



# How Brand Activism Affects Consumer Attitude

A study on Swedish consumers' attitudes towards companies using brand activism, with the Black Lives Matter movement as context

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## Abstract

Black Lives Matter rörelsen engagerade människor både internationellt och nationellt under våren 2020. Företag var inte sena med att ta ställning och visa deras stöd i frågan, vilket ledde till olika typer av reaktioner bland deras konsumenter. Denna studie ämnar undersöka svenska konsumenters attityd gentemot företag som använder sig av brand activism som svar på sociala rörelser, där Black Lives Matter valts som empiriskt kontext. Studien ämnar också besvara vilka de viktigaste aspekterna bakom konsumenters attityd är. En förstudie har gjorts genom netnografi och empiri har samlats in genom en webbenkät med 260 svenska respondenter. Studiens analys och resultat tyder på att respondenternas generella inställning till brand activism är positiv i de fall då respondenterna anser att den sociala rörelsen som stöttas är viktig. Det finns dock tre dimensioner som påverkar den övergripande attityden, dessa är *autentiskt innehåll*, *attityd gentemot företaget* och *värdet i handlingar*. Inom dessa dimensioner utrönas flertalet teman där *företagets historia* och *storlek*, *innehållet i själva budskapet* samt att det *genomsyrar organisationen* är de viktigaste. Vidare är även temana *utbildande*, *genuin* och *handlingskraftig* kommunikation inom brand activism viktiga delar att ta med sig från resultatet.

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## Key concepts

**Social movements:** Mobilized groups that take action through petitions, rallies, strikes, marches etc. for a specific socio-political cause. Usually demands some sort of change from official political parties or governmental bodies (Daellenbach & Parkinson, 2017).

**BLM:** Black Lives Matter is a Black-centered political movement founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Opal Tometi in 2013 (BLM, 2020). The movement was created as a response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman who murdered Trayvon Martin, a 17 year old boy who was shot to death (Sveriges Radio, 2020).

**Brand activism:** Brand activism is a term that is used when brands take a public stand on socio-political issues and use this as a marketing strategy (Vredenburg et. al., 2020).

**Woke-washing:** Woke washing is a concept that exemplifies inauthentic brand activism. Woke washing is used when a brand uses socio-political issues in their communication that does not align with the brand's own values (Vredenburg et. al., 2020).

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# 1. Introduction

Contrary to political parties, social movements are not official governmental bodies. Instead they often start out as a small group of people concerned for the same socio-political issue (Daellenbach & Parkinson, 2017). However, as the group mobilizes and grows larger, so does its influential power over actual governmental bodies and legislations. But their influence through rallies, petitions, strikes and marches does not only reach governmental levels of influence, they also reach corporational levels (Daellenbach & Parkinson, 2017; Buchanan, 2010).

Just like the public interest has grown for how companies take responsibility socially, sustainably and ethically through their work with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), the interest has also grown for the political activity of companies (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Bhagwat et al., 2020). *Brand activism* can be seen as a development of CSR, where the values being endorsed are instead of a socio-political nature where opinions are usually divisive and polarized, sometimes even deemed controversial (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Palazzo & Basu, 2007). Many companies have expressed a vocal opinion on matters such as racism, feminism, abortion, gun-laws and matters concerning the LGBTQ-community after being pressured by social movements (Garfield, 2018; Vredenburg et. al., 2020; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Palazzo & Basu, 2007; Romani et al., 2013).

Brand activism has also been used as a term when brands take a public stand on socio-political issues solely as a marketing strategy (Vredenburg et. al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2020; Bhagwat et al., 2020). It is a tactic that can be used when brands want to stand out in a shattered marketplace. However, this tactic has never been more disruptive or delicate (Romani et al., 2013; Palazzo & Basu, 2007; Bhagwat et al., 2020). Consumers have boycotted Gillette razors, cancelled memberships at Costco and burned Nike shoes not solely because these brands have taken a stand in different socio-political issues, but rather that they lacked credibility in their actions and statements (Vredenburg et. al., 2020; Romani et al., 2013; Palazzo & Basu, 2007; Bhagwat et al., 2020). Gillette communicated the issues of toxic masculinity but got criticised for not feeling authentic and that they were simply “*virtue signaling*”- when one is expressing moral values in order to enhance one's own image (Vredenburg et. al., 2020).

It is mainly in an attempt to align their values with that of their customers that companies endorse and participate in socio-political matters publicly, this could be through for example statements, ad campaigns or donations (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Shivakanth Shetty et al., 2019; Palazzo & Basu, 2007; Bhagwat et al., 2020). This can also be linked to a way of branding the company and its product or service offer which in turn also builds upon their perceived and desired brand image with the targeted customer segments (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Palazzo & Basu, 2007; Bhagwat et al., 2020).

Amongst many, already mentioned, relevant issues that are dealt with by social movements, BLM is an active case that is of high relevance in our contemporary socio-political sphere. The movement has been endorsed by companies world-wide after the second wave of vocal protests in the US during the spring of 2020. For example Nike took a public stand in the 2020 BLM protests on their social media accounts and showed their support against racism and racial injustice. However, they were criticised for not having any black board members, not enough supportive values within the company and for communicating messages that did (or does) not align with the brand's own practice (Vredenburg et. al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Therefore it further accentuates the social movement BLM to be an interesting and relevant empirical context in order to contextualize social movements' effects on companies and how consumers' attitudes are affected by their participation in brand activism.

## 1.1 Problem discussion

Brand activism is a response to the contemporary social issues in society or the world as a large, sometimes referred to as the corporate political shift. Brand activism is oftentimes associated with a higher risk but also higher reward (Palazzo & Basu, 2007; Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019; Mukherjee & Althuizen. 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Bhagwat et al., 2020). From a shareholder point of view, brand activism is not encouraged since the outcomes are uncertain and might have strong negative effects on stock market returns and share prices (Palazzo & Basu, 2007). However, catering to the attitudes of citizen-consumers, who value aligning their consumption with their idealistic and personal beliefs (also known as *political consumerism*), has become more inevitable to companies with certain target markets (Stolle et al., 2005; Palazzo & Basu, 2007; Romani et al., 2013; Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

As already mentioned, many companies have faced backlash and heavy criticism historically after being vocal about social movements and their causes (Al-Muslim, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen. 2020). The criticism from consumers addresses the hypocrisy and *virtue signaling* of companies, consumers also highlight how no actual significant action was made from the companies (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Ritson, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen. 2020). The term *woke-washing* has been coined to describe companies who participate in inauthentic brand activism that does not align with their actual operations and values (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen. 2020).

There are also suggestions that the corporate political shift has gathered momentum in not only the United States but also globally, seeing as political polarisation has become more noticeable worldwide (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019; Bhagwat et al., 2020). Furthermore, the act of political consumerism is rather wide-spread in Scandinavian countries and Sweden in particular (Stolle et al., 2005). Most studies on brand activism are centered around larger societal issues such as the environment, feminism and health matters (Dauvergne, 2017; Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019; Daellenbach & Parkinson, 2017), others are bound by national populations, mainly the US, or online communities (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019; Park et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen. 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Studies on Swedish consumers and brand activism are not prevalent which makes it interesting to study the Swedish consumers' attitude towards brand activism. Whereas the BLM movement is of interest for contextualization of an active social movement in the contemporary world politics sphere. Furthermore, the BLM movement is also a delimitation of particular interest given that most previous studies are either not bound by a particular social movement or they are prone towards larger global movements not bound by the events within one particular nation, which the BLM movement initially was.

## 1.2 Purpose & research questions

The purpose of this study is to explore Swedish consumers' attitudes towards companies affected by social movements to engage in brand activism. Furthermore, the result can be of use for companies wanting to use brand activism in their communication toward Swedish consumers. The BLM movement has been selected as a case to contextualize the power of social movements on companies' communication strategies and actions. Following the above stated problem discussion, the research questions for this study will hence be:



- *What are Swedish consumers' attitudes towards companies using brand activism as a response to social movements?*
- *What are key factors behind the attitude?*

### 1.3 Delimitations and limitations

With the purpose and research questions in mind, there are certain delimitations and limitations that had to be defined in order to set the scope of this study. Firstly, this study's main focus is to examine the consumer's attitudes regarding companies' use of brand activism. Secondly, the BLM movement is set as a delimitation for contextualizing and exemplifying a case of a contemporary influential social movement. Thirdly, the study has its main focus on Sweden and Swedish consumers as another delimitation. Since the study has a qualitative approach, the aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the Swedish consumers' attitude towards brand activism connected to social movements.

