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Manorome, Chaundra

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“It definitely makes me feel better about working in advertising.”

Exploring practitioners’ perspectives on brand activism

Chaundra Manorome

Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

September 2023

Faculty of Society and Design

Dr Sven Brodmerkel and Dr Marilyn Mitchell

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Abstract

In 2018, Nike claimed, "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything," as it featured activist and former NFL player Colin Kaepernick in its infamous Dream Crazy campaign, aligning itself with the Black Lives Matter movement. This campaign ignited a fierce public debate, with supporters applauding Nike's stance and detractors burning their products in protest. This campaign inspired this research, which explores the roles that advertising creatives play in conceptualising and creating brand activism.

Consumers are found to increasingly trust businesses to address societal issues more than their own governments (Edelman, 2022). Brand activism thus presents a unique convergence of business and social activism. As a novel marketing and advertising strategy, brand activism remains underexplored in both academic and industry literature. While top brands like Nike, Chevrolet, and Lenovo have embraced brand activism, critical scholarship has lagged behind. This dissertation addresses this gap by exploring how advertising practitioners perceive and navigate brand activism, impacting the creative process, client relationships, professional identities and moral responsibilities.

This research uses the Systems Model of Creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999) as a guiding framework, examining the domain, the individual, and the field's influence on brand activism. It investigates two primary aspects: (1) the unique characteristics of brand activism from the practitioners' perspectives and (2) its impact on their professional practices and identities. The research data is drawn from semi-structured interviews with twenty senior creative industry professionals and analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step thematic analysis. Key findings highlight that brand activism is now an essential aspect of branding, characterised by its role in driving societal change, the need for purpose, tangible action, the recognition of risk, and proactive practitioner-led motivation. These insights reveal how practitioners shape branding norms and procedures.

In examining the creative process, this dissertation uncovers practitioners' roles as mediators between clients, the public, and the community of the cause, each group representing different actors in the field. This entails managing power dynamics, overcoming development challenges, and maintaining authenticity during brand activism campaigns. Practitioners emerge as moral intermediaries, influencing their clients' moral standing,

consumer sentiments, and their own ethical perspectives. Additionally, practitioners' professional identities are impacted as they become catalysts of change and technological intermediaries, leveraging technology for positive societal impact. They play pivotal roles in maximising technology's potential for addressing real-world needs. Ethical considerations also come to the forefront as practitioners experience 'ethical becoming,' where personal moral identities evolve. In addition, they are found to use a narrative of authenticity to assess brand activism's ethicality. This interrelation between practitioners' perceptions, ethical considerations, and evolving roles in brand activism defines the dynamic landscape of advertising and brand activism.

In conclusion, this research critically engages with the concept of brand activism from the perspective of advertising practitioners, shedding light on its complex nature and impact. It serves as a valuable contribution to the evolving discourse surrounding brand activism in the advertising industry.

Keywords

Brand activism, advertising, ethical considerations, professional identity, creative process, moral intermediaries, ethical becoming, narrative of authenticity

Declaration by Author

This dissertation is submitted to Bond University in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of a Doctor of Philosophy.

This dissertation represents my own original work towards this research degree and contains no material that has previously been submitted for a degree or diploma at this University or any other institution, except where due acknowledgement is made.

Chaundra Manorome

Date:23/08/2023

Ethics Declaration

The research associated with this dissertation received ethics approval from the Bond University Human Research Ethics Committee. Ethics application number: CM03432

Copyright Declaration

No published manuscripts are included within this dissertation.

Acknowledgments

No one who achieves success does so without acknowledging the help of others.
– Alfred North Whitehead

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the twenty creatives who served as my participants in this research. Your passion for brand activism and social change has truly inspired me and helped me realise the full potential of creativity. Without your perspectives and your candour, this project would not exist.

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I must also acknowledge and thank my secondary supervisor, Dr Marilyn Mitchell, for her guidance and mentorship. Thank you for supporting and encouraging my Art Exhibition and encouraging me to display my work. Thank you for being my ANZCA buddy, introducing me to all of your colleagues and helping me network. But most importantly, thank you for putting up with my sometimes thrice daily visits to your office just to chat about TikTok trends, politics and the adventures of Misty.

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To sum up this journey in one quote from the great Michael Scott, “Sometimes I'll start a sentence, and I don't even know where it's going. I just hope I find it along the way.” It took me four years, but I finally found it.

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Abbreviations

Black Lives Matter	BLM
Cause-Related Marketing	CRM
Corporate Social Responsibility	CSR
Middle Eastern, North African	MENA
Non-Government Organisation	NGO
Not-For-Profit Organisation	NFP

Chapter 1 – Introduction

"Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything" (Nike, 2018). In 2018, Nike took a symbolic stance in line with the Black Lives Matter movement by featuring activist and ex-NFL player Colin Kaepernick in its *Dream Crazy* campaign. This campaign is perhaps one of the most notable examples of brand activism to date and is the inspiration for this research. Upon the release of this campaign, the public response was immediate and polarised. One side praised Nike for taking a stand with the Black Lives Matter movement, while the opposing side protested the brand by burning their Nike products and displaying the wreckage on social media (Raggs, 2018; Abad-Santos, 2018). While this reaction served as an interesting moment in time, a few months later, *The New York Times* (Creswell et al., 2018) published an article entitled *Nike nearly dropped Colin Kaepernick before embracing him*. The article explained that it was, in fact, the advertising team that had convinced Nike to keep Kaepernick on contract as they saw his future potential (Creswell et al., 2018). This revelation sparked the idea for this dissertation, which was to research how advertising creatives conceive of brand activism in their work.

In 2019, at the start of this project, the concept of brand activism was emerging as a novel advertising and marketing strategy, and little academic and industry literature was available on the subject. An early researcher, Manfredi-Sanchez (2019), provided a helpful definition of brand activism, which explained it as "a communication strategy whose aim is to influence the citizen consumer, by means of messages and campaigns created and sustained by political values and therefore copies the 'aesthetics of authenticity' of social movements" (p. 348). At the time, this was one of the only definitions available that was not an operational description of how to use it and was instead critical of the strategy.

While brand activism has become a strategy used by some of the world's top brands, such as Nike (2017, 2018, 2020), Chevrolet (Bermudez, 2021) and Lenovo (Medeiros, 2020), there is still a limited amount of scholarly literature on this phenomenon. This lack of attention is surprising given that consumer market research over the past few years has consistently suggested that brands' involvement in environmental and social causes is an important aspect that guides brand preference and purchase behaviour (Edelman, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022). According to the most recent Edelman (2022) *Trust Barometer,* business is more trusted than NGOs, government and media. Furthermore, business is viewed by consumers as more able to solve societal problems through their abilities to "coordinate

cross-institutional efforts [and] successfully execute plans and strategies that yield results" (Edelman, 2022, p. 9). Edelman's research also reveals that 58 to 64 per cent of consumers work or invest in a business based on their beliefs and values, and 88 per cent of institutional investors scrutinise the implementation of Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) policies on the same level as operational and financial policies. These statistics demonstrate that consumers place faith in brands and businesses to an extent that goes well beyond commercial imperatives.

Companies are increasingly meeting these consumer expectations by using brand activism to enter into broader political discussions, addressing issues such as racial inequality, environmental activism, marriage equality and women's rights, to name a few (Airbnb, 2017; Ben & Jerry's, 2020; Nike, 2017, 2020). Due to the controversial and polarising nature of such topics, upon release, these campaigns often garner a lot of earned media and engagement with consumers and capture the attention of the industry trade press. Most of these conversations discuss brand activism un-critically, as illustrated by headlines such as *Brand Activism Is Driving More Meaningful Connections* (Garrido, 2019), *How Brands Can Yield Their Power for the Greater Good* (Bower, 2022), and *Brave brands don't just reflect cultural context, they act on it* (Logan & Burchill, 2020).

While the so far scarce amount of scholarly literature takes a slightly more critical perspective on brand activism, it mostly remains focused on exploring this type of advertising as a strategic marketing tool (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020) by analysing its impact on consumer perception (Eyada, 2020; Shetty et al., 2019). Overall, the literature available on brand activism has not looked at this novel strategy in depth and has yet to question the potentially detrimental consequences of brands infiltrating politicised spaces and ideological debates. Brand activism arguably represents an extreme example of how the lines between brands, commodification, culture, and authenticity have become blurred. While this dissertation does not set out to discuss the detrimental consequences of brand activism, it does aim to explore how it is understood by the advertising practitioners who ideate and create brand activism campaigns and how these perspectives impact the output of creative work.

In addition to the lack of in-depth and critical perspectives on the social consequences of brand activism, the advertising practitioners' perspective on the topic is still a blind spot of

the scholarly literature. This lack of research is surprising because we know virtually nothing about the nuances and complexities of the creative process that drives a global brand like Nike to take the advice of an advertising agency and create a campaign that goes against business logic and risks upsetting one of its biggest partners, the NFL. Furthermore, we do not know much about who actually drives this trend and if it is the client or the advertising agency that is the primary motivator. One question is whether the seemingly backward process detailed by the Nike example is normal in the case of brand activism. In addition, a focus on practitioners' views offers insight into the complex mediation processes that advertising professionals must undertake to ensure the success of their campaigns. Thus, this perspective offers insight into how the creative process of brand activism may differ from traditional campaign processes.

In regard to brand activism, we also know little about how this work impacts the professional and creative practice of advertising practitioners and their occupational identities. Therefore, this research explores how these types of campaigns impact advertising practitioners in relation to aspects such as novel creative processes and workflows, client and risk management, creative identity, morality and work satisfaction. This research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with twenty mostly senior creative industry professionals and was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis.

This dissertation is structured using The Systems Model of Creativity, which takes a holistic approach to understanding the creative process by acknowledging that creativity is influenced by the creative individual's traits and characteristics as well as the environment and cultural factors (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). These traits and factors are conceptualised into three elements, the domain, the individual and the field (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999), and these are used to structure the chapters of this dissertation.

This research aims to make two key contributions:

1. To critically interrogate brand activism in relation to how it differs from past and current branding strategies and discover its key characteristics from the practitioner's perspective.
2. To investigate brand activism in relation to how it impacts the professional practice and occupational identities of advertising practitioners.

In addition, this research has the following specific research questions:

1. How is brand activism defined in relation to other branding strategies?
2. What is involved in the creative process of developing brand activism campaigns compared to that of traditional campaigns?
3. How does brand activism impact the professional and creative practice and occupational identity of advertising professionals?
4. How does the use of brand activism strategies impact how creative practitioners understand their occupational ethical work and professional moral obligations?

The rest of this chapter reviews the relevant literature on brand activism, including perceptions of authenticity in brand activism. This review is followed by an outline of the theoretical framework, research design and methodology used in this dissertation. This chapter then concludes with a preview of the chapters to follow.

1.1 Research and definitions of brand activism

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the first academic studies published on the topic of brand activism defined it as “a communication strategy whose aim is to influence the citizen, consumer, by means of messages and campaigns created and sustained by political values…[borrowing] from the campaigns of social movements, copying their aesthetics of authenticity” (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019, p. 348). The study by Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) analysed 45 advertising campaigns to identify political messages. The author categorised these campaigns into four groups, which were politics/regulatory affairs, society, economy, and environment. Campaigns classified as political and regulatory affairs included “controversial political issues that affect the public sphere” (p. 351), such as supporting a political party, political lobbying and same-sex marriage. The category of society included various issues that are broad representations of the other categories, such as LGBTQ plus issues and women’s and employment rights. Campaigns that fell into the category ‘economy’ included issues such as the distribution of wealth, salaries and business ethics. Lastly, brand activism campaigns that were classified as ‘environment’ focused on issues such as climate change, sustainable travel, and pollution. Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) highlighted the range of political issues that brands address with their campaigns, illustrating the scope of brand activism within the societal and political contexts.

Sarkar and Kotler (2020) presented an operationalised definition of brand activism, focusing on the categorisation of the topics that a message may address. According to Sarkar and Kotler (2020), "brand activism consists of business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society" (p. 467). The researchers categorised six types of activism that brands may commodify to distinguish themselves as relevant political actors within contemporary media and consumer culture. The six types are: (1) political activism, (2) social activism, (3) environmental activism, (4) workplace activism, (5) economic activism and/or (6) legal activism. These categories correspond to different issues. For example, social activism characterises concerns that deal with gender, LGBT, race, and age equality, as well as societal and community issues. In contrast, political activism represents concerns such as lobbying, privatisation, voting, voting rights and policy. This definition provides guidance to those wanting to engage with brand activism strictly from an applied marketing perspective.

Another study by Moorman (2020) defined 'brand political activism' as "public speech or actions focused on partisan issues made by or on behalf of a company using its corporate or individual brand name" (p. 389). Moorman (2020) further categorised seven perspectives that she explained companies use to guide their decision to participate in brand activism. These perspectives are (1) brand authenticity, (2) corporate citizenship, (3) cultural authority, (4) economic calculations, (5) brands as educators, (6) political missions and (7) employee engagement (Moorman, 2020). First, Moorman (2020) described a narrow view of 'brand authenticity', stating that a company should not engage in political activism "unless they can do so in a brand-consistent way that connects with target markets in an authentic way" (p. 389). Second, the 'corporate citizen' perspective is rooted in the ideals of CSR and suggests that companies have a responsibility to participate in social affairs (Moorman, 2020). Third, the 'cultural authority' perspective is related to Holt's (2002) view that some brands hold much influence and cultural power in society. Therefore, these brands may possess the cultural authority to engage in brand activism (Moorman, 2020). Fourth, the calculative view focuses on the return on investment for participating in brand activism (Moorman, 2020). The fifth perspective explored brands as educators. In this view, brands want to engage with brand activism to promote more sustainable practices, with the aim of fostering societal change by creating new standards (Moorman, 2020). Sixth, the political mission perspective represents brands that have embedded activism within their history. Moorman (2020) stated that in the political mission view, "products and services are viewed as tools for creating change in the world" (p.391). Lastly, the perspective of employee engagement emphasises the use of brand activism as a tactic to attract and retain employees (Moorman, 2020). This research by Moorman (2020) provides a framework for understanding the strategic considerations and decision-making processes that brands employ when deciding to participate in brand activism. It helps in defining the underlying drivers and strategic orientations that shape brand activism in the context of the client.

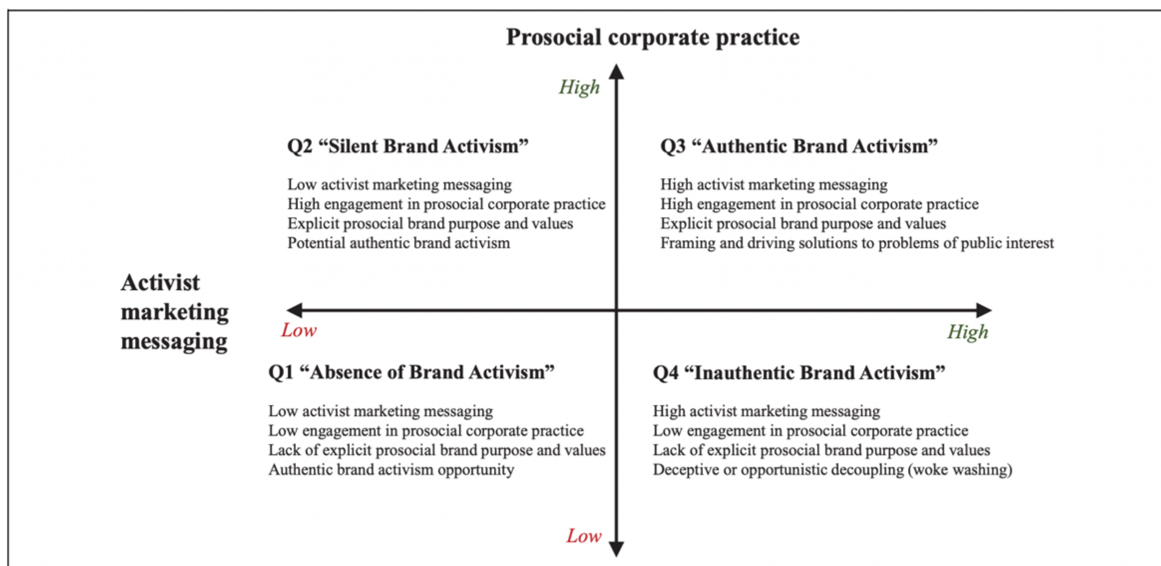
A study by Pöyry and Laaksonen (2022) described brand activism as a marketing practice where companies take stances on "substantial socio-political questions that go beyond their immediate economic interests" (p.261). This study investigated the triggers and strategies consumers use to oppose brands using brand activism (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022). The study focused on an advertising campaign called *Lovebot Blue,* created for the Finnish candy brand, Fazer. This campaign created the Lovebot as a computer bot that spreads love instead of negativity. This Lovebot used artificial intelligence to find hate speech posted on

social media and post a positive reply. This campaign caused a negative response from consumers and social media users. Pöyry and Laaksonen's (2022) study analysed and categorised the users' negative responses into two groups: triggers of political consumer hostility and strategies of political consumer hostility. Analysis of the first group aimed to identify what triggered the negative reactions of the consumers and categorised the triggers into 'field infringement', 'political accusations', and 'impact of the campaign'. Consumer responses in these categories expressed the following concerns. For field infringement, consumers expressed concerns about censorship and felt the brand was limiting their freedom of speech. For political accusations, consumers believed the brand was interfering in topics that were beyond the scope of their business and were acting as a type of politically leftist morality police. Lastly, for the impact of the campaign, consumers expressed they believed the campaign was ineffective at actually creating measurable change or impact (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022). The second grouping of results aimed to identify the strategies that consumers use to convey their anti-brand sentiments and actions. These strategies were 'boycotting', 'discrediting the brand' and 'trapping'. Consumer responses in these categories expressed the following concerns. For boycotting, consumers indicated that they refused to purchase the brand's products. For discrediting the brand, consumers expressed sentiments trying to discredit the brand as a political activist/actor and accused the brand of woke-washing. Lastly, for trapping, consumers hijacked the platform/bot for other uses (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022). By examining these consumer responses, the study sheds light on the dynamics of brand activism and provides insights into the potential consequences and challenges faced by brands engaging in such practices. It adds to the understanding of how consumers perceive and react to brand activism initiatives, contributing to the overall conceptualisation of its characteristics, practice, and dynamics.

Vredenburg et al. (2020) defined brand activism as "a purpose- and values-driven strategy in which a brand adopts a nonneutral stance on institutionally contested socio-political issues to create social change and marketing success" (p. 446). These researchers expanded on the description of brand activism by providing a macro perspective that focused on the ideological representation of the campaign message. According to Vredenburg et al. (2020), there are four key elements that characterise brand activism: (1) the brand is driven by purpose and values, (2) the brand addresses a controversial socio-political issue, (3) issues are subjective and can be progressive or conservative and (4) the company uses communication and practice to contribute towards the chosen issue. Vredenburg et al. (2020)

used these characteristics to develop four typologies of brand activism: (1) absence of brand activism, (2) silent brand activism, (3) authentic brand activism and (4) inauthentic brand activism. These typologies were modelled into quadrants (Figure 1) and mapped based on their prosocial corporate practice and activist marketing messages being high or low, with authentic brand activism remaining at the peak of both axes. According to Vredenburg et al. (2020), brands that are classified as achieving authentic brand activism are believed to align their brand purpose and values, prosocial corporate practice and activist marketing message. In addition, the four characteristics of brand activism, namely, purpose, values, messaging and practice, must be present in order to create the appearance of authenticity (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

FIGURE 1 QUADRANTS OF BRAND ACTIVISM



Reproduced with permission (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 449)

The studies reviewed above critically explore the concept of brand activism from different perspectives. Each study contributes insights into the definition and key characteristics, categorisation, typologies, consumer responses, and the value of engaging in brand activism. All four studies acknowledge that brand activism involves brands taking stances on socio-political issues that go beyond their immediate economic interests. They also recognise the significance of purpose and values in driving brand activism. This highlights the importance of authenticity and the alignment between a brand's messaging, practice and corporate behaviour.

However, there are also notable differences in how Manfredi-Sánchez (2019), Moorman (2020), Pöyry and Laaksonen (2022), and Vredenburg et al. (2020) approached and conceptualised brand activism. Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) focused on the communication strategy aspect of brand activism, examining the political messages conveyed in campaigns. In contrast, Vredenburg et al. (2020) presented a macro perspective on brand activism, emphasising it as a purpose- and values-driven strategy that aims to create social change. Next, Moorman (2020) examined brand activism from the corporation's perspective and provided a framework for understanding the brand's strategic considerations and decision-making processes behind brand activism and communicated the value of engaging in this strategy. Lastly, Pöyry and Laaksonen (2022) examined consumer responses to brand activism campaigns, specifically negative reactions. It is important to note that none of these studies examined the creative practitioner's perspective, thus revealing a gap in the academic discourse on brand activism.

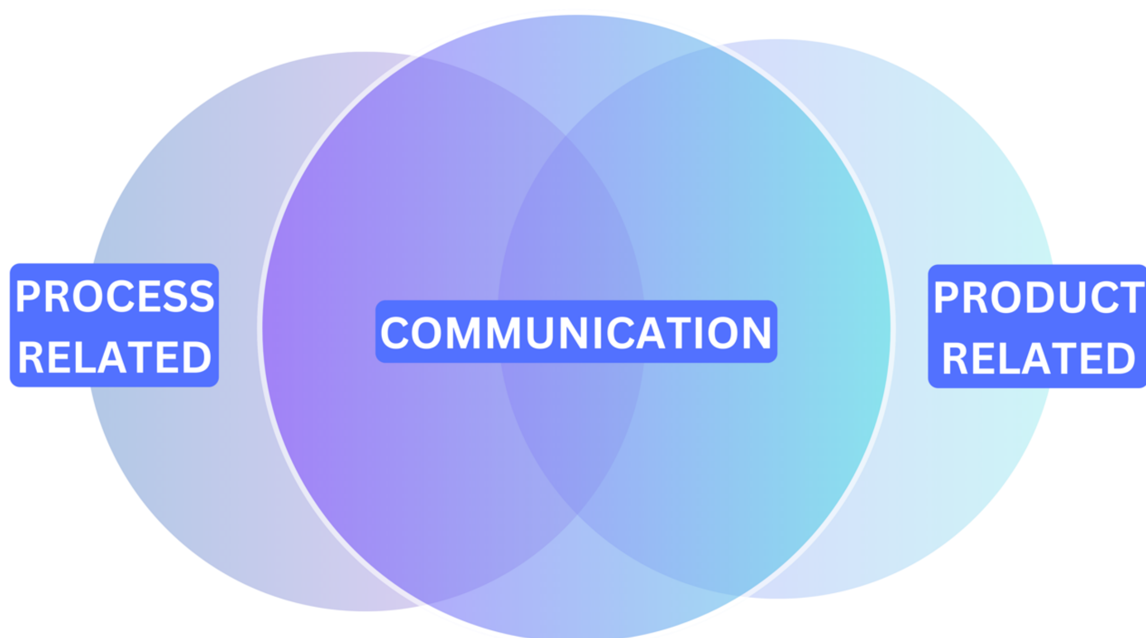
This gap is also revealed in the research of Cammarota et al. (2023), who conducted a systematic literature review of brand activism accompanied by a future research agenda. Cammarota et al.'s (2023) article is the most recent publication on brand activism, published only months prior to the submission of this dissertation. In total, Cammarota et al. (2023) reviewed seventy-six papers to determine the seminal articles on brand activism, its historical evolution, main definitions, actors involved in its implementation methods, and lastly, its antecedents, influencing factors and consequences. Notably, when mapping the actors involved in the implementation of brand activism, none of the literature includes advertising creative practitioners. Instead, the actors involved in creating brand activism include groups such as brands, CEOs, employees, endorses, celebrity stars, consumers, investors and policymakers. Lastly, when discussing directions for future research, the researchers did not include the importance or the need to include the creative practitioner's perspective. This omittance further exposes the gap in the literature and the value of this dissertation's research.

1.1.1 Socially innovative campaigns

The above academic literature explores the various characteristics and typologies of brand activism. Based on the given descriptions, brand activism is manifested through communication strategies, processes, products or a combination thereof (Figure 2). Brand activism exhibited as a communication strategy includes promotional activities such as public relations, marketing, and advertising. This type of brand activism is the most obvious to the

consumer and represents conventional marketing and advertising tactics. In contrast, process-related brand activism may not be publicised and may be found within corporate processes and practices such as covering travel expenses for employee's abortions in response to the 2022 Supreme Court Decision in the United States to overturn Roe v. Wade (Goldberg, 2022). This type may address companies that choose to engage in brand activism with brands as educators or an employee engagement approach as described by Moorman (2020). Lastly, product-related brand activism can be attributed to brands that choose to engage with the political mission view and believe that their products and services should be tools for implementing change (Moorman, 2020). An example of product-related brand activism is the Female Company's *Tampon Book,* which protested the nineteen per cent taxation of tampons as a luxury good in Germany by packaging them within a book which is only taxed at seven per cent. (Flood, 2019a).

FIGURE 2 MANIFESTATIONS OF BRAND ACTIVISM



With these manifestations of brand activism in mind, this dissertation also recognises communication-related brand activism to sit on a spectrum of message controversy and innovation. This spectrum is visualised in Figures 3 and 4 and features the campaigns that are discussed by the practitioners interviewed in this dissertation. The messages within these campaigns may discuss product or process-related brand activism. Also, as shown in Figure 4 along the horizontal axis, the spectrum of message controversy ranges from 'agreeable' to

‘controversial’. Agreeable messages are categorised as topics that are primarily universally supported, whereas controversial messages may be more political and often lead to more polarised and divisive opinions. The vertical axis of Figure 4 measures the innovativeness of the campaign, which ranges from traditional campaigns, such as print or video, to socially innovative campaigns that may be more technological or product focused. As a type of brand activism, socially innovative campaigns are considered in this research as a form of promotional communication that Krumsvik et al. (2019) define as the "innovative use of media and communication services for social purposes" (p. 196).

An example of a socially innovative campaign is the *Thisables* campaign, created by McCann (n.d.) Tel Aviv for IKEA, which designed and developed adaptations for various pieces of furniture to make IKEA products more accessible to the disabled community. Blueprints of the adaptations can be downloaded online and then 3D printed anywhere in the world. Upon the year of release, this campaign won several innovation awards, such as the Cannes Lions Grand Prix for Health and Wellness (Slefo, 2019) and is used to demonstrate how the creative practice of advertising has evolved to include product and process innovation, and how advertising relates to social innovation.

Another example is the *Transparency Card* campaign for Congresso em Foco, a Brazilian digital news platform, created by AKQA (n.d.). This campaign aimed to bring attention to the lack of transparency in politicians’ spending of the Brazilian public’s money. The Transparency Card accessed government spending and sent notifications to citizens when taxpayer money was spent. While this spending information was part of the public record, it was difficult and complex to access for the average person. Therefore, the Transparency Card simplified this process and visualised this spending in real time using push notifications to users’ mobile phones. The Transparency card did not use a special made app, but instead used the ‘wallet’, which was automatically available on most smart phones, making the program easy to access. The spending of specific politicians could be selected so citizens could closely monitor the politician’s past and present spending and more easily identify corruption.

FIGURE 3 MANIFESTATIONS OF BRAND ACTIVISM WITH CAMPAIGNS

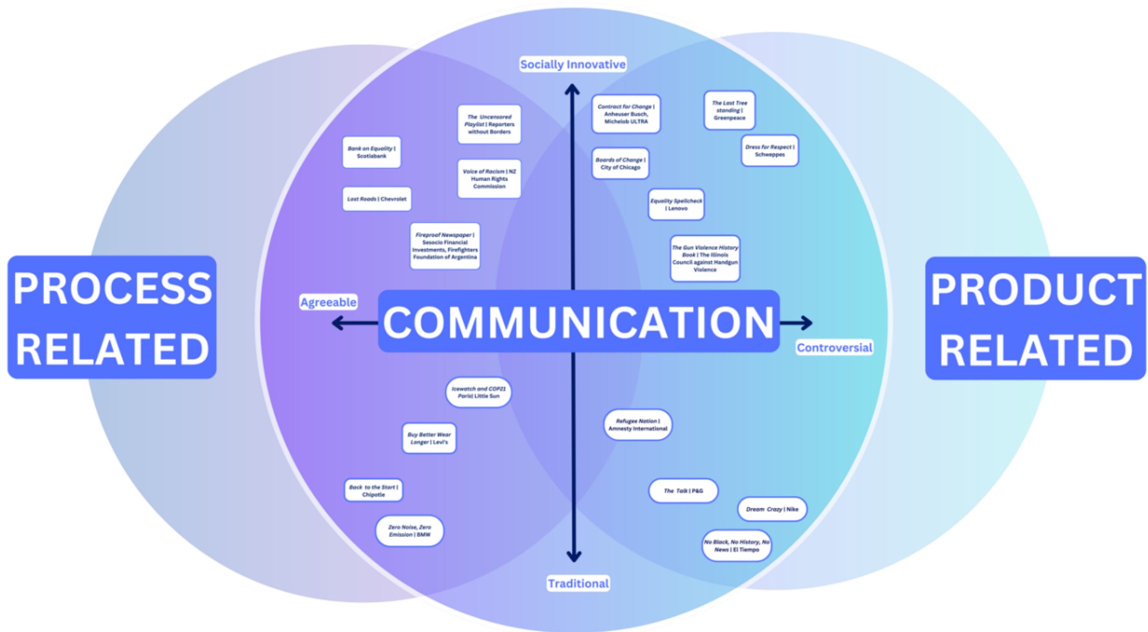
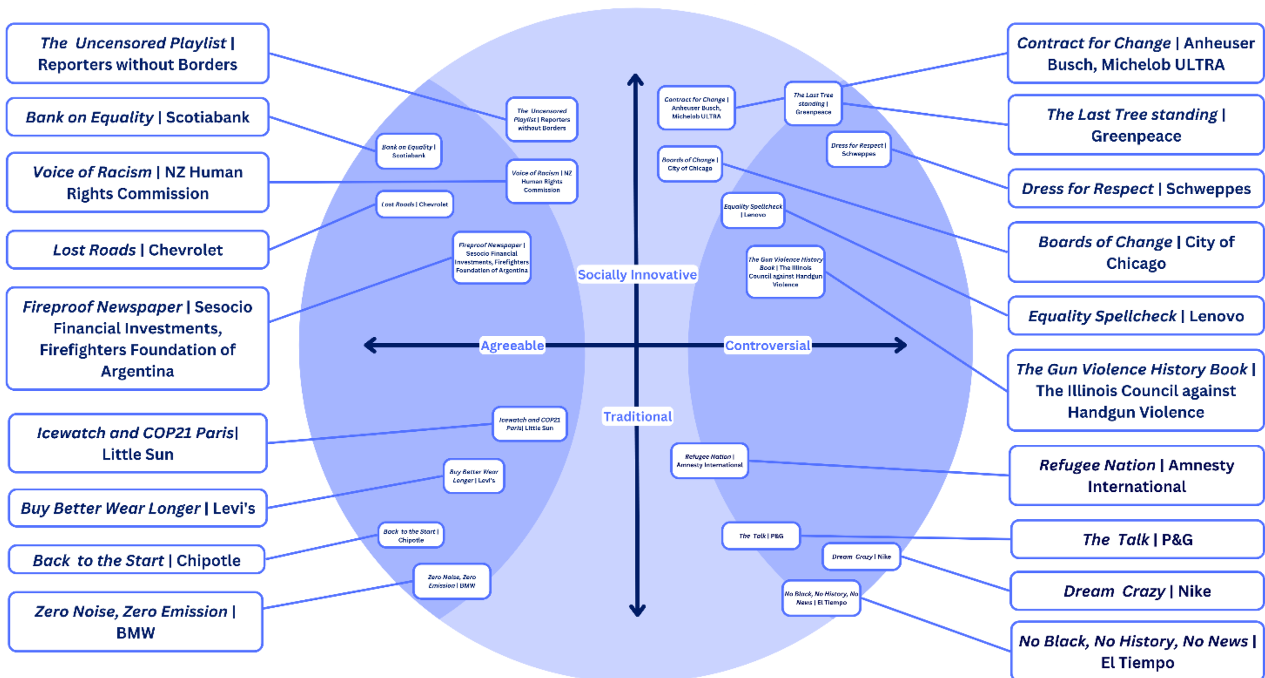


FIGURE 4 MANIFESTATIONS OF BRAND ACTIVISM WITH CAMPAIGNS – CLOSE UP



1.2 Perceptions of authenticity

Overall, the literature reviewed above on the topic of brand activism provides valuable insights into different aspects of brand activism, including the communication strategies used, the decision-making processes, consumer responses, and the key elements and typologies of brand activism. Despite variations in their approaches, each piece of research collectively contributes to the understanding of brand activism and its implications in societal and marketing contexts. In addition, the above studies highlight the importance of authenticity as a potentially manufactured characteristic of successful brand activism campaigns. Manfredi -Sánchez (2019) described brand activism as a communication strategy that borrows from the 'aesthetics of authenticity' found in social movements. This suggests that brands aim to convey a sense of genuine commitment to political values in their campaigns by manufacturing these aesthetics. Moorman (2020) suggested that companies should maintain a sense of brand authenticity, which means that they should engage in brand activism only if it aligns with their brand identity and resonates with their target markets. At the same time, while Pöyry and Laaksonen (2022) did not explicitly discuss authenticity in relation to brand activism, their study, which explored consumer responses, illustrated the consequences of consumers questioning the authenticity and motivations of brands engaging in these socio-political issues. Lastly, Vredenburg et al. (2020) more explicitly highlighted authenticity as a key element in brand activism. They propose authentic brand activism as a typology where brands align their purpose, values, messaging, and practices in addressing controversial socio-political issues.

As the academic studies explored thus far have highlighted, authenticity is an important component for practitioners and brands to understand when engaging with brand activism. Perhaps the most important reason for clients and advertising practitioners to ensure that brand activism campaigns are perceived as authentic is to avoid backlash and the stigma of insincerity, expressed by terms such as woke-washing, green-washing, care-washing and rainbow-washing. The term woke is derived from African-American slang and refers to a person being consciously awake, especially to social injustices such as racism and discrimination (Cambridge-Dictionary, 2020; Kirby, 2020; Stow, 2020). Woke-washing is described as representing brands that use marketing tactics to align themselves with social justice issues that are inconsistent with their past, present and future practices (Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Vredenburg J. et al., 2018). Woke-washing is considered

inauthentic and can lead to severe backlash. However, a simple comparison between the Pepsi (2017) *Live For Now* campaign and the McDonald's (2020b) *They Were All One of Us* campaign demonstrates the complexity of brand activism, woke-washing and the perception of authenticity. Although both campaigns made impassioned pleas in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, Pepsi's campaign was deemed as trivialising the movement and led to massive backlash for the brand, while McDonald's campaign was considered authentic and resulted in industry praise (Victor, 2017; Wohl, 2020). Perhaps one of the main differences between the two campaigns is that McDonald's took tangible action and announced they would donate to the National Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and also made explicit statements of support for the Black Lives Matter Movement. These examples further illustrate the importance of understanding first what it means to be authentic and, second, what it means to be authentic when engaging in brand activism.

Expanding on the concept of authenticity, a small subset of research has evaluated the authenticity of brand activism from a strategic marketing perspective (Key et al., 2021; Mirzaei et al., 2022; Sibai et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). This research discusses authenticity relative to the situation and audience. To begin, Mirzaei et al. (2022) explored the concept of 'woke activism authenticity'. This type of authenticity relies on the presence of six dimensions that influence the consumer perception of a brand's authenticity, which are (1) social context independency, (2) motivation, (3) inclusion, (4) sacrifice, (5) practice, and (6) fit. Adhering to these six dimensions provides protection against the stigma of woke-washing.

Mirzaei et al. (2022) defined social context independency as "the extent to which a woke campaign is independent of topical and trendy social issues" (p. 5). When researching this dimension, Mirzaei et al. (2022) used the Gillette campaign, *The Best a Man Can Be,* which attempted to tackle the concept of toxic masculinity by encouraging men to break the stereotype of 'boys being boys'. They found that this campaign did not achieve social context independency as consumers believed Gillette was trying to capitalise on the momentum from the #metoo movement (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Next, motivation is related to social context independency as it is defined as how the "public perceives the intentions of woke brands as profit-seeking, self-centred versus other-centred, corrupt, genuine, or exploitative" (Mirzaei et al., 2022, p. 7).

Inclusion refers to the neutrality of the message in relation to it being "gender-, race-, and age-neutral, as well as politically neutral" (Mirzaei et al., 2022, p. 5). To demonstrate neutrality, Mirzaei et al. (2022) used the *For Once, Please Don't Do It* campaign by Nike. This campaign sided with the Black Lives Matter Movement and made an impassioned plea against racism following the murder of George Floyd in the United States. The researchers found that this campaign did not meet the standards of inclusion based on consumer responses such as "Nike should now have equality in ads then, right. More races being shown other than black athletes" (p. 6) and "It seems that not all people matter for Nike" (Mirzaei et al., 2022, p. 6). However, this dissertation critiques the dimension of inclusion as a measure of authenticity based on the sample responses provided above by Mirzaei et al. (2022). The consumer responses do not appear to perceive the campaign as inauthentic but instead appear to disagree with the social movement itself, particularly since a common critique of the Black Lives Matter movement by its opposers is the phrase "all lives matter".

