	unique things that set us apart from each other and make us one of a kind.
..Company ..Reminder	4	We've championed this version of beauty for the past 60 years, and celebrated
	5	diverse women in our groundbreaking real beauty campaigns. But we wanted to
..Explaining the Intent / Message	6	bring this to life through our products, too. That's why we've created a
	7	limited-edition range of Dove Body Washes, designed to show how beauty is
	8	diverse and diversity is beautiful.
..Explaining the Intent / Message	9	From curvaceous to slender, tall to petite, and whatever your skin color, shoe
	10	size or hair type, beauty comes in a million different shapes and sizes. Our six
..Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger	11	exclusive bottle designs represent this diversity: Just like women, we wanted to
..Explaining the Intent / Message	12	show that our iconic bottle can come in all shapes and sizes, too.

..Communicating Core Values	1	We use real women in all our campaigns because they represent the real beauty
..Explaining the Intent / Message ..Downplaying the Seriousness ..Downplaying the Seriousness	2	diversity in society. We wanted to take this a step further into the products
	3	themselves and have a bit of fun with them.
..Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger	4	The custom bottles of different shapes and sizes reflect the beauty in diversity
..Explaining the Intent / Message	5	through visual representation and are designed to spark a lively debate and
	6	discussion about what real beauty means.

Source Upper Section (1-12): Dove UK Website

Source Lower Section (1-6): Sophie Galvani, Dove Global Brand Vice President

6. Gillette (2019), The Best Men Can Be

..Downplaying the Seriousness

..Explaining the Intent / Message

1 We're not saying all guys are bad.
2 We're not trying to misrepresent any one individual. What we're saying is, as a
3 collective group let's have a little less bad behavior and more good. That's the
4 big message behind it.

..Reasoning for Engaging in Brand Activism

..Learning

..Reasoning for Engaging in Brand Activism

..Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger

5 We've had a lot of conversations with guys over the years, and sometimes we've
6 not always held up the highest standards of communication. As we reflect on our
7 own purpose, we recognize that we have a responsibility and obligation to step
8 up and improve the language and the expectation that we were setting for
9 ourselves and for guys. This ad is a way for us to do that.

..Reminder

..Reasoning for Engaging in Brand Activism

10 Gillette is one of the largest male brands in the world and we really want to
11 use the platform to advance a more modern, positive vision of what it means for
12 men to be at their best.

..Rejecting Accusation

..Accepting Responsibility for Mistakes

13 Well, we did start with ourselves. It was not just about an ad campaign. We had
14 to look at ourselves and say, 'Are we doing everything that would bring this
15 intent to life - from a brand purpose point of view.' That's where our
16 partnership with The Boys and Girls Club of American was born. We recognize that
17 we need to put our words into action.

..Downplaying the Seriousness

..Rebuilding Relationship with Backlash Participants

18 We really wanted to shine a light on some of the bad behaviors that were
19 happening in society, but more importantly on some of the good ones because
20 that's where we know most guys are really at.

..Downplaying the Seriousness
..Explaining the Intent / Message
..Emphasising the Commitment

21 There are a few bad behaviors that we wanted to call out, so that we're all
22 holding ourselves to a higher standard because we think that's better for guys,
23 women and society.

..Explaining the Intent / Message

24 We are really saying, 'You know what? It's not okay to harass women. It's not

..Explaining the Intent / Message

..Downplaying the Seriousness

25 okay to catcall. It's not okay to bully others.' There are some images that
26 perhaps ruffle a couple feathers because they show guys not being at their best
27 but the ad makes positive examples in the end.

..Explaining the Intent / Message
..ebuilding Relationship with Backlash Participants
..Emphasising the Commitment

28 What we've asked people to do is to watch the advert in its entirety. Then take
29 a minute to reflect. Obviously, we respect everyone's opinion, but encourage
30 people to really take a minute to look at the message through the eyes of the
31 future generation.

Source (1-24): Damon Jones, Vice President Global Communications and Advocacy Proctor and Gamble

..Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger
..Emphasising the Commitment

32 "If we get people to pause, reflect and to challenge themselves and others to
33 ensure that their actions reflect who they really are, the this campaign will be
34 a success."

Source (25-34): Statement via TODAY

7. Hershey's Canada (2023), HER for SHE Campaign

Communicating Core Values
..Company
..Reminder
..Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger
..Emphasising the Commitment
..Endorsement

1 We value togetherness and recognize the strength created by diversity. Over the
2 past three years, our Women's History Month programming has been an inclusive
3 celebration of women and their impact. We appreciate the countless people and
4 meaningful partnerships behind these efforts.

..Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger

5 The reaction to my inclusion as a trans woman in Hershey's Canada's IWD campaign
6 shows just how far we still have to go in the fight for feminist liberation and
7 trans rights.