There has also been a limitation due to the time frame set for this study as well as the limited amount of funding, which has led to the previously mentioned delimitations. The financial limitation is limited to the researchers own budgets which limits the possibility of e.g. other data collection methods such as traveling for interviews. Another limitation to this study is the Covid-19 pandemic which has made it hard to conduct e.g. focus groups as a method, which otherwise could have been a good choice of data collection method.

Furthermore, the aim of this study is not to investigate this from a company perspective, but rather from a consumer's point of view. This delimitation is due to the limited access to companies' internal documentation regarding their individual marketing strategies, and primarily the strategies concerning brand activism. This delimitation does not affect the result of this study since the aim is to determine the consumer's opinions, but the result can be of use for companies wanting to use brand activism in their communication toward Swedish consumers. This study does not focus on statistics in numbers, instead the focus is on gaining a deeper understanding of consumer attitude in relations to brand activism which is why the study will be of a qualitative nature.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Social movements within marketing

Mobilization of groups that fight for a social cause but are not as organized as a political party can be referred to as social movements (Daellenbach & Parkinson, 2017). Through formal or informal means the social movement first mobilizes a small group which gradually grows through personal connections and becomes increasingly formal and influential (Daellenbach & Parkinson, 2017; Buchanan, 2010). Through organized activities (for example: protests, strikes, rallies, marches, petitions etc.) aimed at governmental bodies or influential companies, social movements intend to affect the actions of these parties to support their own cause (Buchanan, 2010). A lot of social movements have through history been successful and associated with large societal changes, e.g. the the American Civil Rights movement (Roy, 2010), the women's suffrage movement and other feminist movements (Hurwitz and Taylor, 2012), and social movements focusing around climate change (Lockwood, 2011).

Despite the varying causes behind social movements, one thing they do have in common are collective action frames (CAFs) which are used as a tool to view and interpret the world, events, actions and experiences (Daellenbach & Parkinson, 2017; Wlodarczyk et al., 2017). Furthermore the action of framing is vital when it comes to CAFs and social movements but also when using social movements for social marketing (Daellenbach & Parkinson, 2017). The message sent out to supporters of the social cause or consumers has to be in tune with their values and beliefs and therefore a combination of direction, tone, emphasis and the meaning of the message are of utter importance (Daellenbach & Parkinson, 2017; Helmig and Thaler, 2010; Thaler and Helmig, 2013).

### 2.2 Brand activism

Brand activism is a marketing strategy for brands that aim to distinguish themselves by taking a public stand on socio-political issues (Vredenburg et. al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). The reason for using brand activism is for brands to showcase their socio-political awareness and for their consumers to know about their political values. According to Vredenburg et. al. (2020) there are four characteristics of what is called *authentic brand activism*. The first being *purpose-driven and value-driven*, meaning the brand contributes to

goals in society and also goes beyond financial gain motifs. The second is *controversial*, which addresses polarized matters that might evoke strong feelings or beliefs. Third is *Conservative or progressive*, which is characterized by endorsing stances that are progressive or conservative on socio-political issues. Lastly *messaging and practice*, which separates or combines *intangible* actions such as messages or *tangible* actions such as donations.

The authors also mention how *congruence* between a company's previous actions related to the socio-political cause and their present ones might affect consumers differently depending on the level of congruence. Seeing as brand activism also acts as a way of differentiation tactics amongst brands, there is a level of *perfect incongruence* between expected actions and previous actions that brands can seek to attain (Vredenburg et al., 2020). However falling too far outside of this incongruence or congruence soft-spot usually leads to the notion of inauthentic brand activism. However *the asymmetric effect of brand activism* is, according to Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020), when depending on if the moral values of the consumer and the political stand of a company aligns or not, the level of brand loyalty, image and purchase intention is affected either positively, not at all or negatively.

However, brand activism can over time become prevalent practice and end up being expected rather than unique. Looking at trends amongst consumers, this seems to be the future for brand activism as the demand for brands taking more responsibility and accountability is increasing (Vredenburg et. al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen. 2020). Woke washing is a concept that exemplifies *inauthentic brand activism*, i.e. the opposite of authentic brand activism (Vredenburg et. al., 2020). Woke washing is used when a brand uses socio-political issues in their marketing messages that are not aligned with their own values, purpose and/or corporate practice in hopes of increased status gain, also known as virtue signaling (Vredenburg et. al., 2020).

## 2.3 Consumer brand attitude

In order to explain and assess human behaviour it is of importance to study the underlying factors (Ajzen, 2007), therein attitude is one of the most diligently discussed factors among psychologists. Ajzen (2007) points out that attitudes shift over time while repeatedly emerging along different social issues. *The tricomponent attitude model* is based on three components; *the affective, cognitive and conative*, which together compose attitudes (Schiffman, Kanuk &

Hansen, 2012, pp 234-237). The affective component contains a consumer's feelings or emotions regarding a specific brand or product. The cognitive component contains the perceptions and knowledge that are obtained through a combination of collected and processed information and hands on experience. The conative component contains the tendency or probability in which a consumer will commence a specific action or conduct oneself in a special way in relation to the attitude object (Schiffman, Kanuk & Hansen, 2012, pp 234-237). The conative component is also known to include the actual behavior of the consumer and is within marketing seen as the purchase intention (Schiffman, Kanuk & Hansen, 2012, pp 234-237).

There are several different models based on the tricomponent attitude model where each studies different variations which are called multi-attribute attitude models. *The attitude towards the ad model* is one of those models and is an explanation of the relationship between the *exposure* to an advertisement and whatever judgement or feelings that might occur and in turn affect the consumers attitude towards the advertisement itself or the brand as a whole (Schiffman, Kanuk & Hansen, 2012, p 241-243). This model has been designed to help understand the impact an advertisement could have on consumer attitude, both towards the brand itself but also specific products or services (Schiffman, Kanuk & Hansen, 2012, p 241-243). The model narrates that the affective component represents the consumers feelings and the cognitive component represents the consumers judgements as a result of them being exposed to an advertisement. These feelings and judgements then develop into attitude, either towards the advertisement only or towards the brand responsible for the advertisement (Schiffman, Kanuk & Hansen, 2012, p 241-243).

Furthermore, Walla et. al. (2011) points out the importance for companies to construct a positive brand attitude. De Chernatony et al. (2011) means that how the consumer comprehends the company depends on how the company works on the creation of their brand. The authors believe that a brand consists of a relationship with its consumers, beyond their service or product (De Chernatony et. al., 2011). Because of this it is of importance that brands contribute not only functionally but also emotionally so that the consumers find the brand both beneficial and valuable.

## 2.4 Composed analytical framework

The analytical framework of this study will be based on a composed analytical framework of the above mentioned theories and models, specifically how they interact and affect one another as mentioned in the literature. Therefore, the analytical framework composed for this study thus consists of the three components: *Social movement*, *Brand Activism* and *Consumer Brand Attitude*. *Feelings*, *beliefs* and *actions* lie within the framework of the Consumer Brand Attitude component, and are derived from the concepts of *affective*, *cognitive* and *behavioural* from the *tricomponent attitude model* (Schiffman, Kanuk & Hansen, 2012, p 236), and will also act as a means of operationalization for this study's web survey. Below is a visualization of the composed analytical framework described that will be used for this study.

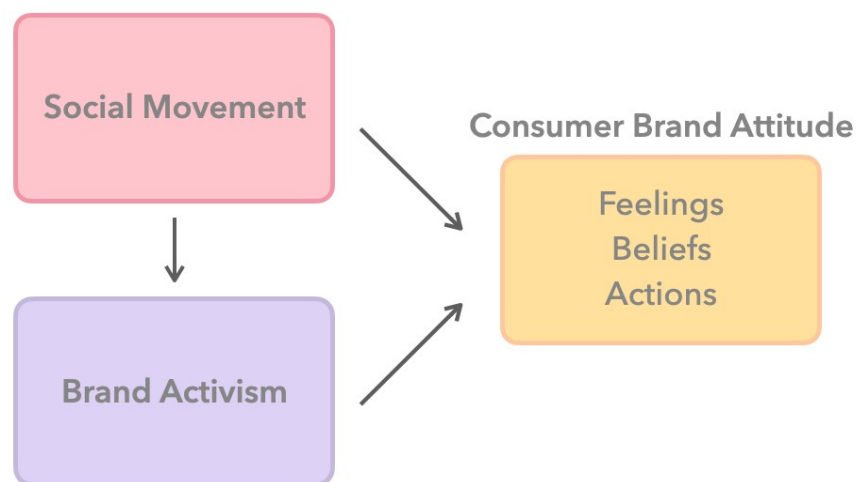


Figure 1. Composed analysis model for this study.