The final three dimensions are sacrifice, practice and fit. These dimensions are more related to perceptions of the brand than the actual campaign messages. Sacrifice refers to the perceived willingness to "forgo profit to support the society in general and its target audience in particular" (Mirzaei et al., 2022, p. 6). The examples provided by Mirzaei et al. (2022) to demonstrate sacrifice illustrate the importance of donating money in conjunction with producing communication campaigns. Similarly, practice is defined as "the extent to which the woke brands exercise and act on what they preach" (Mirzaei et al., 2022, p. 6). Both of these dimensions relate to the brand making tangible action in support of the issue at hand. Lastly, fit is defined as "the extent to which the woke topic is in line with the brand's current or past core business, meaning/image, positioning, and culture" (Mirzaei et al., 2022, p. 7).

The above three dimensions relate to the concept of brand authenticity as they include perceptions of the brand's motivation, tangible actions, and history. As a concept, brand authenticity has been researched by various scholars such as Toft, Sunny and Taylor (2020) and Morhart et al. (2015). Toft, Sunny and Taylor (2020) conceptualised brand authenticity as relating to truth and purpose. Their explanation centres around the framework of being truthful about company claims and aligning the company's purpose with the delivery of products and services.

Similarly, Morhart et al. (2015) conceptualised brand authenticity as having four dimensions: continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism. These dimensions refer to the truthfulness and consistency of the brand’s overall values (Morhart et al., 2015). For example, credibility indicates a brand's ability to deliver on its promises, and integrity is determined by how well a brand's actions align with its communicated values and intentions (Morhart et al., 2015). Continuity refers to “the brand's history and stability over time, but also the likelihood that it will persist into the future (Morhart et al., 2015, p. 202). Morhart et al. (2015) further explained integrity as the perception of authenticity that is based on “virtue reflected in the brand's intentions and in the values it communicates” (p.202). The researchers related the concept of integrity to Holt’s (2002) concept of commercial disinterest. Holt (2002) suggested that for brands to be authentic, they must be perceived as being disinterested in an economic agenda and instead being “intrinsically motivated by their inherent value” (p.83). Lastly, Morhart et al. (2015) applied the dimension of symbolism to brands that appeared authentic as reflecting “values that they consider important and may thus help construct who they are” (p. 203).

The above literature emphasises the significance and perception of authenticity in brand activism campaigns. The studies demonstrate that authenticity is not inherent to brand activism, requiring brands to carefully navigate the complexities of aligning themselves with social causes. To effectively engage in brand activism, brands and advertising practitioners need to be aware of the nuanced nature of authenticity and strive to align their campaigns with social issues in a genuine and consistent manner. By considering the dimensions of brand authenticity discussed above, brands can mitigate the risk of being perceived as inauthentic or engaging in woke-washing. However, the above literature also highlights the complexity and subjective nature of authenticity. Furthermore, considerations on what allows brand activism to be perceived as authentic have so far only been studied from the consumers' or audiences’ perspective. This highlights the importance of exploring brand activism from the perspective of the creatives who produce such campaigns. Therefore, this dissertation aims to fill this gap, first in the form of an analysis of the broader, 'official' discourse around brand activism in the trade press and then from the perspective of this dissertation’s participants.

While exploring the practitioner’s perspective of authentic brand activism, it is important to understand additional conceptualisations of authenticity. Newman and Smith

(2016) argue that ‘authenticity’ is an elusive term despite its substantial presence in everyday life “from consumer products to tourism, to art appreciation, to interpersonal interactions” (Newman & Smith, 2016, p. 609). On a macro-level, authenticity is categorised as external (representing objective and factual truths) or internal (individualism and expression of an internal understanding of the true self) (Dutton, 2003; Newman & Smith, 2016; Shifman, 2018). The literature on authentic branding and brand activism is related to external types of authenticity such as performative authenticity. This type evaluates the performance of authenticity as successful exclusively based on audience perception (Treviño, 2003; Whitmer, 2021). Authenticity that is performative is dependent on the individual, the situational context and the audience (Arnesson, 2022).

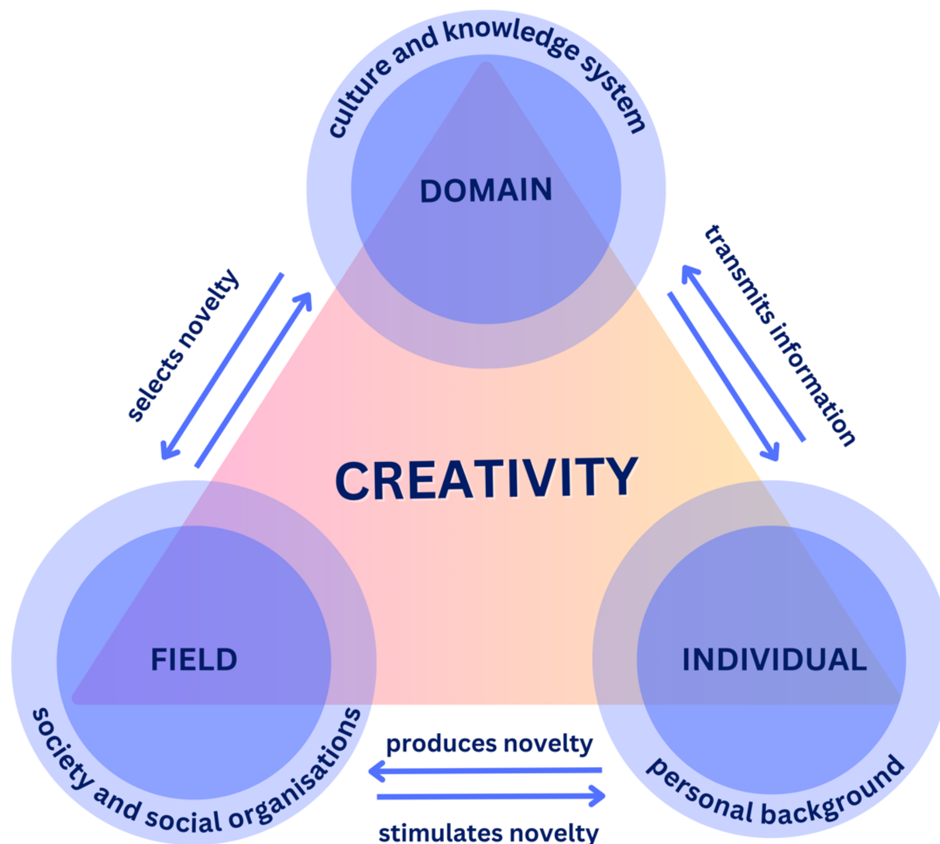
The above types of authenticity are relevant in the context of this dissertation, as creative practitioners may justify the authenticity of their campaigns by attributing various executional or ideational elements to external or internal forms of authenticity. These forms could include executional details such as casting or design choices. Practitioners may also justify the authenticity of their campaigns by referencing internal types of authenticity. By including the practitioner’s perspective, it is not enough to understand authenticity as only performative; it must also include how practitioners themselves may strive to be authentic. Therefore, it is important to be aware of these various conceptualisations of authenticity as they demonstrate the complexity of the concept and how authenticity can vary from the client, consumer and creative practitioners’ perspectives. All of these concepts are visually illustrated in Figure 5.

FIGURE 5 BRAND ACTIVISM AND AUTHENTICITY

1.3 Researching creative practice

Traditionally, the creative process is viewed as a mental process experienced by a creative individual (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015). However, Csikszentmihalyi's (1999) Systems Model of Creativity takes a holistic approach to understanding this process as it is inclusive of the creative individual's traits and characteristics as well as the environment and cultural factors that may influence creativity. These traits and factors are conceptualised into three elements, which are the individual, the domain and the field. Using this model, Csikszentmihalyi (1999) argued that "Creativity is a process that can be observed only at the intersection where individuals, domains, and fields interact" (p. 314). The systems model suggests that creativity is not solely reliant on the talent or intelligence of the individual but is instead a product of the interrelation of these three elements. This is illustrated in Figure 6.

Figure 6 The Systems Model of Creativity



(Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p.315)

Csikszentmihalyi outlined this model, stating, “For creativity to occur, a set of rules and practices must be transmitted from the domain to the individual. The individual must then produce a novel variation in the content of the domain. The variation then must be selected by the field for inclusion in the domain” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p. 315). Therefore, this model argues that creativity can only occur within a domain. The field comprises the individuals who gatekeep the domain. These experts must accept and recognise the creative work for it to become legitimised within the domain. The individuals within the field provide feedback and support for this creative process. Lastly, the individual and their personality traits determine the possibility of creativity, which includes unique skills, knowledge and personal experiences. As individuals engage with the field, their knowledge and experience inform their future processes and creativity. Thus, this model does not attribute creativity to a single cause but instead to interrelated factors.

A domain “consists of information – a set of rules, procedures, and instructions for action” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 229). A domain is not fixed, and therefore, the ease at which one can make a contribution varies in time. There are four characteristics of domains that may enhance creativity, the first being the domain’s stage of development and how fixed it is as a standard (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015). A second factor that may enhance the creativity of a domain is how attractive it is to new talent. This attraction includes its connection with culture, present opportunities and the various intrinsic rewards that come from working within the domain. Csikszentmihalyi (2015) suggested that “A domain with clear rules, where novelty can be evaluated objectively, with a rich and complex symbolic system, and a central position in the culture, will be more attractive than one lacking such characteristics” (p. 109). The final two characteristics that may enhance a domain’s creativity are its accessibility and the degree to which it is linked to culture.

The field “includes all the individuals who act as gatekeepers to the domain. It is their job to decide whether an idea or product should be added to the domain” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015, p. 229). The field consists of those who provide social valuation for ideas or products. According to Csikszentmihalyi (2015), without this social context, “it would be impossible to distinguish ideas that are simply bizarre from those that are genuinely creative” (p. 109).

The final element of the Systems Model of Creativity is the individual. It positions individual motivation as an important factor of creativity since the individual must seek

access to a domain and learn its various rules and processes (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015). Csikszentmihalyi (2015) suggested that acquiring access to the domain does not guarantee the individual will make a contribution to creativity. The individual must possess the ability and the desire to produce novel work. In addition, Csikszentmihalyi (2015) suggested there are four kinds of personal qualities that may aid in the creation of novelty, namely, innate ability, cognitive style, personality and motivation. These qualities and the various traits that are included, such as a favourability to rule-breaking, divergent thinking and problem-finding, are important contributing factors to creativity. In addition, individuals must possess the ability to convince the field that their creative contributions are worthy of being added to the domain, which may involve traits such as "the ability to express oneself in such a way as to be understood" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015, p. 115). It is the interrelation of all three elements where creativity can be observed, which counteracts the notion that the creative process only occurs in the mind as the result of individual talent. In addition, using this model allows the contributions of an individual to be viewed through a coherent and theoretical lens (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015).

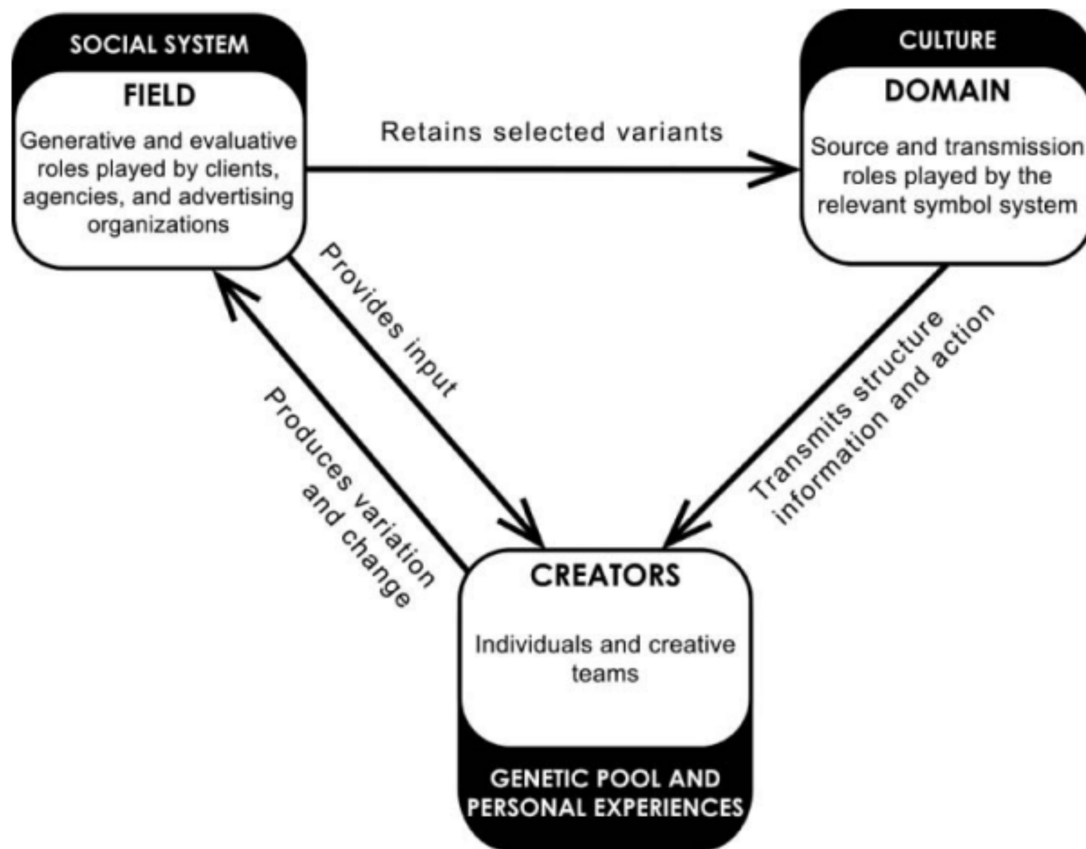
The Systems Model of Creativity has been used to study various forms of creative practice, such as advertising creativity, music, film-making and social media influencers (Drew et al., 2022; Kerrigan, 2013; McIntyre, 2006; Roca et al., 2017; Vanden Bergh & Stuhlfaut, 2006). For example, a study by McIntyre (2011) applied the Systems Model of Creativity to Western popular music. This study found that individual musicians produce novel creative contributions by applying their personal tendencies using their knowledge of the domain (McIntyre, 2011). The subsequent decision-making in this process is structured and constrained by predispositions from the field and the domain. In conclusion, McIntyre (2011) found the interrelation of the domain, field and individual to be prevalent in the creative process of songwriting for popular Western music. Similarly, a recent study by Drew, Fulton and McIntyre (2022) explored the creative practice of Instagram food influencers and how they generate content by applying the Systems Model of Creativity. This study further demonstrates the interrelation of the individual, domain and field as imperative to creative practice.

A study by Vanden Bergh and Stuhlfaut (2006) applied the Systems Model of Creativity to advertising (Figure 7). In this study, art directors and copywriters were the 'individuals' in terms of the model, and the 'field' included account managers and planners,

audiences, clients and creative directors. Lastly, the researchers included general society in the domain of advertising. According to Vanden Bergh and Stuhlfaut (2006), “These creators may author a creative concept, but they do so only after receiving input from the field (client and agency management), as shown by an arrow from field to creator, and after selecting relevant information from the domain (culture)” (p. 381). To reach these conclusions, Vanden Bergh and Stuhlfaut conducted 32 case analyses of advertising campaigns. They found that all three elements of the Systems Model of Creativity were present 91 per cent of the time during campaign creation (Vanden Bergh & Stuhlfaut, 2006). Their study re-affirms the creative process to be collaborative, not amongst the creative team individually, but between the creatives and the field and also the field and the domain (Vanden Bergh & Stuhlfaut, 2006).

Roca et al. (2017) built upon Vanden Bergh and Stuhlfaut’s (2006) research by incorporating Social Identity Theory and exploring the impact of macro-level factors on an individual’s creativity among advertising practitioners in Colombia. These factors include “country, national, social, economic, and cultural elements” (Roca et al., 2017, p. 834). This study found four structural factors that shape creative practice, which were risk aversion of clients, the low status backgrounds of consumers, media monopolies and the overall work environment of the agency. These factors also result in what Roca et al. (2017) term a dual system of creative practice, which segments creative practice into banal daily work and award-winning creativity. Therefore, this study determined the creativity of Colombian advertising practitioners to be extensively shaped by the field and social system (Roca et al., 2017).

FIGURE 7 THE SYSTEMS MODEL OF CREATIVITY APPLIED TO ADVERTISING



Reproduced with permission (Roca et al., 2017)

The studies discussed in this section demonstrate the complexity of the creative process and the importance of maintaining a holistic perspective on creativity. These studies demonstrate that creativity does not result solely from a creative individual but is instead influenced by the interrelation of the domain, field and individual. The Systems Model of Creativity is used as the theoretical framework to structure this dissertation. The following chapters follow this framework and explore the domain, the field and the individual as interrelated elements of brand activism. While this model was chosen for this dissertation due to its holistic perspective on creativity, one possible limitation surrounds the ambiguity around conceptualising the domain, field and individual. This may cause inconsistencies in other research projects that use the model and explore the same phenomenon as this dissertation. This framework is previewed in more detail at the end of this chapter.

1.4 Research objectives and questions

As previously discussed, the topic of brand activism has mainly attracted the attention of marketing and industry scholars focused on exploring brand activism as a strategic marketing tool (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020) by analysing its impact on consumer perception (Eyada, 2020; Shetty et al., 2019). Furthermore, as indicated by the systematic literature review conducted by Cammarota et al. (2023), there is a gap in the academic discussion on brand activism, as past and current research has not included the creative practitioner's perspective. This research was designed to fill this gap in academic knowledge and make two key contributions. The first contribution is to critically interrogate brand activism in relation to how it differs from past and current branding strategies and discover the key characteristics from the practitioner's perspective. The second contribution addresses the lack of knowledge we have about the role advertising practitioners play in the creation of brand activism campaigns, what their perspective is on this often highly politicised form of promotional communication, and how it impacts their professional practice as well as their occupational identities. Based on these aims, the research questions of this study are as follows:

Empirical research questions:

1. How is brand activism defined in relation to other branding strategies?
2. What is involved in the creative process of developing brand activism campaigns compared to that of traditional campaigns?
3. How does brand activism impact the professional and creative practice and occupational identity of advertising professionals?
4. How does the utilisation of brand activism strategies impact how creative practitioners understand their occupational ethical work and professional moral obligations?

1.5 Research design and methodology

This research is designed to address the research questions stated on the previous page. To address the first question, a content analysis was conducted on industry discourse surrounding brand activism. This analysis was needed to supplement information available in the academic literature. For the following three questions, this research conducted semi-structured one-on-one interviews with 20 creative practitioners who had direct experience working with brand activism campaigns. Descriptions of these campaigns are available in appendix 1 for quick reference. The study participants provided in-depth accounts regarding creative practice, ethical awareness, and professional identity. To understand the complexities surrounding creative practice, participants were asked to describe in detail the process they personally followed in developing a brand activism campaign. Each interview was recorded and then transcribed verbatim, resulting in 280 pages of transcription. On average, these interviews lasted from 90 to 120 minutes. These transcriptions, which were coded and analysed, constitute the data collected for this study.

Since this research aims to explore creativity at the individual and organisational level, qualitative methods were used, and data was drawn from practitioner knowledge focused on the professional field of the creative advertising departments. More specifically, data regarding practitioners' lived experiences with brand activism was collected through semi-structured interviews. Questions were open-ended to encourage descriptive and elaborative answers. The interview guide is available in Table 1. While this guide includes several detailed questions the interviews were still semi-structured as participants were also asked additional and sometimes follow up questions based on their responses. This research method was chosen as interviews allow participants to express their individual feelings and experiences (Liamputtong, 2020). Additionally, the use of semi-structured interviews allowed for the conversation to flow naturally and gave all participants the freedom to elaborate on their opinions (Liamputtong, 2020). Fortwengel, Schüßler and Sydow (2017) found that semi-structured interviews coupled with a narrative approach that reconstructs a creative event are an ideal research method to study organisational creativity as a process. Therefore, questions for this study that revolved around the creative process were formulated to encourage narrative responses. For example, participants were asked to detail the entire creative process for a brand activism campaign, starting with the brief or the first process of ideation and ending with the publication of the campaign. Therefore, this style of questioning

allowed participants to fully express the processes involved in their professional and creative practice as well as how these processes impacted their occupational identity. This method aided in providing insight into the participants' worldviews (Liamputtong, 2020). It also ensured that participants addressed all three elements required in the Systems Model of Creativity.

TABLE 1 INTERVIEW GUIDE

	QUESTIONS
Introduction	Ask for permission to record Zoom call Name Age Job Title Education
Background	What drew you to work in advertising? What is involved in your current job position? How do you feel about your career trajectory? What are your goals within the industry? Have you heard of the terms 'brand activism' or 'social innovation'? If so can you describe what they mean to you? Have you worked on campaigns that could be considered a form of brand activism or social innovation? If so what was it?
Creative Process	Can we talk about your work on ________ campaign? What was the client brief like? How did you come up with the original idea? Can you walk me through the different stages of ideation and development? What type of research did you do? Is this process any different from a campaign that doesn't classify as a type of brand activism or social innovation? How does this process (social innovation etc) compare to the process of a traditional campaign? How do you prioritise your responsibilities to your artistic creativity, your client and to the public/society?
Tech	How has technology and its new affordances impacted your ideation process? How do you factor in technology when coming up with your campaign ideas?
Risk	What do you think about using politically divisive messages or themes in your work? Do you feel like this increases your own personal creative risk? How do you feel about pitching politically and or socially controversial ideas in terms of your job security? Have you ever had to deal with a campaign that had messaging that went against your personal moral beliefs? And if so, how did you (or would you) deal with that?
Collab.	Did your ideas involve any external collaboration? How do you work with these external sources?
Ethics	Do you have any moral or ethical issues with using brand activism? How do you feel about merging commercial advertising work with political ideals? How do you distinguish between ethical and non-ethical work practices in terms of creative development?
Professional Identity	How do you feel about using tenets of activism in your campaigns? How do you think technology has impacted your role as a creative professional? When you are coming up with creative ideas, do you prioritise how you think the campaign will be received by the public or do you focus on being innovative? How has the rise of brand activism impacted your role as a creative professional? To what extent is the activism perspective on commercial communication a requirement? Where do you see advertising and creative work going in the future? Could you think of anyone else who was involved in this campaign who would like to participate and may offer another perspective?

1.5.1 Content Analysis

The content analysis examined three of the leading advertising and marketing industry trade press websites for content surrounding brand activism. Searches using exact match for "brand activism" were conducted on *AdAge, AdNews, Adweek, B&T, Campaign Brief, Campaign Live* and *Mumbrella* on 10 March 2023. This search included all articles available on each website. Relevant articles were identified using an exact match search of the term "brand activism". The search functions on the individual publications' websites did not allow for exact match searches, so the Google Website Search function was used. The exact match search returned few results (161 articles in total); however, this method was chosen to eliminate bias in deciding what counted as 'brand activism' and to clearly define and understand brand activism without diluting the conceptualisation with terms such as CSR, CRM or brand purpose. In addition, this mirrored the search for academic articles on brand activism, which did not include other similar typologies of corporate social action. Each of these articles was read, and the ones that had relevant information to defining brand activism were collated on a *Microsoft Excel* spreadsheet. Articles that were discarded did not have enough information or relevant information on brand activism. Some of these articles did not even discuss brand activism, and the search function had picked up the article based on a 'suggested reading' list at the bottom of the page. This left a total of 75 relevant articles. A possible limitation to the low number of results returned through the trade press revolves around the search terms, as there would be more articles that discuss brand activism campaigns without actually using, conceptualising and/or contextualising the term. For example, searching for the *Dream Crazy* campaign by Nike on Mumbrella returned seven results on its own. The small sample size is also representative of the limited coverage that is present in academic literature as well. Lastly, the purpose of this content analysis was not to provide a comprehensive analysis based on an extensive sample but instead to provide an indicative impression of how brand activism is covered in trade press publications. Another limitation of this content analysis is that the selected publications had an anglophone bias due to the researcher only speaking English.

1.5.2 Study participants

Recruiting participants for this study was completed in two phases. It was imperative that participants had first-hand experience working with campaigns that could be classified as a form of brand activism. Therefore, the first recruitment phase involved finding campaigns

that fit this criterion. Sixty-six campaigns were selected based on how closely they aligned with the academic and/or marketing industry definition of brand activism that guides this research. The academic definition was stated at the beginning of this chapter and was formulated by Manfredi-Sánchez (2019). To review, he defined brand activism as "a communication strategy whose aim is to influence the citizen, consumer, by means of messages and campaigns created and sustained by political values…[borrowing] from the campaigns of social movements, copying their aesthetics of authenticity" (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019, p. 348). In contrast to the academic definition, Sarkar and Kotler (2020) provided the following industry definition of brand activism: "brand activism consists of business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society" (p. 467). Both of these definitions were used to select campaigns as together, they provide a holistic view to conceptualise brand activism. Once these campaigns had been chosen, online research was conducted to determine which creative practitioners were credited as working on each campaign. Due to the increasing normalisation of video conferencing technologies like Zoom due to global lockdowns from the COVID-19 pandemic, participant location was not a selection criterion for this study.

This data was then collated on *Trello,* a digital project management software. The second phase of this recruitment involved contacting each participant individually. Initial contact was made using the business social networking website *LinkedIn,* a popular social media platform heavily utilised by advertising practitioners.

Two hundred thirty-five advertising practitioners were invited to connect with the researcher on *LinkedIn*. The digital invitation included a message stating the connection's intent and detailed this study's aims. A total of 116 accepted the connection request. Upon connecting with the researcher, each user was individually sent a personalised message asking if they would be interested in participating in this study. A total of 57 users declined to respond to the message, eight stated that they were not interested, and 51 users stated their interest in participating in the study. These 51 users were asked to provide an email address so that they could be sent the official project description and participant consent form. On the participant consent form, each practitioner had the option to choose for their name to be published as part of the study or to remain anonymous. All respondents who returned a participant consent form opted for their names to be published in this study. Of the 51

potential participants, 34 signed and returned the participant consent form. However, only 20 participants responded to schedule an interview.

Thus, a total of 20 advertising practitioners participated in this study. This is illustrated in Table 2. Participants either worked as a part of or were closely aligned with the creative department of their respective agencies. Job titles for the participants in creative departments ranged from copywriter to executive creative director and included one strategist. Participants' current work locations covered seven different countries and four continents; however, the majority were international citizens and had immigrated for work purposes. Participants ranged in age from 25 – 52 and had a mix of educational backgrounds ranging from high-school graduates to advertising-specific or creative arts post-secondary studies to university educated. Out of the 20 participants, only three identified as female. It is important to note that out of the 235 total practitioners initially identified, only 56 were female, which might be due to the still existing gender imbalance in creative departments of advertising agencies (Broyles & Grow, 2008; Crewe & Wang, 2018). Each participant indicated on the consent form to be identified and allowed for their names to be published in this dissertation (Table 2).

TABLE 2 STUDY PARTICIPANTS

NAME	LOCATION	AGE	CAMPAIGN	JOB TITLE
Yekar Achury	Colombia	25	*No Black, No History, No News* – El Tiempo	Copywriter
Dina Alsharif	UAE	27	*Equality Spell Check* - Lenovo	Strategic Planner
Sonia Barrera	Colombia	31	*Zero Noise, Zero Emission* - BMW	Creative Director
Alejandro Bermudez	Colombia	47	*Lost Roads* - Chevrolet	Regional Creative Director
Siouxzi Connor	Germany	40	*Icewatch and COP21 Paris* – Little Sun	Senior Copywriter
Frances Cooke	New Zealand	38	*Voices of Racism* – NZ Human Rights Commission	Creative Director
Chris Groom	USA	47	*Dream Crazy* – Nike	Freelance Creative Director
Greg Hahn	USA	52	*The Talk* – P&G	Chief Creative Officer and Co-Founder
Todd Hunter	USA	38	*Back to the Start* - Chipotle	Co-Founder
Diego Izquierdo	Peru	34	*Bank on Equality* - Scotiabank	Creative Director
Artur Lipori	USA	37	*Refugee Nation* – Amnesty International	Creative Director
Saymon Medeiros	UAE	28	*Equality Spellcheck* - Lenovo	Senior Creative
Andre Oberg	Brazil	39	*Dress for Respect* – Schweppes	Senior Art Director
Alex Rose	Germany	37	*Buy Better Wear Longer* – Levi's	Creative Director
Ricardo Salgado	USA	35	*The Gun Violence History Book* – The Illinois Council Against Handgun Violence	Creative Director

Tim Schoenmaeckers	USA	34	*Contract for Change* – Anheuser Busch, Michelob ULTRA	Creative Director
Niels Sienaert	USA	33	*Boards of Change* – City of Chicago	Creative Director
Nicolas Trapanese	Argentina	33	*Fireproof Newspaper* -Sesocio Financial Investments, Firefighters Foundation of Argentina	Senior Copywriter
Ricardo Wolff	Germany	38	*The Uncensored Playlist* –Reporters without Borders	Executive Creative Director
Wojtek Kowalik	USA	37	*The Last Tree Standing* - Greenpeace	Associate Creative Director

1.5.3 Data collection

The data collection process for this study was designed specifically with the target participants in mind. Based on the recruitment process, all participants contacted were either mid or senior-level practitioners, meaning they were all relatively time-poor compared to junior employees. Data collection was, therefore, designed to require minimal effort from participants in terms of scheduling and technical obligations. One aspect of this design required the researcher to be extremely flexible with scheduling interview times in regard to time zones. All interviews were scheduled on a date and time chosen by the participant. Interviews for this study were conducted from April to November 2021 using the video conferencing software program *Zoom,* which became a primary tool in telecommunications at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent work-from-home orders in early 2020. *Zoom* was selected due to its ubiquitous nature among business professionals, and therefore was likely to be the most used video-conferencing platform among practitioners. Interviews were automatically recorded on *Zoom* and, upon completion, were immediately downloaded and imported into the online transcription software *Otter.* Once Otter processed and transcribed each interview, they were reviewed, and minor adjustments were made to ensure accuracy.

1.5.4 Data analysis

The qualitative data obtained through the semi-structured interviews was analysed with the software NVivo. Data was analysed using thematic analysis through open and inductive reasoning to understand the causes of innovation and how various knowledge sources are integrated (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In thematic analysis that uses an open and inductive approach, concepts or themes are derived through interpretations of the raw data made by the researcher (Thomas, 2006). According to Thomas (2006), the inductive analysis approach aims to deduce meanings from raw data relevant to the study objectives and

establish related themes or categories. Data was then coded using the six steps of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the researcher familiarised herself with the data. This step involved transcribing, reading and re-reading all present data. This occurred while the researcher transcribed each interview, input the transcriptions into NVivo and then segmented each of these by interview question. The second step of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis is generating initial codes. The third step involved collating codes into potential themes. For this step, the researcher identified potential themes within each of the five codes set out above. The fourth step involved a review of themes, followed by the fifth step, 'defining and naming themes' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). According to Braun and Clarke, this involves "ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme" (p. 87). During this research analysis, the fifth step in the process was iterative as themes were narrowed down.

The initial codes were categorised based on the conceptual themes of the interview guide: (1) creative process, (2) motivation for social justice, (3) risk, (4) ethical responsibility and (5) professional identity. Once these themes had been organised, the responses were analysed again to find commonalities. This analysis revealed several different codes that are summarised in Table 3 on the following page. The next step in the data analysis involved organising the results into the three elements of the Systems Model of Creativity, domain, field and individual. Once the results had been segmented, the last step of this analysis was to again identify commonalities which resulted in the final themes and sub-themes used in this dissertation, which are also previewed in Table 3.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis was also used for the content analysis. Initial codes were generated based on the content of the articles. These were (1) categorisations of brand activism, (2) considerations of using brand activism and (3) reasons for engaging in brand activism. Next these were refined into more specific codes before being categorised into themes and sub-themes. A more detailed overview of this process is provided in chapter 2 (table 5).

TABLE 3 CODING PROCESS

Initial Codes	Codes
Creative Process	Authenticity, Budget, Collaboration, Company Culture, Idea Shift, New Job Roles, Research, Technology, Workload, Definition
Motivation for Social Justice	Authenticity, Brand-Led, Development Hurdle, Limited Budget, Personal Attitude, Pro-Active, Research, Time
Risk	Authenticity, Job Security, Personal Risk, Risk Anticipated, Risk Managed, Strong Beliefs – Risk
Ethical Responsibility	Agency Led Authenticity, Agency Responsibility, Aligns with Personal Beliefs, Authenticity, Better than Nothing, Brand Responsibility, Delayed Moral Objection, Easier to Refuse, Gut Feeling, Issues with Casting, Moral Ambivalence, Moral Objection, Personal Responsibility, Political Opinions vs. Society, Refuse Work, Woke-Washing
Professional Identity	Activism easier to approve, Awards don't matter, Brand Responsibility, Identity – Changemaker, Moralised Profession, Multiple Job Roles, Personally Feels Good, Positive Impact, Technology, Thinking about Public, Willing to Work Extra

→

Themes and Sub-Themes
Domain of Branding:
• Change in Society • Purpose for Profit • Tangible Action • Inherent and Anticipated Risk • Proactive motivation
Field of Brand Activism:
Client Mediation: Proactive practitioner-led campaigns, Determination to overcome development hurdles **Public Mediation:** Anticipated and managed risk **Community of the Cause Mediation:** Authenticity through research, Authenticity through collaboration
The Individual:
Cultural Capital: Career trajectory and job security **Perception of Industry:** Moralised profession **Perception of Self:** Identity as a catalyst of change **Technology:** Technology impacting ideation and professional roles **Moral Identity:** Ethical behaviour related to personal beliefs and values **Ethical Narrative of Authenticity:** Authenticity as 'real', Impact, Tangible action, Alignment with brand history and philosophy, Gut feeling of authenticity, Woke-Washing **Ethical Seniority:** Moral courage as a senior creative

1.6 Chapter preview

As discussed, this dissertation employs the Systems Model of Creativity as its theoretical framework. The elements of this model are used to structure the following chapters of this dissertation as the domain, the field and the individual. Chapter two delves into Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) Systems Model of Creativity, focusing on the domain's role as a source of rules and instructions for action. This exploration shifts to the world of branding and its dynamic connection with brand activism from the practitioner's perspective. The chapter unfolds by introducing relevant branding literature and unveiling insights from an industry literature content analysis about brand activism. Two core questions guide this chapter: (1) How has brand activism reshaped branding? and (2) What defines its key characteristics? Responding to these questions, this chapter uncovers six themes that encapsulate practitioners' standpoints on brand activism, from its perceived necessity to their proactive motivations. This chapter sheds light on the transformative impact of brand activism on the branding domain's rules, procedures, and knowledge systems.

Chapter three delves further into Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) Systems Model of Creativity, emphasising the impact of the field on brand activism. This chapter turns attention to the dynamics of the field, where gatekeepers decide the inclusion of ideas. This social dimension crucially shapes the creative process (Csikszentmihalyi & Abuhamdeh, 2014). This chapter navigates through the various actors of the field—clients, the public, and the community of the cause. This chapter explores relevant literature on advertising's role as a cultural intermediary. Moreover, this chapter reveals findings from the empirical research, addressing how brand activism alters creative processes and the mediation of field actors' expectations. This exploration uncovers a shift in power dynamics, risk anticipation, and the importance of lived insight and reveals practitioners to enact new roles as 'moral intermediaries'.

Chapter four shifts focus from the domain and field to the nuanced role of the individual practitioner in the context of brand activism. As the first instalment of a two-part exploration, this chapter investigates how the dynamic interplay between professional identity and brand activism has unfolded. It begins by exploring the Systems Model of Creativity's 'individual' element, followed by the notion of cultural capital, which is required for access to the domain, and then reviews the literature on professional identity within the

area of advertising. Empirical research findings are revealed, shedding light on the profound impact of practitioners' backgrounds and cultural capital on their engagement with brand activism. Moreover, these findings uncover a transformative professional identity among these practitioners, casting them as potent agents of change, innovation, and impactful transformation.

Lastly, chapter five delves deeper into the individual's role within the Systems Model of Creativity and its connection to ethical aspects of brand activism. Beginning with a review of the literature on ethical considerations within the advertising industry, this chapter then presents the outcomes of empirical research aiming to address the pivotal question: How do ethical considerations influence practitioners' participation in brand activism? The analysis of interviews reveals the concept of 'ethical becoming', reflecting how practitioners perceive their ethical growth. Notably, the findings also highlight the influence of personal moral identities in guiding ethical choices, culminating in practitioners using a narrative of authenticity to justify the ethics of brand activism through their personal perceptions. This chapter is followed by the conclusion, which summarises the main arguments made in this dissertation and discusses limitations and avenues for further research.

Chapter 2 – The domain of branding

As previously stated, in Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) Systems Model of Creativity, the domain "consists of information – a set of rules, procedures, and instructions for action" (p. 229). The domain encompasses the knowledge and symbol system that shapes the creative output. This chapter sets out to explore the key characteristics of brand activism and how they impact the domain of branding from the practitioner's perspective. These perspectives provide a dynamic conceptualisation as practitioners may draw on established definitions but, through their work, also define their own understanding of these characteristics.

