1. Introduction *(around 1.500 words)*
    1.1 Problem statement
    1.2 Aim and research question
    1.3 Relevance for the field of strategic communication
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2. Literature Review *(around 3.000 words)*
    2.1 Advertisement attitude and brand attitude
    2.2 Brand activism and its origins
    2.3 Brand-cause fit and perceived authenticity
    2.4 Issue involvement
    2.5 Synthesis

3. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses *(around 3.500 words)*
    3.1 Elaboration Likelihood Model
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4. Methodology and Measurement *(around 3.500 words)*
    4.1 Research Paradigm and Research Design
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        4.2.1 Measurements
        4.2.2 Experimental Design
    4.3 Sample selection and data collection
    4.4 Considering biases
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5. Quantitative Analysis and Empirical Results *(around 4.000)*
    5.1 Data analysis
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    5.2 Hypotheses Testing
    5.3 Experimental Stimuli Testing

6. Discussion *(around 2.500 words)*
    6.1 Hypotheses discussion
    6.2 Stimuli discussion

7. Conclusion and Implications *(around 2.000)*
    7.1 Implications
    7.2 Limitations
    7.3 Suggestions for Further Research

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1. Introduction

Fridays For Future, Me Too, Black Lives Matter – these are by far just some examples of activist movements that have gained a lot of attention in the past years. Activism is more prominent in our daily life than ever before both online as well as offline. Since 2018, the young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg successfully encourages people around the world to fight together for climate change. However, it is not only individuals or groups that stand up and advocate for social, political or environmental change. Today, more and more brands address different kinds of societal relevant issues in their communication. "I predict that we will see more brands take a stand on issues that impact their brand purpose and audiences. Research has shown that trust among government is down and more people are looking to their workplace and brands that emulate their personality and beliefs to drive change. For brands, it's an opportunity to demonstrate their cultural relevance. – Meghhan Craig, Empower" (Forbes Communications Council, 2019). In our ever-changing marketplace, now it is the right time for brands to become activists, stand out of the crowd and drive change. The phenomenon of firms actively supporting and speaking up for an issue in accordance to their core brand values is called brand activism (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). One reason for this upcoming development in brand communication is certainly the overall lack of trust in the government and public sector. According to the Edelman (2018), consumers rely more than ever on brands. Research showed that consumers even have more trust in businesses compared to the government (Edelman, 2019). They believe that brands are able to make an impactful societal change and thus expect brands to represent their values (Edelman, 2020). Trust in brands nowadays is based on ethics as well as competence, whereas ethical behaviour tends to outplay competence. Ethical brands are purpose-driven, honest, fair and have a vision (Edelman, 2020). Consumers today appreciate it when brands act ethical and take a stand for an issue. In order to make a purchase decision, more buyers assess common values with the brand and consider their principles even more as their products (Edelman, 2018).

Another reason for the rise of brand activism is the importance of younger generations such as Millennials and the Generation Z and their demands towards brands. Millennials and the Generation Z are ethical and belief-driven consumers that are committed to societal and environmental welfare issues more than any other generational cohorts (Title, 2020). These value-driven consumers choose, switch, avoid and boycott a brand due to its position towards societal relevant causes (Edelman, 2020). They look beyond the products and truly care about

the mission and vision of a company. This development brings along new dynamics and challenges for brands in the current marketplace. In order to be recognised, brands cannot remain silent (Shetty et al., 2019). Hence, brand activism offers a chance for firms to position themselves while doing something good for society. It is not just a few brands that already integrate activist messages in their marketing and/or branding strategy. On 2 June 2020, when activists called for action on Instagram against racism and police brutality and started the #BlackoutTuesday initiative, a lot of well-established brands such as Nike and Ben & Jerry's joined the initiative by posting a black square on their profile with #BlackoutTuesday. Nike, for instance, even placed #BlackLivesMatter prominently on their Instagram bio. Another example for an activist brand is Patagonia. Patagonia sued the former U.S. president Donald Trump in 2017, because he removed parts of the Bears Ears national monument in Utah which is protected land in American history (McCarthy, 2017). Evidently, brands are beyond willing to support societal relevant matters by actively taking position and striving for change. In order to address such issues and create noise, brands are required to convincingly integrate activist messages in their marketing and branding strategy. However, there is insufficient research on how consumers perceive brand activism in advertisements and thus form attitudes towards the advertisement and advertised brand (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

1.1 Problem statement

Generally, consumers prefer brands that take a stand on an issue over those that remain silent (Shetty et al., 2019). However, if not done in the right way, brand activism easily can be connected to 'woke washing' (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry & Kemper, 2020) and lead to a backlash and boycott of a company (Shetty et al., 2019). This is identified as a challenge, since a lot of brands do not understand yet how to implement brand activism successfully in their branding and/or marketing strategy. In 2019, when Pepsi launched a campaign standing up against racism with Kendall Jenner as an ambassador, they faced a huge backlash since they were accused of missing the mark by trivialising racism. Pepsi referred to the Black Lives Matter initiative without having neither a congruent brand purpose and values nor remarkable prosocial practices (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Although this campaign integrated a strong activist message that created a lot of noise, Pepsi was lacking value-driven corporate practices that are most importantly in order to be considered authentic. According to Edelman (2019), 56% of consumers' state that too many brands nowadays use brand activism mainly as a marketing strategy in order to grow profits. Especially the value-driven younger generations see through marketing strategies and hence are not reluctant to boycott a brand