The *Social movement* component represents when a social movement gains a large following and therefore also gains leverage and influence on companies and governments (Buchanan, 2010), in this case the BLM movement. The *Brand Activism* component represents when a brand publicly aligns with the message of the social movement and starts communicating in its favour, using the same *collective action frames* in their own communication (Daellenbach & Parkinson, 2017; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Furthermore this component also represents the step where the respondent gets *exposed* to brand activism related to the social movement, which can be derived from the *attitude towards the ad model* where attitude is formed after *exposure to an ad* (Schiffman, Kanuk & Hansen, 2012, p 236).

Within the *Consumer Brand Attitude* component lies the three components *Feelings* (affective), *Beliefs* (cognitive) and *Actions* (behavioural), which help understand how and why a consumer feels and acts as a result of being exposed to the other components as described by the tricomponent attitude model under the previous heading above (Schiffman, Kanuk & Hansen, 2012, p 236). The *Social movement* component can, as mentioned, by itself affect the *Consumer Brand Attitude* component but it is also the foundation for companies being able to exert brand activism which is why it is connected to the *Brand Activism* component as well.

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Research approach

In order to complete a study effectively and accurately, it is important to choose an accurate and appropriate research design (Malhotra, 2012). This study is of a qualitative manner, meaning the study is interpretive and aims to gain a deeper understanding of a social phenomenon (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p 386).

This study's research approach is inductive, where the main research strategy is of a qualitative manner (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p 60). A study with an inductive approach selects theories that help analyse the collected empirical material, compared to a deductive approach which collects the empirical material in order to further explain the theory (Bryman & Bell 2011, pp 714-715). This approach is commonly iterative, meaning the research involves the researchers going back and forth between the collected data and the theories (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p 573).

Since this study aims to interpret how and why Swedish consumers' attitudes are affected by certain communication the study takes a stance in the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition (Sohlberg & Sohlberg, 2013, pp 266-267; Bryman & Bell, 2011, p 19). The hermeneutic tradition includes the doctrine of interpretation with its main focus on trying to explain and understand why a phenomena is the way it is. Central in this tradition is also an endeavour to understand how humans work and why they work that way (Sohlberg & Sohlberg, 2013, pp 266-267). The hermeneutic phenomenological tradition is a broad research paradigm which is suitable when studying phenomena or humans (Sohlberg & Sohlberg, 2013, pp 266-267). Within this research tradition there is also room for interpreting previous research and theories within the same field (Andersson, 2014, pp 16-20). Knowledge found within the hermeneutic tradition can be seen as less certain and not as clear as in other paradigms, but this is what gives scope to interpretations and a more nuanced picture of reality. The hermeneutic phenomenological tradition is therefore suitable for this study since the aim is to examine how consumers experience brand activism.

## 3.2 Data collection methods

A qualitative study is best suited in order to answer this study's research questions due to the fact that this study aims to understand attitudes on a deeper level. A qualitative research strategy is, according to Bryman and Bell (2011, p 386), usually more focused on the meaning of words rather than implementing quantification both in the collection phase and the analysis phase. One of the methods chosen is primarily of a quantitative manner (web survey), but the study aims to analyse the empirical findings in a qualitative way which gives the study a qualitative approach.

### 3.2.1 Empirical context

In this study the Black Lives Matter movement has been chosen as an empirical context and therefore acts as a delimitation for the study. In order to study Swedish consumers' attitudes towards companies engaging in social movements through brand activism it is necessary to make limitations in order for the study to not become overwhelming. It also helps the respondents delimit their attention onto one specific phenomena and therefore the validity and reliability increases in the respondents answers (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p 60).

#### 3.2.1.1 The BLM movement as empirical context

The BLM movement serves as a relevant and interesting empirical context for this study due to its large size in both followers and geographic spread (BLM, 2020). The movement was initially created in 2013 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Opal Tometi as a Black-centered political will and movement building project (BLM, 2020). The project was named *#BlackLivesMatter* and was created as a response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman - murder of Trayvon Martin, a 17 year old boy that was shot to death in February 2012 (Sveriges Radio, 2020). The movement continued growing and following the street demonstrations in Ferguson during 2014, after the death of yet two other African Americans by police, the movement came to be signified by street demonstrations nationwide (CBS News, 2016). Many more protests have ever since been held against the police causing deaths of copious other African Americans.



The movement came to be fuelled in the media yet again in 2020 after the death of George Floyd (The New York Times, 2020c) and up to 26 million people participated in various protests throughout 2020 in the US (The New York Times, 2020a). Even though the BLM movement originates from the United States the movement has got comprehensive international support. The death of Mr. Floyd started demonstrations globally where people were demanding a change in primarily police brutality against black people but also racial injustice on a societal and systematic level (The Geopolitics, 2020). The support stretched all the way to the people of Sweden who joined the movement and continued raising awareness (SVT, 2020). However popular support for the movement within the US has been divisive and has briskly changed over time, going from negative in 2018 to more majorly popular in 2019 and throughout 2020 (The New York Times, 2020b). Due to the divisive response and contemporary relevance of the movement it is a relevant empirical context to study the phenomenon of brand activism within. Furthermore, the movement is a well suited empirical context for exemplifying a relevant social movement as described by the history of the movement above and compared to the theoretical background of social movements in chapter two.

### 3.2.2 Secondary data

Secondary data as a qualitative method is used when the aim is to gain more subtle insights into a specific subject (Bryman & Bell 2011, pp 312-321). Secondary data can e.g. be found in different types of literature such as articles and books, but also online data, documents from governments and firms. Secondary data is a good choice of data collection method for this study since it is both a timesaving and an economically advantageous choice of method. Secondary data was chosen for this study in order to collect data relevant for answering the research question. In this study the collected secondary data has its primary basis in social media posts but also articles and websites and was used as a basis for the empirical material of the study, but also for designing the questions of the web survey that was sent out.

### 3.2.3 Netnography

Netnography is a method that originates from ethnographic research and which has adapted to a way of studying online communities (Kozinets, 2010). Netnography as a method was chosen for this study by virtue of the prosperous data that is available on social media online. Netnography enables researchers to observe lifelike, unhampered community interactions which can be crucial when studying human interactions with companies and how they take

form. It is also a time- and cost-effective method that allows researchers to collect naturalistic data (Kozinets, 2010).

The social media feeds of the most mentioned companies were searched to find posts that were made around the time of the second peak of the BLM movement in the spring of 2020. The social media platforms that were examined were Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, and some companies also had relevant press releases on their websites or were mentioned on official news sources. The main take-away from the netnography was from the comment sections on specific BLM-related posts, specifically the response from Swedish individuals expressing their views regarding the posts.

The approach of the netnography pre-study was to search for articles mentioning companies taking a stand in the BLM movement, to summarize which companies were mostly mentioned and in what light they were mentioned. The netnography also helped aid the selection of which posts or brand activism actions made online by companies to pick for the web survey. The next step was to reach out to individuals expressing themselves in a well-informed manner about the BLM movement and inform them of this study and ask them to participate in the web survey. This was due to the fact that individuals that are engaged and active within the social movement was a part of this study, since knowledge of the BLM movement was a prerequisite for participation. Furthermore these individuals were encouraged to share the survey with any number of conceivable respondents in their social circles. Since the netnography was used as a pre-study the result of this particular method will not be presented in the empirical chapter of the study.

### 3.2.4 Web surveys

Online surveys has become a commonly used method for data collection and is mostly seen as a quantitative method (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p 661). However the use of a web survey can also be of a qualitative manner (Braun et al., 2020), which is what this study aims to do. In some ways online surveys can be seen both as structured interviews and self-completion questionnaires, mostly when giving respondents the option of elaborating their answer with their own words (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p 661). According to Bryman and Bell (2011, p 661) online surveys sent out via email are usually conducted for smaller homogeneous groups of

respondents, whereas web surveys usually are used when studying a larger group of respondents.