..Emphasising the Commitment

8 I'm not going anywhere. I'm not shutting up. I will always stand up for women
9 and girls, cis and trans.

8. Pepsi (2017), Black Lives Matter Campaign with Kendall Jenner

..Explaining the Intent / Message
..Company
..Accepting Responsibility for Mistakes
..Apologizing (Full Apology)
..Accepting Responsibility for Mistakes
..Corrective Actions

1 "Pepsi was trying to project a global message of unity, peace and understanding.
2 Clearly we missed the mark, and we apologize.
3 We did not intend to make light of any serious issue.
4 We are removing the content and halting any further rollout.

Apologizing (Full Apology)

5 We also apologize for putting Kendall Jenner in this position"

9. Skittles (2023), White Skittles Campaign

..Reasoning for Engaging in Brand Activism
..Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger
..Explaining the Intent / Message

1 As a major advertiser we believe we have a responsibility to use our voice and
2 the power of our brands to do good. This campaign allows us to have great fun
3 with our brand while also raising awareness of an important issue.

..Spokesperson
..Rejecting Accusation
..Communicating Core Values

4 In an email to HuffPost, the Wrigley spokesperson shrugged off the controversy,
5 and stressed that "diversity and inclusion are also key values for us."

..Ingratiation
..Communicating Core Values

6 Pointing to the mostly "positive response" the campaign had received, the
7 spokesperson added, "Happiness, fun and inclusion are at the heart of who we are

..Rejecting Accusation

8 ... Any suggestion that this support for Pride is in any way racist is clearly
9 wrong."

10. Starbucks (2015), Race Together Campaign

..Spokesperson	1 "Company spokesman Jim Olson says the coffee chain's initiative to create
..Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger ..Emphasising the Commitment ..Explaining the Intent / Message ..Corrective Actions	2 discussion on diversity and racial inequality will continue without the
	3 handwritten messages, which are phasing out as originally planned".
..Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger	4 "A recently released memo from CEO Howard Schultz says the cups were always
..CEO ..Downplaying the Seriousness	5 "just the catalyst" for a broader conversation, and the company will still hold
..Emphasising the Commitment	6 forum discussions, co-produce special sections in USA Today and put more stores
..Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger	7 in minority communities as part of the Race Together initiative."

11.Starbucks India (2023), #ItStartsWithYourName Campaign

..Spokesperson ..Emphasising the Commitment	1 A spokesperson for Starbucks said that despite the backlash, the company will
	2 continue to support the trans community.
..Emphasising the Commitment	3 "At Starbucks, we unequivocally support the LGBTQIA2+ community," the
..Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger	4 representative said. "Our campaign in India, #ItStartsWithYourName, shows how
..Explaining the Intent / Message	5 Tata Starbucks is committed to making people of all backgrounds and identities
	6 feel welcome ... We will continue to use our voice to advocate for greater
..Emphasising the Commitment ..Transcendence	7 understanding on the importance of inclusion and diversity across the
	8 communities we serve around the world."

12.Target (2023), #takepride Campaign

..Reminder ..Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger	1 For more than a decade, Target has offered an assortment of products aimed at
	2 celebrating Pride Month. Since introducing this year's collection, we've
..Victimage	3 experienced threats impacting our team members' sense of safety and well-being
..Victimage	4 while at work. Given these volatile circumstances, we are making adjustments to
..Corrective Actions	5 our plans, including removing items that have been at the center of the most
	6 significant confrontational behavior. Our focus now is on moving forward with
..Emphasising the Commitment	7 our continuing commitment to the LGBTQIA+ community and standing with them as we
	8 celebrate Pride Month and throughout the year.

13. The North Face (2023), The Summer of Pride Campaign

Annotation labels (left column):
..Company
..Communicating Core Values
..Endorsement
..Explicit Mentioning of the Trigger
..Reminder
..Communicating Core Values
..Emphasising the Commitment
..Ingratiation

1 "The North Face has always believed the outdoors should be a welcoming,
2 equitable and safe place for all. We are honored and grateful to support
3 partners like Pattie Gonia who help make this vision a reality. The Summer of
4 Pride series, now in its second year, has helped foster a more accessible and
5 welcoming environment for individuals from all backgrounds to gather and
6 experience the joy of the outdoors. Creating community and belonging in the
7 outdoors is a core part of our values and is needed now more than ever. We stand
8 with those who support our vision for a more inclusive outdoor industry."

Appendix F: Sentiment Analysis – Three Examples

1. Jung von Matt Donau

The comments were posted in response to Jung von Matt Donau's statement on LinkedIn.

Source: Jung von Matt Donau (n.d.)