meaning avoiding and switching a brand due to their stand in societal issues (Shetty et al., 2019). Thus, advocating for a purpose always entails risks for brands. When brands do not evaluate and choose the issue they stand up for wisely, their activist messaging can lead to 'anti-brand activism' (Cosentino, 2019). Anti-brand activism indicates consumers' active resistance and hate towards a brand that evolved from a brands moral misconduct (Romani, Grappi, Zarantonello Bagozzi, 2015). Therefore, it is of utmost importance for brands to know their target groups, their values, act accordingly and most importantly authentically. Since brand activism is a fairly new concept that emerged in research, there are several questions regarding the effectiveness and persuasiveness of brand activism that are relevant for academics as well as practitioners to face: When do consumers perceive activist messages as authentic? How does brand activism influence attitude formation? What role does the fit between brand and issue play in brand activism? Do consumers care about the fit? What influence has the consumers' own involvement with a cause? Previous research in the related fields of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and cause-related marketing (CRM) identified brand-cause fit as well as issue involvement next to authenticity as influential factors that need to be considered when investigating attitude formation (e.g. Chéron, Kohlbacher & Kusuma, 2012; Lafferty, 1996; Patel, Gadhavi & Shukla, 2016; Pracejus & Olsen, 2004). But are these already researched predictors also relevant in the context of brand activism?

This study particularly addresses these parameters by scrutinising consumers' attitudes towards brand activism in advertisement as well as the brand attitudes within the framework of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion by Petty & Cacioppo (1986). The ELM serves as a basis in order to verify predictors and relations that influence attitude formation after the exposure of brand activism in advertisement.

1.2 Aim and Research Question

This thesis contributes to the previous research of the evolving concept of brand activism. In particular, the main purpose is to examine the effect of environmental brand activism in advertisement on consumers' attitudes towards the advertisement and the brand. Considering the potential of brand activism for marketing and branding, this study is set out to investigate and gain a deeper understanding of parameters that enrich its persuasiveness. With brand-cause fit, authenticity and issue involvement as major identified predictors for the impact of environmental brand activism, this study will be able to provide managerial implications not only for marketers but also for the branding strategy of a company. In order to accomplish the

purpose of the study, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion by Petty & Cacioppo (1986) serves as a framework for testing the hypotheses within a quantitative approach. Quantitative research helps to understand the relations of different variables and predictors in the context of brand activism in advertisements. Ultimately, the aforementioned leads to the following research question:

To what extent does environmental brand activism in advertisement influence consumers' attitudes towards an advertisement and brand?

By answering the research question, this thesis aims to contribute to previous literature in three ways. First, with the help of an experimental investigation, it observes the impact of brand-cause fit on attitudes towards an activist advertisement and brand. Second, it enhances and tests the application of the ELM in the context of brand activism in advertisement. And third, it enriches the research field of brand attitudes and attitudes towards advertisement. As a result, this thesis engenders further insights and develops deeper knowledge for academics and practitioners about how environmental brand activism in advertisement is perceived.

1.3 Relevance for the field of strategic communication

Strategic communication is defined as „the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission." (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič & Sriramesh, 2007). In practice, strategic communication supports an organisation to reach their defined goals, in particular the long-term goals (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018). Falkheimer & Heide (2018) defined three different traditional research fields within strategic communication: public relations, organizational communication and marketing communication. The developing phenomenon of brand activism that is in the focus of research in this study can be embedded in the area of marketing communication. Marketing communication is a continuously developing and dynamic field that needs to adapt constantly to its stakeholders and the environment (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018). Therefore, when new marketing or branding trends evolve, such as the concept of brand activism, strategic communicators have no choice but to integrate this new strategy in order to stay competitive in the prospective marketplace. Certainly, the concept of brand activism contributes to the development and improvement of new communication management strategies in society (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019).

Since brand activism is a fairly new approach, it is highly relevant for strategic communication research to scrutinise this concept and its impacts for marketing and branding success in depth. Brand activism entails chances as well as risks for practitioners, because it requires firms to implement new communication strategies (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Adding on that, brand activism challenges strategic communicators in several ways. First, practitioners should carefully evaluate if the issue they communicate can be associated with their brand and fits their mission and vision. Second, in order to be perceived as genuine, practitioners need to think of corporate actions that are in accordance with the communicated activist messages (Vredenburg et al., 2020). And third, brands are recommended to take the needs of their target groups into account in order to implement a strong and successful activist strategy. From an academic strategic communications' perspective, it is therefore of utmost important to make statements about the effectiveness of brand activism by considering consumers' perceptions about it. Since this phenomenon is just on the rise, it will certainly have more meaning in the near future and is therefore very relevant to study within the field of strategic communication.

1.4 Outline of the study

This thesis will first provide a review of previous literature that is related to the purpose of the study. Particularly, since brand activism is a new developing concept, research referring to similar fields from which brand activism originated is illuminated. Consequently, previous studies are synthesised and the research gap identified. Further on, the ELM as the theoretical framework for this study is introduced and embedded in the research context of this study. Thereinafter, the development of the hypotheses as well as the research model of the study are presented. The following chapter points out the chosen methodology and measurements for the scope of this study.

To be continued.

- Methodology
- Analysis of the results
- Discussion

2 Literature Review

This literature review presents the existing research on the constructs and phenomena that are scrutinised in this thesis. First, the author gives an overview of previous studies concerning brand attitudes as well as attitudes towards an advertisement. Second, the concept of brand activism by Kotler & Sarkar (2017) is introduced while reflecting on relevant historical contexts and first findings. Thereby, previous research in regards to CSR and CRM is considered. Third, brand-cause fit and perceived authenticity as conditions of brand activism are reviewed. And fourth, former research about issue involvement as a moderating variable is highlighted. Ultimately, a synthesis is provided that consolidates the constructs and embeds this study in the context of previous research.

2.1. Advertisement attitude and brand attitude

The concepts of consumers' attitudes have been in the centre of attention in communication and marketing research for a long time (Mitchell & Olson, 1981). Investigations in attitudes not only play a crucial role for academics, but also practitioners are interested in consumers' affective reflections and responses in order to develop more successful marketing and branding strategies (Brown & Stayman, 1992; Mitchell & Olson, 1981). Considering the significance of advertising for brand communication, it is not surprising that previous research focused mainly on attitudes towards an advertisement and the advertised brand (Gardner, 1985).