Web surveys are conducted by giving the respondents access to a website on which the survey can be found and answered (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp 662-665). Among other things it allows for the researchers to pose filter questions which means that questions that are not relevant depending on the respondent's previous answer can be sifted away. There is also the possibility of letting the respondent see only one question at a time, or look through them all by scrolling. The main advantage of web surveys is that the answers can be automatically programmed into a database and turned into diagrams. This eliminates the time consuming coding of a large number of answers (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp 662-665). With open questions in the web survey there are some coding of replies necessary, but apart from that this entire phase is automated. This is both time saving and error reducing when in the phase of processing data (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp 662-665).

The geographical aspect also needs to be taken into consideration since there are no constraints regarding geographical delimitations. This enables the possibility of reaching geographically widespread respondents more cost and time efficiently (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp 662-665).

There are also some disadvantages with using web surveys as a data collection method. The response rate seems to be lower than postal surveys, and the survey is restricted to the online population only (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp 662-665). This means that there will be offline respondents that you will not be able to reach, which is something that needs to be taken into consideration depending on your sample (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp 662-665).

#### 3.2.4.1 This study's web survey

Because of the qualitative nature of the research questions posed, the survey was designed accordingly with some open-ended questions, making it possible to gain an insight into individuals' attitudes and thus the approach is prone towards an interview-like method. The web survey was designed by initially using netnography to study different posts from brands and their interactions with users concerning the BLM movement. Secondary data was then collected on the subjects brand activism, consumer attitude and the BLM movement. This data was later used as a basis for the survey questions. Web survey was chosen as a data collection

method mainly due to the ability to reach a large number of respondents from different generations. In order to decrease the risk of unclear questions, a pilot study was executed with a few chosen individuals with different demographics in order to get as diverse and broad feedback as possible (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp 262-263). The respondents were asked to give feedback on the questions, the answer alternatives and the design of the survey in order for the survey to perform as well as possible.

The survey had a total of 20 questions with a mix of open and closed answer options, and 14 out of the 20 questions were mandatory. The open questions were the ones that were not mandatory to answer, since the aim was for the respondents to elaborate honestly and not feel forced to do so. The respondents were able to move back and forth between the questions which gave them the ability to change their answers after seeing another question. The survey was initially distributed to 150 individuals but was then answered by a total of 260 respondents. This is a result of the snowball sampling which gave the respondents the option of distributing the survey beyond the initial reach. Since this study aims to get a deeper understanding of the attitude of Swedish consumers the survey was in Swedish. The questions and answers have therefore been translated when presented in the empirical chapter and the analysis.

Several of the questions were closed ones, which has the advantage of them being able to be pre-coded (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp 240). Several of the questions had answer alternatives that were designed as a Likert scale, which means that the respondents were asked to answer on a five-point scale (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp 155). In this case there was a vertical scale with the most negative option placed first and the most positive placed last, which gave a neutral option in the middle. This method is often used when studying a cluster of attitudes which made it optimal for this study (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp 155).

The first section of the survey covered the demography of the respondents where age, gender, geographical location, occupation and highest academic level was asked about and collected. This section was important to create the possibility of comparing and drawing conclusions based on the demographic variables. It was also clarified in this section if the respondent was aware of the existence of the BLM movement, which was important for this study in order to validate the answers.

The second section of the survey dealt with social and political societal issues, i.e. gender equality, the climate and environment as well as issues of racism. In this section the respondents answered what opinion they had about the BLM in general but also what they think about companies using brand activism in their communication. The latter had an open answer alternative which was not a part of the Likert scale, yet it felt important to give the respondents the option of motivating their answer.

The third section of the survey covered the respondents opinions on the three chosen messages from H&M, Nike and Ben & Jerrys. This section had closed answers according to the previously described Likert scale, along with giving the respondents the option of elaborating their answers and therefore by extension offering a deeper understanding into why their opinions are the way they are. This section also gave the respondents the chance of elaborating if their opinions were connected to the specific brands and if so how it affected their attitude.

Lastly the survey ended with an open answer question regarding what the respondents think is crucial for a company in order to be perceived as genuine in their produced brand activism communication. This question was designed to be deeply elaborated upon which could lead to many of the respondents choosing not to answer the question, but out of the 260 respondents 226 of them chose to answer (87%) which gives the qualitative analysis increased validity to some extent.

### 3.3 Sampling

Seeing as the studied population for the research question is the Swedish consumer, the total number is very high, however it is not realistic nor desired to actually collect answers from the whole population since the aim is to dig deeper into the respondents' answers. Furthermore, the recommended amount for qualitative interviews is also very dependent on the study itself and anything between three interviews to over 200 can be adequate depending on the nature of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp 489-492; Mason, 2010).

To conduct this study a non-probability sample was applied in the form of snowball sampling. The term non-probability sampling is often used as an umbrella term to cover every type of sampling method that is not aligned with those used for probability results (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp 192-193). In this study snowball sampling has been used to delimitate the study which

means that the researchers make contact with a chosen group of people that seem relevant for the study, and thereafter uses these people to make contact with others (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp 192-193). Snowball sampling is, according to Bryman and Bell (2011, pp 192-193) a suitable choice of sampling method when conducting a qualitative study, which also made the choice of sampling method more evident for the aim of this study. Certain people were chosen through the netnography because of their interactions with the companies and the BLM related posts observed, furthermore they appeared likely to have an interest in spreading the survey.

Another part of the sampling is the geographical delimitation that was made. The focus of this study is on the attitudes of Swedish consumers. Apart from that, gender, age, occupation and highest academic level has been part of the sampling. This delimitation could have been more narrow in order to gain a more generalizable result, but since the aim has been to gain a deeper understanding of the Swedish consumer in general this delimitation has been necessary. However, there is a con with the snowball sampling when it comes to generalizing the results to an entire population. This study would need plenty of more respondents for it to be representative of the Swedish population, furthermore Bryman and Bell (2011, pp 192-193) states that the aim of generalizing an entire population often can be problematic regardless of the chosen sampling method. This is due to the population constantly changing (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp 192-193).

### 3.4 Operationalization

The composed analysis model has been used throughout the entire study and the model itself was constructed by combining the relevant theories and concepts for this study, as mentioned earlier in chapter two. The model is the foundation of which the study is based on, as well as how and what data has been collected, and how this data is analysed. The *Consumer Brand Attitude* component has facilitated the shaping of the web survey so that the research questions could be answered, and the survey questions have been sectioned according to the concepts *feelings, beliefs* and *actions*.

The *feelings* concept has been used to design questions that will help determine what kind of feelings Swedish consumers might have in regards to brand activism. An example of this is the question where the respondents are asked to answer what their attitude is towards specific BLM messages that were communicated during the BLM movement in the spring of 2020.

The *beliefs* concept has instead been used to shape questions that will help determine what beliefs the Swedish consumers might have regarding brand activism activities. By asking questions such as “*What do you think is crucial for a company in order to feel authentic in their brand activism communication? Feel free to develop and motivate your answer*” the respondents most likely base his or hers answer on their individual values and beliefs.

The last concept, *actions*, has been used to determine if and which activities the respondents have actively engaged in related to the BLM movement. Some of the answer options were economical injustices, racial injustices, equality and veganism. This question was partly designed to map out what type of actions the respondents might take when exposed to messages regarding socio-political issues. The other aspect of the question was to measure the validity of the respondents' other answers, and to get an estimate of how deeply the respondents actually care about the specific movement.

<b>Concepts</b>	<b>Survey questions</b>
<b>Feelings</b>	1. What is your opinion about the Black Lives Matter movement? 2. What is your opinion on companies that take a public stand on socio-political issues? 3. What is your attitude towards the following message? (The respondents were shown the three different brands' BLM communication separately) 4. Why do you have that attitude?
<b>Beliefs</b>	5. Which of the following societal issues are the most important to you? 6. Is your attitude towards the message affected by which brand is communicating it? If so, please elaborate (This was a follow up question to question number 3 & 4) 7. What do you think is crucial for a company in order to feel authentic in their brand activism communication? Feel free to develop and motivate your answer.
<b>Actions</b>	8. Which of the following have you actively engaged in, in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement?