This chapter begins by outlining relevant literature on the domain of branding, followed by the findings from a content analysis of industry literature on the topic of brand activism. This chapter then presents the findings of the empirical research to answer the following questions:

1. How has brand activism impacted the domain of branding?
2. What are the key characteristics of brand activism according to industry practitioners?

Based on the responses provided by the participants, six major themes emerged that explain the practitioner's perspectives of brand activism and how this strategy has impacted the domain of branding. The first theme explores what practitioners think about brand activism as becoming a mandatory strategy for all brands. This theme is followed by five key characteristics of brand activism as indicated by the practitioners' definitions and descriptions. These are: (1) brand activism campaigns illustrate a change in society, (2) they must have a purpose, but it does not have to be permanent (3) they must result in tangible action, (4) they have an inherent and anticipated risk, and (5) they are initiated with a proactive practitioner-related motivation. The findings provided in this chapter illustrate how the participants of this study conceptualise brand activism and explore how it impacts the rules, procedures and knowledge systems of the domain of branding.

2.1 Literature

2.1.1 The Systems Model of Creativity – Understanding the concept of the domain

According to Csikszentmihalyi (2015), established domains have elaborate rules, procedures and criteria that specify what is allowed and what represents excellence. In these domains, "accuracy and excellence…is easy to access" (p. 28). However, domains that are not clearly defined lack the specific criteria for evaluation. When exploring the constitution of domains, Csikszentmihalyi (2015) noted that the socio-cultural factors are just as important as the intrinsic ones, i.e. internal or personal elements. In addition, cultural expectations differ between different domains but also between different time spans of the same domain. As stated by Csikszentmihalyi (2015), "As the domain changes through history or across the lifespan in response to shifting sociocultural demands, what constitutes an expression of giftedness will also change" (p.33). The studies discussed in chapter one used the Systems Model of Creativity to explore various domains such as songs, Instagram, photography, digital technology, the micro-domain of a specific online hashtag and advertising (Drew et al., 2022; McIntyre, 2011; Roca et al., 2017; Vanden Bergh & Stuhlfaut, 2006).

In the study by McIntyre (2011), which explored Western popular music, the domain is represented by the 'song' therefore the knowledge required by the artist involves understanding "lyric and melody writing, song structure, rhythmic components… arrangement characteristics… the various material forms songs were manifest as… various production elements…and an understanding of audiences' possible interpretations of the work produced" (McIntyre, 2011, p. 84). McIntyre (2011) found that songwriters are so immersed within this domain that the rules and regulations are second nature. These songwriters acquire access to this domain through various formal and informal learning processes such as education, familial influence and listening to other songs. Another study by Drew et al. (2022) explored the creative practice of Instagram food influencers. This study found that Instagram food influencers immerse themselves in various relevant cultural domains such as photography, digital technology, the Instagram app itself and a micro-domain of '#foodporn' (Drew et al., 2022, p. 314). Lastly, the two studies by Roca et al. (2017) and Vanden Bergh and Stuhlfaut (2006) each explored the domain of advertising. The above studies illustrate the diverse domains where creativity operates and highlight the

importance of understanding the specific rules, knowledge and cultural factors that shape each domain.

It is important to also recognise that understanding the rules of the domain may also come from tacit knowledge, or "non-verbalized, unarticulated and intuitive forms of knowledge," (Kaptan, 2013, p.265). Kaptan (2013) researched the importance of tacit knowledge in advertising agencies in Turkey by conducting interviews with advertising practitioners from three agencies in Turkey, Ivme Marketing Group, Alameti Farika and TBWA/Istanbul. Kaptan (2013) found that advertising knowledge is constructed in two layers: The first is tacit knowledge, and the second is scientific. Furthermore, Kaptan (2013) explains that tacti knowledge comes from three processes, typification, human capital, and common sense. Typification refers to the process of collecting "subjective perspectives of the Turkish population, which, through a process of abstractions, formalizations and generalizations, become knowledge," (Kaptan, 2013, p.272). Human capital also plays a role in knowledge production of advertising practitioners and is explained by Kaptan (2013) as "the employees' skills, but also their deeper experiences, education and knowledge," (p.275). Lastly, common sense is described as "the traditional popular conception of the world, is based on a direct observation of reality and continual experimentation, briefly everyday life experiences," (Kaptan, 2013, p.276). In conclusion, Kaptan (2013) found that tacit knowledge drawn from the three processes are the main source of knowledge production for practitioners in the process of creating advertising work. Following this line of thought, it can be assumed that the use of tacit knowledge may also make up a large part of how advertising practitioners, including those interviewed for this dissertation, understand the various domains in which they take part.

2.1.2 The domain of branding and the commodification of culture

Research into the practical and theoretical nature of brands depicts them as evolving from a means of identification and representation of quality into a ubiquitous aspect of contemporary life (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Oh et al., 2020). More recently, research illustrates how brands increasingly occupy authentic life spaces (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Oh et al. (2020) segmented research into brand strategy into four eras, namely, the information era, the attribute era, the brand equity era and the branding era. Predating the 21st century, between the 1970s and the early 2000s, research into branding practices is segmented into the first three eras named above, namely, information, attribute and brand equity. These eras consider

the brand and culture as distinctly separate entities. According to Oh et al. (2020), the information era saw brands as signifying quality to the consumer. This assessment is demonstrated through research that correlates the reputation of the brand to assurance of product quality and consumer acceptance of higher prices (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Shapiro, 1983; Wernerfelt, 1988). Following, the attribute era is characterised by brands extending into the realm of society and culture. Research during this era focused on brands creating value propositions with both tangible and intangible attributes (Beckwith & Lehmann, 1973; Kamakura & Russell, 1993). Lastly, research in the brand equity era focused on the brand's symbolic equity. Research during this era included defining brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Ailawadi et al., 2003) and identifying categories used to measure brand equity (Ailawadi et al., 2003).

During the first two decades of the 21st century, brands became increasingly fused with everyday life. While research within this current time period still explores tangible aspects of brand fundamentals, including the aesthetics, visual identity and symbolic worth of the brand, such as the name, logo and brand equity (Bresciani & Del Ponte, 2017; Séraphin et al., 2016), it is better characterised by the increasing focus on brand intangibles such as authenticity, feelings and emotions, community, personality and anthropomorphism (Beverland, 2005; Molinillo et al., 2017; Yao & Wang, 2018). In addition, it explores digital marketing, which includes aspects such as social media, influencers, gleaning insights from online data, and traditional media integration (Bresciani & Ewing, 2015; Moro & Rita, 2018; Steenkamp, 2020; Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Lastly, research within this time period also considered brand architecture and the role of brands in relation to cultural differences, legal consequences and symbolism (Aaker et al., 2001; Batra et al., 2010; Mazali & Rodrigues-Neto, 2013; Sood & Keller, 2012; Teng, 2020).

As detailed above, understanding the rules and procedures of the domain of branding is becoming more nuanced and complex. As brands became more entangled with various elements of culture through brand intangibles, a number of critical scholars, such as Holt (2003), Lury (2011) and Banet-Weiser (2012), took notice. In the early 21st century, Holt (2003) critiqued the nominal 'mind-share' branding model, which insists that "the essence of the brand is the strength of associations between the product and its benefits, personality and user imagery" (Holt, 2003, p. 36), as being a standardised solution to unique problems. Holt (2003) noted that the static concepts related to brand fundamentals and intangibles fall short

in the face of the dynamics of popular culture. This led Holt (2003; 2004) to conceptualise a cultural approach to branding that is heavily ingrained in current social marketing techniques. These techniques are rooted in non-business, more qualitative research approaches, such as anthropology and sociology and centre around communications and the consumer experience of stories. Lury (2011) credited these human-centric methods to shifting perceptions around branding. Using this approach, Holt (2003) suggested that brands can become 'iconic' by entering the realm of culture and society through the creation and promotion of a 'myth', which must be rooted in cultural values to create brand value. Brands must become cultural actors themselves and serve as an ideological source for consumers in times of social tension and contradictions and, therefore, must be attuned to popular culture and, more importantly, to ideologically contentious socio-political issues and tensions. In summary, Holt's (2003) method argued for the appropriation of social and political issues by brands as he encouraged brands to implicitly refer to political and cultural issues.

Holt's (2004) cultural approach is arguably amplified within contemporary branding strategies. Brands are now further embedded into daily life, becoming explicitly involved in specific everyday politics. This increasing encroachment of brands on authentic life spaces – realms of life that so far did not follow commercial logic – is documented by Banet-Weiser (2012) through the notion of brand cultures. She argued that cultural spaces previously conceived of as authentic, such as self-identity, creativity, politics, and religion, are becoming increasingly structured by branding logic and are turning into 'branded spaces'. For example, these authentic spaces are integrated and commodified by branding respectively through social media personalities, street artists, consumer activism and yoga. The business strategy of branding is therefore, integrating into society as a component that structures contemporary culture.

For instance, Banet-Weiser (2012) suggested that social media personalities illustrate the complexities between authenticity and commodification as they leverage their 'authentic lives' as personal brands to gain profit. She also argued that this reflects a larger cultural tension around the concept of authenticity as these social media personalities appeal to a sense of genuine and relatable content while simultaneously being inauthentic and carefully curated. She viewed the encroachment of brands onto culture as a response to the neoliberal economy, where market principles and economic logic are the basis for decision-making. Within this type of economy, cultural institutions are structured and positioned within a

framework of business (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Schram, 2018). These cultural institutions, such as higher education, museums or theatres, are therefore increasingly subjected to market principles such as competition, consumer choice and profitability. Since these institutions are expected to generate revenue, they may prioritise popular and more commercially viable forms of production. Therefore, within the neoliberal economy, Banet-Weiser described "cultural meanings [to be] organised by economic exchange" (p. 7). Furthermore, she viewed culture as ambivalent since "economic imperatives and 'authenticity' are [now] expressed and experienced simultaneously" (p. 5). This form of societal structuring allows brands to more easily encroach on authentic life, consequently guiding brands into a political arena that satisfies consumer demand for social and environmental sustainability (Edelman, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022). Therefore, Banet-Weiser's (2012) argued that authenticity cannot be analysed in a binary way as the line between authenticity, culture and branding is blurred and results in what she terms 'brand cultures'. And, consequently, these brand cultures are ambivalent in that they commodify social movements and initiatives, but at the same time might still harbour the potential for positive social change.

The concept of brand cultures extends to the realm of social activism and its integration with corporate profit and market incentives through various Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Cause-Marketing (CRM) and Brand Purpose practices. CSR has developed from a charitable act of philanthropy, endorsed by those who could afford it, to a social expectation. Early definitions of CSR centred around the act of giving as being above what is required by law (Enderle & Tavis, 1998; McWilliams & Siegel, 2001). Though later definitions focus more on the social outcomes of CSR and therefore appear to be more morally motivated, CSR is well summarised by Demetriou, Papasolomou and Vrontis (2010) as a corporate strategy to increase the financial success of a company by leveraging values of trust and a good reputation. Similarly, CRM is an extension of CSR into a more explicit marketing tactic. CRM is best exemplified by the 1983 *Statue of Liberty* campaign by American Express. This campaign helped fund the restoration of the Statue of Liberty in New York City. This campaign, credited as the first example of CRM, pledged to donate one cent per credit card transaction and one dollar per new card (Clegg et al., 2016). Over the course of the campaign, American Express raised $1.6 million dollars to go toward the restoration of the Statue of Liberty; however, to ensure the public knew about the campaign and the supposed goodwill of the company, the company spent $6 million dollars on marketing and promotional materials (Clegg et al., 2016). Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) critiqued the

authenticity of CSR and CRM practices as forms of commodity activism that are conceptualised as acting politically but through commodity and brand cultures. Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) expressed the ambivalence of brand cultures as they situated their argument on commodity activism between corporate appropriation and innovative forms of cultural intervention. However, in the decade since publishing their books (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012), the forms of commodity activism, which are conflated with forms of corporate social responsibility and cause-related marketing, have evolved and integrated into new types of brand strategy that encroach even further into the lives of consumers.

As brands take up more space within consumers' authentic lives, they are asked by these consumers to maintain a more 'authentic' brand purpose (Edelman, 2009, 2022). For example, in 2009, consumer market research suggested that charitable giving from corporations is no longer enough; a social purpose or dedication to good causes must be integrated into daily business operations (Edelman, 2009). According to global market research and consulting firm Ipsos (2017), brand purpose can be described as a strategic concept whereby a brand maintains a purpose extending further than its need to make a profit. Purpose then ultimately becomes the main philosophy behind all branding strategy. Ipsos (2017) claimed that purposes are often oriented in the arena of social responsibility and the idea of promoting social good, but also referred to instances where brand purpose can be used to define what the brand is attempting to achieve. Ipsos (2017) noted that the idea of brand purpose needs to be accompanied by authenticity and relevance to consumer attitude. Similarly, academic literature defines brand purpose as "the essence of the brand, what it stands for, the inspirational reason the brand exists beyond making a profit" (Mirzaei et al., 2021, p. 187).

In contrast to brand activism, brand purpose involves a company taking a stance on issues that are often not controversial and are seldomly disagreed upon. For example, Dove's brand purpose surrounds female body positivity, a topic rarely contested by the public (Dove, 2020; Millard, 2009; Murray, 2013). Dove's *Real Beauty* campaign began in 2004, with a strategy meeting at the Ogilvy & Mather advertising agency in London. Dove has since continued its theme of real beauty, placing it at the heart of every advertisement and campaign. The notion has since become the brand's purpose. Almost two decades later, Dove has firmly stood by its decision to commodify the societal issue of women's beauty standards

that the company promotes through mainstream media to sell its skincare products. Dove's brand purpose is tightly woven into its product and all its messaging.

Banet-Weiser (2012) maintained a similar perspective on CSR and branded politics in comparison to brand purpose, noting that some controversial issues could not be made into branded spaces, such as "pro-choice politics, queer issues, immigration rates or healthcare reforms" (p. 147). However, brand strategy has recently developed the sphere of branded politics to include more controversial topics. Brands are now using brand activism to become explicitly involved in everyday politics through the cultivation of debates around topics such as climate change (Ben & Jerry's, 2020), immigration and refugee rights (84 Lumber, 2017) and public land rights (Patagonia, n.d). While brand activism has so far mainly attracted the attention of industry literature, recent academic studies published on this topic discuss the phenomena in terms of its impact on consumer perception (Eyada, 2020; Shetty et al., 2019) and its strategic capabilities (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

As previously mentioned, the definition by Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) has guided the research for this dissertation since it reignites questions surrounding branding and the ambivalence of authenticity. In addition, his research spawns new questions around the definition and conceptualisation of brand activism and whether it genuinely copies the aesthetics of authenticity or if it can ever be truly authentic. To explore these questions, this research moves away from the corporate and consumer perspectives to focus on advertising practitioners who are tasked with creating such campaigns and, more specifically, to explore their creative process.

The following section will outline how the industry views brand activism in relation to the domain of branding before presenting the interview findings from the practitioners' perspectives.

2.1.3 Brand activism in the industry

As mentioned in chapter one, this research includes a content analysis that uses leading online industry trade publications, including *AdAge, AdNews, Adweek, B&T, Campaign Brief, Campaign Live* and *Mumbrella*. This content analysis aimed to explore brand activism from the advertising industry's perspective and how this perspective fits into the domain of branding. The methodology of this content analysis was covered more

extensively in chapter one. In review, relevant articles were identified using an exact match search of the term “brand activism”. The results of this search are displayed in Tables 4 and 5. Through detailed analysis, relevant articles were narrowed down and are listed in Table 6. The articles were published between 2017 and 2023. Relevant information from each article was coded and analysed to find recurring themes of how the industry conceptualises brand activism. This coding process is displayed in Table 5. These themes are: (1) categorisations of brand activism, (2) considerations of brand activism, and (3) the value of engaging in brand activism. Considerations of brand activism were then divided into the following five sub-themes: (1) alignment of internal and external policies, (2) tangible action, (3) authenticity, (4) risk and (5) impact.

TABLE 4 CONTENT ANALYSIS SEARCH RESULTS

Publication	Location	Total Articles	Relevant Articles
AdAge	United States	8	8
AdNews	Australia	5	4
AdWeek	United States	80	23
B&T	United States	10	6
Campaign Brief	Australia	9	1
Campaign Live	United Kingdom	39	29
Mumbrella	Australia	10	4

TABLE 5 CONTENT ANALYSIS CODING PROCESS

<table>
<tr><th>Initial Codes</th><th>Codes</th><th>Themes and Sub-Themes</th></tr>
<tr><td>Categorisations of brand activism</td><td>Types of Activism, Types of issues, Definition</td><td rowspan="3">Categorisations of brand activism
Considerations:
• alignment of internal and external policies
• tangible action
• authenticity
• risk
• impact
Value of engaging in brand activism
• Consumer demand
• Awards</td></tr>
<tr><td>Considerations of using brand activism</td><td>Business considerations, practical considerations</td></tr>
<tr><td>Reasons for engaging in brand activism</td><td>Industry praise, consumer opinion</td></tr>
</table>

TABLE 6 CONTENT ANALYSIS RELEVANT ARTICLES

	Date	Article Title	Author(s)
MUMBRELLA	07/12/18	*Opinion: Woke washing: What happens when marketing communications don't match corporate practice*	Jessica Vredenburg, Amanda Spry, Joya Kemper, Sommer Kapitan
	04/02/19	*Opinion: post Gillette: other brands are better at matching practice with talk, but don't get the publicity*	Jessica Vredenburg, Amanda Spry, Joya Kemper, Sommer Kapitan
	15/01/18	*Opinion: The intricacies of advertising in a post-Weinstein era*	Bec Brideson
	04/05/22	*80% of Australians want brands to use their power for real world change: nine & fiftyfive5*	Emma Shepherd
ADAGE	09/08/19	*How brand communicators should address societal marketing messages*	Shana Starr
	23/08/21	*Consumers more likely to shop with brands that mandate employee vaccination: new poll*	Ilyse Liffreing
	19/02/08	*Jan Jacobs, leo premutico*	AdAge Staff
	28/01/22	*What Spotify's Joe Rogan uproar means for brands*	Garett Sloane
	30/07/21	*How brands are reacting to the politicization of covid*	John Dioso
	12/06/08	*What the Kennel Club and Looney Tunes can teach you*	AdAge Staff
	28/05/21	*A politically divided America is forcing brands to choose sides*	Michael Applebaum
	24/11/21	*How brands must behave in 'post-purpose' market*	Thomas Kolster.
ADWEEK	17/02/17	*5 types of activism every brand should prepare for, even if you're not taking sides*	David Armano
	28/06/17	*More than ever, strong brands are focused on bridging their value with their values*	David Armano
	29/06/17	*Rethinking the Publicis pullout: Awards shows like Cannes are about more than just the awards*	Tracy Brady
	12/11/17	*LA brand stars: 15 flourishing West Coast marketers in culture-defining categories*	T.L. Stanley
	13/06/18	*These standout U.S. campaigns are up for one of Cannes' most coveted lions*	Doug Zanger
	05/09/18	*With Nike's longstanding brand purpose, featuring Colin Kaepernick made perfect sense*	David Armano
	23/01/19	*Brands dedicated to specific values stand out amidst the government shutdown*	Matt Baker
	06/06/19	*Brand activism is driving more meaningful connections*	Maria Garrido
	19/06/19	*2 creatives mock brand activism on the Croisette with 'Cannes u not?'*	Patrick Coffee
	17/09/19	*Brands are closing their doors in support of the global climate strike*	Ryan Barwick
	22/10/19	*People apparently don't want brands to take a stance on political issues, study says*	Minda Smiley
	25/06/20	*How to be a brand ally without adding to the noise*	Lindsay Vick
	24/07/20	*Why brands need to avoid being heroes in the world's story*	Doug Zanger
	05/08/20	*How Planet Fitness VP channels company culture into brand advocacy*	Jeremy Schumann
	24/11/20	*8 trends marketers are most excited about heading into 2021*	Al Mannarino
	18/01/21	*4 Super Bowl ad missteps brands should avoid*	Thomas Kolster
	05/05/21	*Why Ben & Jerry's criminal legal system reform efforts go beyond philanthropy*	Lucielle Salomon
	28/05/21	*This agency used McDonald's ad inventory to amplify its PSA about anti-Asian hate*	Tiffany Moustakas
	22/06/21	*Grounding your brand activism in the needs of marginalized communities*	Al Mannarino
	30/08/21	*Black Lives Matter changed the way consumers view brands forever*	Virna Sekuj
	07/03/22	*Twitter unveils 2022 Twitter trends report*	David Cohen
	09/03/22	*The golden arches theory may yet prove true in Russia's war on Ukraine*	David Kaplan
	No date	*Brand activism in the hot seat at Cannes Lions*	Charlotte Williams

Source	Date	Title	Author
B&T	17/07/17	*A millennial's view on what works (and what doesn't) in brand activism*	B&T Magazine
	18/12/18	*Tom Eslinger: "AI will mess with the creative industry like the internet & social did"*	John Bastick
	19/09/19	*Doing good is pretty cool, so get involved or get left behind*	B&T Magazine
	03/02/21	*2021: the year to be human*	B&T Magazine
	09/07/21	*Cannes Lions release official 2021 wrap-up, with all the big ideas from this year's competition*	B&T Magazine
	17/02/22	*Super Bowl: Sustainability becomes another feature like new chrome rims*	B&T Magazine
ADNEWS	24/06/19	*A bad dose of woke-washing is infecting advertising*	Chris Pash
	29/06/19	*Do consumers believe brand activism?*	Jessica Vredenburg, Amanda Spry, Joya Kemper, Sommer Kapitan
	15/08/19	*Authenticity, woke-washing and a tricky deal*	Chris Pash
	27/01/21	*Analysis - Rebranding calls are getting louder*	Amanda Spry And Jessica Vredenburg
CAMPAIGN BRIEF	25/11/19	*WARC releases Marketer's Toolkit 2020*	Ricki Green
CAMPAIGN LIVE	01/03/17	*Has brand purpose jumped the shark?*	Max Lenderman
	22/11/17	*Paperchase joins the ranks of Daily Mail detractors - but is this move a suppression of free speech?*	Robert Smith
	07/06/18	*As Lush understands, a principle only matters if it costs you something*	Dan Gavshon-Brady
	21/02/19	*Google and PayPal retain top spots as 'meaningful' brands*	Orianna Rosa Royle
	25/02/19	*What happened to Red Bull?*	Ravi Amaratunga Hitchcock
	28/03/19	*Could entertainment make brand activism actually work?*	Ravi Amaratunga Hitchcock
	29/03/19	*How Ikea, Adidas and Corona are helping consumers clean up their act*	Orianna Rosa Royle
	01/04/19	*Embrace the messy, complicated and difficult*	Rob Alderson
	13/04/19	*How to connect in an era of dwindling empathy*	Zaid Al-Zaidy
	21/06/19	*The Body Shop: the difference between activism and purpose*	Jessie Macneil-Brown
	02/07/19	*Here's why they won Cannes Lions: the jurors' reflections*	Campaign Staff
	11/07/19	*Why does the ad industry keep making racist mistakes?*	Ravi Amaratunga Hitchcock
	26/09/19	*Is it time to challenge our Western lens?*	Ravi Amaratunga Hitchcock
	13/01/20	*Year ahead for cultural trends: This is the age of conscious consumerism*	Brittaney Kiefer
	2/03/20	*Sex, drugs, violence, politics... and your brand?*	Ravi Amaratunga Hitchcock
	3/06/20	*Brands, STFU: actions speak louder than Instagram posts*	Ravi Amaratunga Hitchcock
	8/07/20	*This time it's different: Why we're challenging brands to help tackle systemic inequality*	Stefan Embry and Naria Frazer
	11/05/21	*Why Dove is stepping up its 'actionist' approach*	Alessandro Manfredi
	3/12/21	*How Mars gave voice to 10,000 woman to drive inclusivity*	Campaign Staff
	10/01/22	*2022 Predictions: How CMOs Can Build a Future-Focused Brand in the New Year*	Campaign US Staff
	14/01/22	*Unilever shareholder's attack on sustainability messaging 'flawed', experts say*	Arvind Hickman
	29/03/22	*Elvie "#LeaksHappen" by Don't Cry Wolf*	Campaign Staff
	27/04/22	*Elvie's use of out-of-home stunts is combatting online censorship*	Charlotte Rawlings
	26/05/22	*Movers and Shakers: Dentsu, Mail Metro Media, Havas, McCann, BBH, Bauer and more*	Shauna Lewis
	1/06/22	*Lessons for marketers from brands that have gotten Pride Month right*	Lola Bakare
	16/09/22	*'Going purpose': Patagonia set a precedent, but can others follow suit?*	Imogen Watson

n.d.	*TBWA's 65dB social-insight unit studies impact of BLM brand activism around the world*	Elaine Underwood
n.d.	*Consumers Want Brands to Heal Divisions - Now is not the Time Sit on the Sidelines*	Christine Wise
n.d.	*The nature of 'brand trust' is changing. Are you?*	Harlan Kennedy

The industry articles in the content analysis all discuss brand activism as an important and novel brand strategy. These articles reveal the value of engaging in brand activism and offer various methods and tactics to best utilise the strategy. They often use consumer sentiment to justify the importance of brand activism. For example, Emma Shepherd (2022), acting deputy director of *Mumbrella*, published an article entitled *80% Of Australians Want Brands to Use Their Power for Real World Change: Nine & Fiftyfive5,* which discussed brand activism as vital to consumers who feel that their governments are not acting on social or political issues. These consumers are relying more on brands to make up for policy shortfalls. Similarly, Ilyse Liffreing, a staff writer for *AdAge* (2021), discussed that at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Gen-Z consumers in the United States were more likely to shop with brands that mandated employee vaccinations, which at the time was a controversial stance to make. Another article by Michael Applebaum, the former editor of *BrandWeek* (2021), entitled *A Politically Divided America is Forcing Brands to Choose Sides* also discussed consumer demand on brands entering the realm of politics and taking stances on controversial topics. In contrast, one article by Minda Smiley (2019), an editor at *AdWeek*, reported that one survey found 54% of respondents believe brands should avoid taking sides on controversial debates and instead help to build common ground. However, it is also important to note that more than half of these respondents also described that most brands that use brand activism are participating in woke-washing (Smiley, 2019). The articles in the content analysis also discussed brand activism as an essential strategy for advertising creatives in the pursuit of winning industry awards. For example, Charlotte Williams (n.d.), the VP of Content for Cannes Lions, published an article entitled *Brand Activism in the Hot Seat at Cannes Lions.* She discussed the importance of brand activism as 'table stakes' for the new generation of consumers, stating, "The future of brand activism will be a hotly debated topic on the Cannes Lions festival stage" (Williams, n.d., para.4).

The industry articles also discussed the categorisations of brand activism. For example, David Armano (2017), a strategy director, discussed the 'activist economy', where he categorised five types of activism relevant to brands. These types are consumer, brand,

employee, spokesperson and media activism. Consumer and spokesperson activism refers to consumer backlash toward a brand or celebrity spokesperson. Consumer activism is expressed as consumers being "Empowered by social media and fuelled by political issues [and having] the power to quickly organize, assemble, vocalize support or express dissent" (Armano, 2017, para.7). With consumer and spokesperson activism, support or dissent is equally applied to a brand and their celebrity spokespeople. Employee activism refers to the brand's employees taking stances on political or social issues. Similarly, media activism refers to media outlets taking stances on issues. Lastly, Aarmano (2017) provided the following description of brand activism:

> Societal and political issues are forcing brands to evaluate where they stand or risk leaving their position open to interpretation by consumers. The uptick in brands grappling with this emerging reality, either proactively or reactively, is symptomatic of larger societal shifts and realities, including the re-emergence of populism, distrust in key institutions such as government and media, and world-shaping events like Trump's election or Brexit. (para. 8)

In total, Armano (2017) connected the five types of activism to argue that consumers, spokespeople, employees and the media are all involved in this activist economy. In this new economy, the brand is required to be aware of this polarised environment and "must be ready to ensure that the higher purpose of what they stand for aligns with how the company operates" (Armano, 2017, para. 10). In another article, Armano (2018) discussed the difference between brand purpose and brand activism. He explained how brand purpose shifts into brand activism when a brand takes a stance on a relevant and sometimes polarising issue or cause.

A variety of other articles published in trade journals discussed brand activism without providing exact definitions. Instead, these articles focused on the various considerations for utilising the strategy. For example, Australian Television Channel Nine's director of strategy, Toby Boon, stated that there are six key considerations, namely, the alignment of internal and external policies and positions, relevance of the brand activism issue to the brand and the brand's consumers, resultant tangible action, authenticity and accountability for past mistakes (Shepherd, 2022). Several of these considerations are echoed below by various other industry professionals and are revealed as sub-themes of the content analysis. These sub-themes are outlined below as (1) alignment of internal and external policies, (2) tangible action, (3) authenticity, (4) risk and (5) impact.

The alignment of internal and external policies and positions and the relevance of the issue to the brand and its consumers as a requirement for brand activism are echoed by several other industry professionals. This alignment is discussed using terms such as company values or mission. For example, Shana Starr (2019), the CEO of a PR and Social Media company called Bastion Elevate, suggested the importance of aligning campaign goals with the brand and its core audience. This importance is further explained by Starr (2019), stating "We need to make sure any social stance rings true to the core values of the company and is reflected in the executive board, brand message and potentially even in the company's product or service offering" (para. 7). Similarly, Liffreing (2021), a staff writer for *AdAge*, suggested that brand activism is now an essential component of strategy. However, it is imperative that a brand's "efforts are genuine and align with their practices" (para. 14). This point was re-iterated by Al Mannarino (2021), the senior producer of the *AdWeek* podcast, who discussed a concept called value-led activism, which is reflective of brand activism. According to Mannarino (2021), when engaging with any type of activism, the starting point has to be the core values of the brand.

In addition, the requirement for tangible action as a constituent part of a brand activism campaign is also stressed within industry discourse. According to Matthew McCarthy, the CEO of Ben and Jerry's,

> Activism at a corporate level comes down to a unified walk and talk. Businesses must make transparent their values and take actions to address real social and/or environmental ills. If you're not willing to act, there's no sense in getting involved in the game because the people you serve are too smart, too savvy, and will call B.S. (Dioso, 2021, para. 8)

Eshan Ponnadurai, the Global Head of Brand and Consumer Marketing for WhatsApp, also expressed the importance of action as part of any brand activism campaign (Mannarino, 2020). Ponnadurai stated, "Pure messaging and statements are not enough—it's action, providing solutions via your products and commitment, that matter" (Mannarino, 2020, para. 6).

Lastly, authenticity is a prevalent concept in the discourse of brand activism among industry professionals who express it through terms such as 'genuine' and 'meaningful'. For example, while discussing the rise of brand activism due to a growing mistrust in governments to foster social change, Boon noted that consumers are "holding brands to a

higher standard than ever before, and authenticity is key" (Shepherd, 2022, p. para.7). Similarly, Maria Garrido (2019), the chief insights officer at the advertising agency, Havas, suggested brand activism as imperative for companies wishing to emotionally engage with their consumers. She suggested brand activism to be part of "creating and participating in a genuine, meaningful dialogue that's good for business, both figuratively and literally" (Garrido, 2019, p. para.8). This idea that authenticity is required for brand activism is re-iterated by Wise, the chief strategy officer of the advertising agency DNA Seattle (Smiley, 2019). Wise expressed that some brands are able to align themselves with social, cultural or environmental causes through brand activism. However, it "depends on the authenticity of the brand and the issue" (Smiley, 2019, p. para.5). Brand reporter Ryan Barwick (2019) also focused on brand authenticity when he stated that "in order for a brand's activism to be effective, it has to feel genuine and align with the brand's previous messaging" (para. 18). In addition, while reviewing how the Black Lives Matter movement impacted consumers' view of brands, Virna Sekuj (2021), vice president of market research firm GWI, noted the importance for brands to be both sincere and transparent when engaging with brand activism. This transparency was rationalised by Sekuj (2021) as a countermeasure towards woke-washing. He noted that without this transparency, consumers "will dig beyond the jazzy headlines to understand true corporate accountability" (para.18). This point was re-iterated by a senior marketing director named Lindsay Vick (2020), who discussed the importance of understanding the brand's history and positioning before asking "how you can authentically and best support the conversation" (para.7). She then cautioned that brands should scrutinise their actions in the same way otherwise they may become identified as a performative ally (Vick, 2020). Armano (2018) also explained how authenticity was tied to the success of a brand activism campaign. He stated that while brand activism carries a certain risk, it also has a high potential for reward "depending on the motivation and authenticity of the brand's words and deeds" (Armano, 2018, para. 6).

The industry discourse surrounding brand activism also discussed the risks of brand activism, namely the stigma of woke-washing, pinkwashing, greenwashing, being 'tone-deaf' or engaging in performative allyship. Sekuj (2021) illustrated the term 'performative allyship' by discussing the time at the height of the Black Lives Matter movement protests when companies were Instagramming black squares with the protest hashtag without following through with any further action. Sekuj (2021) noted that consumers now demand transparency and accountability from these brands. In one instance, Thomas Kolster (2021),

who is an author and international speaker on advertising and sustainability, implied that even campaigns that raise enormous amounts of money for causes can still be considered in-authentic and classified as woke-washing. He used the phrase “commercials that are more brag than bang” (para. 7) to illustrate how some brands pay more money for the media cost of their campaigns than they actually donate to the respective causes. Kolster (2021) stated, “I so often hear that actions speak louder than words, and yes, that can be true, but then let me see more real impact, more bang” (para. 7). Starr (2019) also made note of the risks that brands take when taking part in brand activism, namely of being perceived as tone-deaf. Similarly, Garrido (2019) expressed how brand activism isn’t about hijacking or co-opting a social issue just because it is a trendy topic. He stressed the importance of remembering that using such strategies is often accompanied by increased scrutiny by activists, the public and consumers (Garrido, 2019).

Lastly, the industry discourse also paints the impact of brand activism as almost exclusively positive both in terms of societal benefits and company profit. For example, Starr (2019) stated that “Brand activism makes for great conversation and, if executed properly, can lead to great PR” (para.1). At the same time, however, Starr briefly mentioned that brand activism can also have a negative impact on the brand due to consumer backlash. Mannarino (2021) was also very optimistic about the power of brand activism to impact society. While he used the term ‘value-led activism’, he was referencing what this research defines as brand activism. He explained brand activism as ‘people-powered movements’, which he suggested are the best and most effective method of implementing change. Mannarino (2021) argued that the role of businesses and brands is to help grow social rights movements and make the organisations and causes more mainstream.

The above content analysis offers insight into how the industry categorises and characterises brand activism. The industry literature presents brand activism as a distinct strategy from traditional branding practices. As discussed by Armano (2017) and other industry professionals, it involves brands taking a stance on relevant and often polarising social or political issues. In this "activist economy," the following five types of activism are explained to be relevant to brands: consumer, spokesperson, employee, brand, and media activism. To successfully engage in brand activism, brands and industry professionals must consider several key factors. The first is the alignment of internal and external policies and positions, ensuring that their activism aligns with their core values and mission. Tangible

action is also crucial, as brands must take real steps to address social and environmental challenges, not merely rely on messaging. Authenticity is emphasised, with consumers holding brands to higher standards and demanding genuineness in their activism efforts. However, brand activism is not without risks. The term "woke-washing" is used to describe inauthentic or performative allyship, where brands may claim support for social causes without following through with meaningful actions. Brands must be cautious not to co-opt issues for their benefit or appear tone-deaf, as such actions can lead to consumer backlash and reputational damage. Despite the risks, brand activism is seen as having a positive impact on both society and company profits. Properly executed, it can generate positive PR and meaningful conversations, making it a powerful tool for driving change and promoting social rights movements. One perspective that is missing from this literature is a critical view of the societal and ethical problems that may arise from brand activism. This perspective will be discussed in more detail in chapter five. In addition, there is a lack of industry attention towards the potential negative impacts of brand activism and also poorly executed campaigns. These missing perspectives from the industry trade press is a relevant observation for future research.

The following section of this chapter will now review the findings of this dissertation's research, looking into the creative practitioner's perspective on how brand activism has impacted the domain of branding. Utilising a practitioner's perspective contributes to the understanding of brand activism and sheds light on the complexities of brand activism and its various characteristics and categorisations.

2.2 Findings– Brand activism in the domain of branding

As previously established, this dissertation uses the Systems Model of Creativity that proposes that the creative process can only be explained by considering the interrelation of the domain, field and the individual (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). This chapter focuses on the domain, which "[consists] of information – a set of rules, procedures, and instructions for action" (p. 229). During the interviews, the participants were asked various questions about the rules and key characteristics of brand activism. Practitioners were asked questions that help to describe the domain, such as "Is brand activism now a requirement for all brands? Or is it optional?" In addition, they were asked to define brand activism and were prompted to describe how the creative process of ideating and creating this type of campaign differs from a traditional one. All practitioners were very cognisant of the concept of brand activism, but several found it difficult to articulate a coherent description.