Attitude towards an advertisement is defined as "a predisposition to respond in a favourable or unfavourable manner to a particular advertisement stimulus during a particular exposure occasion" (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989, p. 49). MacKenzie & Lutz (1989) emphasised that ad attitude is dependent on individual differences as well as the specific situation in which the advertisement is processed. Whereas brand attitude describes the formation of an individual's evaluation such as general liking or disliking towards a brand (Mitchell & Olson, 1981). Even though advertisement attitude and brand attitude are two independent concepts, previous research found out that there is a strong relationship between them. Particularly, ad attitude can be identified as an important predictor of brand attitude formation, especially if there are

no existing predispositions towards a brand or any prior knowledge (e.g. Brown & Stayman, 1992; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989; Phelps & Thorson, 1991; Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). Nevertheless, for academics as well as practitioners it is even more of interest how attitudes are formed and thereby how advertisements are processed by individuals. Therefore, many researchers refer to the ELM by Petty & Cacioppo (1986) that describes two routes of information processing. With this framework, researchers looked into different kinds of advertising appeals, their impacts on information processing and ultimately attitude formation (Rhee & Jung, 2019). Hence, with the rise of brand activism in advertisements, it is required to scrutinise advertisement attitude as well as brand attitude after the exposure towards brand activism in order to make statements about its effectiveness for marketing and branding.

2.2. Brand activism and its origins

In their ground-breaking work, Kotler & Sarkar (2017) classified brand activism as an emerging field which naturally evolved from the concepts of CRM and CSR. CRM is "the process of formulating and implementing marketing activities that are characterized by an offer from the firm to contribute a specified amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-providing exchanges that satisfy organizational and individual objectives." (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988, p. 60). Research found out that consumers prefer companies that support good causes by donating a certain amount to charities over those that do not. Although customers are aware of the revenues firms make with such collaborations, they generally perceive CRM as highly beneficial for the overall good of society (Farache, Perks, Wanderly & Filho, 2008). The marketing-driven CRM concept is integrated in the context of CSR which is generally known as the "perception of a company's societal integrity." (Sheik & Beise-Zee, 2011, p. 28). Kotler & Lee (2005) disclosed CSR as a multidimensional field: "Corporate social responsibility is a commitment to improve community well-being through discretionary business practices and contributions of corporate resources." (p. 3). In order to persist in our ever-changing, dynamic environment and meet the demands of the target groups, it is generally expected from companies to support a societal purpose and to act socially responsible beyond raising profits (Amad, 2019). Brands nowadays cannot stay silent. It requires them to be flexible and proactive with their CSR strategies in order to meet the demands of their customers and remain competitive in the marketplace (Kotler & Lee, 2005).

However, Kotler & Sarkar (2017) asserted that CSR strategies and marketing-driven cause promotions within CRM are not satisfactory anymore to meet the high demands and desires of the customers towards a brand today. Due to decreasing trust in the public sector, consumers expect from brands to take a stand and advocate for issues relevant to society (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Consequently, in times of rising activism and crises, the concept of brand activism evolved inherently from the well-researched field of CSR. Whereas CRM and CSR are categorised as marketing-driven or corporate-driven concepts, the phenomenon of brand activism according to Kotler & Sarkar (2017) developed as a "value-driven agenda for companies that care about the future of society and the planet's health". Thus, with activist messaging, brands clearly position themselves in society (Champlin, Sterbenk, James & Griffin, 2019). Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) described brand activism as "a strategy that seeks to influence citizen-consumers by means of campaigns created and sustained by political values." (p.343). While CSR initiatives are usually evaluated as positive by consumers, brand activist strategies do not necessarily appeal to everyone. Usually, activist brand messages address controversial, challenging or polarizing socio-political issues whilst driving societal change. By actively standing up for an issue and implementing practices that fit the corporate values as well as the vision and mission of a company, activist brands aim for a greater purpose than just increasing sales (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017; Shetty et al., 2019). In order to gain a better understanding of brand activism, Kotler & Sarkar (2017) developed a framework with six subcategories of brand activism which is fundamental in the current research.

Figure 1: Kotler & Sarkar (2017)

This thesis focuses on environmental brand activism meaning brands advocating on any kind of ecological matters that have an impact on our planet (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). The most prominent example of environmental brand activism is the brand Patagonia. With its

consistent communication strategy that is in accordance with its values and practices, the brand urges their customers to become active by providing opportunities to participate in environmental change (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Taking the role of one of the leaders in environmental brand activism, Patagonia always adapts to changes in society and embraces them. Consequently, this can be identified as the road to success in brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020)

As Patagonia, brands generally become activists when making public statements, standing up or donating money for an issue whilst integrating it in their marketing communication. Besides executing activism, brands can create a lot of attention that leads to publicity (Shetty et al., 2019). In their study, Shetty et al. (2019) found out that Millennials across gender and salary levels prefer brands that take a stand over those that stay neutral or even silent. Adding on that, activist brands have the potential to develop a strong relationship with their target groups assuming they share the same values. On the one side, Millennials would be willing to pay a higher price, if a brand shares the same values and stands up for them (Champlin & Sternbeck, 2019; Shetty et al., 2019). On the other side, Millennials would change brands and generate enormous backlash, if their favourite brands would promote ambivalent issues (Shetty et al., 2019). Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) researched both brand activism in regards to hypothetical as well as known brands showing that consumers who do not share a brand's position on an issue consequently have negative attitudes towards the brand (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Further, there is no significant change of attitudes for those consumers that support a brand's position. As a result, they recognised an asymmetric effect of brand activism on brand attitude formation as well as consumer behaviour (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Whereas in the context of environmental brand activism in advertisement, Elkan (2018) discovered that U.S. Millennials had positive attitudes towards the advertisement, but not towards the brand when comparing to generic advertisement that is only focused on a product. Evidently, previous research regarding environmental brand activism in advertisement is very limited, but indeed highly relevant to study. Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) suggested to further research parameters that mediate the impact of brand activism on attitudes. Thus, this study follows up to previous research by considering possible predictors of attitude change that also play a crucial role in the origins of brand activism, CSR and CRM.