Figure 2. Table of the division of the survey questions according to the concepts. (The numbers presented in the table are not related to the actual order of the questions in the web survey).

### 3.5 Data analysis

The Gioia method was deployed when analysing the collected data from the web survey (Gioia et al., 2013) extracting first order concepts, second order themes and lastly aggregate dimensions. First order concepts consist of a summary of the respondents' most occurring choice of wording and phrases. Second order themes being a compound of the respondents' wording along with the concepts within the relevant theory and literature, straying away from the respondents' own words and instead the underlying implication that moves more towards the theoretical framework is depicted (Gioia et al., 2013). Lastly, aggregate dimensions is an analysis of the answers strictly within the theoretical realm and thus the wording has strayed far from the respondents' own and instead the answers are put into the perspective of the phenomenon studied (Gioia et al., 2013).

The open-ended questions posed in the web survey were initially read and coded by both authors individually and then coded systematically according to the Gioia method to extract first order concepts. The process of coding and developing themes was made both individually and collaboratively by the authors of this survey to ensure that the authors agreed. For example, when coding differently on the same respondent's survey answer, the answer was then revisited together by both authors and a discussion of the interpretation was held, wherein a consensus and understanding was reached for how to analyse and code the given answer. When analysing second order themes it became evident that a lot of the first order concepts could be sorted into recurring distinct categories that both authors could easily agree upon. Lastly the aggregate dimensions were brought together by revisiting the relevant literature and theories mentioned in this study within the field.

#### 3.5.1. Data structure

The empirical findings are presented according to the key themes found in the respondents' answers along with the data structure conforming to the Gioia model. The data structures are presented according to the aggregate dimensions they lead up to and no specific meaning is behind the order in which they are presented. Furthermore, the data structure is composed of all open-ended answers, meaning the themes extracted are both about the particular brand activism messages in the web survey, along with the respondents' general views upon brand activism which all leads up to each of the different themes and dimensions.



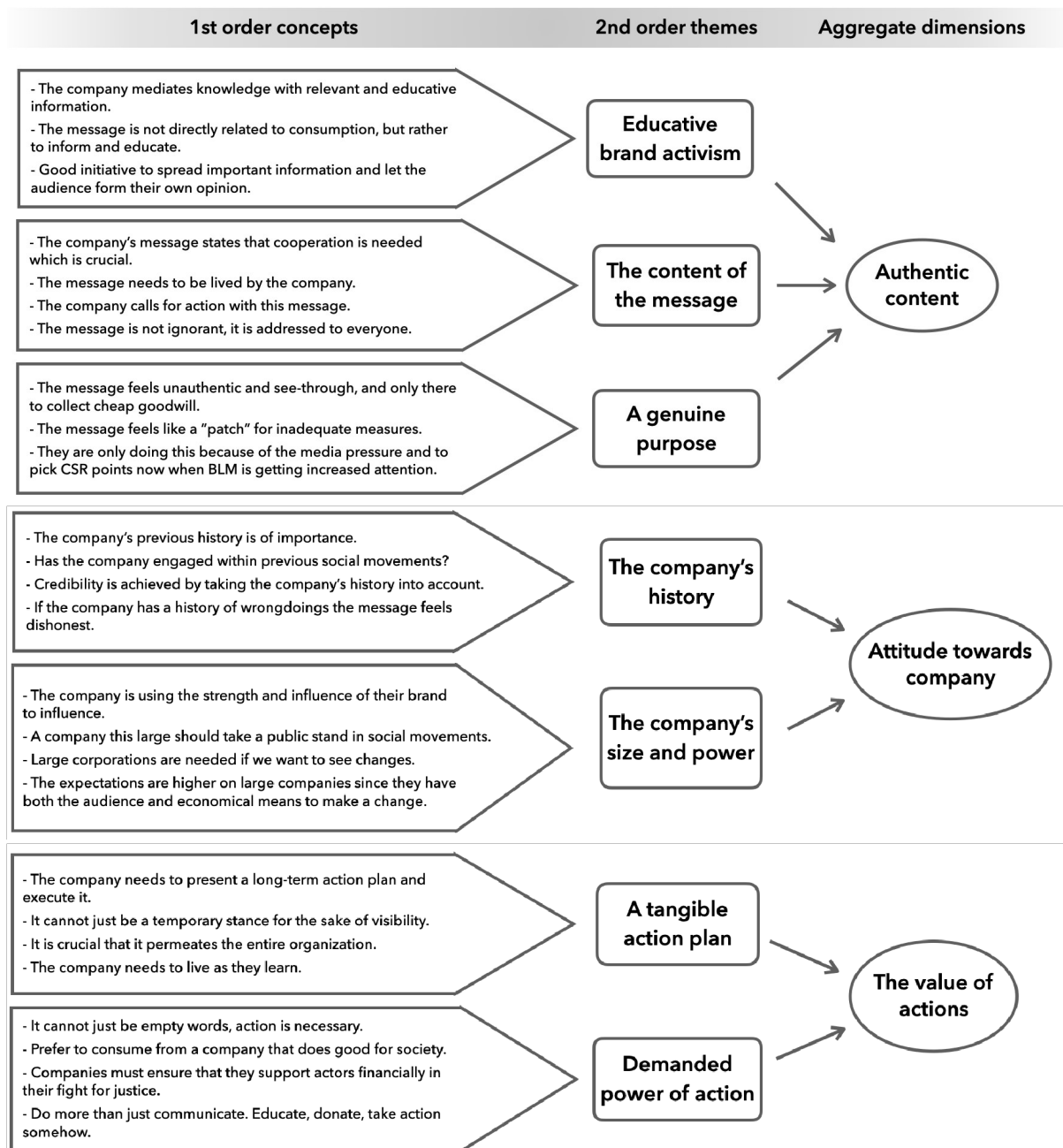


Figure 3. Data structure

### 3.6 Research ethics

Research ethics and potential ethical issues are important to be aware of when conducting a study. It is important to keep in mind what ethical aspects apply to the researcher and what responsibilities that come with that - both regarding the research itself, as researcher, the society and the research community (Swedish Research Council, 2017). This is called professional ethics and applies to all researchers regardless of the study's nature. A researcher should never get convinced by others (e.g. funders) to over-interpret any result in a specific direction, even

though this might lead to an “undesirable” result (Swedish Research Council, 2017). Angled results and studies can cause a great deal of harm, which has been taken into consideration for this study as well and impartialness has been kept when analysing results and data.

When conducting a study and using the Internet as a method of data collection, one needs to be aware of the eventual ethical issues related to this particular method (Bryman & Bell, 2011:669-670). When using web surveys as a data collection method it is important to ensure that the questions maintain a high ethical level, and that the respondents are kept anonymous. It is crucial to protect the people that participate in a study from any wrongs or harm related to their participation. This is a part of the *criterion of protection of the individual* (Swedish Research Council, 2017) and includes requirements for, among other things, confidentiality and consent. All respondents who participated in this study’s web survey have remained anonymous from the collection stage and throughout the entire research. To ensure that the data collection and survey was in line with the recommendations from the Swedish Research Council (2017), a covering letter was at the beginning of the survey informing the respondents of their ensured anonymity, the purpose of the study, the data collection and their participation being voluntary (see appendix 4).

One problem area that has emerged lately is the over-researched populations which results in “*respondent fatigue*” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp 669-670). This means that the respondents eventually get blunted and this might affect their answers, or they choose not to participate at all.

### 3.7 Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability are two important factors that need to be taken into consideration when conducting a study. Reliability is, according to Bryman and Bell (2011, pp 41-42), usually put in relation to whether the result of a study is repeatable. Validity can be seen as the most important principle of research (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp 41-42). Validity regards the integrity of the drawn conclusions that is generated from the research.

Validity and reliability has been taken into consideration especially when designing the web survey and its questions. Reliability can be defined as to how well web survey questions actually measure what the study aims to answer (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp 41-42). It is therefore of utmost importance that the questions are distinct and that the given answers are not

ambiguous. Validity is related to how well the questions are answered and if their answers help answer the research questions (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp 159-160). A negative aspect regarding validity is the lack of flexibility, in this case primarily in the web survey. The closed questions give the respondents no flexibility in their answers and might result in answers that are not aligned with the respondent's first thoughts. In this study this issue was handled through open-ended questions as a complement in order to increase the flexibility and therefore the validity (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp 159-160).