Based on the responses provided by the participants, six major themes emerged that explain the practitioner's perspectives of brand activism and how this strategy has impacted the domain of branding. The first theme explores what practitioners think about brand activism as being a mandatory strategy for all brands. This is followed by five key characteristics of brand activism as indicated by the practitioners' definitions and descriptions. These are: (1) brand activism campaigns illustrate a change in society, (2) these campaigns must have a purpose but this purpose does not have to be permanent (3) they must result in tangible action, (4) they have an inherent and anticipated risk resulting in an increased sense of responsibility, and (5) they are made with a proactive practitioner-related motivation. The findings provided in this chapter illustrate how the interviewed practitioners conceptualise brand activism and explore how it impacts the rules, procedures and knowledge systems of the domain of branding.

2.2.1 Brand activism: required or optional?

The first theme discussed in this section relates to how brand activism impacts the domain of branding. During the interviews, practitioners were asked if they thought brand activism was now a 'must' for brands or whether it was still optional. This question is relevant considering the aforementioned surveys, like the Edelman Trust Barometer, which suggest that the vast majority of consumers now expect brands to take a stand on social and political issues (Edelman, 2019, 2021, 2022).

Interestingly, practitioners gave a diversity of opinions regarding the need for brands to participate in brand activism. For example, Participant G did not believe all brands need to participate in brand activism. She stated, “It’s fine to just do plain old advertising. It’s fine to just sell.” That being said, she was still really supportive of any brand wanting to take part in brand activism as long as it is authentic. She explained authenticity as having the ‘correct stance’, which she meant as properly aligned with the brand's overall history and current values:

> If there’s something that’s related to your brand, it’s great for you to have a stance on it if you feel you have the correct stance. Correct stance doesn’t mean that there’s a right or wrong, but… it’s right for your brand, and it makes sense for your audience.

She then offered one reason why she did not think that every brand needs to participate in brand activism. She described that if all brands did this, then the narrative would be over-saturated and “to a certain extent that purpose loses its essence… like if Nike and Adidas and Puma and all of these people were talking about the same topics… I just want some trainers, you know? So it doesn’t… need to be so intense all the time.”

Participant I also expressed a similar perspective to Participant G, explaining that not every brand needs to participate in brand activism. Participant I also noted that he felt as a strategy, it has become oversaturated, and he alluded to woke-washing in the industry, stating, “It seems like every brand feels the need to speak up.” However, he was adamant that brands should be politically active only if the brand lines up with the topic or issue, otherwise, it is inauthentic:

> You don’t necessarily need to hear how paper towels feels about the election… some brands don’t make sense, and it feels like you’re just inserting yourself in a conversation that no one asked you to be in.

Participant I was then asked how he distinguishes which brands ‘make sense’, and he explained that it depends on “what they’re founded on and what their purpose is.” He explained that he based this decision on the brand’s history using the example of *The Talk* campaign for P&G, which addressed the history of racialised police brutality in the United States:

> When we did *The Talk,* they had this whole long-running program and other programs to kind of brand that voice further, so it made sense. But just to jump in on the conversation, no one really needs that.

Participant N noted that all brands should participate in some form of brand activism. However, he also made it clear that this stems from his own personal agenda, as he loves creating this type of work. He explained that soon, all brands will be required to take some sort of activist position. However, in his view, this was based on consumer market trends. He noted, "[Brands] need to stand for something because people are demanding it." However, this explanation immediately led him to the concept of authenticity and the need for it as brand activism becomes more popular and more present in the advertising landscape:

> I think we are going to have another question… the real meaning of it… [Do] they really want to communicate and take a stand? Or [are they] only looking [out] for their pockets?

Participant H also used the concept of authenticity to determine which brands should participate in brand activism. She stated, "It really depends on how genuine they are… I think they should have a perspective [only] if it's true to them." She further elaborated how she was against brands that participate in woke-washing, and because of this, not all brands should be required to use brand activism:

> I just feel really anti-tokenism from brands who… want to… associate themselves with a cause to make them look better [and] for no other reason, or they're just like, 'Oh, sweet… we'll do a pride flag in this ad, and that's us kind of being brand activist' or something. That doesn't sit well with me at all.

She reiterated the importance of being genuine to participate in brand activism. She explained that if a brand has the "will and the intent and the influence and they are really passionate about an issue [and] the right reasons are there", then she would be very supportive of using this strategy.

Similarly, Participant A also anticipated that due to consumer demand, brand activism will soon be required by all brands, stating that "People are now asking brands to do it." Aside from consumers, Participant A used the term 'people' to also include employees who work for the brand. He described this as a recent "political and philosophical" shift in thinking amongst these employees:

> We want inclusion. We want equality, we want to work for a better world, and we want a greener world. Inside big corporations, [this] thinking is changing.

Participant E also noted that consumers now expect brand activism from modern brands, particularly if the brand is targeting younger audiences. This expression caused him to refer to brand activism as “entry-level table stakes” for these types of brands, noting that “it really has to be ingrained within the brand.” While he expressed brand activism to be important for new companies targeting Gen-Z consumers, he also noted that it does not need to be the main branding strategy:

> You don’t have to talk about it all the time. You can do it. You’re doing it. It’s important stuff to do. But maybe find other things to talk about. More interesting things to talk about.

Participant P also related brand activism to a need driven by consumers. However, she more specifically related this to Gen-Z consumers, rationalising that brands catering for a younger generation would probably see brand activism as an essential part of their overall strategy. While she expressed the use of brand activism to “be a really positive thing”, she still cautioned that it needs to be ‘authentic’ stating that it must be “the right brand to be using those kind of messages.”

Participant B also noted that brand activism is required by all companies. However, the way he worded his response implied he was referring more to large corporations rather than small businesses. Participant B’s rationale refers to the concept of corporate social responsibility and the impact that these big corporations have in structuring society:

> Companies play a huge part in the world we live in, whether it's from hiring [or] how they produce… to their tax money. They have huge control over the countries they reside in, over the planet. From government issues [like] lobbyists, to whatever else…If you agree with capitalism or you don’t, one thing everyone has to agree on is how big a part huge corporations and these companies play in the world we live in and how much… new initiative and laws… specifically come into effect based around how companies operate.

He further elaborated that because society is structured around large corporations, these companies “have [a] huge responsibility to… make sure they’re doing the right thing or trying to do the right thing.” To which he described brand activism to be part of ‘doing the right thing’.

Participant Q had a similar perspective to Participant B, noting that any brand can take part in some sort of brand activism. He even stated that, in his experience, most brands want to participate in brand activism. However, he expressed that these acts of activism could not be done on a day-to-day basis. He explained that brands have two main agendas, the first of which is always to sell their products and make a profit. The second is to participate in any form of social or environmental activism.

> If you're an ice cream brand, you want to sell ice cream, right? It's super simple. But on top of that, a brand has a conscious. So they put money aside and time aside to be involved in the conversation…it's our job to find a relevant thing.

Participant Q elaborated that it is very important for brands to have some sort of activist perspective, not only because "consumers are demanding it" but because they have the resources to make a greater impact. He explained this impact by comparing it to his own personal activist pursuits and convictions:

> I try to be zero waste. I buy cotton diapers for my baby. It sucks. But it's part of the deal. But I cannot help feeling that it's a very small thing in a very big problem. But again, if I shop at IKEA, I demand IKEA to… do their part. And if they don't, I will never shop at IKEA again. I think everybody thinks this way now, so now it's required.

The above findings present practitioners' opinions and perspectives as diverse and varied regarding whether brand activism is required or optional for all brands. While there was no consensus, the diversity of perspectives offers insight into how the domain of branding is impacted by brand activism. Some practitioners expressed that brand activism is optional for brands. For example, Participant G, Participant I and Participant H expressed that not every brand needs to participate in brand activism. They acknowledged that traditional advertising and selling can still be effective for some brands. Participant G, while supportive of brand activism if authentic, did not consider it a requirement for all brands. Similarly, Participant H noted that not all brands should be required to engage in brand activism, but those who do should be genuine and true to the cause they support. Participant I shared a similar perspective and expressed concerns about oversaturation and the danger of inauthenticity.

On the other hand, some practitioners expressed that brand activism is required. For example, Participant N and Participant A are proponents of brand activism being necessary

for all brands. Participant N outlined that all brands should participate in some form of brand activism due to consumer demand, and Participant A explained that consumers and employees are now asking brands to engage in activism. These practitioners explained brand activism to be an essential part of a brand's overall strategy.

Some practitioners expressed that brand activism is required for certain brands. Participant E and Participant P explained brand activism as important for specific types of brands, especially those targeting younger audiences like Gen-Z. Participant E referred to brand activism as "entry-level table stakes" for such brands. Participant P rationalised that brands catering to a younger generation might see brand activism as essential for their overall strategy. Similarly, Participant B and Participant Q expressed the view that brand activism is required for larger corporations. They explained that because big corporations have a significant influence and impact on society, they have a greater responsibility to participate in brand activism as part of their corporate social responsibility efforts. Therefore, these practitioners see brand activism to have impacted the overall branding strategy required by certain brands based on their target audiences and their overall influence.

2.2.2 A change in society

The second theme to emerge from the practitioners' definitions of brand activism revolved around a change in society. According to practitioners, brand activism campaigns look ahead and show what society and culture could be. In contrast, traditional campaigns may reflect society in its current form. This theme was expressed directly and indirectly using phrases that discussed social change. For example, Participant A described brand activism as a strategy that looks to the future, ultimately holding the view that most of the time, society and advertising are living in the past. He explained this by stating, "[For example] when you see students get to the agency, the first ideas that they have are ideas that they already saw in other brands and other campaigns, so they live in the past, and that can't change the future." Participant A's definition reflects the belief that traditional brand-building or sales activation advertising campaigns reflect culture and society in their current form. In contrast, brand activism reflects an ideal future imagined by the practitioners themselves. He applied this sentiment to his work on Chevrolet's *Lost Roads* campaign, which aimed to change the social narrative surrounding the area of Caquetá in Colombia. This area was previously controlled by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and its history has been largely characterised by war and control by a Guerrilla army (Fontecha-Tirado, 2019). In 2016, a

peace treaty was signed between the Colombian government and FARC, opening the region to Colombian citizens after 52 years of continuous war (Fontecha-Tirado, 2019). Prior to developing this campaign, Participant A explained that Columbian society was living in the past as they still perceived these ex-guerrillas as criminals, even though the war was over. He expressed that his campaign would bring society forward and de-stigmatise the people living in the Caquetá region:

> To say to society, you know what, they deserve a change, and they are doing things to change the future of our country, and if we don't change that thought, we're going to keep saying … the only thing that you are capable of is to be a Guerrilla … With brand activism, we have the power to get the budget of the brands and the [influence] of the brands to change the thinking of society.

Similarly, Participant B also related his definition of brand activism as something that depicts a change in society. He provided a more concise definition, which is similar to how industry literature discusses brand activism. For him, brand activism is characterised by

> brands actually doing something where they take a stance or a role or a view which actually changes social behaviour … [actually] it doesn't have to be social, it could be environmental, but it could be changing behaviour for the better.

Like Participant B's definition and those provided in the industry literature, both Participant H and Participant K stressed that brand activism is about creating change within society. According to Participant H, brand activism is "when brands are taking on board causes, and … using their platforms to be activists in some way, voicing something, maybe for the people or for the greater good. It is about brands sort of making changes or wanting to make changes." Here, Participant H alludes to the potential limitations of the tangible actions of brand activism in making societal changes. While brand activism may not be able to actually change society, it may be more dependent on the 'intention' of the brand to make these changes. Similarly, Participant K related his definition to creating change, stating, "I think it's brands… standing behind the cause and using their platform to really either elevate that cause, you know, drive it forward, create a change."

Participant O's definition was inspired by the book *Goodvertising: Creative Advertising That Cares* (2012), which advocates that the "advertising industry can make a real, world-changing difference" (Kolster, 2012, p. 9). She related her definition to this concept of "good-vertising." She explained this concept, stating that "it's about how

communication can in some ways change the mind of society … like peoples' mindset and behaviour, and not just to sell or make a brand huge, but to help society, to change minds."

Participant F did not provide an exact definition for brand activism but likened the concept to equality, inclusion and "some sort of purpose". Participant F emphasised that brand activism requires more than brands putting money into social causes, but it is about brands making change, which in the long run is "not important for the brand, [but] it's important for the people that love your brand."

The above findings demonstrate how brand activism has impacted the domain of branding by introducing a shift in focus and illustrating purpose as a key characteristic. These practitioners highlight that brand activism campaigns look towards the future and strive to create a positive change in society and culture. In contrast, traditional campaigns tend to reflect the current state of society without necessarily envisioning or actively promoting a better future. These practitioners understand brand activism to be a communication strategy that extends beyond standard brand building or selling products and services to promote some sort of social, political or environmental agenda. Collectively, they appear to hold the belief that brand activism has the power to actually initiate or inspire societal change as they see the strategy as going beyond mere token gestures or financial contributions to social causes. Brand activism requires a genuine commitment to making a difference and addressing societal challenges. Some practitioners acknowledge that the impact of brand activism may not solely rely on tangible actions but may also rely on the intention to create positive change. These explanations also demonstrate that practitioners are aware of the amount of ideological power that brands hold in shaping public opinion as they believe their brand activism campaigns to be able to change societal opinion. This highlights a debate in advertising scholarship that has been going on for decades that discusses the role and impact that advertising has on society and whether or not it shapes or mirrors culture (Lantos, 1987). In this instance, practitioners appear to believe the former.

2.2.3 Purpose, but not permanent

The third theme that emerged from the definitions provided by the practitioners is that brand activism employs the concept of 'purpose' but in a non-permanent way. In these instances, the various practitioners used the concept of 'brand purpose' to frame their understanding of brand activism. For example, Participant J expressed that brand activism

emerged as a tactic that mirrors the brand purpose strategy. The concept of brand purpose epitomises the branding and business strategies of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), otherwise referred to as Not-for-Profits (NFPs). As previously described, brand purpose is a strategic concept where a brand maintains a purpose beyond its need to make a profit (Ipsos, 2017). This purpose ultimately becomes the main philosophy behind all branding strategy.

The outdoor retail company Patagonia (2023) serves as a paradigmatic example of brand purpose as it strives to protect the planet. This is illustrated in their business decisions as well as their promotional communication materials. Participant J expressed that this strategy was adopted when “brands discovered they need to have their own voice [on social issues].” Purpose is therefore at the heart of brand activism. Participant L shared this sentiment, simply stating, “I think it’s the brand telling people what they stand for.” Based on these two descriptions, the main difference between brand purpose and brand activism is that the latter does not have to encompass the totality of the brand. For example, Patagonia’s brand purpose centres around environmental advocacy. Both its business and brand strategy revolve around this purpose. Patagonia also participates actively in brand activism. For example, in 2018, the company launched a lawsuit against the Trump administration in the United States over the reduction of protected public land (Patagonia, n.d). This act was later accompanied by a documentary to further spread awareness on the issue of dwindling public land. In contrast, an example of a company that only participates in brand activism and may not have a brand purpose is Air BnB. Considering, for example, the company’s *Until We All Belong* campaign, which advocated for marriage equality (Airbnb, 2017). Since this campaign launched, it has been observed that Air BnB has not made LGBTQ plus rights a core part of its brand strategy, nor has it continued to advocate for the community.

Participant S offered a similar perspective, expressing brand activism to be a strategy that uses a purpose to make the world a better place and combat the opinion that “advertising is largely responsible for making the world a worse place.”

> I do believe that brands need to have purpose … [this is] kind of overused already … but in my opinion, if a brand has a real purpose, it can start doing [something] that resembles activism.

Here, Participant S referenced the path from purpose to activism. He described purpose as the starting point towards engaging in brand activism. However, it is also interesting to note that

he referenced brand activism as being authentic by stating it first needs to have a 'real purpose'. He then juxtaposed this idea, stating that it 'resembles activism' as if to say that this real purpose is used to manufacture the aesthetics of activism. Participant S further explained his point by re-iterating the fact that these companies are businesses and, therefore, still need to make a profit:

> So, brand activism, in my opinion, would be brands doing their own bit to make the world a better place in a way that aligns with their brand mission and in a way that it kind of fits the brand proposition … because, of course … it's still a business, right? So, they should be solving the problems that are close to what the brand sells to what the brand wants to be.

Here, Participant S reiterated one of the differences between brand purpose and brand activism that was also mentioned by Participant J and Participant L, namely that brand activism does not have to be an all-encompassing part of the brand and company but just needs to be utilised "in a way that kind of fits the brand proposition."

Participant I explicitly made the distinction between a for-profit and not-for-profit purpose, which was alluded to by the practitioners above:

> It's a brand basically demonstrating their values as a brand geared around a cause … it hopefully benefits society … A lot of what we have done in that space is for public service or non-profit, but I almost think that brand activism [occurs when] a brand whose main purpose isn't necessarily a cause, but they take on a cause, and they go beyond, so it's like a for-profit brand that expresses a perspective or point of view on a cause.

The statement provided by Participant I clearly distinguishes between brand purpose and brand activism by suggesting that the cause being addressed in a brand activism campaign does not have to be the focal point of the company's entire branding strategy.

Participant K referred to brand activism as highly emotional, 'purpose-driven' work and considered this to be a factor of difference from traditional advertising campaigns. Initially, Participant K said that both brand activism and traditional campaigns that focus on either sales or brand building are similar in the sense that they both aim to change behaviour:

> Whether you're trying to sell a piece of gum or you're trying to get them to go out and vote, both of those things are trying to change behaviour … so a lot of the

> process of it is similar … you just want to find the most impactful and original way to do that.

Even though Participant K expressed the two types of campaigns as conceptually similar due to their shared end goal, he also suggested that his campaign, *Boards of Change* for the City of Chicago, was "pretty different from a lot of the ideas you see out in the world". This campaign brought registration booths to areas of low voting turnout that were heavily populated by people of colour. This campaign encouraged these residents to create systematic change using the power of democracy. Participant K then referred to brand activism as being highly emotional and 'purpose-driven' by stating, "In a lot of purpose-driven work, I think you lean into that emotion just a bit more."

Similarly, Participant G related brand activism to a "purpose campaign or a purpose-driven brand". Participant G explained this as a trend that had spiked post-COVID. However, she attributed this desire for purpose and, more specifically, authentic purpose to the advertising agencies themselves and not the brands:

> [Brands are] realising that … [they] need to have… a purpose, [they] need to have something that [they] stand for … but the thing is, a lot of brands are doing it just because they want to do it … I think a lot of agencies are trying to push their brands to actually have a proper purpose, and as I was mentioning, it's … linked to culture nowadays, especially in the Middle East. So we're bringing in sustainability a bit, but we're educating around that, rather than just having a sustainability piece, it's more about education.

Here, Participant G suggested that while brands may want to have a 'purpose,' it is the advertising agencies that are pushing these brands to have a 'proper purpose'. She distinguished purpose and proper purpose by comparing a campaign around sustainability to a campaign that educates around the subject, the former of which implies that it has some form of tangible impact.

Similarly, Participant S also related agency and individual practitioner motivations as distinguishing factors between brand activism and traditional campaigns. Participant S described the creative process for brand activism campaigns to be similar to working for an NFP or NGO, describing purpose to be the differentiator from traditional campaigns. He explained that in traditional campaigns, practitioners are motivated to be involved in attempts

to get ‘credit’ for the ideas. He explained that when working on big campaigns such as Super Bowl ads, everyone wants to be a part of it and to have their name on it:

> Even if you don’t contribute anything … a lot of people build their entire careers like this, they just come to one meeting, and then you can see the work in their portfolio … I think people have this tendency of trying to … rationalise their presence. For example, you have a meeting, just twenty people … everyone who is in the room, even if they don’t have anything to contribute, everyone tries to say something because they need to justify their presence, ergo their salary. And at the end of that, you get 20 different bullshit ideas because someone just felt pressure to say whatever.

In contrast, with brand activism campaigns, which he related to his experience working with NGOs, he explained purpose instead of ego to be the main motivator:

> With NGOs and basically brands that can flex their social and environmental purpose, you get people who are united by the goal, by the purpose … They want to do something.

The above findings further demonstrate how brand activism has extended the concept of brand purpose and has impacted the domain of branding. Brand purpose is outlined above as a strategic concept where a brand maintains a purpose beyond its need to make a profit. It is this purpose that becomes the main philosophy behind all branding strategies. Brands with a purpose often align their entire business and brand strategies around specific causes or missions. Purpose, therefore, becomes central to the brand’s identity and values, and it guides its actions and initiatives. In comparison, the practitioners illustrated brand activism as employing the concept of purpose but this purpose did not have to be a permanent part of the overall brand strategy. Brand activism is described as using a purpose to make the world a better place while still being aligned with the brand’s mission and proposition, and unlike brand purpose, it does not require the cause to be the focal point of the entire brand strategy. Similar to brand purpose, practitioners explained brand activism to be highly emotional and ‘purpose driven’ and must lean into the cause to evoke meaningful changes and impact. However, brands that engage in brand activism may take on social or environmental causes even if their primary business purpose is not directly related to those causes.

2.2.4 Tangible action

The fourth theme to emerge from the practitioner-provided definitions of brand activism revolves around brands taking tangible action about a cause or issue. The following practitioners express the importance of campaigns being 'real', which means that they need to result in some sort of tangible action. For example, Participant C described brand activism as something that "needs to be real", using the following example to elaborate on what he meant by real. According to Participant C, "Let's say… a meat company is doing something for veganism, it's fake… It's not going to happen." He noted the misalignment between the brand's actions and their words to define it as 'not real'. Adding on to this narrative of being real and resulting in action, Participant N stated the following.

> [It is] like putting their purpose in action … it's finally doing something real, not only putting it on a board [and] saying, okay, this is our value, this is our purpose… This is the stage that we are leaving advertising [and] brands need to take action … so this is the real meaning of brand activism … when brands start to take action.

It is quite clear that Participant N sees tangible action as the most important aspect of brand activism. This sentiment was mirrored by Participant R, who described brand activism as "the way brands take a stance on societal issues and, more importantly, put their actions behind them in order to make an impact in the world." Participant R considered tangible action as a determinant of authenticity. He described action to separate clients who are co-opting a moment from clients who participate in creating an "authentic actual piece of activism." He elaborated on this point by stating that it comes down to the standards to which brands hold themselves accountable:

> [It's the] willingness to live up to what you're saying and the standards of which to do what you're doing. And that's what makes the difference between the two categories of companies. [Those] that are looking at it from an 'it's trendy and commercial standpoint' to 'no, we're a group of humans who have to go to work every day, and we want to be excited about what we do for a living, so we're going to make sure we go the extra mile.'

In addition, Participant R mentioned that the metrics used to determine the success of a campaign differ for brand activism versus traditional campaigns. He expressed that the traditional metrics of views, clicks, or even return on investment in sales do not always directly apply to brand activism campaigns but include things like increasing support around a cause or movement.

Participant E offered a more critical definition of brand activism, but it was still rooted in the narrative of tangible action. Participant E said he had heard clients use the term brand activism, and he described it as being a part of the 'world of activism' where "brands do stuff [and] act… in a way that they are seen to be aware of [and] know the things that are going on in the world [and] making sure that the brand feels like it's modern and contemporary." Participant E's description is obviously cognisant of brand activism as a necessary strategy to stay relevant in the market. He elaborated on what he thought to be the theoretical origins:

> A lot of it came about because, for a long period of time, advertising was just about saying something to the world. Brand activism … it's not just saying, it's also doing, it's being seen to be doing stuff, and you know, walking the walk as much as talking the talk.

Participant Q offered a comprehensive description of brand activism, stating it is "brands taking up responsibility on one end and being part of important conversations and sometimes leading the conversation." Participant Q further elaborated, noting the power that large brands have to "back up really important causes or really important conversations that are relevant to their brands." He also described brand activism as a way for brands to counter-act their part in societal problems, whether these be cultural or environmental problems, stating that brands "need to take [on] more responsibility, and that's their way to do it. [What's] very important is they have to act, they don't have to say. [They] can do both, but if [they] don't act, then [they're] just doing nonsense."

Overall, the perspectives above highlight how brand activism impacts the domain of branding as practitioners emphasise the central role of tangible action as a defining characteristic of brand activism. Whether it is addressing societal problems, participating in meaningful conversations, or supporting causes, the practitioners expressed that brand activism requires brands to actively engage and make a real impact in the world. They stated that it is not enough for brands to merely communicate their values through advertising or statements; instead, they are expected to actively engage in real-world initiatives that contribute to various causes. In addition, the practitioners see tangible action as closely related to authenticity and accountability. Practitioners view authentic brand activism as a genuine commitment to social issues backed by consistent action and adherence to self-imposed standards. In contrast, traditional branding strategies may be perceived as more

superficial or opportunistic. Practitioners also discussed brand activism as requiring different metrics for success compared to traditional branding strategies. While traditional campaigns often use metrics like views, clicks and sales, brand activism is evaluated based on factors such as the level of support generated for a cause or movement and the societal impact of a brand's tangible actions. This shift in metrics reflects the focus on impact and engagement rather than solely on commercial outcomes. Practitioners also recognise brand activism as allowing brands to take responsibility for their role in societal problems. They recognised that brand activism is a way to counteract a brand's negative impact on cultural or environmental issues. This view illustrates how brand activism adds and rewrites the rules, procedures and instructions for action in the domain of branding.

2.2.5 Anticipated risk resulting in increased sense of responsibility

The fifth theme that emerged from the practitioner definitions of brand activism revolved around the concept of inherent and anticipated risk, resulting in an increased sense of responsibility. Practitioners expressed that brand activism campaigns carry more risk and require an extra layer of sensitivity during the ideation process. This anticipated risk results in an increased sense of responsibility by practitioners. Understanding this type of risk is considered to be an inherent part of brand activism and, therefore, adds to the knowledge system required to be drawn upon and utilised in the ideation process. For example, Participant C expressed that a campaign that is focused on a social cause and that aims to "start the conversation… [to] hear both sides and… [to] have an opinion" demands much more from the team and from the clients. He elaborated on this point as a matter of risk for both parties. He described traditional campaigns as less risky for the client and the practitioner because results can be anticipated by research and data, for example, a campaign selling shoes being microtargeted to users who have already viewed the shoes online. He stated, "Sometimes your creative criteria has to be above research or data and that needs someone to take a step and say, let's do this because it will be good." Similarly, Participant E identified that the use and creation of a brand activism campaign is 'harder':

> You have to deal with the edges of things in terms of how comfortable [the brand is] about saying certain things because…when you're in that creative space, invariably… as creatives, we will push or want to be as provocative as possible and more often than not it becomes a question of comfort and how much risk a client is willing to take.

Participant G also identified risk and responsibility as an important part of the domain of brand activism and the ideation process. To Participant G, brand activism has the power to enact some sort of cultural change. Therefore, she suggested that there is an increased sense of risk and required sensitivity when ideating brand activism campaigns due to the brevity of the message and output:

> I think it differs because you're really… creating some kind of cultural change… and I'm not making someone spend money on a product, I'm doing something that is much more meaningful, much bigger [and] it could have a negative effect, and so I have to be a lot more careful, especially when a brand is attached to it.

Participant Q echoed the above point, noting the importance of being 'careful'. He elaborated that there are more things to think about and account for when making brand activism campaigns. This difference can make the ideation and creative process much more complicated compared to a traditional campaign.

> You have to be way more careful, which I think is super interesting compared to selling a TV, for example, [which is] straightforward. [That] whole process is just simpler and lighter because it's straightforward.

This narrative around risk and being careful was also expressed using the term sensitivity. For example, Participant H referred to this element of sensitivity that she explained was attached to making a brand activism campaign. When asked if the ideation process between brand activism and traditional campaigns differs, she responded that it is definitely different due to the level of sensitivity involved:

> When you're actually … using your communications to change people's behaviours or influence in some way or create a tool or… something that's more than a campaign is actually greater … like you still have a client, but you've got a social issue you're trying to help in some way … you just have … so many layers of sensitivity … you have to really understand the audience …and you also have a lot of responsibility. There's a lot of weight to what you end up doing … it's quite different to if you were selling something.

Participant I also expressed that brand activism campaigns require a certain level of sensitivity. He explained that all campaigns, including brand activism initiatives and traditional forms of promotion, are based on insights. He elaborated that since the goal of advertising is to always be relevant to the target audience, the process of coming up with ideas and finding insights are the same. This means that the creative process between the two

campaign types is quite similar. However, he noted an added level of responsibility for brand activism:

> They're really not that different. It's just that we felt a responsibility to make sure we got the tone exactly right.

Participant R reiterated a need to be accurate with brand activism, explaining that these campaigns require a high sense of integrity. When specifically discussing if there was a difference in the creative process behind brand activism and traditional advertising campaigns, he stated they are both "Ultimately still solving problems and coming up with solutions that you think people are going to find compelling and interesting". However, he then elaborated on the difference from the creative practitioner's perspective:

> [The difference is] the integrity with which you… interrogate those ideas… There needs to be a really high bar for making sure there's a no-bullshit test on the idea… really making sure that you can confidently execute and live up to what that campaign is versus, let's say, a really great idea that's promotionally driven around like a new product launch.

The findings provided above highlight how brand activism impacts the domain of branding in several key ways, mainly related to the level of risk, sensitivity and responsibility involved in the ideation and execution processes. The practitioners interviewed perceive brand activism campaigns as carrying more risk compared to traditional campaigns. These risks are associated with taking stances on social issues, initiating conversations and facing potential negative consequences due to dealing with polarising or controversial topics. These practitioners also see brand activism as a tool for enacting cultural change and addressing social issues, which demands a higher level of sensitivity and care during the ideation process. The practitioners feel that they have to be more cautious about the message they convey and be wary of the potential impact of their campaigns on society. Creating brand activism campaigns is also considered more complex and challenging than traditional advertising, as practitioners note that the process involves considering multiple layers of sensitivity and addressing social issues. These practitioners also perceive brand activism campaigns as carrying a greater sense of responsibility and, therefore, require a higher level of integrity in executing ideas as they emphasise a need to be accurate, relevant and true to the cause. In addition, brand activism campaigns require a deeper understanding of both the audience and the social issues to be addressed. Practitioners believe they must be aware of the

audience's perspective to create impactful campaigns. Lastly, the practitioners see the creative process behind brand activism as involving an additional layer of scrutiny to ensure authenticity and integrity. They emphasise the importance of having a high bar for ideas maintaining integrity, and avoiding any sense of inauthenticity or, as Participant R refers to as, "bullshit " in the execution. Overall, these practitioners perceive brand activism to impact the rules and procedures of the domain of branding as they focus on the higher level of risk, sensitivity, complexity, and responsibility and focus on creating meaningful social impact. While some aspects of the creative process may be similar, the inherent social and cultural elements require practitioners to approach brand activism with heightened care and integrity.

2.2.6 Proactive motivation

The sixth theme that emerged from the practitioner definitions of brand activism regards proactive motivation from the practitioners themselves. While discussing the main differences between traditional and brand activism campaigns, several practitioners suggested that the latter relies on the proactive motivation of advertising practitioners themselves. This type of motivation adds to how practitioners conceptualise the domain of brand activism. For example, Participant J explicitly alluded to this proactive motivation when describing brand activism:

> Maybe in a traditional campaign, you have a traditional brief with a target, objective, KPIs, et cetera, and maybe in this kind of campaign, it's a pro-active campaign, or you have like a simple brief.

He further differentiated between the two types of campaigns by discussing brand activism as being practitioner-led and open in terms of limitations on ideas. He expanded on this sentiment by discussing his work on the *HIV on the agenda* campaign for a not-for-profit organisation called Fundación Huésped. He recalled that the brief was simply to develop a campaign to generate awareness for the brand, and it was to be launched during the upcoming International Day against the fight against Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). "That was the brief, and that was enough. You don't need more than that to develop these kinds of ideas."

Participant N's thinking was similar to Participant J's, with both practitioners noting differences in the client brief as one distinguishing factor between the two campaign types. According to Participant N, "[In a] regular brief, in general [we] receive everything that we

[need] to do in the sheet…in a common traditional brief, we are going to have a budget, for example." He continued, noting that even when he receives a brief where the brand wants to "communicate social behaviours and brand activism, [they] don't have the same kind of budget…[they] have less [and the client is] still looking too much for sales." In these instances, he expressed that the client is not fully invested in the social message, and that is why the responsibility is placed on the creative to be "100 per cent focused on communicating [the] values and purposes of the brand." He believed it to be imperative for the creative to be personally invested in the issue at the heart of any brand activism campaign:

> If you are not involved, if the subject itself is something that you are not related to, or you don't believe, or it's something that you don't trust, or you don't want to communicate… I think it would be hard. I think you, as a creative, need to have this activist spirit inside of you.

Similar to Participant N, Participant L also expressed that there is a proactive motivation from practitioners when producing brand activism campaigns. Participant L described how *The Gun Violence History Book* campaign differed from a traditional campaign. This campaign created a book outlining the 200-year history of gun violence in the United States and was intended to educate current and future voters on how to stop repeating this history. The campaign video involved shooting the book with an actual gun to symbolically represent the one thing history has been unable to do, stop a bullet. Using this example, Participant L elaborated on two points of difference between traditional and brand activism campaigns. The first was the increased amount of work a team was willing to do to complete the campaign, and the second was an innovative use of media. According to Participant L, coming up with ideas for traditional campaigns that use traditional forms of print media, such as billboards, is "easier to produce". However, Participant L also noted that coming up with ideas that have a goal relating to sustainability or any type of social justice is easier to think of, as opposed to an idea for a product benefit. Participant L summarised his opinion by stating, "I think it's easier for creatives, although I'm not sure if it's easier for brands. Most of them don't want to talk about [social topics]."

Participant D explained the difference between the two types of campaigns by defining their goals. He described that traditional campaigns only have one of two goals, either to increase sales or to create more brand awareness and recognition:

> And it stops there…When you attach some sort of brand activism, it becomes much more interesting because… you deliver something that the world is craving for, like … you are really helping better the world somehow and create a positive perception for the brand.

Participant P provided a slightly more critical perspective when describing brand activism. Participant P expressed that brand activism had recently become a 'buzzword' within the advertising and marketing industry. She then provided an example of a recent meeting with a global brand that she believed wanted to participate in brand activism. Participant P thought that the brand's approach towards using brand activism was inauthentic:

> We were doing a pitch for [a brand] …and they were kind of quite… progressive with that in a lot of campaigns, even ten years ago… [But] now the impression I got when we were pitching for this work [is that] they felt they kind of… lagged behind a bit.

Participant P thought that the client had seen the current and emerging opportunities of using brand activism and wanted to capitalise on this momentum. Participant P's example is the opposite of a practitioner-led and proactively motivated campaign as, in this instance, the client was the driving force for participation in brand activism:

> They were really trying to use their brand as sort of an activist again, and even using activist language and terms and even jargon…so it became a huge part of the… strategy and in the pitch that we were doing.

This example by Participant P illustrates that while clients may want to interact in brand activism, their brief may appear inauthentic to practitioners. While this is only one example, it also relates to Participant L's perspective of clients still being too focused on sales. Therefore, client-initiated brand activism may lead to inauthenticity and woke-washing. It was clear in Participant P's tone, coupled with the perspective throughout her interview, that her uses of the words 'activist language', 'terms' and 'jargon' were negative in this instance.

When discussing brand activism and how this creative process differs from traditional campaigns, Participant S explained that he perceived the process for brand activism to mimic the process for an NGO or NFP campaign and, thus, maintained a proactive practitioner-led motivation. To elaborate on these differences, he first explained the bureaucratic process of creating traditional campaigns and referred to them as rigid, stiff and much slower:

> It’s full of processes… full of approvals… if you work in a big advertising agency that employs…500 or 800 people, you come up with ideas inside your agency. [Then] inside your agency, you have at least 15 to 20 decisive people above you… So you have to convince that person, [then] that person has to convince another, another, another, every single meeting. You know, every single stage, every single version of a presentation… it’s absolutely not free… and before you even go to the client, it’s kind of already castrated.

While this bureaucratic process may still exist for brand activism campaigns for big global brands, Participant S still expressed that working on any campaign that has a social opposed to sales motivation or is developed for an NGO is much easier and gives creatives much more freedom. Reiterating his opinion that brand activism campaigns resemble those for NGOs, he guessed that this increased freedom was because NGOs often are not as focused on profits and have a limited budget to work with, “so you work for free.” Another interesting disparity discussed by Participant S was the different types of people involved in a campaign for an NGO:

> [They] are full of different types of people. They don’t employ businessmen, they employ activists, and activists like to act. They like to do things. You can’t close a bunch of activists in a five-hour-long meeting in a conference room talking about some bullshit full of marketing jargon.

Participant S further emphasised this notion of ‘freedom’ when working with an NGO, stating that the approval process is very quick and can often times be informal, as opposed to a more commercially motivated client where you have to “organise your first review with your boss inside the agency first…the first out of twenty reviews for the next two weeks if you get lucky… the normal process is…very bureaucratic”. While he noted that some commercial clients give agencies more freedom, he offered another perspective as to why the process for a purpose-driven campaign for an NGO may be faster than a traditional campaign. He explained that it might be because the issues or social causes are time-sensitive. He elaborated on this point using the example of logging:

> The NGO has a problem suddenly. Last week, the forest was not logged…this week, it's being logged…that problem kind of appeared…the NGO wasn’t debating for six months about whether they should do something with this logging or not. They already know that they have to stop it.