2.3. Brand cause-fit and perceived authenticity

Brand-cause fit generally describes the similarity or congruence between a cause or social issue and the brand (Lafferty, 2007). However, the definition of brand-cause fit is not very distinct in previous research. On the one side, a brand could fit with a social cause if both address the same or compatible target groups. On the other side, a fit could also be perceived if a brand and a cause have the same values and achieve the same goals (Nan & Heo, 2007). In this thesis, the author pertains to the description of Du, Bhattacharya & Sen (2010) who classified brand-cause fit in the context of CSR as the "perceived congruence between a social issue and the company's business" (p.12). Related to CRM and CSR - in particular brand extensions, co-branding and sponsorship - brand-cause fit and its impact on consumer response is widely researched (e.g. Aaker & Keller, 1990; Pracejus & Olsen, 2004; Rifon, Choi, Trimble & Li, 2004). Consumers often expect brands to only support a cause or social issue if it is in accordance with the companies' values so that it can easily be associated with the brand (Du et al., 2010; Lafferty, 2007). Supporting that claim, the majority of previous research found out that high perceived brand-cause fit favours attitudes towards the advertisement and brand. (e.g. Chéron et al., 2012; Pracejus & Olsen, 2004; Rifon et al., 2004). Nevertheless, there is no general consensus about the role of brand-cause fit. Some studies stressed that high brand-cause fit can lead to negative attitudes, since it seems as the brand could take advantage of the fit (Drumwright, 1996; Ellen, Mohr & Webb, 2000). Also, Lafferty (2007) emphasised that a perceived fit does not necessarily have a crucial role in regards to attitudes towards the advertisement or brand as well as purchase intentions. Adding on that, Nan & Heo (2007) underpinned that CRM messages generally are more favourable compared to generic advertisement, also regardless of the brand-cause fit (Nan & Heo, 2007). However, with their experimental investigation, they found out that a high brand-cause fit elicits more positive attitudes towards the advertisement and brand compared to low brand-cause fit in a CRM message. Thus, it can be assumed that a higher fit enriches the effectiveness of the message and therefore enhances persuasion. In contrast to this, a low brand-cause fit entails the risk of criticism or boycott from the consumer (Chéron et al., 2012). The lower the perceived fit, the more doubtful the consumers towards the partnership. They perceive the cooperation rather as an act of self-interest and sales growth than contributing to welfare of society. In the context of brand activism, Shetty et al. (2019) showed as well that Millennials rather support a brand that stands up for a cause in accordance with its brand ideology and personality. Thus, it is essential to further examine

and understand the role of brand-cause fit and its impact on consumer response in the scope of brand activism.

Moreover, in order to prevent a boycott and ensure effectiveness of brand activism, several researchers stressed the significance of authenticity (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017; Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). In their study, Alhouti, Johnson & Holloway (2016) scrutinised the role of authenticity in regards to CSR initiatives. They connected CSR authenticity closely with the ideas of perceived brand-cause fit and therefore identified fit as one of the determinants of CSR authenticity. Further, Pérez (2019) suggested that authenticity can be enhanced when there is a high brand-cause fit as well as detailed information on the social issue. CSR authenticity according to Alhouti et al. (2016) portrays "the perception of a company's CSR actions as a genuine and true expression of the company's beliefs and behaviour towards society that extend beyond legal requirements. "(p. 1243). Their research results indicated that it is necessary for brands to consider authenticity as an important predictor that influences consumers' perceptions and attitudes. Adding on that, Vredenburg et al. (2020) pointed to the importance of authenticity for brand activism not only for the brands' success but also for societal change. They described authentic brand activism "as the alignment of a brand's explicit purpose and values with its activist marketing messaging and prosocial corporate practice" (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p.445). In order to be perceived as preferred in the marketplace, it is essential for brands to focus on authentic activist messaging and practices. In contrast to authentic brand activism, Vredenburg et al. (2020) conceptualised inauthentic brand activism that is perceived when a brand's doings do not affiliate with the brands' purpose, values, messages and practices. Thus, such activist messages can induce 'woke washing' (Vredenburg et al., 2020). The term 'woke washing' depicts ""brands [that] have unclear or indeterminate records of social cause practices" (Vredenburg et al. 2018) but yet are attempting "to market themselves as being concerned with issues of inequality and social injustice" (Sobande 2019, p. 18)" (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p.445). Since woke washing deludes consumers, it can damage the consumers' trust in the brand as well as the brand equity. Moreover, the stakes for actual societal change are limited and lacking authenticity in brand activism can result in immense backlash and boycott of the brand. Accordingly, Shetty et al. (2019) demonstrated that activist messages perceived as fake or hypocritical tend to provoke outrage and a boycott. Hence, in order to maintain authenticity, brands are required to understand and communicate with their target groups to comprehend their demands and interpretations regarding brands activist messages (Vredenburg et al.,

2020). Particularly, it is recommended for brands to be very specific with their wording whilst eluding claims that could be misinterpreted. Ultimately, taking authenticity into account when integrating brand activism in marketing or branding strategies, is of utmost importance in order to influence consumers attitude formation. (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017; Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Apart from brand-cause fit, perceived authenticity is identified as a vital parameter that influences the effectiveness of brand activism in previous research and is therefore relevant to consider in this study. Vredenburg et al. (2020) emphasised the need to further investigate in the role of authenticity regarding brand activism and its impacts by understanding consumer attitudes.