Comment	Sentiment	Backlash Related	Interaction with Response
No reason WHATSOEVER to apologize. Great campaign (copied from McDonald's in Denmark 5 years ago, but OK). People love to be offended, and in this case it complete nonsense! I will write an article about it for www.marketingtherainbow.info	Positive	Yes	Yes
Homophobia is still SO fucking funny to straight-folks. Congratulations on a very successful insult	Negative	Yes	Yes
Am I missing something?! What was wrong with the ad? I thought it was clever	Positive	Yes	Yes
Very good statement. One note: LGBTIQ+ people are not necessarily LGBTIQ+ diversity experts. But that's exactly the kind of people you need when creating such campaigns ;-)	Positive	Yes	Yes
As a queer person in marketing, here were some of my thoughts and ideas. Thank you for your public recognition and commitment to change.	Positive	Yes	Yes
This campaign is brilliant. I think most of us (gays) think it's hilarious. It has got so many shares and funny comments online. I think the backlash is more with 'rainbow washing' and people (especially after the pandemic) being a bit on edge en extra critical on corporations using social messages but not having something solid to back up the messaging. It's a creative and funny ad. Goal achieved. Now BG needs to really tell us how they support the lgbtq community , they got our attention.	Positive	Yes	Yes
Honestly, most of us found it hilarious. 😂 🏳️	Positive	Yes	Yes
I honestly don't see a problem with this one. People need to take a joke and not have a competition of who can be the wokest of the woke. If I was at your agency, it would have my big gay approval. You apologized, don't lose much sleep over it.	Positive	Yes	Yes
„IF we offended"?! You already have, there's no if here, except for: if you actually wanted to apologise and take responsibility for a mistake, you would would have.	Negative	Yes	Yes
& 25 thumbs up	Positive	Yes	

2. Bud Light

The comments were posted under the post on Bud Light's X account (14/04/2023), which was published after CEO Whitworth's statement.

Source: Bud Light [@budlight] (2023)

Comments	Sentiment	Backlash Related	Interaction with Response
Sorry I already "transitioned" to another brand.	Negative	Yes	No
Out of all the marketing moves you could make to get back your customers, I think this would be the one.	Negative	Yes	No
Sorry, I'm not your new target demo. But don't worry: Alissa Heinerscheid said your brand was dying anyway, so no big loss.	Negative	Yes	No
Stop promoting transgender ideology.	Negative	Yes	No
Look at all these fragile conservative snowflakes. So emotional. After 30 or so failed boycotts in the past decade, they feel this one is going to work. Isn't that cute? Any publicity is good publicity. Give your marketing team a raise for a job well done!	Negative	Yes	No
I'm just here for the comments.	Neutral	Yes	No
You might want to identify as another beer brand.	Negative	Yes	No
Nope.	Negative	Yes	No
It is so over	Negative	Yes	No
Thank you Bud Light for being inclusive. You represent what's good in the world. Unlike the whiny haters, I appreciate you more than you know, and support you every chance I get.	Positive	Yes	No
It must suck to not be able to use social media when you have new advertising campaigns going on...hahahahha. You are going to have to wait years before you tweet again and not get crushed.	Negative	Yes	No
They can't even give it away....hahaha.	Negative	Yes	No
Do you still hate America?	Negative	Yes	No
Not yet… 1) Someone needs to show actual remorse 2) Someone needs to lose their job for the poor decisions 3) Someone needs to make an actual effort of reaching out to your actual target market/ideal clients	Negative	Yes	No

It's one thing to be greasy water that is impersonating beer. It's a whole different thing to sponsor a man who is impersonating women and in the process making a mockery of what women are. Then to issue a letter impersonating some kind of apology? No thanks @budlight	Negative	Yes	Yes
Still not posting we see, because you cannot even GIVE your garbage away, you MUST be working up to promote the FIRST woman VP to destroy a brand in what, 2 months? She going to become President because checking an f-ing box is more important than organizational success?	Negative	Yes	No
Keep up the pressure on these woke liberal sickos. Wipe bud light off the map and make their stock worthless.	Negative	Yes	No
Dude where's your pride stuff?	Negative	Yes	No
Guyz, I know we put 21st century black face on our product. And, yeah, the movement behind him is obviously maoism with american characteristics. And sure, they are pulling for permanently mutilating children for updoots on the internet, but can't we be friends?"	Negative	Yes	
That's it? TGIF? That ain't going nowhere. But then again even an apology won't get anyone back.	Negative	Yes	No
We will continue to boycott Woke Light until you apologize	Negative	Yes	No

3. The North Face

The comments were posted under the posts on The North Face's Instagram account (25/05/2023, 05/06/2023, 07/06/2023).