The account by Participant S demonstrates the interrelation between the domain and field by previewing a shift in power dynamics between the client and practitioner. As

mentioned by Participant S, during traditional campaigns, the client as part of the field acts as a gatekeeper between the individual and domain. This form of gatekeeping is illustrated by Participant S in the form of approval processes. However, as explained by Participant S, this relationship between the domain, individual and field is different for brand activism campaigns, allotting more power to the individual to make quick decisions. This potential shift in power dynamics between the client and the practitioner is explored in further detail in chapter three.

Based on the findings above, the practitioners view proactive motivation as a defining characteristic of brand activism. This characteristic illustrates how brand activism has impacted the domain of branding. These practitioners believe brand activism campaigns often rely on the proactive motivation of the advertising practitioners themselves. They are personally invested in the social issues at the heart of the campaign and are driven by a desire to create positive change and improve the world as opposed to just focusing on sales or brand awareness. According to the practitioners, brand activism campaigns are often practitioner-led, meaning the creative team takes the initiative and ownership of the campaign. Some of the practitioners note that this means they have the freedom to explore innovative ideas and are not bound by the rigid processes and extensive approvals that are common in traditional campaigns. This autonomy allows them to be more creative in their approach. They also note that traditional campaigns typically come with detailed client briefs that outline specific objectives, target metrics, and budgets. In contrast, brand activism campaigns may have simpler briefs that focus on generating awareness for a social cause or NGO without extensive budget allocations.

Some of the practitioners expressed concern that brand activism may become inauthentic when driven by clients who merely want to capitalise on the current momentum of brand activism. When clients force an activist approach without genuine commitment, it can lead to woke-washing and undermine the credibility of the campaign. Some of the practitioners also see brand activism as offering more creative freedom, particularly when working with NGOs, since the bureaucratic process that often exists with traditional brands and campaigns is less prevalent. This ease of process is also justified by the notion that brand activism addresses time-sensitive issues or causes. This urgency to act quickly and make a positive impact contributes to the faster approval and execution process of brand activism compared to traditional campaigns.

2.3 Discussion

As previously stated, the domain "consists of information – a set of rules, procedures, and instructions for action" (p.229) and is the knowledge and symbol system that shapes the creative output. This chapter set out to explore the key characteristics of brand activism and determine how brand activism impacts the domain of branding from the practitioner's perspective. This chapter began by providing relevant literature exploring the practical and theoretical nature of branding. This literature detailed an evolution of branding that has led to the commodification of authentic life spaces. The literature by Banet-Weiser (2012) depicts the domain of branding as extending past the realm of business and becoming reliant and reflective of culture, resulting in brand cultures. In relation to the inclusion of politics or corporate social responsibility, this literature has yet to extend past concepts of brand purpose and into the more controversial realm of brand activism. Upon the review of this academic literature, this chapter presented the findings of a content analysis of industry literature to provide an overview of the value, categorisations and characteristics of brand activism.

The content analysis revealed the industry perspective on the value of engaging in brand activism. This value was centred around demand from consumers and industry awards. The industry literature also brought attention to more of the operational aspects of brand activism and provided additional insights into these characteristics, categorisations, typologies, and consumer responses. Key characteristics include aligning with core values, tangible action, authenticity, genuineness, meaningful dialogue, and having a positive impact. In addition, the industry literature acknowledged the risks associated with brand activism, emphasising the need for caution, transparency, and accountability. Potentially unsurprising, the practitioners interviewed for this dissertation closely aligned with the industry perspective regarding the key characteristics and categorisations of brand activism.

The findings from the empirical research reveal how the practitioners understand and conceptualise brand activism and how that has impacted the domain of branding. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, sociocultural factors impact domains just as much as intrinsic ones. In addition, it was mentioned that the cultural expectations of the domain could vary across timespans (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015). This emphasises the importance of understanding how practitioners understand brand activism and how this, in turn, has impacted the domain of branding. The practitioners' definitions and conceptualisations of brand activism appear as

a dynamic process, where they perceive the "rules" but at the same time "create" these rules through their practice. This process may explain why they had a difficult time articulating an exact definition of brand activism as their understanding appears to be a form of tacit knowledge, gained from lived experience (Kaptan, 2013). Their defintions and conceptualisations of brand activism may be drawn from the three sources of tactit knowledge production, typification, human capital, and common sense (Kaptan, 2013). This process further alludes to the interconnection between the individual and their subjective experiences and the creation and understanding of the domain.

The findings first explored whether practitioners think brand activism is mandatory from all brands or if it is an optional strategy. The practitioners' opinions and perspectives on this topic were diverse. While these responses varied, they still offer insight into the impact that brand activism has had on the domain of branding. Some of the practitioners expressed brand activism to be optional. However, others expressed it to be required, arguing that this obligation is driven by the evolving demands of consumers, particularly from the Gen-Z generation, who expect brands to take a stand on social and environmental issues. This requirement demonstrates how the cultural expectations of these consumers have impacted the domain of branding to include strategies like brand activism (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015). For these practitioners, brand activism becomes a means to add intangible value to the brand, aligning it with the modern Gen-Z consumer archetype. In viewing brand activism as an extension and evolution of brand personality, practitioners are essentially conceptualising it as another way for brands to differentiate themselves in the market. It allows brands to establish a unique identity and connect with consumers who seek authenticity and purpose-driven businesses. This focus on authenticity aligns with Banet-Weiser's (2012) notion of ambivalence in brand cultures, where brands may simultaneously appeal to consumers' desires for authenticity while still functioning as commodified entities.

If brand activism is perceived as a requirement for all 'modern' brands, then brands are increasingly encroaching on and becoming more intertwined with relevant social, political, and environmental issues. This encroachment suggests a further blurring of boundaries between brands and larger societal discussions, as brands more explicitly and frequently position themselves as agents of change. Consequently, practitioners in the fields of branding, marketing, and advertising will find themselves navigating the complexities of politics and culture in their efforts to effectively engage with consumers and address social issues. While

brands' integration into social and political issues could potentially lead to explicit commercialisation of activism, where causes are continuously and fervently co-opted for marketing purposes, it is the practitioners' adamance for authenticity that reinforces this ambivalence of brand 'activism' culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

The findings in this chapter also outlined five key characteristics of brand activism described by practitioners. These findings also demonstrate how brand activism has impacted the domain of branding. The five key characteristics are: (1) Brand activism campaigns illustrate a change in society, (2) these campaigns must have a purpose, but this purpose does not have to be permanent (3) they must result in tangible action, (4) these campaigns carry an inherent and anticipated risk resulting in an increased sense of responsiblity and (5) they are made with a proactive practitioner-related motivation. The first characteristic highlights brand activism campaigns as looking towards the future and striving to create positive change in society and culture. Practitioners understand brand activism to actively shape culture as opposed to traditional campaigns, which often reflect culture. Practitioners believe brand activism has the power to actively initiate or inspire societal change and demonstrates the ideological power that they believe brands hold in shaping public opinion. This belief demonstrates a change in the domain of branding as the rules and procedures expand to include envisioning or actively promoting a better future. This characteristic of brand activism also signifies a fundamental shift in the role of brands in society as it elevates the domain of branding to include the transformation of brands into agents of social change and cultural transformation. Brands are increasingly viewed as entities with the power and responsibility to shape public opinion and actively contribute to building a better future.

The second characteristic highlights brand activism as an extension of brand purpose. The interviewed practitioners illustrate brand activism as employing the concept of purpose, but this purpose did not have to be permanent. The use of brand activism does not require the cause that is being supported to be the focal point of the entire brand strategy. The practitioners see brand activism as a delicate balance between purpose-driven initiatives and delivering tangible results that benefit both society and brands themselves. Brand activism is also differentiated from the rules and procedures found in the domain of branding by one practitioner who expressed that individuals engaging in traditional strategies prioritise individual agency recognition and may lead to more ego-driven ideas and participation in the creative process.

The third characteristic further highlights how brand activism impacts the domain of branding as practitioners emphasise the central role of tangible action. Practitioners outlined action as addressing societal problems, participating in important conversations, or supporting causes, and they believe that brand activism requires brands to actively engage and make a real impact in the world. In a sense, this reliance on action shifts the intangible elements in the domain of branding into tangible ones. The brand personality and archetype of the activist is no longer an intangible element of the domain, but with brand activism, the brand is transformed into an actual activist that must perform its activist role in society. Brand activism also redefines how practitioners measure the success of their campaigns. Traditional metrics like views, clicks, and sales take a back seat as brand activism prioritises factors such as the level of support generated for a cause or movement and the broader societal impact of the brand's tangible actions. These new metrics reflect a fundamental change in perspective, where the effectiveness of a campaign is evaluated based on its actual influence on society and its ability to drive meaningful change rather than just on its commercial outcomes. Some practitioners also recognised brand activism as allowing brands to take responsibility for their role in societal problems and use this responsibility as a way to counteract the brand’s negative impact on cultural or environmental issues. This change further reinforces the ambivalence of brand activism as a tool for commercial prosperity or societal change. While it can undoubtedly drive positive change and enhance a brand's reputation, there still remains a fine line between authentic activism and mere opportunism. The delicate balance between commercial prosperity and authentic social change highlights the nuanced nature of brand activism as a powerful and potentially transformative force in the domain of branding.

The fourth characteristic also highlights how brand activism has impacted the domain of branding in relation to the level of risk, sensitivity and responsibility involved in the ideation and production processes. Creating brand activism campaigns is considered more complex and challenging than traditional advertising, as practitioners note that the process involves considering multiple layers of sensitivity and addressing social issues. Practitioners also expressed that brand activism campaigns require a deeper understanding of both the audience and the social issues they address. This increased level of risk experienced by practitioners further emphasises how brand activism has impacted the domain of branding as practitioners detail the need to become further embedded in culture and society. This engagement goes beyond a campaign merely reflecting societal values; it involves actively

engaging with those values and taking a stand on societal issues. As a result, the practitioners take on a greater sense of responsibility in how they navigate the complexities of the social landscape. The next chapter will look in more detail at how practitioners embrace this responsibility in their creative practice and how they manage and mediate between the different actors of the field in the process of developing brand activism campaigns.

The fifth and final characteristic detailing the importance of proactive practitioner-related motivation demonstrates a large shift in the domain of branding and emphasises the role of brand cultures in brand activism. Practitioners are not just executing campaigns for the sake of their jobs; they are deeply personally invested in the social issues at the core of their activism efforts. Their driving force is a genuine desire to effect positive change and contribute to making the world a better place. As such, brand activism campaigns are often practitioner-led, meaning the creative team takes the initiative and ownership of the campaign. This hands-on involvement and personal investment in a cause demonstrates how the conventional rules, procedures, and knowledge systems of the domain of branding are significantly impacted by brand activism. Similar to how Banet-Weiser (2012) outlines social media personalities to represent the commodification of self-identity, in a way, practitioners who use brand activism commodify their own personal activist values. Their motivation and passion become integral components of the brand's identity, making the activism effort a part of the overall branding and marketing mix. This blending of personal values with the brand's image creates a unique brand culture that goes beyond merely promoting a product or service. This topic is investigated in more detail in chapters four and five. It becomes an expression of the brand's core values and mission, resonating with like-minded consumers who share similar beliefs. This deep-rooted motivation and practitioner-led approach also emphasises the ambivalence of brand activism's authenticity.

This examination of the practitioners' perspectives contributes to the understanding of brand activism and how it impacts the creative domain of branding. It highlights the practitioners' thoughts about the power of brand activism to shape and influence society, offering insights into their motivations and intentions when engaging in brand activism campaigns. The findings from this chapter deepen our understanding of how brand activism is conceptualised, setting the stage for further exploration of the field element of the Systems Model of Creativity in the next chapter. This assessment is followed by an exploration of the

individual in chapters four and five which, respectively discuss professional identity and ethical awareness and responsibility.

Chapter 3 – The field of brand activism

The previous chapter outlined findings that demonstrate how brand activism impacts the domain of branding. This chapter will now build on this perspective and discuss the field "which includes all the individuals who act as gatekeepers to the domain. It is their job to decide whether an idea or product should be added to the domain" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015, p. 229). The field represents the social aspect of creativity and provides vital input that significantly impacts the creative ideation process. According to Csikszentmihalyi and Abuhamdeh (2014), contributions to a certain domain must fulfil the needs of the field in order to be legitimised. This chapter explores the various actors in the field that are relevant for practitioners who engage in brand activism and how the perspectives and expectations of these actors are mediated by practitioners.

This chapter begins by reviewing literature on the Systems Model of Creativity with a specific focus on the concept of the 'field'. This review is followed by literature that relates to the historic role of advertising practitioners as cultural intermediaries. Lastly, literature is reviewed that is relevant to the three distinct actors of the field defined in this dissertation, which are the client, the public, and the community of the cause. This chapter then presents the findings of the interviews to answer the following questions:

1. How does the creative process differ for brand activism compared to traditional campaigns?
2. How does mediating the expectations of the various actors in the field impact the creative process?

Based on the responses provided by practitioners, the findings are divided into three main themes, which are the client, the public, and the community of the cause. The findings on the client as an actor in the field and the various mediation processes that practitioners must undergo when engaging in brand activism are divided into three sub-themes, which illustrate a shift in power dynamics for these types of campaigns. These sub-themes are (1) proactive practitioner-led campaign creation, (2) determination to overcome development hurdles and (3) brand authenticity. The findings on the public as actors in the field highlight how practitioners anticipate and manage the risk of public backlash when ideating and executing brand activism campaigns. The third group of findings focuses on the community of the

cause as actors in the field. These findings reveal the importance of gaining deep insight into the experiences of the community of the cause, i.e. Black Lives Matter. This insight is acquired by two main methods, which make up the sub-themes of this section (1) undertaking extensive research into the topic of the campaign and (2) collaborating with relevant parties who have first-hand insight.

3.1 Literature

3.1.1 The Systems Model of Creativity – Understanding the concept of the field

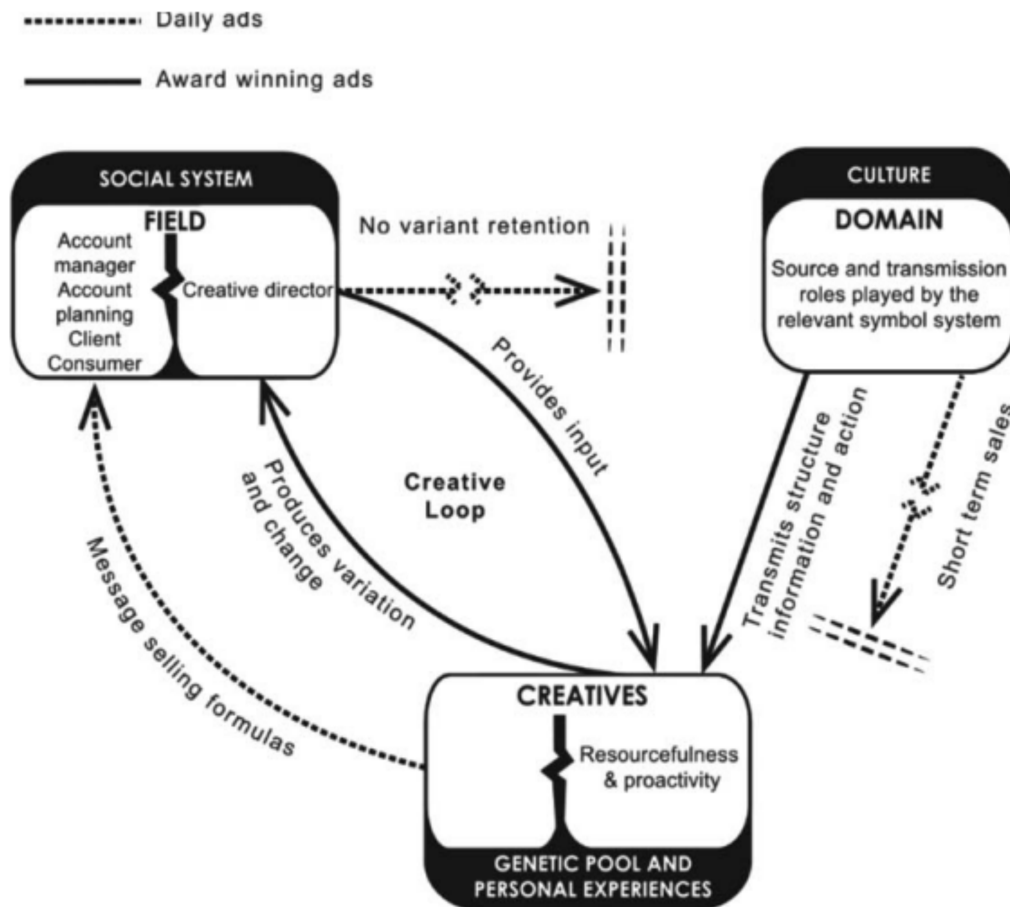
As already mentioned in chapter two, Drew et al.'s (2022) study of Instagram food influencers provides a good example of how to operationalise the notion of the field in research on creativity and creative communication. This study considered members of the Instagram platform as actors in the field. As actors in the field, these members validated individual contributions "through likes, comments and shares, enabling individuals to acquire a significant following and establish their position as an opinion leader on the platform" (Drew et al., 2022, p. 310). Individual members of Instagram were distinguished from users identified as food enthusiasts, with the latter representing actors in the field. These actors were found to represent a niche interest and established a form of authority within their chosen niche community (Drew et al., 2022). In the context of this study, the field was composed of users who "identify as food enthusiasts, including influencers, chefs, the business accounts of marketing, hospitality and media organisations and external culinary organisations such as Food Critics and Bloggers Australia" (Drew et al., 2022, p. 311). The study found the field to impact the creative practice of food influencers in various ways. For example, continuous engagement with the field through comments, likes, and shares was found to be the most effective way for the individual to grow their accounts (Drew et al., 2022). This research highlights the impact of the field on creative output and emphasises the significance of the field's input.

Research by Vanden Bergh and Stuhlfaut (2006) applied the Systems Model of Creativity to advertising and suggested the field to include internal roles of the agency, such as account managers, account planners and creative directors and external roles, such as audiences and clients. This study conducted a content analysis of the regularly featured article *The Moment of Creation* published in the *Agency* magazine between 1991 and 2001, which provided narratives of the creative process from the perspective of advertising practitioners. This data was then used to illustrate the interrelation between the domain, field and individual in advertising. Vanden Bergh and Stuhlfaut (2006) found the field to influence the advertising creative process through generative and evaluative roles. Generative refers to guiding, supporting and providing opportunities to the individuals. An example of providing opportunities was allowing the practitioner creative freedom to develop any idea they wanted. Evaluative roles included judging the ideas to determine what counts as relevant and original.

Vanden Bergh and Stuhlfaut (2006) determined that generative input was primarily given by clients and account managers. Overall, this research explored the generative and evaluative roles of the field, demonstrating that clients and account managers primarily provided generative input. Similar to the previous study, this research by Vanden Bergh and Stuhlfaut (2006) demonstrates the influence of the field on the advertising creative process.

A study by Roca et al. (2017) also applied the Systems Model of Creativity to advertising. Roca et al.'s (2017) study used Vanden Bergh and Stuhlfaut's (2006) definition of the field to include target audience, client and agency management and extended this conceptualisation to include industry peers. Roca et al. (2017) specifically examined the Colombian advertising industry and found that the field extensively shaped the creative outcome into a dual system of creative practice. The study found that practitioners divided creative practice into two streams, daily work, i.e. traditional or banal, and award-winning work, i.e. innovative. This study found that the division of creative practice and inclusion of industry peers into the field impacts the feedback/input loop in the Systems Model of Creativity. As illustrated in Figure 8, the field provides input to the creative, who then produces a variation and change and presents this back to the field, which creates a loop. According to findings from the study, banal daily advertising is not innovative or different enough to provide any input into the domain. Therefore, there is no feedback for the domain to adapt and grow. At the same time, the award-winning work is too innovative and does not provide input into the domain and instead gets filtered back to the creatives. This feedback creates a creative loop between the field and the individual and, therefore, never impacts or alters the domain. This process is illustrated in the figure below. Overall, this research demonstrates a feedback loop between the field and the individual and shows how the field influences the creative outcome.

FIGURE 8 THE SYSTEMS MODEL OF CREATIVITY APPLIED TO ADVERTISING - ADAPTED



Reproduced with permission (Roca et al., 2017, p. 14)

Overall, these studies collectively emphasise the significance of understanding the field and its dynamics in shaping creative practices. Whether it's through validation on social media platforms like Instagram (Drew et al., 2022) or the generative and evaluative roles within advertising agencies (Roca et al., 2017; Vanden Bergh & Stuhlfaut, 2006), the field plays a crucial role in shaping the creative process and its outcomes. Understanding these interactions and processes of mediating the expectations and opinions of the field is vital when researching creativity and innovation within various domains.

3.1.2 Intermediation and creative practice

The above studies demonstrate the importance of the field in generating creativity and also shed light on the various external influences on a practitioner's creative process. This influence results in a process of mediation between the practitioner, the field and the creative

output. This mediation process performed by advertising practitioners is historically used as a critique of the industry, which focuses on advertising's role as part of the 'culture industries' and its mediation of capitalistic perspectives and its ideals (Adorno, 1986). The term culture industries describes forms of mass communication such as television, radio, film and advertising as powerful communication methods that infect society with banalness by entertaining the masses and suppressing imagination (Adorno, 1986). The critiques of the culture industries paint advertising practitioners as constructing a standard of idealised living by mediating capitalistic practices. This is a common stigma associated with the profession as scholarly critiques often focus on issues of consumption, mainly charging advertising for promoting excessive consumerism and the promotion of unhealthy and/or addictive products (Cohen & Dromi, 2018; Drumwright & Murphy, 2004; Hunt & Chonko, 1987; Moon & Franke, 2000; Rotzoll & Christians, 1980). However, Cronin (2004) suggested that these critiques are oversimplified as they regard advertising as a monolithic, single-minded proponent of capitalism and do not devote enough attention to the complexity of practitioners' roles as cultural intermediaries.

The concept of the cultural intermediary is often traced back to Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and his works on the sociology of cultural consumption. In his research, cultural intermediaries are aligned to a sub-category of occupations called the 'new petite bourgeois' (Bourdieu, 1984). This category included "all the occupations involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 359). Bourdieu (1984) explained these roles as emerging due to a changing economy and an increase in the "symbolic work of producing needs" (p. 345). This perspective of the advertising profession's role as a cultural intermediary is summarised by Cronin (2004) as "the translation or relaying between the purportedly distinct realms of production and consumption: educating the masses in the art of consumption and the social distinctions of taste, these cultural workers are thought to mediate between the needs of producers and the desires of customers" (p. 350). However, for Cronin (2004), the practice of developing advertising campaigns is not just a role of purveying 'taste' but it involves a much more complex process of mediation between clients, the public and the different departments and commercial interests within advertising agencies themselves. This process is reflected in the different actors of the field in the studies reviewed earlier. The inclusion of these different actors who make up the field, therefore, challenges simplified notions of advertisers as

powerful cultural intermediaries and draws attention to the complexity of the mediation process by including various other perspectives and elements aside from advertising practitioners' own perceptions of 'taste'.

Due to the various processes of mediation between the perceptions of the actors of the field, Cronin (2004) viewed advertising campaigns as reflective of practitioners' and clients' experiences as consumers. Her argument outlined that advertising does not drive cultural change but reflects new ideas derived from existing popular culture as perceived by creative practitioners (Cronin, 2004). According to Cronin (2004), "such accounts [of mediation of various actors] are indeed lacking in the field, and their input is urgently needed in order to fully appreciate this complex arena" (p. 352). The complex mediation processes discussed above by Cronin (2004) further illustrate the importance of understanding the role of the field and its various actors in facilitating the creative output of advertising materials. In addition, Cronin (2004) emphasises how this complex mediation process reflects practitioner and client experiences just as much as those of the consumers.

More recently, Cohen (2019) built on these processes of mediation, viewing advertising practitioners as apt market intermediaries who construct and make sense of meaningful accounts of the market in order for the campaign to succeed. The term' sensemaking' is used to describe the materialisation of meaning through experience and, therefore, as a concept, both informs and constrains action and identity (Cohen, 2019; Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking refers to the interplay of behaviour, action, and interpretation as a process of an organisation (Weick et al., 2005). According to Cohen (2019), this process is done through performative sensemaking, which involves making sense of the mediation processes between themselves and their clients, the public and their industry peers and colleagues. Cohen's (2019) notion of performative sensemaking understands advertising agencies to create and socially perform manifestations of the market. This means that advertising firms actively shape and perform the market as opposed to only being passive observers or mirrors of it. In addition, this also means that they selectively highlight certain aspects of the market and neglect others. Therefore, advertisers do more than just produce ads; they actively contribute to the development and embodiment of market dynamics. This process of sensemaking is impacted by changes in market attitudes and consumer sentiments, changes in standards and industry award categories and changes in client attitudes and willingness to embrace new innovative strategies. This sensemaking process is crucial for the

interpretation and performance of the various mediation processes that practitioners undertake. Therefore, Cohen's (2019) notion aligns with this dissertation's exploration of creative practitioners as more than just cultural intermediaries as they expand into new roles as 'moral intermediaries'. This term is coined by this dissertation and describes a new role practitioners try to inhabit that mediates between the respective client's current and potential future moral standing as a brand, the perceived moral sentiments of consumers and other stakeholders, and practitioners' own moral, ethical and political leanings.

3.1.3 The actors in the field

3.1.3.1 The client

The above studies shed light on the complexity of the creative process as they highlight that creativity is not the product of a talented individual alone but is the result of various knowledge systems and processes of intermediation. The studies further reinforce the Systems Model of Creativity as a framework for understanding this process, as they illustrate that the perspectives of various actors in the field impact creative production. In the context of brand activism, this dissertation focuses on the client, the public, and the members of the community of the cause as actors in the field.

Without the client, the advertising industry would not exist. Therefore, the client is perhaps the most relevant actor in the field of advertising and is viewed as a vital part of the creative process. For example, a study by Turnbull and Wheeler (2017) explored the creative process in advertising and all of its complexities and nuances. Their study used in-depth interviews with advertising practitioners in the United Kingdom and illustrated the various stages involved in the creative process. The majority of the participants in their study were from the accounts and business departments, with roles such as account director, business director, client director, managing partner and campaign manager. Their study revealed twenty-four distinct stages of the creative process, which were further categorised into a Seven-Step Model of the Advertising Creative Process (Turnbull & Wheeler, 2017, p. 188). The seven steps are (1) task identification, (2) agreement of task objectives, (3) ideation, (4) response, (5) validation – internal review, (6) validation – external review, client and consumer, and (7) decision.

In Turnbull and Wheeler's (2017) study, the client is an essential part of the creative process, and interaction with the client is included in several of the distinct stages. The

earliest interaction is in stage three, where the client provides their brief to the agency. This interaction is followed by a strategy presentation to the client in stage five and the delivery of the creative brief to the client for approval in stage eight. Once the agency has developed its idea, it presents this idea to the client in stage eighteen, where the client seeks approval from their own management and stakeholders in stage nineteen, finally followed by approval in stage twenty. Turnbull and Wheeler's (2017) study demonstrates the significance of the client in the various steps of the creative process.

Several studies specifically explore this relationship between the client and the advertising agency during a traditional campaign process (Bilby et al., 2023; Bull, 2003; Koslow et al., 2022; Koslow et al., 2006). For example, Koslow et al. (2022) investigated how good and bad agency-client relationships impact creativity and campaign effectiveness. They found that when agencies feel they have a strong relationship with their clients, they are less willing to take risks. This risk aversion results in less originality, strategy and creativity in the produced campaign. However, when the client-agency relationship is bad, or the quality of the relationship is lower, Koslow et al. (2022) found that it results in more creative work because the practitioners are more willing to take creative risks at the expense of their client. Bilby et al. (2023) also explored how client risk aversion and the client-agency relationship impact creativity. They described client risk aversion as the fear of making creative decisions and agency risk aversion as the fear of losing the account, a phenomenon which they term 'clientelism' (Bilby et al., 2023). According to Bilby et al. (2023), clientelism results in the production of less creative work, and client risk aversion can lead to tension between the agency and its clients.

The above studies highlight the impact of the client and their expectations on the creative process for advertising campaigns. Arguably, the use of brand activism poses new challenges for this client intermediation, namely the importance of being authentic and avoiding the stigma and backlash of woke-washing. In chapter one, the various characteristics of this type of brand and campaign authenticity were outlined by Mirzaei et al. (2022), Mohart et al. (2015) and Toft et al. (2020). These studies illustrated the importance of both the client and the campaign being perceived as authentic (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Morhart et al., 2015; Toft et al., 2020). Since the above literature talks about risk management, a topic that was previously discussed in chapter two, this arguably adds a new element to the client intermediation process that practitioners must consider when creating brand activism

campaigns. It also poses new questions about who takes on the role of ensuring these types of authenticity and how these new considerations fit into the overall creative process.

3.1.3.2 The public

In addition to the client, the public and the audience are significant actors in the field of advertising and brand activism. Numerous studies, known as consumer market research, explore the importance of the public in developing advertising creative output (Eyada, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Romani et al., 2015; Shetty et al., 2019). Understanding and mediating the expectations of the audience is perhaps one of the most fundamental goals of the industry. Generally, for traditional campaigns, practitioners are required to understand elements such as style, aesthetics, norms and desires to mediate and meet the expectations of their audience. While this understanding is still required for brand activism, practitioners must also mediate ideological expectations in order to avoid backlash and the stigma of woke-washing. This mediation of the public's ideological expectations creates an added element of risk to brand activism campaigns, as topics may be socially or politically controversial.

As previously discussed, research into brand activism still remains limited. However, a significant part of this research focuses on the impact and reaction of consumers. For example, Shetty et al. (2019) conducted research exploring how millennial consumers perceive brand activism. Their study used surveys to explore this relationship. Shetty et al. (2019) found that millennials preferred brands that engage in brand activism compared to brands that do not. Similarly, Eyada (2020) explored the relationship and impact of consumer perceptions of brand activism on tangible results such as brand image and profit. This study analysed Nike's history of engaging in socio-political topics, finding a positive correlation between brand activism and brand image and profit. However, a possible limitation of Eyada's (2020) study is that it relied solely on Nike as a case study. Lastly, a study by Romani et al. (2015) explored backlash from consumers who perceive brands or companies to participate in some form of moral misconduct. This study found that some consumers engage in anti-brand activism, which includes actions such as boycotting and online backlash when they learned of or perceived a brand or parent company's moral misconduct. These studies demonstrate the importance of understanding the consumer as an active participant in brand activism. They also highlight these new forms of risk in brand activism and the need to navigate ideological expectations to avoid any negative repercussions for the campaign.

As mentioned in the study by Romani et al. (2015), the risk of consumer backlash for brand activism campaigns is an imperative consideration for practitioners. This backlash can manifest through boycotts of the brand, physical protests or online hate. As actors of the field, the perspectives and expectations of the public for authenticity must be mediated by practitioners to avoid any accusations of woke-washing. A study by Hong and Li (2021) explored the boycott and buycott behaviours of consumers when brands engage in brand activism. The researchers define these behaviours as "a deliberate decision to punish (boycott) or reward (buycott) a company by selectively choosing products or brands for social, political, or ethical reasons" (Hong & Li, 2021, p. 195). They found the expressive nature of these behaviours to be elevated in the context of digital media, where consumers can easily share their opinions with their peers. This type of online backlash is relatively modern and is amplified by social media. Pfeffer, Zorbach and Carley (2014) name this a 'social media firestorm', and define it as a "sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative [word of mouth] and complaint behaviour against a person, company, or group in social media networks," (p. 117). This type of risk dramatically increases when the messages are political or divisive in nature, making digital advertising and online promotional media high-risk/high-reward environments, as praise can spread just as fast as hate. This type of risk is illustrated by Pepsi's *Live For Now* campaign, which depicted reality star and model Kendall Jenner approaching a line of police officers at a protest and achieving 'peace' by sharing a Pepsi. Critics stated the advertisement that was meant to promote a message of unity and peace instead trivialised the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) and downplayed the historic sacrifices of the BLM protests (Victor, 2017). The ad was met with an intense backlash from the public, and Pepsi quickly pulled it down (Victor, 2017).

More recently, social media firestorms have grown due to the concept of 'cancel culture', a phenomenon that involves the immediate and very public withdrawal of support for an entity, such as an individual or a company, through both physical and virtual boycotts, also known as being 'cancelled'. These 'cancellations' are enacted upon entities or individuals who are perceived to have done or said something problematic from the general standpoint of a social justice perspective, i.e. pertaining to racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. (Geran Pilon, 2020; Ng, 2020). Cancel culture can impact both sides of political ideology, as recently Bud Light faced backlash from conservatives after partnering with trans influencer Dylan Mulvaney (BBC News, 2023).

When brands face criticism online from cancel culture, they are quick to act and often do so at the expense of specific employees involved in the controversy. For example, Niel Golightly, communications chief at Boeing, resigned after an employee complained about an article he wrote in 1987 for a U.S. Naval Institute magazine whilst he was a U.S. Navy lieutenant (Gerstmann, 2020). The article entitled "No Right to Fight" argues against women taking part in combat (Johnson, 2020). However, Golightly is adamant that the opinions expressed in his article, which reflected the government policy and popular social sentiment at the time, no longer represented his current beliefs (Gerstmann, 2020). According to one source, the board members at Boeing pressured Golightly to resign as the company was still recovering from the MAX crisis that involved two fatal aeroplane crashes within a one-year timeframe (Johnson, 2020; Jolly, 2022).

On the surface, cancel culture appears to be an appropriate form of publicly led social justice that targets industry leaders, the wealthy and others "whose privilege has historically shielded them from public scrutiny" (Hagi, 2019, para.4); however, in July of 2020, a group of academics and literary workers wrote an open letter on 'Justice and Open Debate' referring to the intolerance of cancel culture (Harpers Magazine, 2020). The open letter lists what the authors call 'hasty and disproportionate punishments' that result from cancel culture as "Editors are fired for running controversial pieces (BBC News, 2020a; James, 2020); books are withdrawn for alleged inauthenticity (Sehgal, 2019); journalists are barred from writing on certain topics (Folkenflik, 2020); professors are investigated for quoting works of literature in class (Flood, 2019b); a researcher is fired for circulating a peer-reviewed academic study; and the heads of organisations are ousted for what are sometimes just clumsy mistakes (Mounk, 2020)"(Harper's Magazine, 2020, p. 2).

This risk of being 'cancelled' further demonstrates the importance of the public as part of the field of brand activism, particularly as the internet and social media have afforded the public an increased amount of power to hold brands, companies and individuals accountable for actions that they deem negative. Practitioners must mediate the public and audience perceptions in order to anticipate and mitigate these risks for themselves, their agencies and their clients. The risks associated with politically or socially controversial brand activism campaigns are, therefore, heightened in this digital age. Arguably, this also points to socio-ethical issues related to brand activism. For example, does brand activism amplify political ideological division and encourage online hate and retribution for perceived

injustices resulting in individuals and corporations being cancelled? These types of ethical concerns as related to practitioners will be discussed in more detail in chapter five.

3.1.3.3 The community of the cause

In addition to the client and the public, this dissertation recognises the community of the cause, for example, those involved in the Black Lives Matter or the Me-Too movement, as additional actors in the field. A common part of the creative process for advertising strategy and creative ideation is the uncovering of audience insights. However, for brand activism, these insights require more than consumer market research, as the campaign must address the complex nuances of very specific social or political problems. For example, the Carrefour *Black Supermarket* campaign protested against the European agrochemical industry in a bid to protect farming biodiversity (Jardine, 2019). This campaign required practitioners to understand the nuances of the farming and agrochemical industry and the surrounding political system and resulted in a change in the law (WARC, 2020a). In these instances, practitioners may mirror design thinking processes within their own creative ideation in order to solve these complex problems.

Design thinking is an approach that emphasises empathy for users and collaboration and is valued for its ability to foster creativity, promote user-centric solutions, and address complex problems (Brenner & Uebernickel, 2016; Pressman, 2018). While there are various design thinking models, the most prominent was created by the d.school at Stanford University (Calgren et al., 2016). The Stanford model is a five-step iterative process which some interpret as linear (Calgren et al., 2016). These steps are (1) empathise, (2) design, (3) ideate, (4) prototype, and (5) test (Calgren et al., 2016). While the Stanford model remains the most widely cited, Calgren et al. (2016) find that there is ambiguity surrounding design thinking as a concept. Calgren et al. (2016) research how design thinking is applied in practice and found five predominant themes that characterise the concept, (1) user focus, (2) problem framing (3), visualisation, (4) experimentation and (5) diversity. User focus is "expressed in terms of empathy building, deep user understanding and use involvement," (Calgren et al., 2016, p.46). Problem framing refers to relating to the "problem at hand: instead of trying to solve the problem [trying] to widen, challenge and reframe it," (Calgren et al., 2016, p.47). Visualisation refers to "making ideas tangible by means of low-resolution representations or mock-ups of ideas or solutions," (Calgren et al., 2016, p.47). Experimentation refers to "testing and trying things out in an iterative way," (Calgren et al.,

2016, p.47), and lastly diversity is “encompassing collaboration in diverse teams, and [integrating] diverse outside perspectives throughout the process, (Calgren et al., 2016, p.48).