2.4. Issue Involvement

Several researchers referred to the term involvement as an important variable in consumer and marketing research. It has been identified as one of the major mediating factors in a communication process (Nowak & Salmon, 1987). Involvement was first in the centre of attention in Krugman's (1965) research about television advertising. He categorised involvement in the scope of an individuals' own interest and importance towards an advertisement whilst differentiating between states of high vs. low involvement (Antil, 1984; Krugman, 1965). High involvement described a high degree of attention and interest, while low involvement indicated low levels of relevance regarding a stimulus. Consequently, consumers' behaviour was different depending on the state of involvement (Krugman, 1965). Generally, research related involvement as personal relevance usually to either situations, messages or products (e.g. Bloch, 1982; Mitchell, 1979; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Personal relevance according to Zaichkowsky (1985) is formed by intrinsic values, needs and interests towards a stimulus.

In this thesis, the interest lies in involvement towards an issue or cause that is supported by a brand through brand activist messages. Nowak & Salmon (1987) described issue involvement "as the state or level of perceived importance and/or interest evoked by a stimulus (issue) within a specific situation." (p.1). Similar to that, Grau & Folse (2007) outlined it as "the degree to which consumers find the cause personally relevant to them." (p. 20). Personal relevance of an issue could derive from previous experience with the specific cause or the

self-identity and concept of an individual (Grau & Folse, 2007). Accordingly, individuals who are highly involved with an issue are expected to engage and process the information more extensively since the message in an advertisement stimulated their attention and interest (Grau & Folse; Kim, 2014). Furthermore, highly involved consumers analyse the advocacy in detail whilst reflecting on their prior knowledge about the issue in order to evaluate the validity of the message. In contrast, individuals that are less involved with the cause, consider other cues in regards to their information processing that are usually not related to the cause itself (Petty, Cacioppo & Schumann, 1983).

Cause involvement can be identified as a crucial predictor of attitude formation and change. Indeed, several researchers that observed issue involvement in the context of cause-related marketing supported this claim (e.g. Bigné-Alcañiz, Currás-Pérez, Ruiz-Mafé & Sanz-Blas, 2010; Kim, 2014; Lafferty, 1996; Patel et al., 2016). Hajatt (2003) scrutinised the role of issue involvement in cause-related marketing research and its effects on attitude formation as well as purchase intentions. The study results confirmed that high involvement with a social cause enhances the persuasiveness of messages in CRM. Further, it has a positive impact on consumer attitudes towards an advertisement and brand as well as behaviours. Similar results can be found in the study of Patel et al. (2016). They also observed the moderating influence of cause involvement and scepticism on attitude and purchase intention in the context of CRM. In accordance to Hajatt's (2003) findings, Patel et al. (2016) showed that attitude formation and purchase intention is influenced by the consumers' degree of issue involvement. Hence, advertisements with a social cause that is personally relevant to individuals have the huge potential to allure consumers (Kim, 2014), assuming that the message and the cause fit with the brand and are perceived as authentic.

2.5 Synthesis

This literature review shows that the research field of brand activism is just beginning to evolve. Most of the recent studies concerning brand activism referred to the concept suggested by Kotler & Sarkar (2017) that is grounded in CRM and CSR research. Indeed, previous studies stated that there is a huge potential of brand activism in advertisement, presupposing the brand shares the same values as the consumer on a certain topic (Shetty et al. 2019). Although there is little research about the effects of brand activism on attitude formation, the impacts of CSR and CRM strategies on attitudes are considered as a

groundwork for studying the field. Former research particularly expressed the need to further scrutinise parameters of effective brand activism in order to make statements about its persuasiveness and give managerial implications (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). By examining consumers' perceptions regarding brand activism in advertisements, this gap in the literature is addressed. Since brand-cause fit, perceived authenticity and issue involvement are acknowledged as important predictors in regards to success in CSR and CRM strategies, this study bases its investigation on these findings while testing the ELM in a new arena. Ultimately, the evolving research field of brand activism is amplified.

3 Theoretical Framework and Development of Hypotheses

In this chapter, the ELM is presented as the theoretical framework for this research. It serves as the foundation for the purpose of this study in order to predict attitude formation in the context of brand activism in advertisements. Based on the ELM the hypotheses are developed and the research model presented. To start this section, the author introduces the theory and its application in detail. Second, the ELM is brought into the research context whilst demonstrating the development of the hypotheses. Lastly, the research model is portrayed and explained.

3.1 Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

Originally, the ELM of persuasion by Petty & Cacioppo (1986) emerged due to interest in persuasion and influence through communication within the field of social psychology. Further clarification was demanded in regards to attitude change and persuasion research, since there was little consensus on the role of the source, messages, arguments and individuals (e.g. Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953; McGuire, 1969; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Hence, the ELM of persuasion was developed in order to provide a frame that explains information processing and consequently attitude change after the exposure to persuasive communication. Indeed, conflicting previous research was taken into account and a suggestion to explain differences in communication-induced attitude formation was made (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Since the ELM aims to enlighten the effectiveness of persuasive communication, it is

widely used in mass media and advertising research. Accordingly, this model helps to understand attitude formation or change after the exposure to an advertisement (Moscato, 2018; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Therefore, the ELM is well-suited as a framework for this thesis in order to understand the effect of brand activism in advertisements on ad attitude as well as brand attitude. This theory is chosen, because it outlines the persuasiveness of communication and its effect on consumers' attitudes as well as the explanation of why an advertisement leads to different outcomes across individuals and situations (Bhattacherjee & Sanford, 2006).
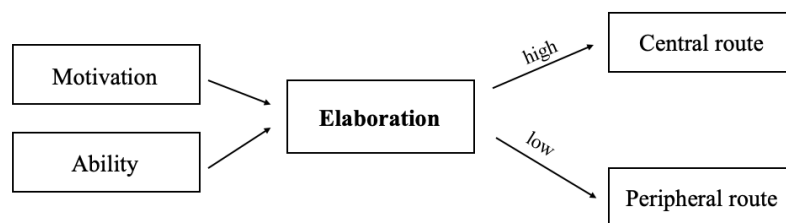