Furthermore, questions with predetermined answers such as *I don't know*, *maybe* and *I have no opinion* could reduce the reliability (Djurfeldt et. al., 2003, pp 108-109). Regardless, we have chosen to include these types of predetermined answers in the majority of our questions due to the fact that we do not want to force answers that are not aligned with the respondent's actual thoughts and opinions. We believe that this as well is a way of increasing the validity of the study.

### 3.8 Method criticism

Although the aim of the sampling was to collect answers from Swedish consumers of all ages and genders the majority of the respondents has been between 20-35 years old and female (67,3%). This makes the analysis less generalisable than desired, but based on the thorough answers of the open-ended questions the result can still be relevant for the purpose of the study.

In all studies internal and external attrition rate occurs to some extent (Johansson 2010, p 94). The main question lies in whether the sampling is done correctly to achieve a representative result in relation to what the study aims to answer. The net sample was 260 respondents, where the external attrition rate is the ones who received the web survey but chose not to answer it. Because of the snowball sampling the total number of people who received the web survey is unclear, which makes it problematic for the representativity of the study. Furthermore, the internal attrition rate differed from question to question, where the three questions regarding the brand activism examples had an attrition rate between 15-29 %. The attrition rate gradually increased from the first message to the third, indicating respondent fatigue (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp 669-670).

The penultimate question had an attrition rate of 53%, although it is noteworthy to point out that only the respondents who answered yes on the previous question were offered to answer

the penultimate question. When disclosing only the ones who got sent to the penultimate question there was an internal attrition rate of 1,4%, and the final question had an internal attrition rate of 13%. It is necessary to point out that these questions were all non-mandatory open-ended questions which might be a reason for them being the only ones not having a 100% completion rate. Despite this attrition rate the authors feel confident that the answers collected will be of relevance when answering the research question, and all 260 questions will be taken into account when compiled.

The web survey was designed to allow the respondents to move back and forth between the questions. This is not anything the authors believe will have any effect on the result, but it requires reflection upon. One aspect that could have been beneficial for the result of the study is if the web survey had included a question regarding if this was the first time the respondents came in contact with the chosen brand activism or not, in order to easier distinguish the respondents' previous knowledge and/or attitude. Another aspect that needs to be taken into consideration is the translation of the respondents' answers. Since the survey was in Swedish a translation has been made of the respondents' answers, which could lead to a matter of tone, emphasis and meaning being lost in translation.

When using netnography as a way of finding respondents for the web survey it is worthwhile to reflect upon the fact that these respondents already had an attitude and deeper knowledge towards the movement itself. This could have an effect on these respondents' other answers and general attitude towards the brand activism and is something worth mentioning. In this case the previous knowledge and attitude towards the BLM movement is seen as advantageous since these aspects might contribute with deeper reflections regarding the chosen subject. However, knowledge about the movement served as a delimitation, thus making it a prerequisite for participation. This further underlines the relevance of allowing individuals with knowledge of the movement to also spread the survey within their own social spheres in order to access more individuals with the same prerequisite.

## 4. Findings

First of all, no remarkable differences in answers were found between respondents within different age and gender groups. Not within the open-ended questions, nor the close ended. The same can be said about level of education and geographical location. Based on this no empirical findings will be put in relation to any of the above mentioned demographics.

However, the empirical findings from the data analysis pointed strongly towards an already existing attitude towards this study's contextual social movement (BLM) having an effect on respondents' attitude towards the brand activism. Respondents who had a previous positive attitude towards the BLM movement were prone towards also having a positive attitude towards the brand activism. However, this did not necessarily mean that all respondents who were positive towards the movement also were positive towards the brand activism, the different factors playing in on this will be elaborated upon under the different dimensions presented in this chapter. Moreover, respondents with a negative attitude towards the BLM movement were prone towards an already negative attitude towards the brand activism.

The importance of attitude towards the social movement also became apparent when comparing the respondents' answers to which societal issue they deemed most important compared to their attitude towards the specific case of BLM. Meaning that respondents who for example deemed racial injustice the most important societal issue, also supported the BLM movement and were also more prone towards positive attitudes toward the brand activism, and vice versa.

### 4.1 Authentic content

The dimension *Authentic content* is derived from the three themes of *Educative brand activism*, *The content of the message* and *A genuine purpose*.

#### 4.1.1 Educative brand activism

A recurring opinion among the respondents were the aspects of the message being educational. The positive attitudes were of a vast majority where the respondents appreciated the brands contribution to educating the public masses on the social movement's cause, which was seen as a key factor if truly wanting to affect and change society. On another hand some of the respondents felt that the communication was insufficient and that they had too little knowledge

about the educational sources referred to in the communication. Nevertheless, educational brand activism has been seen as one of the most appreciated segments within the messages shown to the respondents, as exemplified in these quotes excerpted from respondents.

*“I find it inspiring when companies educate and inspire their target group, spread knowledge and encourage people to learn things that are not taught in school, on their own”*

- Respondent 172

*““We need education and action” is very well worded. I especially think that education in these matters is extremely important.”*

- Respondent 129

*“It is positive that they address the subject, but they make no further effort to educate one within the subject.”*

- Respondent 12

#### 4.1.2 The content of the message

Some respondents expressed opinions about the choice of words, music or design in the message which affected their attitudes in different ways, one respondent for example said:

*“For the most part I like their wording about us having to work against the embedded racism in society. It is also an emotional ad with the ad’s music playing at a slower pace. Don’t like it as much that they write America since this is a problem in many places of the world.”*

- Respondent 253

The content of the message however was seen with different eyes according to the respondents. Some simply appreciated that the message was communicated at all, some demanded a greater effort and some thought that companies should not include politics in their communication at all. Amongst the respondents a clear attitude was the demand for the companies to call for action and encourage their consumers to take action against the racial injustice. In summary the content of the message is of importance for these respondents, as shown below.

*“There is no mention of action, power or anything. It feels more like a “trend” like wanting to show superficially that “you are also good”. Still good with prompting but it falls a bit flat.”*

- Respondent 17

*“Positive towards thorough and active work with CSR but negative towards politically angled organizations such as, in my opinion, BLM or Antifa.”*  
- Respondent 139

### 4.1.3 A genuine purpose

Throughout the respondents' answers the words genuine and authentic appeared often, if not with those exact words then as an underlying message. A vast majority pointed out that they felt a lack of genuineness in the messages. These respondents felt that some messages were not completely honest and that they were made with the companies' financial interests in mind as exemplified in the following answers:

*“I often get the feeling that companies play on these matters for their own gain.”*  
- Respondent 157

*“[...] The more money involved, the less trustworthy it is according to me.”*  
- Respondent 180

Other messages were deemed authentic due to the opinion that they did not try to sell a product according to respondents. Some respondents expressed the positive aspects of the companies trying to do better and meant that the genuineness certainly was present, while a demand for more genuine communication was clear among other respondents. Whereas others expressed that they did not care for the genuineness behind the message, they simply cared for the awareness being raised for the cause of the social movement:

*“Positive because it is good that attention is being brought to the movement. Negative because it doesn't feel authentic.”*  
- Respondent 127

*“The message itself is touching, but it is obvious that the company is playing on people's feelings in order to be seen as politically correct, which is most likely the basis for increased sales...”*  
- Respondent 174

## 4.2 Attitude towards company

The dimension of *Attitude towards company* was mainly determined based on the two themes *the company's history* and *the company's size and power*.

#### 4.2.1 The company's history

The company's history could have both a positive and negative implication. Depending on the previous actions of a particular company respondents were prone towards already decided attitudes and opinions of their future and present actions as well. Namely negative attitudes were based on previous actions of the company either not aligning with their now stated message, or that no previous action had been taken.

*"[...]The company doesn't want to ruin their image, that's why they're taking action so no one will ask them why they haven't 'taken a stand'. Even if they as a company used child-labour in Congo to make their cotton and then supporting BLM is just hypocrisy. Companies think we don't see it, but we do."*

- Respondent 87

It could also have a neutral or positive implication according to those meaning that a hypothetical company that had not engaged in any particular socio-political issues, but had a clear history regarding 'wrong-doings', was deemed admirable or overall positive if deciding upon engaging in brand activism. Furthermore positive attitudes were much like negative ones, based on the previous actions of a company actually aligning with their statement or message, or the overall reputation of the company being positive. Meaning that if a company is known for engaging in the social movement from before and the engagement was successful, then the attitudes towards future or present brand activism is more likely to also be positive.