While design thinking is normally applied to fields in mechanical engineering, management of innovation and product design, Brenner and Uebernickel (2016) also see an overlap with marketing practices. The principles of design thinking can be applied to virtually any problem-solving endeavour where understanding human needs and finding innovative solutions are essential. Therefore, any industry that has a goal of solving consumer-related problems can benefit from design thinking. While advertising strategies have relied on market research, design thinking is said to require a deeper understanding of consumers (Brenner & Uebernickel, 2016). It requires more in-depth research than the traditional approach of standardised surveys (Brenner & Uebernickel, 2016). Even though market research still includes quantitative and qualitative methods like focus groups and interviews, design thinking always relies on qualitative research (Brenner & Uebernickel, 2016). In addition, over the past decade, the rapid development of the internet and accompanying technologies has brought new opportunities and challenges for advertising to use big data (Ge & Wu, 2021).

According to Malthouse and Li (2017), big data is defined by ‘Three Vs’ (p. 227). This data is conceptualised as large volumes of data from a variety of sources that are generated at a high velocity (Malthouse & Li, 2017). Such data sets include online behaviours of both the brand and the consumer and are used in advertising research in various ways. Malthouse and Li (2017) set out at least three ways that advertisers use big data. The first is to gain fine-level insights into the consumers’ purchase behaviour. The second is to optimise the delivery of the campaign using personalisation and hyper-targeting, and the third uses big data to uncover consumer insights. Using social media, advertisers use big data to better understand what consumers are thinking and feeling (Malthouse & Li, 2017). While there are many advantages to using big data, brand activism, particularly more socially innovative manifestations, seems to resemble design thinking, which relies on a more human-centred approach that focuses on “the needs and experiences of real people – not hypothetical ‘market segments’- as a source of inspiration and insight” (Gobble, 2014, p. 59). This use of human insight to make sense of big data is nominal in applications of design thinking (Brenner & Uebernickel, 2016). According to Gobble (2014), “Reaching that level of insight requires a

different approach, one that makes room for intuition and creativity alongside analysis" (p. 59).

According to Brown (2010), interdisciplinary collaboration is also imperative to achieve divergent thinking in the field of design thinking and social innovation. This sentiment is mirrored by Ibert et al. (2018), who see creativity as a collaborative and complex social process that has become a culturally dominant form of work organisation. Collaborative spaces allow people to co-create and negotiate ideas, resulting in improved problem-solving and sometimes intense disagreement (Fan & Zietsma, 2016; Zietsma & McKnight, 2009). Solving problems using design thinking encourages a higher degree of collaboration between peers, other professionals and the community. In line with the previous definition, Brown (2010) distinguishes design thinking as designing for consumer experience as opposed to traditional design, which focuses on the look and functionality of consumer products. Design thinking relies on intuition, pattern recognition and idea construction that has both emotional meaning and functionality while "[addressing] the needs of the people who will consume a product or service and infrastructure that enables it" (Brown, 2010, p. 32).

As brand activism aims to address specific social or political problems of consumers, the literature above supports the potential of using design thinking to mediate the experiences and perspectives of the community of the cause who are central actors in the field. Brand activism requires a deeper understanding of consumers and the social issues they care about, which aligns with the human-centric approach of design thinking. Part of this intermediation requires understanding the complex nuances of specific social or political problems and implies that practitioners must go beyond standard market research and delve into qualitative methods to comprehend the intricacies of the issues they aim to address. By adopting design thinking principles, advertising can gain more profound insights and innovative solutions, particularly for technology-driven, socially innovative manifestations of brand activism, which is discussed in more detail in chapter four. Practitioners can best mediate the experiences of the community of the cause by embracing a human-centric approach, delving into qualitative research methods, and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, resulting in campaigns that not only resonate with the target audience but also drive positive social change.

In summary, the literature provided in this chapter sheds light on the complexity of the advertising process and practitioners' roles as intermediaries. This literature emphasises the importance of managing expectations of the field and its various actors by mediating their diverse perspectives and expectations. In the context of brand activism, these actors are considered to be the client, the public, and the community of the cause. The following will now provide the findings of this dissertation's research as it correlates to the above actors in the field.

3.2 Findings

As the literature provided in this chapter suggests, there are several types of actors who make up the field. Practitioners must consider the expectations and perspectives of these actors during the creative ideation process. As discussed in the literature, these expectations could be at odds with each other as clients may be more risk averse to engaging in political debates than the practitioners themselves. While the actors in the field of brand activism are nearly the same as for traditional campaigns, it is the nuances of how practitioners mediate the expectations and perspectives of these actors that differ. To review, these actors are the client, the public and the community of the cause. It should be noted that while agency peers such as management are typically part of the field when the Systems Model of Creativity is applied to advertising research contexts, they are not included in this dissertation because this research focuses exclusively on creatives. However, the perspective and contribution of other functional roles in advertising agencies would make an interesting topic for further research.

The findings on the client as an actor of the field and the various mediation processes that practitioners must undergo when engaging in brand activism are divided into three sub-themes, which illustrate a shift in power dynamics between the practitioners and their clients for these types of campaigns. These sub-themes are: (1) proactive practitioner-led campaign creation, (2) determination to overcome development hurdles and (3) brand authenticity. The findings on the public as actors in the field highlight how practitioners anticipate and manage the risk of public backlash when ideating and executing brand activism campaigns. The third group of findings focuses on the community of the cause as actors in the field. These findings reveal the importance of gaining deep insight into the experiences of the community of the cause, i.e. Black Lives Matter. This insight is acquired by two main methods which make up the sub-themes of this section: (1) undertaking extensive research into the topic of the campaign and (2) collaborating with relevant parties who have first-hand insight. This insight mimics design thinking principles and aids practitioners in identifying and solving complex social and political problems.

3.2.1 The client as actors in the field

This first section explores findings related to the client as an actor in the field and details the nuances of the complex mediation process that practitioners undertake while engaging in brand activism. Based on the analysis of the interviews, the managing process

between the client and agency for brand activism is different from traditional campaigns. As previously mentioned, traditional advertising campaigns typically begin with a detailed brief provided by the client (Turnbull & Wheeler, 2017). The expectations and perspectives of the client are mediated by the agency and practitioners throughout the entire creative approval process. However, in the case of brand activism, the practitioners detailed a process that either did not include a client brief or when a brief was provided, practitioners regularly ignored or disregarded it. While clients still remain significant actors in the field, their role in terms of setting objectives for campaigns and guiding the creative process appears to be significantly curtailed in the case of brand activism campaigns. For such campaigns, advertising practitioners themselves proactively suggest campaign ideas, set goals, and ensure authenticity, or at least the perception of authenticity for these promotional activities. In fact, as the following analysis of the empirical material reveals, practitioners tend to be the primary source of inspiration and motivation for brand activism and the promotion of social causes. The interviews also revealed that practitioners take it upon themselves to ensure brand authenticity on the part of the client and, therefore, mediate and define their own expectations for the client.

The following findings are grouped into three sub-themes. The first describes and explores the extent to which advertising practitioners proactively ideate and 'sell' brand activism campaigns to clients. The second theme focuses on the constraints and obstacles advertising practitioners often deal with and overcome that are specific to initiating and developing brand activism campaigns. These hurdles include budget and work restraints, the willingness to work overtime and, in some instances, to work pro-bono. The third theme illustrates how practitioners attempt to ensure the perception of authenticity of their client's brand activism. The findings reveal a variety of methods and tactics practitioners put in place to certify that their campaigns are authentic. These ranged from vetting the client, which included confirming that their overall mission, philosophies, and history align with the cause or topic at hand, to checking the intentions and commitment of their clients to take tangible action. As the findings show, in the context of brand activism, advertising practitioners consider themselves as 'moral intermediaries' – a term that describes a new role practitioners try to inhabit that mediates between the respective client's current and potential future moral standing as a brand, the perceived moral sentiments of consumers and other stakeholders, and practitioners' own moral, ethical and political leanings.

3.2.1.1 Proactive, practitioner-led campaign creation

The first theme to emerge is that creative practitioners proactively ideate and lead brand activism campaigns rather than follow a client brief. As previously mentioned, during the creative process for a traditional campaign, the first point of contact between the agency and the client is through the client brief. This brief also represents the first instance of mediation, as practitioners must make sense of the client's expectations for the campaign. However, the practitioners interviewed for this dissertation described a different process. Practitioners detailed that the ideas for their brand activism campaign were often proactively conceptualised prior to securing a client. In addition, some described a situation where there was a client brief, but it was not followed for the campaign creation. These instances illustrate a unique mediation process between the client and the creatives during the creation of brand activism campaigns. While the final approval is still in the hands of the client, these practitioners place less importance on the client's initial perspectives and expectations and instead take it upon themselves to act as 'moral intermediaries' and express their own activist expectations to their clients.

The following three cases detail examples of proactive ideation. The first case was described by Participant D while discussing his work on the *Refugee Nation* campaign for Amnesty International. This campaign set out to create a flag and anthem for the refugee team that would be competing at the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics. These athletes came from Ethiopia, South Sudan, Syria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. When asked to recall the ideation process, Participant D began by recollecting the Syrian refugee crisis, which was peaking in 2016, with more than half of the Syrian population being displaced (UNHCR, 2017). Participant D recalled that this refugee crisis was dominating the news cycle, and he knew that the organisation Amnesty International would be prioritising assistance to the situation. According to Participant D, in response to this, "We were already really prepared to create something in case the opportunity could arise." This meant Participant D and his creative team were prepared when the International Olympics Committee announced that there would be a refugee team competing at the Rio Olympics but without a flag or anthem. At that point, Participant D thought that this was his opportunity to create a flag and anthem, which "could also become a huge symbol for people to learn more about refugees [and] to find ways to help them." Participant D made it clear that this proactive approach is typical of his personal creative process:

> This is something that I really [tell] my teams, you don't need briefs all the time to create work. You need to understand what the priorities of your clients are. Because the solutions, the creative solutions for some of these problems, they are everywhere … You could just read the news in the morning [and] that could spark an idea, [or] you can see people talk and hear people talking about something that sparks an idea if you have a problem clear in your mind. So, if you really know the problems that your client wants to solve, your radar is always ready to solve [it], to hear [or] capture insights and get ideas from people you talk to, [or from the] news and everywhere to create solutions.

The second case was provided by Participant F, who described a creative process that did not have a client brief but instead was proactive and practitioner-led. Participant F recounted the ideation process for the *Bank on Equality* campaign for Scotiabank. This campaign addressed the gender pay gap in Peru, which at the time was close to thirty per cent (Wunderman Thompson, n.d.). This pay gap was addressed in the campaign by giving new and existing female clients an additional 29.6 per cent of Scotia points. These points are part of a reward system set up by the bank, which can be used as real-life currency. When discussing the ideation process of this campaign, Participant F mentioned that the idea was thought of in preparation for International Women's Day, meaning there was no client brief. At this time, Participant F came across research that discussed the gender pay gap, such as a recent study ranking Peru in the bottom twenty per cent of gender wage equality for all of Latin America and the Caribbean (Vaccaro et al., 2022). Upon finding more data and statistics that clearly demonstrated this wage gap for female professionals working in the same job as males, Participant F and his team went out and talked to people both outside and inside of the bank to gather their perspectives and sentiments on the topic. According to Participant F, "We realised it was a real problem in Peruvian society, and that is why we wanted to take charge and look for a more solid way to close this gap."

The third case is from Participant J, who detailed a similar proactive approach when discussing the idea for the *Fireproof Newspaper* campaign for SeSocio Financial Investments and the Firefighters Association of Argentina. Participant J narrated his ideation process by detailing the severity of the wildfires in the Cordoba region in Argentina during the final quarter of 2020 (Goni et al., 2020; Reuters, 2020). Participant J elaborated that this was "a huge problem. We needed to achieve some visibility for those people because it's a small town in the South, really far away from the Capitol, and sometimes that is a problem. They don't have enough media to fight against the fires." Participant J expressed that without this

media attention, there was less incentive for immediate action by the government and less chance to raise funds to support the area. Participant J was motivated to address the root of the problem and explained that they needed a method that preventatively fought wildfires. Using the insight that Argentinians often use newspaper as kindling to start fires, the team came up with the idea to create a fireproof newspaper. This idea had no client or brief, so the next step in producing this campaign was to find a client to fund the project. Participant J explained that his agency had worked with the company SeSocio Financial Investments before, and he knew that they had ties with supporting the Firefighter's Association of Argentina. He stated, "We found our match… the client who will develop the idea… because the objective of the idea was to raise funds for firefighters."

The findings from the three cases presented above reveal significant insights about the client mediation process. In the three cases, brand activism campaigns were proactively ideated and led by the practitioners themselves. This process is unlike traditional campaigns, which are often initiated by a client brief. Instead, these practitioners appear to take it upon themselves to come up with ideas before finding a client. This may indicate a shift in power dynamics where practitioners exert more influence in shaping the campaign's purpose and message. These practitioners emphasise that they rely on various sources such as the news, social conversations and research data to spark ideas and find creative solutions to social, environmental or political problems. This approach leads them to identify these problems and address them through brand activism campaigns paid for by brands without requiring a formal client brief. Despite the practitioner-led approach, the three cases show that the relationship between the practitioners and their clients is still collaborative. In some instances, the practitioners had worked with the clients before and had prior knowledge of their interests and support for specific causes. This familiarity facilitates the alignment of the brand activism campaign's objectives with the client's values. Overall, these cases highlight that in the context of brand activism campaigns, practitioners can take a more proactive and leading role in the creative process. They are empowered to identify and address social issues that they find meaningful, which can lead to impactful campaigns that resonate with both the clients and their target consumers. The power balance between practitioners and their clients seems to shift towards practitioners' favour as they employ their new roles as moral intermediaries, which includes mediating between their client's current and potential future moral standing as a brand and their own moral, ethical and political leanings.

In the following case, the practitioners detail an example of proactive practitioner-led campaign creation where the idea went beyond the original brief, leading to the rejection of the idea by the initial client. This resulted in the practitioners proactively finding a new client for the campaign. This is the only case in this dissertation that details this type of process. The *Equality Spellcheck* campaign for Lenovo was proactively developed by the creative practitioners. This campaign involved a Microsoft Word plugin that detected seemingly positive workplace-related words and underlined them in red. To the majority of computer users, this red line signifies that a word is misspelled. However, even though the seemingly positive workplace-related words were spelt correctly, the red line would cause users to click on the word to double-check. This would then reveal a relevant statistic of a women's unequal workplace reality. According to Participant N, the original client brief for this campaign was for a simple HR campaign in the form of an email or poster celebrating International Women's Day internally. He explained that this showed a tokenistic motive from the client. Participant N summarised this by stating, "[they wanted] to send an email or do something very small internally to celebrate the day and just … put something on the board. Basically, show employees … we are celebrating … we need to create something visual just to say congrats." Based on this initial brief, the task was conceptually simplistic and was supposed to go straight to the designers. However, Participant N and his team were motivated to do more, stating, "When we looked [at] it, we said, guys, we have a beautiful opportunity here." Participant N, who is a Brazilian working abroad in the UAE, saw two opportunities: the first was to simply make a compelling and emotional campaign that could easily connect with the audience due to the nature of the subject. The second opportunity was a chance to challenge the culture at large. He explained that due to the social and political culture in the UAE, talking about controversial topics is always challenging:

> All the time, we try to present ideas, even for LGBTQ, but this one [for example] was definitely completely refused. Here, it is not allowed at all. But … we always try to communicate … something that we can also push people to think or have a different point of view of the problem … So, when we received [the brief], we thought, 'Okay, I think this is the opportunity to try to do something right.' And then we said, 'Let's remove this brief from the designers and let's take it for us because we believed we had a beautiful opportunity.

Participant G also worked on the *Equality Spellcheck* campaign and was equally proactively motivated. Participant G explained her passion for social justice:

> Speaking personally… I'm very much into cultural change. I'm very much into kind of taking it that extra mile to do something for the culture and for the region, especially being a Saudi woman, there's so much that I want to say, and I feel like so many brands can do that.

This passion for creating change inspired Participant G and her team to create an idea that was disruptive. It was important that the message was heard.

> We [wanted] it to be in your face because if you're not going to talk about it, we're going to put it right where you can't run away from it. Because so many topics are taboo in the region, and this couldn't be one of them. I mean, this is a big issue. Let's discuss it. So, we wanted to put it right in your face. You can't run away from it. That red line is so bothersome, and we know that you have to click on it. So, we're going to show you the stats. We're going to make you look at that because there's no way around it anymore. We have to discuss it.

As detailed above, the practitioners working on the *Equality Spellcheck* campaign took a proactive approach to developing and expanding the idea. However, they also took a proactive approach in terms of finding a client. As previously mentioned, the client who provided the original brief only wanted a simple internal campaign to celebrate International Women's Day with their employees. This client had recently suffered some negative press relating to gender equality and workplace conditions and was trying to reassure their employees that they cared about them. After meticulously researching the issue of gender equality in the MENA region, Participant G was determined to expand the campaign from internal to external, stating, "This was a conversation that needs to be had."

Both Participant G and Participant N were motivated to create a viral campaign that would spark the conversation around gender equality in the workplace. This led to the first draft of their idea, described by Participant G as a "more subtle version of *Equality Spellcheck*." They pitched this idea to the original client, who rejected it due to fear the campaign would shed too much light on their currently ongoing issues. However, this did not deter Participant G and her team. She stated, "If this client is not going to take it, we need to sell it to someone else and showcase how important it is." The team eventually recruited the company Lenovo as a client willing to execute the campaign, and with this partnership, the *Equality Spellcheck* campaign was launched. Similar to Participant D, Participant G noted that this proactive approach is normal for her. She recounted that she often tries to find brands that are ready to contribute to a positive cultural change in the region. In instances when she is unable to do proactive pieces, she is so passionate about social activism that she

writes thought leadership articles about topics she thinks the region needs to discuss. As an example, Participant G cited an article she wrote with her boss regarding gender equality in the advertising space.

The following cases provide examples of practitioner-led brand activism campaigns where the idea diverged from the original client brief. In these instances, the practitioners enacted their roles as moral intermediaries by prioritising their own social, environmental or political agendas over their client's expectations for traditional advertising campaigns. The first case was exemplified by Participant E, who had previously worked at Wieden and Kennedy. As mentioned at the start of this dissertation, the inspiration for this research came from the *Dream Crazy* campaign for Nike. This research is fortunate to have been able to interview Participant E, who worked on this campaign, which featured retired NFL player and social activist Colin Kaepernick, to symbolically align Nike with the Black Lives Matter movement. This campaign made headlines due to the political uproar from consumers. However, according to Participant E, this was not Nike's original intention. He recalled that the original brief revolved around celebrating the 30th anniversary of the 'Just Do It's slogan. According to Participant E,

> 'Just Do It' comes and goes an awful lot, and there's a whole generation of kids that [don't'] even see 'Just Do It' t-shirts and bags. So, the brief was to do a 'Just Do It' campaign that spoke to the new generation of kids.

Upon conducting research on topics that would interest this younger generation, Participant E and his team discovered their interest in "everything that was going on in the world." This became the perfect opportunity to use Kaepernick since Participant E and his team were also hyper-aware of the ongoing social tension caused by systemic racial inequality.

> It was an interesting time to work on Nike because they are 30-40% African-American when you actually look at the makeup of the company, and the roster of athletes is skewed so heavily that way [and] the brand itself was built off the back of a lot of African-American culture and people of colour… so there was a real desire to get that work out there and make some stuff that challenged … the political conversation at the time.

While Kaepernick ended up being the focal point for this campaign, according to Participant E, they had been trying to feature him in a campaign for over a year and a half.

> We wanted to do various pieces of different work, and sell different ideas to Nike and use Colin Kaepernick and support him … that was tricky, that was hard … That was hard because there were a couple of clients who were very keen to use [him] and keep him, and at the time, there were … conversations about Nike dropping him internally. So, we were pushing to try and use him for something.

As demonstrated by Participant E, while Kaepernick was not initially intended to be the focal point of the campaign, the practitioners recognised the opportunity to challenge the political conversation at the time and pushed to use him. This highlights the practitioner-led approach in aligning the campaign with ongoing social tensions and the willingness to push boundaries despite potential internal concerns and conversations about Nike dropping Kaepernick.

Participant A also detailed this practitioner-led campaign ideation and expressed this to be the norm for brand activism. According to Participant A,

> Most of the time, social activism comes from the [advertising] agency [and], not from the [clients]. So, it's not like a brief tells you, 'Let's do some social activism.' It doesn't happen. Most of the time, it is our ideas that we tell the client, and most of the time, [most of the people agree with and want to produce the ideas.] Like most people want peace or equality.

Participant A provided two examples of campaigns where he diverted from the original client brief and came up with a brand activism campaign instead. The first campaign he discussed was the *Bullet Pen* campaign for the Ministry of Education in Colombia. According to Participant A, the original brief was simply to announce an increase in funds allocated to education by the then Colombian president Juan Manual Santos'. However, similar to some of the practitioner narratives detailed above, Participant A saw this as an opportunity to do more. For the first time in the history of Colombia, the education sector, and not the defence and police sector, would receive the largest portion of the annual budget (Sanchez Pedraza, 2014). To Participant A, this meant "the government was betting on education for the future instead of war." This concept became the foundation for the *Bullet Pen* campaign, which re-purposed fired machine gun bullets into pens. Each pen was engraved with the message "Las balas escribieron nuestro pasado. La educación, nuestro future" which translates to "Bullets marked our past. Education will write our future." Turning a symbol of war into a symbol of peace, pens were sent to the country's leaders and were used by President Santos to sign the Colombia-FARC peace deal (ABC, 2016).

Participant A provided a second example of this proactive ideation process when discussing the *Finding New Roads of Colombia* campaign for Chevrolet. This campaign took the form of a documentary in partnership with The Discovery Network promoting tourism in the area of Caquetá, Colombia. This documentary aimed to reframe the stigmatising narrative about the ex-guerrillas who lived there as members of the guerrilla army. The campaign initiatives also transformed the lives of these people by training them as tourism guides and job opportunities. The original campaign brief provided by Chevrolet was simply about promoting their most expensive range of cars in the region, mainly their four-wheel drives and SUVs. At the time, Participant A had been reading the news about the impact that the peace treaty mentioned above had on the people of Colombia and, more specifically, the now ex-guerrillas. This made him wonder, "What if… we don't use influencers, but instead we use ex-guerrillas. And then [from there] it just grew and grew and grew."

Another example of a practitioner-led campaign where the idea and execution diverged from the original client brief came from Participant K when discussing the *Boards of Change* campaign for the City of Chicago. Similar to the two examples above, in the early stages of idea development, Participant K drew inspiration from the sociocultural events happening at the time. He explained that during the Black Lives Matter protests after the murder of George Floyd in the United States, several shops in downtown Chicago had been vandalised, causing businesses to barricade their windows with plywood boards. These boards were then co-opted by Chicago Street artists who transformed the boards from symbolic representations of violence, destruction and division into symbols of hope, unity, justice and a public desire for change. As a resident of downtown Chicago, Participant K experienced these scenes first-hand and recounted the experience as incredibly powerful, emotional, and inspiring. This inspiration sparked a determination to use the plywood artwork for something positive. From this idea came the *Boards of Change* campaign, which took the painted boards and turned them into voting registration booths with the goal of encouraging disenfranchised Americans to make their voices heard by registering to vote in the then-upcoming presidential election. Participant K recalled that the "client brief itself didn't start out … as a clear brief for 'oh, we need to get more people to vote', it was a little bit broader … it was mainly about the Census and 'how can we get people [to be] more engaged in this.'" According to Participant K, the original task set by the client was "okay, how can we get more people to be counted in the census?" However, once he had applied his idea to use

the plywood boards, the campaign was expanded to "how can we get more people to actually register to vote and eventually vote."

Participant Q provided another example of a proactive, practitioner-led brand activism campaign where the idea deviated from the original brief. While discussing the first stages of the *Contract for Change* campaign for Michelob Ultra-Pure Gold, AB InBev's first organic beer, he remembered the original brief was for a Superbowl commercial. However, while he was looking through the client's 30-page-long briefing presentation discussing the importance of organic beers, he got fixated on one particular sentence. This sentence stated that only one per cent of American farms were organic. Participant Q and his creative partner, Participant K, were both fascinated by this statistic and decided to research why the number was so low. They discovered that the process for an ordinary farm to become an organic farm takes three years, which in many cases is not viable because the transition means no income for that time period. According to Participant Q,

> Nobody would back up these farms. Nobody would fund them … They were on their own, meaning they would lose crops, they would lose money during [that] three-year transition and then … maybe [not even] have a buyer because the market was super uncertain. So, we just had a simple idea … What if … we invent a contract that's looking to the future, and that gives [farmers their] first buyer three years from [the start of their organic transition]. So that was basically the idea. And we put it on paper. We put it on the wall.

Participant Q remembered that the entire team immediately fell in love with this idea, but the problem was that they "didn't know what to do with it, because [they] were trying to solve a Super Bowl brief… The biggest entertainment stage in the world. [The idea and the brief] were … not meant for each other. But we kept working on it …[and]…we kept thinking on it." The team couldn't let go of the idea, so they decided to present it to the client. The client loved the proposal, but they all agreed that it would not fit the original objective of the Super Bowl brief. However, seven months later, the client returned and informed the team that they had "put it through legal … talked to our agronomists, [and] we're going to do it."

Another instructive example of practitioner-led brand activism was provided by Participant B when discussing the *Buy Better, Wear Longer* campaign for Levi's. While brainstorming for this campaign, the team started with a cultural idea, "If it happened, it

happened in Levi's." This idea hinged on the fact that through both good and bad world cultural events, people have been wearing Levi's.

> For example, if you look at people knocking the Berlin wall down, they're wearing Levi's, if you look at people marching for Black Lives Matter, they're wearing Levi's, so it was interesting that Levi's has been there, and the negatives as well, it's not just everyone wears Levi's. So, you have to take the good with the bad. But the idea that Levi's has a right because it's been worn at all these moments, where people have been worn down, for example. So, Levi's has a responsibility because of…the amount of people that wear them, to have a voice, to have a comment.

This ideation process led Participant B and his team down the path of environmental responsibility, in part because it aligned with the ideals of their Gen Z target audience. Participant B's main goal was to communicate that there is a different way to buy and look at fashion.

> They should question it. And people should question how Levi's produces their clothes, their production line, how much water they use just to make their things, who makes their clothes, [they should question] everything.

This thought process led the team to research this problem of overconsumption, with Participant B finding one statistic particularly compelling. He recalled that "Up to 10 tonnes of used clothes get dumped in Australia alone, every day into landfills, which is incredible." According to Participant B, the strategy behind this campaign was immense.

> Looking at trends of how fashion has evolved, even from 10 years ago, how fast fashion has been pushed and legitimised, and you know there's a lot greenwashing going on … one example we see a lot … I won't name any names … but you often see companies say this is 100% recycled garment, footwear, whatever, but what you don't actually realise is that to do that … you waste loads more water and loads more resources.

This led Participant B to the discovery that the best way to help the planet with sustainable practices is to reuse rather than produce new through recycling. This was mainly due to the resources required to produce the garments. These insights into global overconsumption led to a campaign idea that, on the surface, appears to be counter-intuitive to a standard business model, the notion of buying less. This was justified back to the notion that they wanted to "change the way people thought about fashion." According to Participant B, it was important this campaign didn't come off as 'preachy':

> It wasn't this big corporation telling … everyone you have to change your behaviour. You are the problem because it's the companies ... that produce stuff … so they need to take responsibility for that.

Participant B said that there are so many ways to help the planet, but it can be difficult to navigate what is right and wrong:

> It does come from [Levi's], and it is their responsibility. They make clothes, so they, of course, have a responsibility to make clothes better. But they can only make better if people buy the clothes that are made better and say, hey, let's buy clothes that are made better and less of them, rather than clothes that are made worse that don't last as long.

This campaign is part of an ongoing sustainability effort by Levi's to encourage sustainable production practices. These practices include promoting and investing in sustainable products like Cottonised Hemp and Organic Cotton and technology like water <Less ® manufacturing. According to Levi's (2021), they have saved "more than 4 billion litres of water and resulted in the recycling of nearly 10 billion litres of water since they were first introduced" (para.5).

Overall, the cases above provide valuable insight into the client mediation process for brand activism and the power dynamics between clients and practitioners. Based on the above findings, these practitioners take a more proactive and leading role in the creative process as they ideate and initiate campaigns based on their own social, environmental, or political agendas, diverging from the traditional approach of starting from a client brief. The findings suggest a shift in power dynamics in brand activism campaigns, where practitioners appear to exert more influence in shaping the campaign's purpose and message as opposed to just aesthetics and style. Some practitioners had prior knowledge of their client's interests and support for specific causes, which facilitated a collaborative relationship between the practitioners and clients. However, it is essential to note that the degree of practitioner influence can vary, depending on the specific client-agency relationship and the receptiveness of the client to practitioner-led ideas. Lastly, the practitioners' roles as moral intermediaries also became evident in the findings above as they mediate between their clients' interests and values and their own moral, ethical, and political leanings. Practitioners prioritise campaigns that align with their passion for social justice and change, and they actively seek out clients who share the same vision. By advocating for brand activism and challenging cultural norms through their campaigns, practitioners act as agents of positive cultural shifts and important conversations. Overall, these findings indicate that brand activism campaigns involve a more

proactive and collaborative approach between practitioners and clients, with practitioners taking on influential roles as moral intermediaries.

3.2.1.2 Determination to overcome development hurdles

The second theme that emerged in relation to the client mediation process of brand activism revolved around the practitioners' determination to overcome various development hurdles. While development hurdles are also common in traditional advertising campaigns, it is the practitioners' proactive willingness and determination to overcome these hurdles that make the brand activism process unique. This further positions the practitioners as the driving force behind completing brand activism campaigns. While practitioners were illustrating the creative ideation and production processes of their brand activism campaigns during the interviews, there were several examples of overcoming development hurdles such as budget and time constraints. Practitioners explained a willingness to work overtime and, in some instances, pro-bono.

For example, while discussing the *Equality* campaign for Nike, which encouraged people to extend the positive values associated with sport, such as fairness and equality, into everyday life, Participant E alluded to the challenges faced when dealing with brand activism. According to Participant E, "[that campaign] was a real slog getting that out into the world." While not stating anything specific, Participant E alluded to the sensitivity surrounding socially controversial topics and how his agency had struggled to get final approvals from Nike to produce the campaign. Participant T also experienced a delay in getting approval to publish the *No Black, No News, No History* campaign for El Tiempo. This print campaign took a stand against racial inequality by displaying historical events involving famous black individuals but with the person photoshopped out of the moment. According to Participant T, they had to wait six months for it to be published due to controversy surrounding the topic, stating "because of the social history [that topic] was hard to publish [about]." Here, Participant T refers to the controversial history Colombia has with racism (Godoy, 2018).

As previously mentioned, Participant G and Participant N had to overcome development hurdles to create the *Equality Spellcheck* campaign, which was rejected by the original client. According to Participant N, the brand's representative acting as the client actually loved the idea. However, it was the stakeholders of the global brand that took issue with the campaign's intensity. As previously mentioned, the global brand had been facing a

wave of negative press and was afraid that the campaign, which included statistics on sensitive topics such as harassment, would draw additional attention to their already existing problems. This rationale for rejecting the campaign surprised Participant G.

> We didn't expect it … They had a problem, so we're like, 'Okay, we're fixing your problem.' But they were like, 'No, this is too intense. It's too big … We will be in the spotlight [and] we don't want that.' And we were like, 'Yeah, but this is exactly the time for you to have this conversation.'

When the client refused, Mederios and Participant G did not give up. They were determined to spark the conversation around gender equality in the workplace and pitched the idea to various other clients. However, they continued to experience more rejection.

> We looked at all the kinds of clients we had ...There were others that were saying, 'No, this is too taboo.' And they were worried of having movements happening within their company that they weren't expecting … That was upsetting because it was like, 'Yeah, if it's happening, let it come out and then fix your issue.'

Eventually, they found Lenovo, who agreed to do the campaign. This is an exceptional example of practitioner determination to overcome development hurdles as Participant N and Participant G struggled to find a client willing to address such a sensitive topic.

The findings above indicate that brand activism campaigns can face significant resistance and challenges when seeking approval from clients, particularly when addressing sensitive or controversial issues. For example, both Participant E and Participant T expressed how their campaigns faced delays and the struggle to get approval from clients due to concerns about potential backlash or the controversy surrounding these topics. Practitioners expressed that some clients may be reluctant to approve brand activism when they are already facing negative press or public scrutiny and are worried about potential issues arising within their company. However, these practitioners demonstrated persistence and determination to ensure their impactful campaigns were published.

The following four cases demonstrate how practitioners deal with budget restraints while engaging in brand activism. Two of these cases involved multi-national corporations as clients, and the other two were from not-for-profit organisations. In the case of the multi-national corporations, the lack of funding was due to the scale or innovativeness of the campaign idea. At the same time, the restricted budget from the NFPs was explained as a

normal occurrence of working in the sector. In these examples, practitioners proactively overcame these development hurdles by either finding alternative funding, being persistent in convincing the client, leaning into creativity to generate earned media or working pro-bono.

For traditional campaigns, a budget is often allocated within the client brief. However, the following cases detail a process where the practitioners dictated the budget of the campaign and, in some cases, were tasked with finding alternative forms of funding in cases where the client refused to pay. For example, when describing the process behind the *Finding New Roads of Colombia* campaign for Chevrolet, Participant A recalled budget restraints as an obstacle to development. As previously mentioned, the brief for this campaign was to simply show the vehicles' capabilities on difficult terrains. Participant A took this brief and incorporated a social element of de-stigmatising an area characterised by war and violence and decided to show "the capabilities of our SUVs on a terrain that no one has been to in 60 years, so let's go to Caquetá, let's find places that nobody knows exists." Even though the region had been open for more than five years after the peace treaty was signed between the Colombian government and FARC, Participant A knew that people were still afraid to go there because of the ex-guerrilla fighters living there (Fontecha-Tirado, 2019). With this insight at the top of his mind, Participant A came up with the idea to go to Caquetá and turn these ex-guerrillas into tourism operators. The overall concept for this campaign stayed consistent from the moment of ideation to execution. However, due to budget restraints, the delivery medium changed. Initially, the campaign was pitched as a documentary series to be aired on Netflix. According to Participant A, the client loved the idea but refused due to budget restraints. However, that did not stop Participant A, who believed so strongly in his campaign that he asked the parent company of Chevrolet, the General Motors global team in Detroit, for an investment. Unfortunately, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, he was denied the budget request. Still motivated to create the campaign, Participant A began looking for other producers to come on board and eventually partnered with the Discovery Network, collaborating with investigative journalist Maria Alejandra Cardona, who agreed to fund the production of the documentary after the agency invested in a media budget.

Participant C also noted budget issues as a development hurdle to overcome while discussing the *Dress for Respect* campaign for Schweppes. This campaign used custom-designed wearable technology to conduct a social experiment and raise awareness of the sexual harassment experienced by women in nightclubs. The campaign was technologically

innovative at the time and used a smart dress lined with pressure sensors to register touch. For the experiment, three women wore this dress and spent four hours inside a nightclub. The dress registered an average total of 157 touches. Since this campaign involved a technologically advanced component, when Participant C pitched the idea to the client, they loved it but were immediately concerned about the cost. Upon determining the cost of the dress and the overall campaign, Participant C remembered that the client was less enthusiastic, and he thought that the idea would be scrapped. However, according to Participant C, "They returned to us [and asked] is there a way to do this idea in a less expensive way? Maybe it's not a dress. Maybe it's just a skirt. Maybe it's another set-up. Maybe we just do it with hidden cameras without the dress." This time, it was Participant C who rejected the suggestions, stating, "We were a bit stubborn … it needs to be the dress." He recalled it took almost one full year to acquire the budget required to produce the idea in full.

The following two cases are from campaigns for NFPs. In these cases, it was made clear that the budget was virtually non-existent. When discussing the process behind the *Gun Violence History Book* campaign for The Illinois Council Against Gun Violence, Participant L explained that this organisation approaches his agency annually for a campaign that advocates against handgun violence in the United States. He recalled budget restraints as a consistent part of their request, stating, "Their goal is usually ... we need something cheap because we don't have a bunch of money." Participant L stressed that when working on campaigns for NFPs, it is important to have an idea that has a big impact and can create a lot of PR attention to spread the message at a minimal cost. Participant A had a similar perspective, specifically for brand activism campaigns. In order to achieve this big impact and get a lot of PR attention, he explained that "social activism needs a lot of friends." He made specific reference to the fact that these types of campaigns require a lot of resources and have minimal budgets:

> Social activism usually needs a lot of resources. You need journalist friends or media friends who are willing to expand the action and get into the political agenda. You need a lot of friends in social activism.

With all of these requirements and stipulations in mind, Participant L came up with the *Gun Violence History Book* campaign. This campaign involved the creation of an 853-page book detailing 228 years of gun violence history in the United States. This book was then shot with

a gun, causing the headline 'the book that stopped the bullet, something that history has been unable to do.'