Figure 2: Own portrayal based on Petty & Cacioppo (1986)

Petty & Cacioppo (1986) define the term 'elaboration' as "the extent to which a person carefully thinks about issue-relevant information." (p.7). According to the ELM there are two paths of elaboration that lead to persuasion: the central and the peripheral route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The central route of persuasion is taken when a recipient carefully reflects on the persuasive message by using prior knowledge or experience in order to evaluate on the provided information (Petty & Cacioppo 1986; Petty, Brinõl & Priester, 2009). Consumers that process information via the central route critically analyse the arguments in the persuasive message as well as consider their relevance before forming attitudes and judgements (Bhattacherjee & Sanford, 2006). The central route of persuasion therefore requires high elaboration meaning consumers need to have the motivation and ability to process the given information with extensive cognitive effort. When being highly involved, consumers take into account the actual merits of the message and form their opinions and attitudes accordingly (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Significant for persuasion under the central route therefore is that consumers consider the arguments of the message as qualitative and compelling. However, ensuring argument quality does not necessarily mean that the message is elaborated via the central route. Motivation and ability to process information are also dependent on individuals as well as situational factors. Further, even though a persuasive communication is extensively elaborated, it does not imply that attitudes are formed

rationally. Emotions, prior attitudes or knowledge can play an important role and influence the persuasiveness of communication as well (Petty et al., 2009). Nevertheless, there are some attributes that result from attitude formation or change through the central route. Since these attitudes are saved in a consumers' cognitive structure, they are easy to retrieve, persistent over a long period of time as well as resilient to change (Petty et al., 2009). In contrast, the peripheral route of persuasion is taken if message recipients do not have the ability and motivation to process the presented information with cognitive effort and consideration of merits (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty et al. 2009). Under the peripheral route, persuasion occurs through simpler means such as different features of communication like images, attraction of the source or source credibility. In any case, elaboration via the peripheral route is based on cues that do not refer to the persuasive message itself. Whilst a cognitive evaluation of the arguments and merits is missing, persuasion is induced by other cues that are equally able to influence attitude formation or change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Contrary to the central route, persuasion caused through peripheral cues is cognitive less available and lasting as well as resilient to change (Petty et al., 2009). Nonetheless, peripheral cues are influential even though just for a shorter period of time. Bhattacherjee & Sanford (2006) summarised three main characteristics that distinguish the central and the peripheral route: First, the central route takes into account the comprehension of argument quality related to the message while the peripheral route focuses on cues. Thus, there is another kind of information processing. Second, whereas the central route is based on careful evaluation through cognitive efforts before making a judgement, the peripheral route requires less reasoning but rather positive or negative associations with cues in an advertisement. Third, compared to the peripheral route, attitude change or formation via the central route is more constant, lasting and predicting of behaviour, because the arguments are scrutinised carefully and thoughtfully.

The vital aspects that determine elaboration likelihood and therefore which of the two routes is taken are motivation and ability to process the information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In order to reach high elaboration, and thus the central route of persuasion both moderators need to be present. Otherwise, it is more likely that a stimulus is processed on low levels of elaboration and therefore dependant on peripheral cues. Both, motivation and ability can be affected by several factors depending on the individual and the situation (Petty & Cacioppo, 1996). Bhattacherjee & Sanford (2006) emphasised that motivation and ability to elaborate moderate the impact of argument quality and peripheral cues on attitude formation: High elaboration likelihood moderates the impact of argument quality, whereas low elaboration

likelihood moderates the effect of peripheral cues on attitude formation. Previous research often refers to prior expertise and personal relevance when identifying elaboration motivation and ability (Sussman & Siegal, 2003). Thus, it can be stated that higher levels of prior knowledge and personal involvement regarding an argument or issue communicated increase elaboration likelihood.

3.2 Development of the Hypotheses and the Research Model

In the following section, the components of the ELM are scrutinised in-depth and embedded in the context of this research. Hereinafter, the ELM is extended and the development of the hypotheses pointed out. Thereby, the following variables are in the centre of research: argument quality, perceived authenticity, source credibility and issue involvement. Eventually, the research model that guides this study is presented.

The central route: argument quality & perceived authenticity

As stated in the previous chapter, when elaboration likelihood is high, information is processed via the central route of persuasion according to the ELM. In the centre of evaluation hereby is the argument quality of the presented information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Heesacker, Petty & Cacioppo (1983) claimed that argument quality is the evidence for a thorough processing of the message presented and thus, also a confirmation for the central route of persuasion in the ELM. Consequently, argument quality is considered as one of the main variables that predicts attitude change through the ELM (O'Keefe & Jackson 1995). Quality of arguments refers to the strength of the arguments. Here, it needs to be distinguished between messages that contain 'weak' or 'strong' arguments. When the argument quality is perceived as strong and the arguments as convincing, consumers form their opinions favourable. Whereas when argument quality is perceived as weak, careful thinking about the message leads to unfavourable thoughts and evaluation of the message. Hence, it can induce counter-effects (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Subsequently, perceived argument quality has an important impact on the attitude formation. Several studies confirmed these statements by applying the ELM in different research fields (e.g. Bhattacherjee & Stanford, 2006; Sussman & Siegal, 2003). Hereafter, Lin, Hwang & Lai (2017) claimed that strong, objective arguments that are easy to understand have a bigger effect than weak, subjective arguments that seem emotional.