Sources: The North Face [@thenorthface] (2023a), The North Face [@thenorthface] (2023b), The North Face [@thenorthface] (2023c)

Comment	Sentiment	Backlash Related	Interaction with Response
❤️❤️❤️❤️ splendid	Positive	Uncertain	No
#boycottnorthface	Negative	Yes	No
Thank you so much for releasing the women's SKAGAT water shoe! I have been anxiously waiting for months! I love the black and pink pair I purchased last year, and I just now purchased the light green. Next year, will you produce a white one again with some pretty contrasting color… Thank you so much! These are so comfortable and well-made!	Positive	No	No
Haters gonna hate. Thank you for your love to all, I love companies with a spine 🙏🌈✨	Positive	Yes	No
ususus#cancelnorthface	Negative	Yes	No
Don't cave to the haters! You are doing RIGHT! ❤️🧡💛💚💙💜🖤	Positive	Yes	No
❤️🏳️‍🌈🏳️‍⚧️❤️ thank you	Positive	Yes	No
❤️❤️❤️	Positive	Yes	No
Love the campaign and the support for all. Definitely on my "buy" list.	Positive	Yes	No
Thank you for standing with the LGBTQ community. Will always be a north face supporter. 🌈	Positive	Yes	No
#boycottnorthface 👏	Negative	Yes	No
How's sales?	Neutral	Yes	No
❤️🧡💛💚💙💜	Positive	Yes	No
Never getting my business. Telling everyone to stay FAR away from this company.	Negative	Yes	No
Welp time to burn everything I have by this company and never buy from them again. These companies are saving me money!	Negative	Yes	No
Boycotting	Negative	Yes	No
Poisonous company. I've binned all of my North Face equipment and I'm never setting foot in one of your stores again.	Negative	Yes	No
Farewell @thenorthface	Negative	Yes	No
Is pattie gonia not on Ig anymore ?	Neutral	Yes	No
👏🏳️‍🌈	Positive	Yes	No
Shame on you.	Negative	Yes	No
♡💧♡💧♡💧♡🌈	Positive	Yes	No
Fell of😂😂😂😂😂what a shame	Negative	Yes	No
♡♡♡	Positive	Yes	No

I love North Face even more now! Haters are going to hate but love wins. 🏳️‍🌈🏳️😍	Positive	Yes	No
Looks amazing! My North Face Goretex has kept me safe and dry for years. Awesome company.	Positive	No	No
Proud of North Face! 🤍🩵🤍🩵🤍🩵 Stay strong! #customerforlife	Positive	Yes	No
North face are going down bad bro🤣	Negative	Yes	No
Fuck this product	Negative	No	No
Hi, I've got an art idea. what's the best way to connect and discuss🤍	Neutral	No	No
#boycutnorthface	Negative	Yes	No
Now I know where to get camping gear🥹 love your Pride campaign!!😊🏳️🤍🤍	Positive	Yes	No
🔥🔥🔥	Positive	Uncertain	No
the north face 🔥🔥🔥🤍	Positive	Yes	No
Loved north face before & love them more after this campaign !	Positive	Yes	No
This brand thought it can get away with it, but people are so tired of this. The super mega majority is so tired of this garbage thrown in our face. It will cost you, it might cost you everything because that small group of people can't save your numbers. 🤡🤡🤡🤡🤡	Negative	Yes	No
Northface stock is down -62% over the last year. L O L 🏳️	Negative	Yes	No
#NonceFace	Negative	Yes	No
I never imagined that I would be embarrassed to wear a jacket with the North Face logo.🙁	Negative	Yes	No
😎👏😎	Negative	Yes	No
Throwing all my north face in the trash. It's worthless now.	Negative	Yes	No
#boycottnorthface	Negative	Yes	No
Well shit hey there @thenorthface Consider myself a new customer 🏳️🤍 Thanks for the support and being an ally	Negative	Yes	No
😭🤍😭🤍😭🤍😭🏳️‍🌈🏳️‍🌈	Positive	Yes	No
Love your clothes and camping equipment!	Positive	Yes	No
Done with your brand.	Negative	Yes	No
Yooo need that jacket	Positive	No	No
Lame brand	Negative	Yes	No
NNNNNIIIICCCCEEE 📷	Positive	Yes	No
🙏🙏🙏	Positive	Yes	No
Don't listen to the haters. TNF is on the right side of humanity.	Positive	Yes	No
😍😍😍😍😍	Positive	Yes	No
Love your gear and what you stand for 🏳️‍🌈 🤍 T Swift said it best - shade never made anybody less gay	Positive	Yes	No
Just gave TNF some money, because they are doing the right thing. I love that this campaign is drawing haters into TNF marketing and into conversations they would rather not have with real adults. 🏳️🏳️‍⚧️🏳️ Love is love, is love. 🤍	Positive	Yes	No