Participant S detailed a similar experience with budget restraints when discussing his work on the *Last Tree Standing* campaign for Greenpeace. In 2016, the Polish Environment Minister increased logging in the district of the Bialowieża Forest despite it being a UNESCO World Heritage site. This campaign aimed to protect the forest by creating an interactive experience using the video game Minecraft. Within this virtual world, the agency recreated the Polish side of the Bialowieża Forest for the public to explore freely. Once the digital forest had gained the attention of Minecraft players, the map was replaced with a logged version of the forest, leaving only one solitary tree. In this example, Participant S noted that the agency was not paid for the work, and he was working pro bono. This project also had several international partners coming from countries such as Brazil, Denmark, the Czech Republic and Poland, all of which also worked pro bono. According to Participant S, "Over 80 very creative people, you know, project managers, designers, coders … 3D modellers, influencers, actors, directors … you name it, and all of them [worked] for free … people just … brought together by an idea to save that forest."

The two examples illustrated by Participant L and Participant S demonstrate a different approach from Participant A and Participant C to overcoming budget restrictions. Both Participant L and Participant S had worked on campaigns for not-for-profit organisations previously and were prepared to overcome this hurdle. Participant L anticipated these budget restraints and recognised the importance of achieving earned media for the brand. This factored into his ideation process, knowing he would need to create something of 'viral' quality. Participant S also created a viral campaign with a low budget and took the approach of collaboration with other like-minded peers who were also willing to work pro bono.

The above findings demonstrate the hurdles practitioners must often overcome to get approval from clients for brand activism campaigns in relation to funding. In all four cases, budget constraints posed a significant development hurdle for the practitioners. Whether it was due to the scale or innovativeness of the campaign idea or the limited funding available, these practitioners faced challenges in securing sufficient resources to execute their campaigns. To overcome these budget hurdles, practitioners proactively sought alternative

sources of funding by leaning into creativity to generate earned media, partnering with alternative organisations, working pro-bono, or simply being persistent in order to bring their campaigns to life. In the two cases detailed by Participant A and Participant C, the practitioners had to negotiate with their clients or alternative sources of funding to convince them of the campaign's value to secure sufficient funds. In contrast, in the cases detailed by Participant L and Participant S, these practitioners understood budget constraints from the beginning and had to devise creative solutions that aligned with these limitations. Overall, these findings shed light on the client mediation process of brand activism campaigns and the practitioners' determination and resourcefulness in navigating budget constraints to ensure successful executions. It also demonstrates that practitioners who engage in brand activism may need to leverage their networks, creativity, and passion to garner support and resources for their campaigns. Based on these cases, the client mediation process for brand activism campaigns involves practitioners taking a proactive role in not only shaping the campaign's purpose and message but also overcoming financial challenges to make their ideas a reality. The cases showcase the practitioners' commitment to advocating for social change and the lengths they are willing to go to achieve impactful campaigns, even in the face of budget limitations.

The following three cases demonstrate the factor of time as an example of practitioners' determination to execute their brand activism campaigns. In these examples, practitioners expressed that their campaigns took an extenuated amount of time to either complete or get approved. Again, this sheds light on the nuance of the client mediation process and how this impacts the completion of advertising campaigns. According to Participant A, it took almost three years to execute the *Finding New Roads of Colombia* campaign. Similarly, Participant C recalled that the *Dress for Respect* campaign took almost two years to complete. He reflected on why the process for brand activism campaigns can take so long:

> Sometimes it's not just, 'Oh, we approved the idea. Let's do it'. You have a budget situation, [you need] proper money to do it, and you also have a political situation inside the company. Are they okay to go on socials, go on Facebook … start this conversation … argue with some of our customers who are being bothered by this piece? And it bothered a lot of people.

Participant C went into detail about the specifics of the *Dress for Respect* campaign and why it took so long to execute. Participant C explained that this timeline and the budget restraints

had to do with Schweppes' parent company, Coca-Cola. In 2016, when Participant C received the brief from Schweppes, it was an Olympic year, meaning Coca-Cola would be allocating most of its advertising and marketing funds towards the games.

> Usually, during the Olympics, the products that get [bigger] budgets within the company were the bigger brands, and logically, Schweppes isn't one of them if you compare them to Coca-Cola or Fanta … so they didn't have a massive budget to go with a big campaign.

The limited budget meant that the brief was open, as the client just "wanted a firework idea to make something viral." After they ideated the campaign and found companies and producers who could execute the dress and experiment, Participant C was met with the first obstacle of budget constraints, as previously detailed. Not only did it take time for Participant C to convince the client to spend the money on the campaign, but they also needed extra time for approval. According to Participant C, they had to "convince [the] global team from Coca-Cola to make something social that … could generate hate for the brand … [talking] to a lot of people who know about a lot about this issue and [inviting] them to tell us how to respond in a proper way." The idea was not finalised until 2018. However, according to Participant C, the rest of the execution came together quite quickly, such as "[producing] the dress, [producing] the video … with the hidden cameras … and [going] online."

This extended production timeline and approval process was also described by Participant Q when discussing the *Contract for Change* campaign. As previously stated, the insight behind this campaign revolved around the fact that it takes three years for a farm to convert to an organic one. So, the idea behind the campaign was simply "What if we give [farmers] … a contract that's looking to the future, and that gives [them] the first buyer three years from now." This would act as an incentive for farms to convert to organic ones. This idea was written on a piece of paper and placed on the wall in the agency. According to Participant Q, "That paper hung there for a month", and he recalled that everyone in the team, including the global creative partner and chief creative officer, kept looking at it and trying to figure out what to do with it. They wanted to use the idea but couldn't figure out a way to make it fit the original client brief, which was for the upcoming Super Bowl. After creating a separate campaign to complete the original brief, the team returned and refined the idea before pitching it back to the client. While the client loved the idea, they were unsure if it was a viable option as they had not worked out all the logistics. However, seven months later, the

client returned to the agency having worked out the finer details and the legalities, logistics and agronomics and had decided to run with the campaign. The above cases by Participant C and Participant Q illustrate how sometimes brand activism campaigns can take years to fully execute. Both cases suffered from poor timing and the fact that the campaign ideas were out of the scope of what the clients were expecting.

Overall, the findings above showcase the significance of time as a hurdle in completing brand activism campaigns. These findings demonstrate that practitioners often face extended timelines in order to gain approval or execute their campaigns. Again, this highlights the complexity of the client mediation process and how this impacts the creative process. The findings illustrate the considerable amount of time required for certain brand activism campaigns. These extended timelines were influenced by various factors. Participant C explained that the process for brand activism campaigns involves more than just obtaining approval. It involves considerations such as budget allocations, internal politics within the client's company, and potential backlash from customers. These additional factors contribute to the lengthened timeline for executing these campaigns. Participant C's case emphasised the time needed to overcome budget restraints and convince clients to invest in the campaign. On the other hand, the case explained by Participant Q illustrated the complexity of the campaign idea and the subsequent time required to address logistical and legal considerations.

In addition to budget and timeline development hurdles, practitioners also noted a willingness to take on an increased workload, which supports the finding that practitioners are often the driving force and main source of motivation when it comes to brand activism. The following three cases demonstrate the practitioners' willingness to work overtime to ensure the campaigns are completed to their satisfaction. The reasons provided for an increased workload varied. For example, Participant A cited his busy work schedule due to "a lack of hands." He described his workload as including tasks ranging from strategic planning, creative ideation, videography, editing, and even copywriting. However, he also made it clear that he was willing to work longer hours for campaigns that involved a social purpose or had a message he was personally invested in. Participant A illustrated this point when discussing the *Blind Interviews* campaign for Grupo Contacto and the Rehabilitation Centre for Blind Adults (CRAC). This campaign aimed to make the job recruitment process more inclusive by training visually impaired people as job head-hunters. The idea behind this initiative was that the visually impaired would be able to bypass the judgement of visual stereotypes of those

who do not meet normalised beauty standards. These 'non-normal' visual aesthetics can lead to bias in the hiring process. Participant A had a personal motivation to work on this campaign, which is why he thought that he was willing to put in extra work to complete it.

> My father lost his sight, and I know those people because of my father… when you work with something that you're not working there for money or just to fulfil a brief, and you're working to change people's lives, that includes people you know, it's differently approached, it's different in the amount of work that you're willing to do, and after that, I just kept doing it.

Similar to Participant A, Participant Q took on an increased workload when working on the *Contract for Change* campaign. He cited passion for the project as the reason himself and his team were "involved with almost everything [they could] get [their] hands on." Participant Q was worried that if he was not involved in each individual step of the process, something might change and ruin the overall concept: "Imagine if they would have changed something and the concept breaks apart. We need to see it … it's almost like an … eagle eye. You really need to focus on that [so] that they don't ruin it in any way possible [and they] stay true to the idea." After the campaign had been approved, the next steps in the production process were particularly labour-intensive for Participant Q as they had to start getting farmers to participate in the campaign and convince them to transition to organic farming. After calling as many farmers as possible, they eventually found seven farms to be the test case for the initiative to ensure that the project was successful. After two and half years of completing the transition to organic farming, Participant Q and his film crew went to the farms to interview the farmers and take photographs. After confirming the transitions had been successful, Participant Q got to work with a PR agency so that they could open the program to other farmers. He stated that "we wanted everybody to know that they could sign up," which involved creating an informational website. Then, another two years later, this campaign circled back to the original brief and a Super Bowl spot. According to Participant Q, "The client [asked]… 'Can we do this on the Super Bowl?'… [and] we're like yeah, you can. You can talk about it. But it has to be consumer-facing [despite the fact that it's] essentially a B2B idea." This involved another creative ideation process, where Participant Q estimated they wrote around 100 different scripts to create the first consumer-facing version of the initiative. This campaign was called *Six for Six Pack,* and it promoted a consumer activism exchange where, if consumers purchased a six-pack of beer, Michelob would transform an additional six square feet into organic farmland. After this Super Bowl

campaign in 2020, they opened the program again and did another more localised campaign where they targeted smaller farmer communities in states like Idaho and Arizona to recruit more participants. Participant Q summarised that it was basically three advertising campaigns over the course of three years where they were involved in more or less everything except for the legal aspects surrounding the contracts with the farmers:

> Our involvement… was almost everything. Only [we couldn't] get into the legal in the contract. We only pushed legal, like, no, this has to be in there. And then it's out of our hands, of course. But other than that, everything, communication-wise, PR-wise, farmer-wise, like contracts, we all did that ourselves with our team, of course, and our producers and with our creative partners and clients.

Participant L also described an increased workload to complete *The Gun Violence History Book* campaign. According to Participant L, "We were always working extra hours to get this idea done". For this campaign, Participant L was tasked with creating the content for the book, which required a copious amount of research, with the final book being 853 pages.

The findings above shed light on the practitioners' passion and personal investment in brand activism, which motivated them to go the extra mile to ensure the campaign was successfully executed. In all three cases, the practitioners exhibited strong personal motivation and passion for their campaigns. This passion drove them to put in additional effort. In addition, in each case, the practitioners were extensively involved in various aspects of their campaigns beyond their primary creative roles and detailed a very hands-on approach. These findings highlight the role of practitioners as drivers of change and moral intermediaries, leveraging their commitment and passion to advocate for social issues and bring impactful campaigns to life.

Overall, the findings in this section shed light on the various challenges that practitioners faced in their quest for brand activism and demonstrated how they proactively overcame these hurdles. These findings highlighted practitioners as the driving force behind the completion of brand activism campaigns as they battled budget and time constraints and demonstrated a willingness for increased workloads. These findings also emphasised the nuance of brand activism as they mediated between the clients' and their own personal moral and political agendas. The first set of findings in this section indicated that brand activism campaigns are often met with resistance and challenges when seeking approval from clients who may be reluctant to engage in sensitive or controversial issues. Despite this hurdle, the

practitioners demonstrated persistence and determination in ensuring their campaigns were published. The second set of findings highlighted the impact of budget constraints as a development hurdle of brand activism. To overcome these challenges, the practitioners demonstrated proactively seeking alternative sources of funding by partnering with other organisations, working pro-bono, or continuously negotiating with clients to secure sufficient funding. The third set of findings revealed that in the experience of these practitioners, brand activism campaigns often face extended timelines to gain approval and to be executed. This demonstrated the nuances of the client mediation process, as practitioners need to navigate budget allocations, internal politics within the client's company, and potential customer backlash. Lastly, the fourth set of findings emphasised the practitioners' passion and personal investment in brand activism campaigns. These practitioners exhibited strong personal motivation and commitment to their campaigns, which drove them to put in extra effort. These practitioners also detailed that they were extensively involved in various aspects of the campaigns beyond their primary creative roles, showcasing their role as drivers of change and moral intermediaries while advocating for social issues.

3.2.1.3 The authenticity of the brand

The third theme that emerged in relation to the client mediation process of brand activism campaigns revolved around the importance of authentically aligning the brand with the campaign message. Detailed analysis of the practitioner interviews reveals that they take it upon themselves to ensure that the brand appears authentic in its utilisation of brand activism. The following findings reveal that practitioners use various measures of authenticity to ensure their campaigns are not stigmatised as woke-washing and that the brand does not receive any backlash from consumers. These measures align with the dimensions of woke-activism authenticity discussed in chapter one. To review, these dimensions are studied in relation to how consumers may perceive the authenticity of brand activism, and therefore, their inclusion may protect the campaign from the stigma of woke-washing. These dimensions are social context independency, inclusion, sacrifice, practice, fit and motivation (Mirzaei et al., 2022). By ensuring their clients and their campaigns align with these dimensions of authenticity, practitioners further demonstrate how they mediate between their client's current and potential future moral standing as a brand, the perceived moral sentiments of consumers and other stakeholders, and practitioners' own moral, ethical and political leanings.

Practitioners describe a process that includes proactively vetting their respective clients' missions, philosophies and histories to ensure that these align with the topic of the brand activism campaign. This process is used by practitioners to ensure that the dimensions of social context independency and fit are present. As previously defined, social context independency is "the extent to which a woke campaign is independent of topical and trendy social issues (Mirzaei et al., 2022, p. 5). Similarly, fit is defined as "the extent to which the woke topic is in line with the brand's current or past core business, meaning/image, positioning, and culture" (Mirzaei et al., 2022, p. 7). For example, when asked if he had any moral or ethical issues using brand activism as a strategy, Participant E stated that he would only have a problem if it was "not authentic [or] if it feels appropriated or co-opted." When asked to elaborate on the term authentic, Participant E initially described it as an intuitive feeling, stating, "I think your gut tells you. Does this feel real? Does this feel authentic? Does this feel like a natural fit?" In this response, Participant E refers to the dimension of fit, previously defined as how closely the perspective on the topic aligns with past messages or the brand's image (Mirzaei et al., 2022). However, this intuitive feeling quickly became rooted in the brand's history and the respective campaign's social context independency. According to Participant E, when deciding if a brand has any authority to speak about an issue, "You look into what they've done in the past. You look into what they are, knowing what their history is, who they are, the makeup of the company. I think deep down, you know… and when you need a little bit of evidence, you go digging for it." When asked if this intuition had any links to products or services offered by the brand, Participant E was adamant that it was more related to the history and corporate structure:

> It's what their brand values are. It's what their brand purpose is. It's what their mission is. It's what they make, how they make it, where they make it. What's their history of corporate governance…you just dig a bit deeper just to see… what their story is and who they are. Who the founders are, what inspired them…I think you can quite quickly get to the bottom of whether it just feels like somebody's trying to make a quick buck versus somebody that's actually trying to do the right thing.

Participant R also considered the idea of brand history being related to the authenticity of brand activism. Participant R even included looking at sustainability reports published by clients of public companies. Once he finds these reports, he explained that he will follow up on their degree of truthfulness:

> [See] if they've made meaningful hires in these areas. And if you can talk to those hires, whether that's a chief diversity officer or the founder… I would say, [when] the brand lets you do that [it is] always a good sign… And even if all that comes out of it is feeling better, it's a win. And usually, what comes out of it is really great ideas that you probably wouldn't have had before because you got to talk to the person that's closer to the work.

Participant B, too, discussed this notion of holding brands accountable for what they report and say. However, he specifically referenced consistency across regions for global corporations as an essential aspect. He stated, "We have to check that they're actually doing something or are involved in a practice that makes sense… like if they're contradicting themselves in a different region, then that's a problem for us."

While discussing with Participant I if social activism was required for all brands, he noted that it did not make sense for some brands. He explained that for these brands, "It feels like [they're] just inserting [themselves] in a conversation that no one asked [them] to be in." Participant I was then asked to elaborate on this point and explain how he determined 'which brands made sense'. He explained that this was determined by the brand's history, which included "what they're founded on and what their purpose is."

Practitioners also judged the motivation behind the brand's intentions for engaging in brand activism. As previously defined, motivation is how the "public perceives the intentions of woke brands as profit-seeking, self-centred versus other-centred, corrupt, genuine, or exploitative (Mirzaei et al., 2022, p. 7). Participant B provided an example by elaborating on the questioning process he used to determine whether a client has these proper intentions:

> Normally, if we work on a campaign for a company … and they're adopting something… we question … their involvement … what they're doing [and] why. If it is a political statement that makes sense and it's a good cause … simply say, why are you adopting it? What makes you … as a company [think] that you can say that?

Participant B also provided a justification as to why this vetting process is for the benefit of the client, stating it as a method to safeguard against the stigma of woke-washing or other forms of backlash:

> Most people are … going to check. Like we live in a world where … you're only one Google search away from finding stuff out … I think that keeps us asking the questions because otherwise, it is going to come out anyway, and I think it's really important to make sure those two things align.

The above findings highlight nuances in the client mediation process for brand activism. Particularly, these findings demonstrated how practitioners proactively vet the mission, philosophies and histories of their clients to ensure the authenticity of brand activism campaigns. As part of the client-mediation process, practitioners aimed to ensure that the campaign message is independent of trending social issues, that it aligns with the brand's core business and culture, and that it is motivated by genuine intentions to align with the dimensions of social context independency, fit and motivation. In doing so, these practitioners enact their roles as moral intermediaries as they determine which clients can align with particular issues. These findings highlight the role of intuition and research in determining brand authenticity as practitioners relied on their gut feeling to assess the authenticity and natural fit of a brand with the topic at hand. At the same time, this intuitive judgment was reinforced by researching the brand's history, corporate structure, brand values, purpose, and mission. As stated by Participant R and Participant B, it is not enough to accept the information provided by their clients, but there is an added element of caution that requires extra research on the part of the practitioner. This included digging deeper and examining the brand's story, founders, and past actions, as practitioners aim to uncover evidence of genuine intentions and ethical behaviour. Practitioners also recognised the significance of motivation in determining the authenticity of brand activism. They understood that public perception of a brand's intentions can influence how the campaign is received and whether it is seen as authentic or exploitative. By questioning the client's motivations and ensuring alignment, practitioners aimed to mitigate the risk of backlash and maintain the integrity of the campaign.

Lastly, practitioners addressed the dimension of practice by holding their clients accountable to take concrete and tangible actions that align with their campaign's statements. As previously defined, practice is "the extent to which the woke brands exercise and act on what they preach" (Mirzaei et al., 2022, p. 6). Participant Q distinguished between tokenistic and authentic actions, believing action in the form of economic contributions to be a sign of token intentions. He even went as far as to say both himself and his agency would refuse work if they believed the client's motivations were tokenistic, citing the importance of an 'act first, talk later' strategy.

> Of course, brands can communicate about…doing good stuff. Talk about it. Be proud of it… But don't beat yourself on the chest because you donated $50,000 to a

> cause… Do that in silence…A lot of brands ask for that…[They say] 'We're going to donate. Can you make a campaign?' [and we say] no we can't, we cannot do that.

Participant Q further explained that promoting good deeds does not necessarily make brand activism inauthentic as long as it is focused on tangible action:

> One doesn't go without the other… I think action is your starting point… That's the genuineness. If you don't do the action, you cannot talk about it." But he made it clear that the brand still needs to promote these actions "because how else do I know that [a brand] is taking responsibility?

Participant R also discussed the importance of action in determining authenticity, stating that "it comes down to what impact [the client's] business model [has] on what it wants to talk about". Using an example of environmental stewardship, Participant R reiterated the importance of aligning the business model or internal practices with the activist intentions expressed in the brief. In instances where these were misaligned, Participant R suggested that he was also willing to refuse work:

> [If internal practice is misaligned with the brief] either a conversation needs to be had about what the plan is and what you're willing to do … and if you're not willing to do it, then maybe we're not willing to do the campaign, and that's often where that conversation has either ended or moved forward. When clients have made large-scale commitments and said … by 2040, we're going to make this commitment to climate change, or we're going to make this commitment … and then that helps make the work even better, and you've influenced a company to actually do more than just say something.

Action was also an important factor in determining the authenticity of a brand activism campaign for Participant D. Using Nike and the *Dream Crazy* campaign to illustrate his point, he stated, "It's not just about using Kaepernick to create an ad, but it's about tangible actions to support that." To Participant D, the authenticity of tangible actions differed from Participant Q's perspective. While he still echoed the concept of the 'act first, talk later strategy', Participant D saw a simple donation as enough of an action to counteract accusations of tokenism. Participant D stated, "It can't be just…what you say. It needs to be connected to tangible actions … really attached to a donation or product that solves a problem for a specific public that you are talking about."

While Participant F did not explicitly relate action to a conceptualisation of authenticity, he noted its importance for the *Bank on Equality* campaign. As previously

discussed, this campaign addressed the gender wage gap in Peru by awarding women with additional reward points during International Women's Day. However, it was important for Participant F to extend this action into a tangible and long-term solution. This included the extension of the campaign into an award system called *Premio Igualitario,* which aimed to eliminate this gender gap by rewarding the efforts of companies and young people who are committed to this cause. After the first instalment of the award, Participant F recalled they had more than sixty companies sign up, all claiming to be working towards or maintaining wage equality. At the time of his interview, they were getting ready to launch the second instalment of the award, and they had already had over 300 companies committed. Participant F saw this growth as a positive affirmation of the actions of the client to continue to address the issue of the gender wage gap. He continued that these actions were both good for the business and for society, explaining that companies could also sign up for the program to get help addressing this wage inequality:

> Don't forget that we're a bank, and we know that we need to [remember] this commerce part. [So] if you want to participate [and] you don't know how to do that with your company, we, Scotiabank, can manage all your payroll to make that happen… So, it's important for Scotiabank one way and to the world the other way. But also, it's important because a lot of companies are applying for this award, and we noticed now a lot of companies don't have this wage gap. So, we think we are doing something good with all this communication.

Participant L also provided an example of tangible action resulting from his campaign, *The Gun Violence History Book.* Though he could not remember who came up with the idea, he recalled someone suggesting that they take the book and get it into some schools to teach about the history of gun violence in the United States. This led to one of the producers, volunteering to bring the book to the attention of some local schools in Chicago. Participant L recalled that "suddenly a bunch of schools were requesting the book to teach their students." While at the time of the interview, he was unsure whether these schools had continued to use the book to teach their students, he remembered simply being excited at how many schools were requesting it. "The goal here is you don't want to do just a book, but I want people to see it and understand a little bit more about this tragic history." In this sense, the book acted as an educational tool and not just a prop used in a promotional video.

Participant S discussed the action that resulted from the *Last Tree Standing* campaign. In tandem with the virtual interactive experience in Minecraft, the campaign collected signatures on a petition.

> This motivated young people to start signing the petition … we collected over 170,000 [signatures]. And eventually, of course, together with everything else that Greenpeace Poland did to save the forest, we managed to actually stop the logging. Even the Environmental Minister was dismissed.

This petition from the *Last Tree Standing* campaign serves as a marker of tangible action as the campaign did not just bring attention to an issue but actively sought out a solution to solve the problem. Thus addressing the dimension of practice.

Participant P also provided an example of her ability to implement change and hold her client accountable to take concrete action. She recalled a time when she was asked to "re-edit what the client had written about their sustainability charter." However, upon reading this charter, Participant P explained that she believed the brand's intentions to be disingenuous as it lacked tangible action. While working on this task, she noted that she felt a great deal of freedom and agency to make comments and amendments, using the fear of consumer backlash as her rationale to the client.

> "Okay, you're saying this… but people will see right through it, now that you're just… making vague promises that have no tangible [action], there's no date… on when you want the goal to be achieved."

According to Participant P, "Clients are also thinking way more about [consumer backlash], and if you would pull them up on things like that, there wouldn't be some kind of pushback…They would actually listen." Here, Participant P references the nuanced power dynamics of the client mediation process for brand activism. In this situation, Participant P expressed her belief that she has the ability to make changes to the client's company policies without question or hesitation. In addition, she recalled another example from a campaign that she worked on with her director for a large and important client:

> We were deliberately pushing them further… We came up with some ideas of… instead of just having a paragraph about like 'in 2050 we're going to maybe use recycled cardboard boxes'… to something like [this] week… We've been really pushing them to have a distinct timeline… So…by 2021, you're going to have this. By 2030, this will definitely happen… Both of us were sort of laughing to

> ourselves… often we don't enjoy working on this client, but at least for this project, we can actually push them… we feel like we [a] some positive… role. Whether or not they enjoy us pushing them… we're gonna do it anyway.

The above findings highlight the importance of action in brand activism campaigns and their relation to authenticity. The practitioners emphasised that action must align with the brand's overall messaging and should be the starting point for brands to demonstrate a tangible effort to address social issues. This included actions such as donations, product development, changing business practices or implementing other long-term solutions. The practitioners' perspectives indicate that, in their view, authenticity is achieved when brands go beyond empty rhetoric and take concrete steps towards addressing social and environmental issues. The findings also shed light on the practitioners' roles as moral intermediaries as they believe with brand activism, they have the power to hold their clients accountable to make changes and actions that address social, environmental or political issues that they value.

The findings provided in this section highlight the nuances of the client mediation process of brand activism and how it differs from traditional campaigns. Based on the practitioner responses, this mediation process has a particular focus on authentically aligning the brand to the campaign's message. The analysis of the practitioner interviews revealed how they practically address many issues related to the authenticity of brand activism. These issues aligned with various criteria previously identified in the academic and industry literature. The first section of findings highlighted the proactive vetting process conducted by practitioners in attempts to align the brand's mission, philosophies and histories with the topic at hand. Practitioners used this process as a method to ensure the authenticity of the campaign. They seem to align their methods with the dimensions of social context independency, fit and motivation (Mirzaei et al., 2022). By examining the brand's history, corporate structure, values, purpose and mission, the practitioners aimed to determine whether the brand's involvement in the campaign felt authentic and natural. In some instances, the practitioners went beyond accepting the information provided by clients and conducted additional research to uncover evidence of genuine intentions and ethical behaviour. The second section of findings highlighted the dimension of motivation as practitioners recognised that the public's perception of the brand and its authentic intentions could influence how the campaign was received (Mirzaei et al., 2022). By questioning the client's motivations and ensuring alignment, practitioners aimed to mitigate the risk of

backlash. The third section of findings highlighted the importance of tangible action in determining the authenticity of brand activism, which aligns with the dimension of practice (Mirzaei et al., 2022).

Overall, these findings highlight the role of intuition and research in determining brand authenticity. Practitioners relied on their gut feeling to assess the authenticity and natural fit of a brand with the campaign's topic. This intuitive judgment was reinforced by conducting thorough research on the brand's history and holding clients accountable for performing tangible actions that aligned with the campaign's objectives. The above findings emphasised how practitioners mediate between their client's current and potential future moral standing as a brand, the perceived moral sentiments of consumers and other stakeholders, and practitioners' own moral, ethical and political leanings.

3.2.2 The public as actors in the field

The following section of this chapter explores the findings of this dissertation's research related to the public audience as actors in the field. The term public audience is used to describe not just the specific target audience, a common term in advertising describing the audience who the campaign is intended but includes every potential viewer of the campaign. While it is important for practitioners to mediate the expectations of the public into the creative output of traditional campaigns, this is often in relation to the style and aesthetics of campaigns. For brand activism, practitioners must mediate the ideological and moral sentiments of the public and consider their expectations for campaigns to be authentic. Without this perceived authenticity, campaigns run the risk of backlash by consumers through online hate and boycotting of the brands. The detailed analysis of the interviews reveals how practitioners understand risk while engaging in brand activism. The practitioners view this risk of backlash as inherent and inevitable, and mitigating this risk becomes an important part of the public mediation process. In addition, these findings reveal the nuances of the public mediation process as practitioners place high importance on garnering both support and criticism from the public for their campaigns.

The following practitioner descriptions highlight risk as an inherent part of engaging in brand activism. For example, according to Participant E, "There is definitely an inherent risk in [using brand activism]. I know there's always a chance you might get it slightly wrong, and also that it dates… I just think it is very hard to [execute brand activism] in an

authentic way." Participant S also referred to an inherent level of risk in dealing with politically controversial subjects, stating that sometimes, for big campaigns, the opposition may dig a little deeper "and they will send you a nasty message on Instagram or LinkedIn. Fine, that happens. I mean, if you don't get death threats online, you don't even do activism." Lastly, Participant B stated, "There's a risk in being brave. There's an inherent risk." Here, the practitioners highlight that they feel the presence of both the commercial risk, i.e. risk to the brand, and the personal risk involved in brand activism.

While discussing her work on the *Voices of Racism* campaign, Participant H talked about anticipating the risk of the message being ineffective. She also described that there was a definite feeling of risk because they were putting an experience about racism out into the world, "and it was probably going to create a little bit of push and pull with people on the outside." Similarly, Participant E expressed that you always need to be prepared for backlash. He continued this thought, speaking more specifically about the United States. He noted that "you have to be comfortable with the fact that… it's so divided. It's so split down the middle that you're going to get heat." Participant E illustrated this point with a Super Bowl commercial created by Wieden and Kennedy for Coke in 2014 entitled *America the Beautiful.* While Participant E was employed at Wieden and Kennedy at the time, he did not specify if he had actually worked on this campaign. The campaign featured Americans of all different ethnicities, while the anthem 'American the Beautiful' was sung in seven different languages. According to Participant E, this sparked controversy, with some saying it was 'un-American' to not be sung in English. He referred to this campaign as "super powerful, and to have that run in the Super Bowl was really strong. But there was a lot of backlash for Coke, from the [politically] right [and] from all the racists out there. So, you have to be prepared to take some heat."

Similarly, Participant D also expressed the inevitability of public criticism when engaging in brand activism. This point was illustrated by discussing the *Shop, share and support black women-owned businesses* for Mastercard. This campaign aimed to support black women-owned businesses during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant D remembered, "41 per cent of the businesses owned by black women were about to close because of the pandemic [versus] 17 per cent of white-owned businesses." He suggested that this was due to systemic racism, which is prevalent in the United States. He explained that black women-owned businesses did not have the same access to loans or investment

opportunities since they had low credibility. “That’s why they need help the most [during the pandemic], and it justifies why Mastercard [decided] to invest specifically in that,” Participant D recalled that even though he believed it made sense and was a statistically justified decision, there was still backlash:

> When they posted the [campaign online], there were a lot of people commenting like, ‘Oh, why don’t you invest in small businesses in general, like why are you prioritising this group?’ So, they don’t get the big picture, so this is something that is complicated, even with something that was supposed to be what everybody gets because it’s on the news… If you create something this a little political in a way, there will be people that are going to criticize, and that’s part of the journey of the brand.

The following case provided by Participant C discusses how he anticipated risk working on the *Dress for Respect* campaign for Schweppes. Participant C’s case details the importance of considering the current societal sentiments and political leanings. He recalled being aware of this type of risk at the beginning stages of idea development, asking himself, “How do we convince the global team from Coca-Cola… to make something social… that could generate hate for the brand?” He continued this sentiment by explaining how he rationalised using controversial topics in his creative work and how he anticipated any risk associated with it. He expressed that using any type of social topic in a campaign will always result in some form of hate, “so you need to balance the love and the hate.” After the campaign video had been released online, he remembered that people began engaging in the conversation immediately. The campaign addressed sexual harassment of women in nightclubs and opened with a line of copy that stated, “86% of Brazilian women have been harassed in nightclubs…Still, many men say they don’t see it happening”(Ogilvy Brazil, 2018). This was followed by a series of men who are waiting outside of a nightclub, making statements that align with the previous statement. While the campaign already carried an inherent element of risk, Participant C explained this risk to be elevated due to the prevailing social sentiment at the time. He recalled it was an election year at the time the campaign launched:

> It was a very tough election… I don’t want to get political here, but our current president [who was running for first time election at the time] had loads of controversial sayings about sexism and racism and other stuff, so quickly the conversation, which was about sexism, became a political conversation as well.

The candidate and current president at the time, Jair Bolsonaro, had been quoted as making statements to women such as "I wouldn't rape you because you don't deserve it" (Meredith, 2018, p. 8). And while discussing a congresswoman who had suggested that Bolsonaro's comments encouraged sexual harassment, Bolsonaro was reported to have said, "Rosario was 'not worth raping; she is very ugly'" (Meredith, 2018, p. 9). It was comments like these that led to the following headlines during Bolsonaro's campaign: *Trump of the tropics: the 'dangerous' candidate leading Brazil's presidential race* (Phillips, 2018), *Brazil's wealthy farm belt backs Trump-like presidential candidate* (Mano & Boadle, 2018)*, Leading candidate in Brazilian election charged with racism* (Savarese, 2018). Within this social context, it is understandable that this campaign carried an extra form of risk since the topic of sexual harassment was already on the public agenda, and according to Participant C, "Coca-Cola was also afraid of [backlash stemming from the political situation], but they decided to do it, which I thought was just unbelievable."

When working with topics that are 'sensitive' in comparison to working on campaigns for more generic products, Participant Q discussed anticipating risk by remembering to account for the various communities being affected. He used his work on the *Contract for Change* campaign as an example.

> You need to take into account [that] you're talking to [the] farmer's specific community. It's a type of farming community, not a normal [one]. That's [number] one. Two, you're going to hit environmental conversations that can backlash on your brand... So there's way more to think about if you do a campaign like that and way more to watch out for. I think you have to be way more careful.

Participant Q also pointed out that creative work will always have both 'haters' and 'lovers', and while hateful comments may bother him personally and artistically, he expressed that this bipartisanship "creates the conversation … If they don't have the conversation, I'm missing my goal. So that's normal." Where he takes issue, and what he hopes to avoid, is to 'get it wrong' and miss the mark of the message entirely.

The above findings highlight the nuances of mediating public expectations of brand activism. These practitioners recognised that engaging in brand activism carries an inherent risk and acknowledged that tackling politically or socially controversial topics can attract criticism. However, they also expressed that embracing this risk is an essential part of the brand's journey when pursuing meaningful causes. The examples provided by practitioners

illustrate the divisiveness of social, political and environmental topics. They clearly depict how this inherent risk comes from the parts of the public audience that take residence in the opposite ideological position of the practitioners themselves. For example, Participant E noted backlash from the "[politically] right [and] from all the racists out there." Similarly, Participant D characterised his campaign detractors as people who "don't get the big picture." In addition, Participant Q summarised the inherent risk of divisiveness as important to drive the conversation. Therefore, mediating the public audiences' expectations and balancing this 'love and hate' from both sides of the debate is viewed as a crucial aspect of the process. By understanding the public audience as active participants in the field, these practitioners demonstrated how they navigate the nuances of brand activism.

The following two examples discuss how these practitioners manage the risk of backlash. Participant Q explained that the type of risk that comes with using controversial topics that may cause backlash is "part of the deal. If you want to go to that space, if you want to have heavier messaging… then you have to be willing to take the consequences." He also noted that aside from himself, his agency and everyone who worked on the campaign was also at risk of backlash, particularly the higher-up positions such as the executive creative director, chief creative officer and CEO. This type of risk was identified in the literature, where public pressure can result in loss of employment. Participant Q stressed the importance of research as a tactic for mitigating any risk:

> Especially for *Boards of Change* and [other] very sensitive topics, we have specialists. We do our research. We talk to groups. We do our research to figure out 98% that we are not hurting people in the wrong way… So, we have a lot of backups. But if it goes wrong… of course… that's terrifying. But it's also part of the game… If I want to make meaningful work, that's going to be part of it…That's on me. It's not on anybody else.

Participant Q then referenced some 'legal issues' he had encountered while working on campaigns back in Belgium. Though he did not expand on this point, he provided a justification for the risks he took, stating, "But at least people are talking about it, and at least they're having hopefully an important conversation about it."

Similar to Participant Q, part of Participant G's management strategy also revolved around completing the appropriate amount of research to understand the brand. This research was used to certify that the campaign would not harm the brand. Another part of this

management strategy is to confirm that the client understands that there is always a risk in tackling such issues. Participant G illustrated her point using an example of a feminine hygiene brand called Nana:

> When we were doing Nana, and we were saying, 'We are going to talk about periods in a region where it's taboo'. We said that it is risky, but it's a good risk to take. So, you have that slight fear. But that I hope this goes well, and I hope it doesn't backfire on me, especially if they take it forward. But I don't think that any of us have ever felt that we are in danger of losing our jobs if we do that. It's just if it does backfire, then maybe you get taken off the client for a bit.

The following two cases describe how these practitioners manage actual backlash on their brand activism campaigns. While discussing the infamous *Dream Crazy* campaign for Nike, Participant E discussed the initial backlash endured by the company, which involved the loss of "a couple of billion dollars off the value of the company." Though eventually, this campaign was said to have made Nike money in the long run, Participant E explained that "hate usually is quick and hard and loudest, to begin with**.**" This was exemplified by the loss in market capitalisation, estimated at 3.2 per cent, and the public display of online protest and boycott of the brand by consumers burning their Nike products (Abad-Santos, 2018; Kelleher, 2018). However, eventually, the public narrative changed to one of support.