For the purpose of this study, it can be assumed that perceived argument quality plays an important role in the context of environmental brand activism in advertisements. Berger, Cunningham & Kozinets (1999) generally stated that the way of processing advertisements is closely related to the arguments of the message. Further, they scrutinised the role of argument quality in cause-related advertising finding out that especially under high involvement meaning high elaboration likelihood argument quality plays a crucial role for attitude formation or change. Brand activism easily can lead to backlash due to doubtful consumers and lacking consideration of fitting activist arguments as well as actions (Edelman, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Therefore, it can be assumed that consumers' perception of argument quality also has a vital role in order to predict not only their attitudes towards the advertisement but also towards the brand. Consequently, the quality of arguments in accordance with the ELM is fundamental to investigate in the context of environmental brand activism in advertisements. The aforementioned leads to the following hypothesis:

H1a+b: *In the context of environmental brand activism in advertisement, there is a positive significant relation between argument quality and attitude towards the ad (a) and brand (b).*

Moreover, one of the identified key variables of effective brand activism according to previous studies is authenticity (e.g. Vredenburg et al, 2020). Brand activism is identified as authentic when a brand's messages, core values as well as corporate practices are aligned. Otherwise, brand activism easily can be perceived as inauthentic and further lead to counter-effects such as boycotting the brand. Pepsi, for instance, with its Kendall Jenner advertisement was perceived as inauthentic which caused a huge backlash for the brand (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Thus, investigating perceived authenticity and its relations to attitude formation and change is of utmost importance. Alhouti et al. (2016) examined the role of authenticity in CSR research finding out that authenticity has a great influence on important consumer outcomes. They stated that consumers will have positive attitudes towards brands that engage in authentic CSR. Also, Pérez (2019) emphasised the importance of authenticity in CSR messages and its effect on attitude formation. Previous research about authenticity in the field of CSR and the theoretically analysed concept of brand activism, provide clear occasion to expect that this variable has a great significance for attitude formation in the context of brand activism as well. When perceived as authentic, brand activism can be very auspicious for a firms' marketing and/or branding strategy (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

For the purpose of this research, perceived authenticity serves as an independent variable that is added to the persisting ELM. As a new variable attached to the central route of persuasion, it not only enriches but also embeds the ELM to this research context. Perceived authenticity in this study refers to the consumers' evaluation of the presented messages as well as the brand's intentions behind it. In particular, it explains the level of consumers' perception in regards to authentic brand activism (see Alhouti et al., 2016). Since perceived authenticity is fairly related to the content of the message, it can be assumed that this variable is elaborated under the central route of persuasion. Thus, a careful and thought-through evaluation of the message as well as the brands' purposes via the central route of persuasion are underlying. In accordance with the ELM as well as previous literature, the following hypothesis developed:

H2a+b: *In the context of environmental brand activism in advertisement, there is a positive significant relation between perceived authenticity and attitude towards the ad (a) and brand (b).*

The peripheral route: source credibility

It is not only the message and arguments itself that can have an impact on the consumers' processing of the given information. There are also peripheral cues meaning more simple indicators that consumers refer to when evaluating a message. These cues are more likely to be considered when the motivation and ability to elaborate on the content of the message are low (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Previous research primarily scrutinised source credibility as a main parameter that predicts attitude formation or change through the peripheral route of persuasion (Petty, Cacioppo & Goldman, 1981; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Ohanian (1990) stated that ""Source credibility" is a term commonly used to imply a communicator's positive characteristics that affect the receiver's acceptance of a message." (p. 41). Thus, when a source is perceived as being trustworthy, attractive and an expert in its field, the sender is considered as being credible and therefore persuasion is more likely to occur (Wu & Wang, 2011). Trustworthiness means the confidence and acceptance consumers have towards the source, attractiveness implies the degree of consumer attraction towards the content of the message and 'being an expert' indicates the level of knowledge that can be attributed to the sender (Ohanian, 1990). Irrespective of the argument quality in the message, source credibility fosters favourable attitude formation or change (Petty et al., 2009). Source credibility is classified as a peripheral cue that can be especially meaningful when elaboration

is low (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). However, it is also in general identified as a significant variable in regards to attitude change (Petty et al., 1981). Usually, the influence of source credibility on attitude formation is quite dominant even though rather lasting in a shorter period of time (Petty et al., 2009).

In regards to the context of environmental brand activism in advertisement and in accordance to the ELM, it can be assumed that source credibility has a direct influence on the formation of attitudes towards the advertisement as well as the brand. Source credibility in the scope of this study refers to the credibility of the brand that is integrating brand activist messages in its advertisement. Since the concept of brand activism emphasises the importance of the alignments of a brand's values with its activist messages in order to achieve authenticity and trust (Vredenburg et al., 2020), it can be argued that the credibility of brands most likely has a positive impact on attitude formation. Regarding this research, when a brand seems to be credible and an expert in environmental matters, consumers tend to have more positive attitudes towards the ad and the brand. Subsequently, Braunsberger (1996) as well as Pornipitakpan (2014) indicated that a high-credibility source rather leads to persuasion and attitude change than low-credibility sources. This being said, the following hypothesis emerged:

H3a+b: *In the context of environmental brand activism in advertisement, there is a positive significant relation between source credibility and attitude towards the ad (a) and brand (b).*