*"I know from earlier that Ben and Jerry's are very political and not afraid to express their values, but also that they as a company live up to what they advocate (e.g. presence at Pride or projects aimed at halting climate change)."*

- Respondent 121

#### 4.2.2 The company's size and power

The company's size and power affected the attitude in the manner that larger companies with a lot of power were deemed more responsible and influential when dealing with socio-political issues. It was also implied by many respondents that the larger a company is, the more responsibilities and expectations are put upon it, whereas a smaller company cannot be held



accountable for larger societal issues. Also the importance of large companies taking action was expressed by many respondents, because of the impact and power they hold in society.

*“[...] It also matters how large a company is, how successful they are. A large company can for example donate more money than a small one, or at least they should do it!”*

*- Respondent 124*

## 4.3 The value of actions

The third and last dimension is *The value of actions* which is drawn from the themes *A tangible action plan* and *The demanded power of action*.

### 4.3.1 A tangible action plan

A recurring theme that has been identified is the requirement for a long-term action plan both within the company and directly connected to the social movement. Many respondents expressed a wish for the companies to not only communicate the message when the social movement is most noticed, but also during a longer time period. These respondents connected this to the purpose and authenticity of the communication and pointed out that companies who continue to take a stand and express their opinions over a longer time feels more genuine which results in a more positive attitude towards the company. In summary there is a clear demand for a tangible action plan that permeates the entire organisation in order for the consumers to feel trust in the companies.

*“[...] In addition, it is a well-communicated message, and it is positive that they describe concrete measures they themselves must take to support the BLM movement.”*

*- Respondent 32*

### 4.3.2 The demanded power of action

One of the companies' communication shown to the respondents included a message about the company making a donation to support the cause. This power of action was appreciated among the respondents who expressed their concern with the use of empty words and no actual effort being implemented from companies. A majority of the respondents wanted to see actual actions, whether it was in the form of a donation, education or some other kind of action that makes a difference. Some of the respondents expressed concerns regarding the companies trying to “buy

themselves free” by donating money and expressed that a donation by itself is not enough, it needs to come as an addition to other actions like a long-term action plan. The main point here is that some of the respondents did not feel that a message containing just words highlighting the social movement was enough, especially when coming from larger companies.

*“This is better than companies that only share a post as a symbolic gesture, and in addition put a huge brand logo on it. [...] They say that they will act and contribute with money and influence in other ways which is positive.”*

*- Respondent 53*

*“Less selfish. Here it seems that they are actually doing something rather than just empty words.”*

*- Respondent 81*

*“Here it is not just a message, they come up with concrete solutions.”*

*- Respondent 249*

## 5. Analysis and discussion

The aim of this study has been to answer the research questions: *What are Swedish consumers' attitudes towards companies using brand activism as a response to social movements?* and *What are key factors behind the attitude?*. In order to do so an analysis model was composed to help operationalize the study and aid the analysis of the empirical findings. Thus, the analysis of the findings will be presented according to the concepts within the analysis model.

### 5.1 Social movements

Several themes and dimensions fell within the concept of how they related to the social movement, which in this study is the BLM movement. The theme *Content of the message* was important since it connects to the importance of *framing* within marketing and *collective action frames* (CAF's), i.e. the message being sent out is in line with that of the social movement (Daellenbach & Parkinson, 2017; Helmig and Thaler, 2010; Thaler and Helmig, 2013). Depending on whether or not the message communicated by companies through their brand activism was in tune with the values of those supporting the BLM movement, it could amplify or decrease their sense of agreement and in some cases even indicated towards the possibility of *political consumerism* (however this was not the main focus of this particular study). For instance, respondents who expressed disbelief towards the BLM movement also deemed the brand activism negative since it was directly related to the social movement in their eyes.

Which is in line with the studies made by Mukherjee and Althuisen (2020).

On the other hand, respondents who supported the BLM movement were instead more focused on the wording of the message or the theme of *The company's history*. If the company had a history of supporting the cause of the movement, the attitude towards the brand activism and the company itself was positive. But if the previous actions or statements made by the company were deemed negative or not enough by the respondent, then the attitude towards the brand activism and the company was negative, often in relation to the reliability or authenticity of the brand activism. This aligns with the notion of *congruence*, meaning companies endorsing socio-political causes that fall too far outside of their previous standing point risk being deemed *inauthentic* (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

The relevance of the respondents' previous attitude towards the social movement is also in tune with some previous studies indicating that consumers' own opinion of the socio-political matter

being endorsed is of relevance as to how the brand activism will be received (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Palazzo & Basu, 2007). However, it goes against the studies by Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) which mentions the *asymmetric effect of brand activism* meaning consumers' attitudes are not affected by the brand activism when they support the brand's stand in the matter.

The *Companies' size and power* was also brought up as relevant to how the brand activism would be received. Respondents that supported the BLM movement stated the importance of large and influential companies to take responsibility for their actions and their impact on society. This was also due to the fact that the larger and more influential a company was, the more means it has to actually push forward the agenda of the BLM movement. Which coincides well with the theme of *A tangible action plan*, where respondents expressed the need for action over words. Namely stating that donations directly to the movement along with other direct actions were deemed positive. This is in line with previous studies that accentuates the relevance and importance of the company being a genuine part of the social movement and contributing its resources towards the cause as wished by those supporting or being a part of the social movement (Buchanan, 2010; Daellenbach & Parkinson, 2017; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

## 5.2 Brand activism

Another interesting aspect to look at is the different attitudes toward brand activism itself. Within the dimension *Authentic content* the respondents referred to both education, action, cooperation and genuineness. As for the theme *Educative brand activism* which directly connects to brand activism, the importance of further educating the audience with the brand activism was stated as an important factor in order for the content to be deemed authentic and of importance. This can be related to the *purpose- and value-driven* characteristics of what Vredenburg et. al. (2020) states as authentic brand activism since its aim is to contribute to the larger societal goals and not having an economic interest as main purpose. This was presented by the respondents as something that affected their attitude towards brand activism in a positive manner.

As for the theme *Content of the message* this applies to brand activism as well as social movements which is mentioned above, but in a different manner. Some of the respondents did

not care for the purpose of the communication, as long as the message was communicated. This contradicts what the characteristics of authentic brand activism is and how they affect consumers as suggested by Vredenburg et. al. (2020). However, it suggests that some consumers care more for the spread of the social movement's cause than the authenticity of the brand activism. The theme *A genuine purpose* can be connected to this as well. Some of the respondents expressed a concern for ingenuine communication from companies that appeared to only be following trends and not living up to their statements.

As stated above a lot of the respondents expressed authenticity to be connected to the underlying motif of the company, one of the most mentioned lines of reasoning was that if the brand activism was directly connected to increasing sales and revenue then it was deemed inauthentic. Much like the different categories of brand activism mentioned by Vredenburg et al. (2020), where brand activism connected to efforts towards revenue increase was deemed negative. In some ways one could argue that this could be an alternative for companies wanting to take a stand regardless of their own history, knowledge or purpose. However, a majority of the respondents wished for more than empty words and were very clear in their wishes for encouragement and call for action within the message. This could be interpreted in a way that the communication is closer to damaging than building the company's reputation if executed wrongly (Vredenburg et. al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

When looking at the theme *A tangible action plan* it connects to the part of the brand activism where a company takes action in some way. Some respondents were of the opinion that the message communicated and the stance taken needs to permeate the company in order for the respondents to have a positive attitude toward the brand activism. This aligns with the theory of brand activism and what Vredenburg et. al. (2020) states as being outside of the incongruence soft-spot. The respondents highlighted both the internal communication, recruitment processes and internal education as well as a long-term action plan, how they produce their products and the models in their ads as important aspects of what needs to align with the meaning of the social movement.

As for the theme *Demanded power of action* another important point being made by some of the respondents was that a company needs to live as they learn, meaning that their actions need to align with their words. The demanded power of action mainly refers to the need for action over words which was expressed amongst a large majority of respondents. Additionally, this

theme also entails the explicit actions that were expressed by respondents to be deemed positive and helpful. For example, donations to and education about the specific socio-political issue both within the company but also spreading the message to consumers. Moreover, respondents conveyed the desire to consume from brands that do good for society.

### 5.3 Consumer brand attitude

The dimensions of *authentic content* and *the value of actions* both affect the dimension of *attitude towards company*. Meaning the content of a company's brand activism message as well as the actions taken by the company affect the consumers' attitude of the company. This finding can be related to the composed analysis model (see 2.4) where the components Social movements and Brand activism affects the Consumer brand attitude and the three concepts of *feelings*, *beliefs* and *actions* (Schiffman, Kanuk & Hansen, 2012, pp 234-237).

The concepts of feelings and beliefs were underlyingly present throughout the entire analysis. The respondents who believed that the social movement was unnecessary, provocative or irrelevant i.e. something negative, continued to have that same attitude towards the brand activism. As for the respondents who believed that the social movement was something good, necessary and important i.e. something positive, a majority of them continued to have the same positive attitude towards the brand activism. This both confirms and denies the findings Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) presents in their studies, where no signs could be seen of a change in attitude amongst consumers who already had a positive attitude towards a socio-political cause. As mentioned earlier the respondents in this study showed signs of that their already positive attitude made them positive towards the brand activism as well, regardless of the content of it. This also connects to the respondents' feelings, which connects to their attitude towards the company and the social movement.

The concept of actions is connected to what actions the respondents themselves can and wish for others to take as a result of being exposed to the companies' brand activism. Which ties back to the concept of *woke-washing*, which Vredenburg et. al (2020) discusses, in the form that actions were directly associated with authentic brand activism. If a company's own values and beliefs do not align with that of the social movement in question, the brand activism is deemed as inauthentic and will have an inferior chance of influencing the consumers actions.

## 6. Conclusion

It could have been beneficial for this study to have a more equal age and gender distribution between the respondents in order to increase the possibility of finding more substantial similarities or differences between the demographics.

The key factors affecting the Swedish consumers' attitudes as according to the findings of this study are the three dimensions of authentic content, attitude towards company and the value of actions. Wherein the attitudes and reasoning a respondent had to the themes of educative brand activism, the content of the message and a genuine purpose affected their view of the dimension of authentic content. The themes of the company's history and the company's size and power affected the dimension of attitude towards the company. Lastly the themes of a tangible action plan and the demanded power of action affected the dimension of the value of actions. This tells us that there are several factors that affect the attitudes of Swedish consumers in regard to brand activism, where the use of one factor alone does not guarantee a successful use of brand activism. It is a complex relationship between the different themes, where companies need to evaluate if not all then several of them in order to acknowledge what suits their company best and how it can help achieve authentic brand activism.

Furthermore, the consumers' opinion or attitude towards the cause being endorsed in the brand activism is of importance, since the findings of this study points to the tendency of Swedish consumers to favour brand activism that aligns with their own beliefs and values and vice versa. Additionally, Swedish consumers' attitudes towards companies using brand activism points towards an overall positive attitude, although the underlying aspects for their reasoning behind their attitude is of relevance to answer this study's research questions.

According to the findings this study can draw a conclusion pointing towards Swedish consumers weighing in the above mentioned key themes when forming an attitude towards brand activism, where the company's history and reputation, the content and purpose of the message and that it actually permeates the entire organisation were the most important factors determining the positive or negative stance of the attitude. In addition to this woke-washing has been established as a highly relevant concept which can act as a pitfall for companies to avoid in their brand activism by taking the implications of this study into consideration.

## 6.1 Future research

For future research it would be of interest to look further into how influencers or other public figures might affect how consumers perceive brand activism and by extension examine any possible collaborations for companies when wanting to use brand activism. There is also a younger generation growing up with the daily impact of influencers on social media which makes their role in socio-political questions highly relevant. This phenomenon in relation to brand activism could therefore be subject to future research.



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## Appendices

### Appendix 1



Ben & Jerry's. 2020. <https://twitter.com/benandjerrys/status/1268910002238107649>

[Accessed 2020-12-14]

## Appendix 2



*Screenshot of the presented video.*

Nike. 2020. For once, Don't Do It. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drcO2V2m7lw>

[Accessed 2020-12-14]

## Appendix 3

INSIDE H&M

# There's no room for silence

The recent events in the US have left us heartbroken. We stand with and support all our colleagues and communities in the work against discrimination.

06/01/2020

We stand with and support the Black Community – today, everyday and everywhere to end racism in all forms.

The recent killings of more members of the Black Community in the US leave us devastated and heartbroken. Their lives, and the lives of all black people taken by violence, mattered.

We also acknowledge our past mistakes and they have made us acutely aware of how much we still need to learn. As a company, we are growing, but we can and must do better. We re-commit to taking tangible steps to challenge racism and support our colleagues, customers and communities. Symbolic support is not enough – we will take action.

More directly, we will play our own part. H&M group pledges to donate 500,000 USD to the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Color of Change, and the ACLU. These organizations fight for justice, economic rights and empowerment of the Black Community. We will provide our colleagues additional resources to further educate them around implicit bias. Furthermore, in the US, we will develop a stronger relationship with Historically Black Colleges and Universities and increase community events that continue to empower the Black Community. We will also mobilize efforts to increase voter registration. This list is not exhaustive. We will assemble a task force of black leaders to help advise us on further work. But for now, it is important for us to state firmly and unequivocally:

Black lives matter.

H&M. 2020. There's no room for silence. [https://www2.hm.com/en\\_us/life/culture/inside-hm/theres-no-room-for-silence.html](https://www2.hm.com/en_us/life/culture/inside-hm/theres-no-room-for-silence.html) [Accessed 2020-12-14]

## Appendix 4

Denna enkät är en del av empirin till en kandidatuppsats inom International Business and Marketing vid Uppsala Universitet.

Syftet med studien är att skapa en djupare förståelse för konsumenters attityd gentemot och uppfattning av företag som tar ställning i sociala rörelser. För att kunna undersöka detta har Black Lives Matter-rörelsen valts ut som kontext. Black Lives Matter (BLM) är en global rörelse som protesterar mot polisvåld mot svarta människor, samt rasprofilering och annan rasdiskriminering inom det amerikanska rättssystemet. Önskas ytterligare information om BLM rekommenderar vi att du besöker rörelsens hemsida på <https://blacklivesmatter.com>.

Dina svar kommer ligga till grund för vår analys och därför uppmanar vi dig att svara så ärligt som möjligt. Inget svar anses vara mer korrekt än ett annat utan vi vill enbart förstå din uppfattning och attityd gentemot fenomenet brand activism. Med brand activism avses all typ av kommunikation från företag som tar standpunkt i sociala och politiska samhällsfrågor.

Din medverkan är frivillig och du kan välja att avbryta enkäten när du själv önskar. Väljer du att avbryta din medverkan registreras inga av dina svar. Enkäten tar mellan 5-10 minuter att genomföra, och dina svar kommer att vara helt anonyma samt enbart användas till denna studie.

Tack för ditt deltagande i denna undersökning!

Vill du ta del av resultatet eller har du några frågor angående enkäten eller undersökningen kan du höra av dig till oss på:

emma.lundemodahlin.6398@student.uu.se  
diana.araf.9578@student.uu.se

*Printscreen of the covering letter presented in the beginning of the web survey. Translation below:*

This survey is part of the empirical chapter of a bachelor's thesis in international business and marketing at Uppsala University.

The aim of this thesis is to create a deeper understanding of how consumers' attitudes towards and perception of companies taking a stand in social movements. In order to do so the Black Lives Matter movement has been chosen as a case study to give the study context. Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a global movement protesting against police brutality against black people, racial profiling and other racial discrimination within the US legal system. For further information about the BLM, please visit the movements website at <https://blacklivesmatter.com>.

Your answers will be the foundation for our analysis and we therefore encourage you to answer as truthfully as possible. No answer is more correct than another, we only seek your perception and attitude towards the phenomenon of brand activism. By brand activism we mean all kinds of communication from brands taking a public stand in socio-political issues.

Your participation is voluntary and you can cancel the survey at any time. If you choose to cancel the survey none of your answers will be registered. The survey takes between 5-10 minutes to complete, your answers will be completely anonymous and will only be used for this study.

Thank you for your participation in this study!

If you have any questions regarding the survey or study, or wish to see the results please contact us at:

[emma.lundemodahlin.6398@student.uu.se](mailto:emma.lundemodahlin.6398@student.uu.se)

[diana.araf.9578@student.uu.se](mailto:diana.araf.9578@student.uu.se)