Level of elaboration: issue involvement

In order to understand why some consumers have higher levels of elaboration compared to others, it is relevant to question mediators that effect the state of elaboration. In accordance with the ELM, motivation and ability to process a stimulus are highlighted as significant predictors (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Early studies in persuasion and consumer research already emphasised the need to differentiate between various states of involvement and their impact on persuasion (e.g. Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Involvement, in accordance to the ELM, describes the degree to which a consumer is motivated and able to process given information (Kim, 2003). Motivation to elaborate is often related to the personal relevance of the message, whereas ability refers to an individuals' prior knowledge about the topic (Sussman & Siegal, 2003). Assuming that both, motivation and ability are present, consumers are said to be highly involved with the communicated issue. Individuals that have extensive knowledge or perceive the communicated cause as personally very relevant to them, most likely have the motivation

and ability to evaluate the presented information carefully whilst following the central route of persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1996). Hajatt (2003) further confirmed that consumers that are highly involved with an issue have sufficient ability and motivation to elaborate on relevant information and use their prior knowledge to form attitudes and judgements in regards to an advocacy. On the one side, when being highly involved, peripheral cues are less relevant and most likely not considered for the elaboration of the message. On the other side, when motivation and ability to elaborate on a message are lacking, meaning consumers are less involved, peripheral cues impact the evaluation of the message and attitude formation. Thus, it can be stated that high involvement moderates the central route of persuasion within the ELM, while low involvement moderates the peripheral route of persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Referring to the purpose of this study, issue involvement is assumed to have an impact on the effect of environmental brand activism on ad attitude as well as brand attitude. Based on an individuals' involvement, environmental brand activism in advertisement is supposed to be processed differently. Previous studies that applied the ELM within CSR and CRM research underlined the impact of issue involvement on attitude formation (e.g. Bigné-Alcañiz et al., 2010; Grau & Folse, 2007; Hajjat, 2003; Patel et al., 2016). Accordingly, Bögel (2015) found out that consumers elaborate CSR communication depending on their CSR involvement. Thus, it stands to reason that these findings can be applied to the field of environmental brand activism as well. The more individuals are involved with the addressed environmental issue, the more likely they take the central route of persuasion whilst evaluating argument quality as well as brand activism authenticity. In contrast, individuals that are less involved with the communicated issue rather take peripheral cues such as source credibility into consideration for forming their attitudes towards the advertisement and the brand. Ultimately, issue involvement functions as an important moderator that manipulates the effect of environmental brand activism in advertisements. Eventually, the aforementioned leads to the following hypotheses:

H4a+b: *In the context of environmental brand activism in advertisement, greater issue involvement moderates the effect of argument quality on attitude towards the ad (a) and brand (b).*

H5a+b: *In the context of environmental brand activism in advertisement, greater issue involvement moderates the effect of perceived authenticity on attitude towards the ad (a) and brand (b).*

H6a+b: *In the context of environmental brand activism in advertisement, less issue involvement moderates the effect of source credibility on attitude towards the ad (a) and brand (b).*

3.3 Research Model

The following figure visualises the research model that guides this study including all variables and hypotheses.
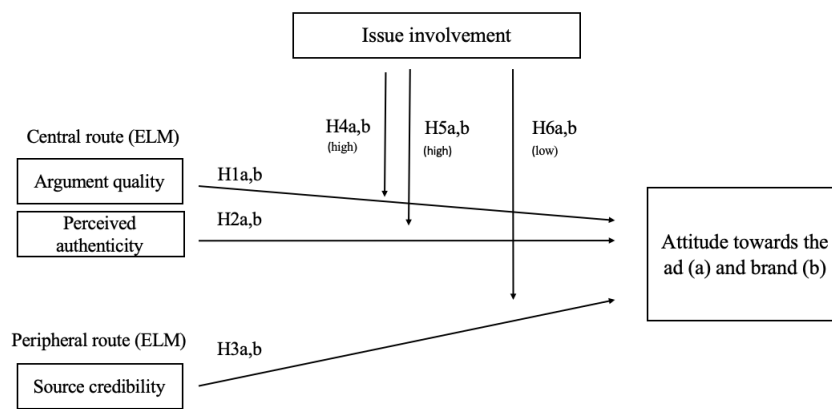

Figure 3: Research Model

Based on this research model, attitude formation after the exposure to environmental brand activism in advertisements is scrutinised in this thesis. Since both, advertisement attitude as well as brand attitude are vital components for brands in order to ensure success in their marketing and branding strategy, both concepts are considered as dependent variables in this study. Here it is interesting to investigate and compare the effects of the research model on both types of attitude formation. Accordingly, all hypotheses are split into part *a* and part *b*. Under the central route of persuasion, the first hypothesis claims that there is a positive significant relation between the independent variable 'argument quality' and the dependent variables 'attitude towards the advertisement (a)' as well as 'attitude towards the brand (b)'. The second hypothesis under the central route states that there is also a positive significant relation between the independent variable 'perceived authenticity' and the dependent variables 'attitude towards the advertisement (a)' as well as 'attitude towards the brand (b)'. Hence, the higher the perceived argument quality as well as perceived authenticity, the more positive attitudes towards the ad and brand. The third hypothesis refers to the peripheral route

of persuasion indicating that there is a positive significant relation between the independent variable 'source credibility' and the two dependent variables (a) and (b). Accordingly, higher perceived source credibility also engenders attitude formation. Hypotheses 4,5 and 6 assume that there is a moderating effect of 'issue involvement' on the relations between the independent variables and the dependent variables. In particular, hypothesis 4 implies that greater issue involvement moderates the effect of 'argument quality' on 'attitudes towards the ad (a) and the brand (b)'. The same effect of greater involvement is supposed to occur for the independent variable 'perceived authenticity' in hypothesis 5: Greater issue involvement moderates the effect of 'perceived authenticity' on the two dependent variables. Hypotheses 4 and 5 indicate high levels of consumers' cause involvement that leads to a moderation effect on the central route of persuasion. Lastly, hypothesis 6 states that less issue involvement moderates the effect of 'source credibility' on 'attitude towards the ad (a) and brand (b)'. This hypothesis explains the impact of low issue involvement that implies a moderation effect on the peripheral route of persuasion in accordance with the ELM.

All hypotheses are based on the ELM framework entailing that consumers with high issue involvement elaborate the presented activist advertisement on the central route of persuasion whilst considering argument quality as well as authenticity. In contrast, consumers that are less involved with the communicated issue take peripheral cues such as source credibility into account in order to form their attitudes towards the activist advertisement and brand. Since this research contains an experimental investigation with two treatment groups, the research model is further tested within both experimental groups in order to observe differences in the outcome.

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