> People started supporting it more, and things turned around, and it was a really successful campaign for them. So that's where it gets really, really hard. I think it's just an uncomfortable way to work. Because you're dealing with uncomfortable truths… There's always going to be a level of discomfort in some shape or form, and if it's not in some way uncomfortable, then why are you really doing it?

Participant R recounted a similar experience to that of Participant E, describing his experience working on the *Evolve the Definition* campaign for a men's clothing brand called Bonobos. This campaign aimed to challenge the 'prescribed definition of masculinity' and was launched during the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network's (ESPN) award show, the ESPYs. Participant R described this as a "huge 90-second spot when you know sports people can't fast forward the commercial." This campaign featured a diverse combination of 172 men, including various gender identities, ethnicities, ages and body types, reacting to the standard and traditional definitions of masculinity. This was then followed by an explanation of why that definition did not fit with them in relation to their own personal stories. According to Participant R, when the campaign launched, there was a lot of panic

within the agency and from the client. The backlash was intense, and people were burning their Bonobos apparel.

> And so, of course… as a person, you worry, you want to do good work. I love the client and the people in the team [who worked] on it, and… you worry that you've put not only yourself out there, but maybe [you've] endangered the careers of others as a result. And I think the good reality is that over time, over a year of analysis, that turned out to be their most successful campaign that they had ever done. But…that's a long time to figure that out. And then obviously, there's the other end of the spectrum, which is like, you know, not all companies share the same point of view on political statements. So certainly, it affects maybe your [future job prospects], but that's okay for me.

The above findings further highlight how practitioners anticipate and experience risk of backlash and also how they manage backlash itself. However, this management strategy primarily revolved around doubling down on the campaign message as practitioners held the belief that they were ultimately correct in their ideological stance. Participant G and Participant Q emphasised the importance of research in mitigating the risk associated with brand activism. They ensured that they understood the brand and the potential impact of their campaigns on different groups. This research-driven approach helped them make informed decisions and minimise the possibility of negative consequences. Participant G also noted that part of this strategy was to ensure her clients were aware of the potential risks associated with brand activism. She ensured that her clients were aware of the potential consequences and were willing to take the risk to address important issues.

Overall, the findings in this section have highlighted the practitioners' perspectives on risk and how they navigate the potential negative consequences of their creative work. They also shed light on the nuances of the public mediation process and the influence of the public as actors in the field. The findings acknowledged that when dealing with sensitive and controversial topics, being met with criticism and opposition is considered to be inevitable. The practitioners demonstrate a willingness to take risks and engage in uncomfortable conversations through their work as they expressed the belief that to create meaningful and impactful campaigns, some level of discomfort and potential backlash is unavoidable. The findings highlight that the actors of the public as part of the field are divided into two camps, each representing opposing political and social ideological beliefs. To these practitioners, it is just as important to receive criticism of their campaigns from the 'racists' and 'people who don't get the big picture' as it is to have applause. As explained by Participant Q, without this

touch of negativity, the conversation that the campaign is trying to ignite is never started. Practitioners see criticism of their campaigns as an essential part of this conversation and believe that without opposition, true activism cannot take place. They view this backlash as an indication that their campaigns have truly crossed the line into activism and are distinguished from the insincerity of woke-washing. These findings provide insight into how practitioners perceive and navigate the risk of backlash and showcase a perspective that embraces discomfort and acknowledges the importance of critics being part of the field. This sheds further light on the challenges and considerations involved in mediating the expectations of the public.

3.2.3 The community of the cause as actors in the field

This section of findings discusses members of the community of the cause as actors in the field. This term is used to describe anyone who is or has been involved with the cause or movement that is the focus of the brand activism campaign. In addition, this includes anyone with lived insight into the cause. This section explores how practitioners use design thinking principles to mediate these experiences and expectations of these communities to better understand the problem and help facilitate solutions. This insight and the mediation processes involved are found to impact the overall creative output of brand activism. The findings below reveal that practitioners use two main strategies to involve this community and mediate their experiences and expectations while creating brand activism campaigns. These strategies include (1) undertaking extensive research into the topic at hand and (2) collaborating with relevant parties to lend credibility to the campaign and message. This process assists in facilitating the appearance of macro and micro forms of authenticity, as previously outlined in chapter one. To reiterate, on a macro-level, authenticity is categorised as external (representing objective and factual truths) or internal (individualism and expression of an internal understanding of the true self) (Dutton, 2003; Newman & Smith, 2016; Shifman, 2018).

Research into consumer behaviour, clients' competitors and cultural trends has always been an important component in the process of creating promotional communication, a function that is typically performed by account planners or creative strategists. However, in order to mediate the experiences and expectations of the community of the cause, practitioners report using increased levels of research during the creative process. For example, Participant S likened his experience in researching for *The Last Tree Standing*

campaign for Greenpeace Poland to a process similar to the work of an investigative journalist**.** When discussing the process behind this campaign, Participant S stressed the importance of research, which included insights into demographics, consumer behaviour and, for this specific campaign, the use of video games. But it went well beyond that. According to Participant S, you have to read "absolutely everything… [including] smaller, local, explorative research." Participant S detailed his thought process behind this type of research:

> You have a lot of people that you know that say that Greenpeace is not right. So, you want to verify…who is right, whether you're actually doing the right thing…so you have to read a … tonne of papers. If you can understand research papers, then you read research papers.

Participant H also described an extensive amount of research while discussing her work on the *Voices of Racism* campaign for The New Zealand Human Rights Commission. This campaign was an immersive experience to demonstrate the casual racism that many New Zealanders face daily. This campaign went through several stages of ideation because it was very important to Participant H and her team that they make an introspective and personal experience that might "change the way [participants of the experience] see themselves in the context of racism in New Zealand and how [they can] kind of understand what people might be going through and realise their part in it." It was very important to Participant H to get the tone right because she was worried of "spreading examples of racism around." According to Participant H, after playing around with various publication mediums such as print or radio, nothing felt right:

> It needed to be something that was deeply, deeply personal. It needed to be a learning tool, not like a piece of comms. … We needed it to have a reason and a purpose, and you needed for people to actually choose to experience it…[and] gain knowledge, gain perspective [and] feel like what they've gone through is actually going to help them in their worldview, as well as… helping the people.

Due to the sensitivity surrounding the subject matter, research was an integral part of the overall creative process. The depth of research required for this campaign led Participant H to use an external source to conduct interviews, collecting the experiences to be recreated in the campaign. When discussing this research, Participant H stated, "It was really important to us… Obviously, it had to be real. So, it had to really ring true and…be real." Once the team received the interview transcripts, the copywriter was tasked with reading through this data and pulling out the pieces that would be used in the experience. Participant H noted that it

was very hands-on for everyone, and it was particularly an intense and confronting experience for the copywriter, who had to continuously re-read and then re-create experiences of racism.

Participant L also conducted an extensive amount of research while working on the *Gun Violence History Book* campaign. He was tasked with writing and putting together the actual book, which meant he had to research and collate 228 years of gun violence in the United States. To ensure accuracy, as this was supposed to be a historical book, Participant L elaborated that he "had to read a lot of books. To understand [and] to learn a little bit more about [this] history, this tragic history in the US… I've read more than 50 books, plus a bunch of websites, blogs and newspapers."

Research also played an important role in the creative process for the *Equality Spellcheck* campaign. Participant G recalled that after receiving the initial brief, she started researching all of the problems women were having in the workplace. She was personally impacted by everything she read, stating, "As a woman reading the problems and things that they face, I was really upset… it triggered me personally." This inspired her to conduct further research and expand her search parameters to talk to other companies in the area that may be facing similar problems. Eventually, she started researching the global Me-Too movement, which involved women speaking up against sexual harassment. Participant G noted that these problems faced by women were not common topics of discussion in the UAE, which motivated her to continue researching. This led her to speak to people within her office to "try to see, had they faced anything or heard any of these stories, and I realised how big of an issue this was." The execution of the campaign also required an extensive amount of research, particularly the process of selecting the underlined words and the accompanying statistics. The campaign, in total, connected 300 statistics to over 1,000 words.

While discussing the process behind creating the *Fireproof Newspaper* campaign, Participant J also described an extensive amount of research. He described this process to include researching forest fires in Argentina and other countries such as Australia, the United States and Peru (the Amazon). This also included conducting first-person qualitative research and interviewing people from the South of Argentina, where the wildfires were most prevalent at the time. This research led to the insight that a lot of the fires were being started accidentally from newspapers being used as kindling for barbeques or bonfires. This insight

led to the idea of the fireproof newspaper. However, they still needed to research how to produce the actual product. Eventually, they found two potential non-flammable products to develop the newspapers. Once they decided on the best material, they then had to determine if the product would work as a printed newspaper, considering the photography on the pages as well. When the team was satisfied with the quality of the product, they began working with a production company to develop the first fireproof newspaper. The last stage of research involved searching for a company that would "print the newspapers and make them fireproof all within the timeframe of a week."

The above findings explored how practitioners employed extensive amounts of research to mediate the experiences and expectations of the community of the cause of the brand activism campaigns and how this impacted the overall creative output. These findings illustrated how different practitioners incorporated research into their creative process. The example provided by Participant H demonstrated research and the hands-on involvement of her team members to highlight the importance placed on the authenticity and accuracy of the message. Practitioners demonstrated the importance of undertaking thorough research into the topic at hand and going beyond the surface-level information. This research process was described by one practitioner as resembling the work of an investigative journalist, where he delved into various sources, such as research papers, to ensure he was well-informed on the subject matter. These findings highlight research as an integral part of the creative process for brand activism campaigns as practitioners mediate the expectations of the community of the cause. The practitioners recognised the importance of this research as a means of understanding their audience, building credibility and ensuring the campaign effectively addresses the topic at hand. By immersing themselves in research, these practitioners expressed their belief that they can ensure authenticity and create impactful campaigns.

According to Participant Q, an extensive amount of research was also required for the *Contract for Change* campaign. He remembered that the idea they wanted to pitch to the client deviated from the original brief. It required a lot of research to affirm the viability of the idea. This included confirming the statistics provided to them in the pitch deck, stating that only one per cent of farms were organic. Once this was confirmed, they started to research the reason why so few farms were organic. This included researching all of the problems and hurdles that farmers faced when converting to organic land, what organic farmers needed and where they were located. According to Participant Q, this research was

very important to back up not only that there was a problem but also justify why they needed to act "because you cannot just say, hey, you're responsible, please do this."

Similarly, while the insight for the *Boards of Change* campaign came from the lived experiences of Participant Q and Participant K, the execution and implementation required an extensive amount of research. Participant Q explicitly emphasised the important role research played in the early stages of the campaign:

> There's a lot of research… it all comes down to research. For example, for *Boards of Change,* we talked to the artists living in the neighbourhood, we talked to the city, we talked to BLM activists, just to present them the idea… 'Is there something that really can offend somebody?' And then we would pull the plug before we obviously get it out in the world.

Participant K also recalled the strategic nature of the research required to create the campaign. For example, researching the best locations for where to place the voting registration booths because "it doesn't make sense to just put them randomly throughout the city. You want to go in the neighbourhoods where they are going to be most impactful." According to Participant K, they focused on registration numbers for various wards throughout the city. The data illustrated which areas had the highest and lowest voter turnouts in past elections and, therefore, where to place the booths for the highest impact. These were placed mainly in areas with higher minority populations.

The last example illustrating the extensive research required for brand activism campaigns is narrated by Participant P while discussing the campaigns for a company called Little Sun. This company was founded by a contemporary artist named Olafur Eliasson and an engineer named Frederik Ottensen. Little Sun raised money by selling solar devices with the aim of providing solar lights to "energy-impoverished rural communities in Africa." According to Participant P, working for an activist-driven organisation meant that research was already an imperative part of her everyday work:

> We'd already kind of had to do so much research. I mean, we really had to know day-to-day things, like the statistics of how many lamps we had sold worldwide and how that translated into the carbon emissions that had been saved and how much. We really had to keep up to date with these statistics all the time… like the impact of using candlelight, or… a gas-fueled light had on the lungs as opposed to using a solar lamp… these kinds of solar impacts.

Participant P discussed a campaign that consisted of four events that she worked on leading up to the COP21 Paris. These events built on each other and aimed to demonstrate how individuals can be part of a solution for climate change. The first event consisted of an art installation at the Falling Walls Conference in Berlin, an annual science event, followed by a speech at a Documentary Film Festival in Copenhagen. This speech aimed to raise awareness for a video competition entitled *Little Changes, Big Impact,* asking filmmakers to show how small changes could make a significant contribution to combatting climate change. The third event was a street photography campaign that occurred during COP21 Paris. For this event, participants were asked how they personally tackled climate change. The last part of this campaign was Olafur's Icewatch installation, which consisted of several melting icebergs from Greenland placed in the Place du Pantheon in Paris. In collaboration with students from the Sorbonne and a group called Artists 4 Climate, the installation involved everyone making a 'Light is Life' chain around a block of melting ice. This final demonstration aimed to illustrate how everyone could play a part in fighting climate change. Participant P made a specific note about the research that she had to conduct prior to running these events and before attending COP21 Paris:

> What kind of people would be going to COP21? What organisations? What are the exact goals that they wanted to have signed? When the Paris Agreement would be like… if all the goals would be agreed upon, what impacts that would have in like one year's time or five years' time?

Participant P's account demonstrates how research is embedded in the everyday work of an activist-driven organisation. This research provides factual support for their mission and activities. At the same time, she expressed criticism regarding the lack of research conducted by some agencies that work on more commercialised forms of brand activism. She referenced her work for a multinational corporation and was critical of the amount of research they conducted.

> From my experience with this…campaign, for example, or some of the other campaigns that have had a really quick turnaround, I don't think it has enough [research]…I don't think the people on the agency side have enough respect for activists as they should. For example, you know, they might just do some very quick, cursory research… they might research a little bit about like what happened at, you know, Black Lives Matter protests and maybe sort of take some of the slogans that were used and like reappropriate them, things like that. So, I think they

> do a bit of research. But I don't think enough research is done to really, you know, to give the respect that there should be.

The above findings further highlight the importance of research in mediating the experiences of the community of the cause for brand activism campaigns. This research is used by practitioners to support the campaign's feasibility, justify the need for action and ensure that campaigns are impactful. For example, Participant Q emphasised the importance of research for the *Contract for Change* campaign. This research was crucial to identify the problem addressed in the campaign while justifying the need for action. This highlights the importance of research in ensuring a solid foundation for the campaign's concept. In addition, Participant P's critique of research by some highlights the importance of conducting thorough and respectful research to ensure campaigns are authentic, well-informed, and considerate of the communities they aim to engage with. These findings demonstrate how research that mediates the perspectives and expectations of the community of the cause is used to validate ideas, back up claims, justify actions, avoid controversies and maximise impact. The research processes used by the practitioners mimics design thinking principles as they aim to better identify complex social problems and come up with innovative solutions.

So far, the findings in this section discussed the role of research in the creative process of brand activism and how it is used to mediate the experiences and expectations of the community of the cause. These findings emphasised how practitioners use research to ensure the authenticity and credibility of their campaigns as well as their overall impact. The findings illustrated how practitioners used research to dig deeper into the topic at hand, understand their audience and effectively address the issues. This in-depth research allowed practitioners to gain insight into social issues and historical contexts and enabled them to create authentic and impactful campaigns. These findings also highlighted the importance of research when addressing sensitive topics, as practitioners noted it was crucial to understand the nuances and the real experiences of these issues. This research aimed to ensure campaigns were accurate, respectful and relevant to their target audience. Research was also used to validate ideas and justify actions as it helped practitioners gather evidence, statistics and real-life stories to support the feasibility of campaigns. In addition, this research assisted in identifying problems, understanding barriers and proposing solutions. This section also included criticism from one practitioner surrounding the lack of respect for activists and the insufficient research conducted by some agencies and practitioners. This critique further

emphasised the importance of conducting respectful and comprehensive research to develop brand activism campaigns.

The second main strategy that practitioners use to mediate the experiences and expectations of relevant actors belonging to the community of the cause is to include lived insight to inform the campaign. This mediation process greatly impacts the creative output of the campaign. These insights came from the practitioner themself, someone within the practitioner's team, or an external collaborator directly related to the cause. For example, when discussing the creative process for *The Talk* campaign for P&G, Participant I explained that the insight came from the lived experiences of his team members. This campaign brought to light a discussion that seemingly all African-American parents had with their children in the United States about how to act while in the presence of police. *The Talk* campaign was run off the back of a previous campaign initiative called *My Black is Beautiful*, a campaign that aimed to encourage a new beauty standard promoting African American women's natural beauty (P&G, 2020). According to Participant I, the *My Black is Beautiful* campaign was aimed at women of colour to tell them, "We understand your particular needs… we know what's going on in your world, and we support that… and we also have… commercial products that are specifically geared towards the things that you have told us … you need and are missing in the marketplace."

While brainstorming a new execution for the *My Black is Beautiful* campaign, some younger African American members of Participant I's team mentioned 'the talk'. According to Participant I, "They mentioned that their parents [and] every parent has this talk with their kids at some point that shows them how to be safe around police and what they're going to be facing in the world." At the time, this insight was shocking to Participant I, who "growing up in Midwest Ohio as a white kid… [couldn't] believe this still [had] to happen." Though the concept of the 'talk' has since entered the discourse of mainstream American society, particularly due to the increasing presence and global press surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement, at the time this campaign was being ideated, these experiences were not common knowledge to the same capacity that they are today. Participant I stated that it was very important to portray an authentic experience using the knowledge gained from lived experience. He explained this by stating, "I'm…a 40-year-old white due like I can't relate, I shouldn't be speaking on their behalf, I can't relate to their world. I'd like to think I can, but the truth is, there are some insights and knowledge you just have to live through". The team

started drawing on these experiences and soon discovered that this shared understanding of the 'talk' went back generations and it had been "ingrained in America that you have to act different around white people… and to us that needed to be brought to light… not to African Americans, they know that, they [needed] P&G to use their marketing power to bring it to a broader audience."

Another example of lived insight came from Participant K when discussing the *Boards of Change* campaign. As previously mentioned, the original brief from the City of Chicago was to get more citizens to participate in the 2020 United States census. However, during the time of ideation, the United States was experiencing nationwide protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement in lieu of the murder of George Floyd. These protests were happening in downtown Chicago, where Participant K and Participant Q were residing at the time. Participant K recalled this experience:

> We were in the midst of it. I remember at night, suddenly hearing like glass shatter and fighting and screaming and sirens, and I opened the blinds, and I could see, just on the street, looting going on and windows being smashed.

Participant K juxtaposed the violence and chaos from these riots with the peace, clarity and calm that followed the next day.

> Then the next day, we were just walking through town, and I just see all the damage, and you see the boards going up. And then in those following days, I thought… it was very powerful. You saw all these messages being written on those boards, and it was being turned from something that a lot of people saw as a symbol of destruction and… divide, and suddenly saw that becoming…like a canvas…for people to… voice their frustrations…but also their hope, their desire for things to change … I found [this] incredibly powerful.

Participant K recalled talking about his feelings with Participant Q as they were both experiencing emotional reactions. They were so inspired by this that they became determined to do something with the boards.

> That was the trigger for us to be like… if these are going to be taken down, what is going to happen to these boards?... This is not just plywood. This is kind of like a piece of history now. So, let's use it for something good.

At this moment, Participant K connected what he perceived as a powerful moment and the start of a cultural revolution to the original brief by the City of Chicago. He questioned,

“What if we use it [and] turn it into something that can help people, create real change through democracy, through census, through voting?” This was followed by a lot of brainstorming, which led him down various usage paths such as school desks or speaker podiums and eventually landed on voting registration booths, which, according to Participant K, “is probably the most powerful symbol or of making your voice heard.”

In addition to lived insight informing the creative ideation of the brand activism campaigns, practitioners also used the method of collaboration as a way to mediate the experiences and expectations of the community of the cause. When discussing the creative process for the *Buy Better, Wear Longer* campaign, Participant B explained the importance of connecting with Gen Z and their voice of concern for the planet. As previously stated, this campaign aimed to tackle global overconsumption by promoting the philosophy to buy less but better-quality clothing and avoid fast fashion. To maintain an authentic voice, this campaign focused on including and casting influential activists residing in the target demographic, such as Xiuhtezcatl Martinez, Marcus Rashford and Jaden Smith, who respectively use their platforms to speak out against issues such as climate change and child food poverty. Participant B elaborated on this notion of authenticity by stating the importance of each collaborator's individual stance. According to Participant B, the brand did not ‘put words in their mouth’ but wanted to give them a platform and a stage to share their own views.

> When we realised these incredible people were essentially doing the same thing that we wanted to talk about… we were just like, let’s not hijack or take over that conversation. Let’s allow that conversation, put them on the stage and let Levi’s use its power to help these people spread the word.

Another instance of collaboration that mediated the experience of the community of the cause and lent authentic credibility to the campaign was explained by Participant D when discussing the *Refugee Nation* campaign. As previously discussed, this campaign created the flag for the refugee team competing at the 2016 Rio Olympics. When ideating the campaign, Participant D explained that it would be inauthentic for him to come up with the design:

> [It would be] not legit if two creatives from Brazil created the refugee flag and the refugee anthem [because they] didn’t go through the pain the refugees went [through, and they] didn’t understand precisely… all the things that happened to them through [their] journey.

Participant D decided to collaborate with a refugee artist named Yara Said, who had recently fled from Syria, seeking asylum in the Netherlands. Said narrated her harrowing journey to Participant D. This journey involved crossing the border between Turkey and Greece on the Aegean Sea. Said recounted that on the small and over-crowded boats, the refugees only had the life vests to rely on. In the midst of the Syrian refugee crisis, these life vests were discovered to be fake, soaking up water and not providing any form of buoyancy (Turnball & Shoebridge, 2016; UNHCR, 2017). Despite this fact, the life vest was the only thing many of these refugees had to rely on and Said understood the life vest to be a very impactful symbol. Said then came up with the idea that the flag needed to be orange and black, the colours of the life vests. This flag was envisioned by Said "as a symbol of their fight to survive and to look for opportunities in a new country." Participant D furthered this vision, stating that "the flag also became a symbol of solidarity to refugees across the world." This flag has been adopted into refugee camps and has since been acquired by museums like the MOMA.

Collaboration was also required for the *Boards of Change* campaign. According to Participant K, once they had decided to use the plywood boards, they had to determine where they were and when they could pick them up. They also had to find the artist collectives who were behind the majority of the artwork. According to Participant K, they were "super enthusiastic" and even told the team where they could find more boards and invited them to join them as they went out to paint more.

The above findings showcase the use of lived insight and collaboration as strategies used by practitioners to mediate the experiences and expectations of the community of the cause. The use of lived insight to inform the campaign idea was discussed as important to portray an authentic experience. Collaboration with external parties involved in the community of the cause was also used to ensure an authentic voice resonated in the campaign. Both insight and collaboration were used by practitioners to ensure authenticity, amplify the voices of those directly involved or affected by the cause and bring about social change. By drawing on personal experiences and involving individuals connected to the cause, these strategies contributed to the effectiveness and impact of the campaigns.

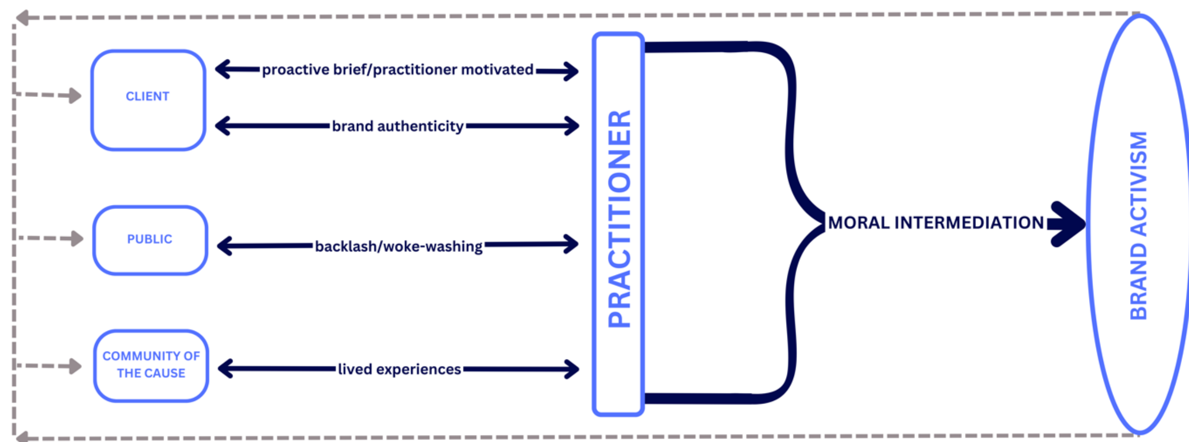
Overall, the findings in this section showcase the complex processes involved in mediating the experiences of the community of the cause for brand activism campaigns. Practitioners use research, insight and collaboration to ensure authenticity, credibility and

impact of brand activism campaigns. Practitioners emphasised the importance of conducting extensive research into the topic at hand as a crucial method for building credibility, addressing the issues effectively and ensuring authenticity. They demonstrated hands-on involvement of themselves and their team members as this research allowed them to gather evidence, statistics and real-life stories, all of which supported the feasibility of the campaign idea. In addition, this research was used to help identify problems, understand the barriers, and propose adept solutions, a process that mimics design thinking principles. Another justification for this extensive amount of research conducted by practitioners acknowledged the sensitivity surrounding brand activism campaigns. Practitioners recognised that this research allowed them to understand the nuance and real experiences that were related to the issues. Through research, practitioners could immerse themselves in the topic as they aimed to ensure their campaigns were respectful and relevant and accurately represented the community of the cause. In addition, the use of lived insight and collaboration reflects a conscious effort by practitioners to ensure authenticity, amplify the voices of those directly affected by the cause, and bring about social change. Furthermore, this section emphasised practitioners' new roles as moral intermediaries as they engaged with the community of the cause through research, insight and collaboration. These were used to validate ideas, back up claims, justify actions, avoid controversies and backlash and maximise the impact of the campaign.

3.3 Discussion

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, the field "includes all the individuals who act as gatekeepers to the domain. It is their job to decide whether an idea or product should be added to the domain" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015, p. 229). This chapter set out to explore how practitioners manage the expectations of the various actors in the field, defined as the client, the public, and the community of the cause and how this impacts the creative ideation process. This chapter also explored how the creative process differs for brand activism compared to traditional campaigns. This chapter began by presenting relevant literature exploring the historical role of practitioners as cultural intermediaries and outlining the traditional creative process in advertising. This was followed by literature related to each of the three actors in the field. Upon the review of the literature, this chapter presented the findings from this dissertation's empirical research. These findings revealed how practitioners mediate the expectations of the various actors in the field and how this impacts the creative process. The findings were divided into three main themes that correlate to the actors in the field, namely the client, the public, and the community of the cause. The findings on the client as an actor in the field and the various mediation processes that practitioners must undergo when engaging in brand activism were divided into three sub-themes which illustrated a shift in power dynamics for these types of campaigns. These sub-themes were (1) proactive practitioner-led campaign creation, (2) determination to overcome development hurdles and (3) brand authenticity. The findings on the public as actors in the field highlighted how practitioners anticipate and manage the risk of public backlash when ideating and executing brand activism campaigns. The third group of findings focused on the community of the cause as actors in the field. These findings revealed the importance of gaining deep insight into the experiences of the community of the cause, i.e. Black Lives Matter. This insight was acquired by two main methods, which make up the sub-themes of this section (1) undertaking extensive research into the topic of the campaign and (2) collaborating with relevant parties who have first-hand insight. These processes of acquiring insight and collaborating with community members were found to mimic design thinking principles as practitioners aimed to better identify problems and come up with innovative solutions. These findings are visualised in Figure 9.

FIGURE 9 BRAND ACTIVISM – THE MEDIATION PROCESSES



As mentioned in the literature at the start of this chapter, advertising practitioners have been historically positioned as cultural intermediaries. This term depicts practitioners as playing a significant role in transmitting cultural and capitalistic messages and values within society. However, Cronin (2004) suggested that this view of the practitioner's role as a cultural intermediary was an oversimplified interpretation of the complex intermediation processes that must occur while creating advertising campaigns. The findings in this chapter have illustrated the nuance of these mediation processes by outlining the various actors in the field whose perspectives and expectations must be considered by practitioners when engaging in brand activism. These findings demonstrate a shift in the role of practitioners that further challenges and extends their traditional roles as cultural intermediaries. While Cronin's (2004) perspective framed them as mere reflections of existing cultural ideas, the practitioners in this study view themselves as catalysts for cultural transformation and societal progress. This transformation is epitomised by the new role that they undertake as moral intermediaries. The term moral intermediary is coined by this dissertation and describes a role that mediates between the respective client's current and potential future moral standing as a brand, the perceived moral sentiments of consumers and other stakeholders, and practitioners' own moral, ethical and political leanings. The cases provided in this chapter highlight this new role and emphasise a process where practitioners prioritise their own social, environmental and political agendas over their client's expectations for traditional advertising campaigns through a proactive practitioner-led motivation.

The first set of findings in this chapter revealed how the client mediation process differs between brand activism and traditional campaigns. As detailed by Turnbull and

Wheeler (2017), in traditional campaigns, the client generally takes charge of guiding the early stages of the creative process by setting the main message and objectives for the campaign. This is delivered to the practitioner through a client brief. The practitioner then begins the mediation process, where they must consider their own and their client's expectations for the campaign. According to Cronin (2004), these complex mediation processes make practitioners more than just cultural intermediaries as they do not simply mediate 'taste' but must also mediate various stakeholders' expectations and experiences. The findings in this section expand on this notion of cultural intermediaries and reveal practitioners who engage in brand activism to take on these new roles as moral intermediaries. In addition, this presents a shift in power dynamics during the client mediation process.

These findings reveal practitioners take a more proactive and leading role in generating campaign ideas and objectives. In some cases, the practitioners came up with ideas for campaigns before finding a client, and in instances where a client brief was provided, these were often ignored. This shift suggests a change in the dynamics of this process where practitioners exert more influence in shaping the purpose, message and objectives of brand activism campaigns. The creative process for brand activism is driven by practitioners' own motivations and social, environmental, or political agendas as they assume the role of moral intermediaries, where they mediate between their own moral expectations and their client's potential moral standing. The examples show how practitioners take the initiative to diverge from their client's briefs and incorporate social activism elements into their campaigns. For instance, Participant E discussed the shift from a celebratory thirtieth-anniversary campaign for Nike's 'Just Do It' slogan to an opportunity to address ongoing social tensions related to systematic racial inequality and police brutality in the United States.

The practitioners' roles as moral intermediaries are also illustrated by their determination to complete the brand activism campaigns. The findings revealed a proactive motivation to overcome development hurdles as practitioners described a willingness to go the extra mile to address these challenges, often working overtime or pro-bono. In some cases, the practitioners demonstrated resourcefulness by seeking alternative funding sources, partnering with other organisations and negotiating with their clients to secure sufficient funds. This passion and personal investment highlight practitioners as drivers of change and moral intermediaries who leverage their dedication to advocating for social issues. This type

of proactive motivation also provides insight into the nuances and dynamics between practitioners and their clients when engaging in brand activism. They suggest that in certain cases, practitioners may possess a degree of creative autonomy and persuasive power in their roles as moral intermediaries as they advocate for brand activism and align their clients' campaigns with their own values and social causes. As detailed by example from Participant N and Participant G for the *Equality Spellcheck* campaign, the practitioners took the initiative to go beyond their provided client brief, recognising the potential of the campaign to address a pressing social issue. Their campaign aimed to challenge cultural norms and taboos in the MENA region, and the message was meant to be disruptive and in the audience's face. When the initial client rejected the idea, these practitioners actively sought out a new client who would support and execute the campaign, further demonstrating their determination to bring this campaign to life and that some clients may be more open to these innovative and activist practitioner-led ideas while others may prefer a more traditional approach aligned with the initial brief. Within this process, both Participant N and Participant G demonstrated their roles as moral intermediaries as they mediated between their own passion for moral perspectives and determination for social justice and change and their various clients. They note that they were determined to create impactful campaigns that spark important conversations and contribute to positive cultural shifts in the region.

The findings also reveal a shift in the power dynamics between the client and practitioner. As practitioners take on their roles as moral intermediaries, they explain how, with brand activism, they have the power to influence their clients' policies and actions, leading to changes that address social, environmental, or political issues. In opposition to Cronin's (2004) perspective, these practitioners see themselves as actually shaping culture and society by not only proactively ideating brand activism campaigns but also by holding their clients accountable to take concrete actions that go beyond superficial gestures. In addition, this shift in power dynamics presents the opposite of the research on risk aversion by Bilby et al. (2023). As stated earlier in this chapter, Bilby et al. (2023) found client risk aversion to be characterised by a fear from the client of being too creative and unique and agency risk aversion to be fear from the agency of losing the account. Both types of risk aversion resulted in less creative work. However, in the case of brand activism, the clients seem to trust the agency and practitioners to make these creative decisions. In addition, as demonstrated in the example by Participant N and Participant G, in cases where the client

does exhibit this risk aversion, the practitioners appear unphased about losing the account and simply find new clients to take the case.

The second section of findings discussed the public as actors in the field, which further shed light on the nuances of the mediation processes required for brand activism. In addition to enacting their roles as cultural intermediaries and purveyors of 'taste' by mediating the expectations of the public for stylistic and aesthetically pleasing campaigns, when engaging in brand activism, practitioners must consider the ideological and moral sentiments of the public. This further repositions practitioners who create and develop brand activism campaigns as moral intermediaries. While the literature outlined at the beginning of this chapter highlighted the importance of consumer market research and understanding audience expectations in order to avoid various forms of backlash, such as boycotting the brand or online hate, the findings reveal this risk of backlash as being perceived as inherent and inevitable. The practitioners expressed that campaigns dealing with politically or socially controversial topics naturally attract criticism, especially from segments of the public with opposing ideological beliefs. This criticism is understood as essential for brands pursuing meaningful causes through activism. The practitioners' perspectives reveal a nuanced approach to mediating public expectations as they highlight the significance of garnering both support and criticism from the public. This "love and hate" from both sides of the debate was considered crucial for fostering genuine conversations and meaningful activism. Criticism was seen as an indicator that a campaign had truly crossed into activism territory and was not merely engaging in performative gestures. In contrast to the logic of advertisers who use consumer market research to try and safeguard their work from criticism, these practitioners seem to welcome it. In this sense, the practitioner's perspective on the inherent risk of brand activism solidifies the importance of political and social ideological division for these campaigns to exist. While some of the practitioners emphasised the importance of thorough research in mitigating the risks associated with brand activism, this research served to reinforce their preconceived ideological beliefs. These findings further highlight the practitioners' roles as moral intermediaries as they navigate the expectations of both supporters and critics of their campaigns.

The third section of findings discussed the community of the cause as an actor in the field. This term is used to describe anyone who is or has been involved with the cause or movement that is the focus of the brand activism campaign. In essence, these practitioners act

as bridges between brands and the causes they are trying to support, striving to authentically represent the concerns, experiences and moral values of these communities through their work. While the inclusion of an audience insight is a common part of the creative process for traditional campaigns, for brand activism, this insight requires more than market research and must address the complex nuances of very specific social or political problems. In addition, as the practitioners have made clear throughout this chapter and the previous one, brand activism relies on tangible actions that can be used to solve the various problems experienced by these community members. As discussed in the literature, design thinking is an approach that emphasises empathy for users, collaboration, experimentation, and iterative development. Design thinking is valued for its ability to foster creativity, promote user-centric solutions, and address complex problems. Its principles can be applied to virtually any problem-solving endeavour where understanding human needs and finding innovative solutions are essential (Brenner & Uebernickel, 2016; Pressman, 2018). The findings in this chapter revealed practitioners apply the characteristics of design thinking principles to their ideation processes of brand activism. More specifically, they apply the following three characteristics of design thinking: a user focus, problem framing and diversity. Similar to design thinking, the mediation of the community of the cause's expectations relies on a human-centred approach that focuses on "the needs and experiences of real people – not hypothetical 'market segments'- as a source of inspiration and insight" (Gobble, 2014, p. 59). This type of insight appears to be used by practitioners as a tactic to not only better understand the problems that they are trying to address but also to facilitate the perception of authenticity.

The practitioners used two main strategies to mediate the experiences and expectations of the community of the cause. These strategies include undertaking extensive research into the topic at hand and collaborating with relevant parties to lend credibility to the campaign and message. The practitioners use extensive research to understand the issues at hand, the nuances of the community's experiences and the historical contexts related to the causes. This approach goes beyond surface-level information, and in one case, the practitioner explained it to resemble the work of an investigative journalist. This deep level of research ensures the authenticity and credibility of the campaign's concept. This research assists in identifying problems, understanding barriers, and proposing effective solutions. Practitioners also recognise the importance of lived insight and collaboration with individuals connected to the cause. This approach allows them to portray an authentic experience and

ensure that an authentic voice resonates in the campaign. Collaboration helps these practitioners amplify the voices of those directly involved or affected by the cause and brings about social change. For example, in the case provided by Participant B, when discussing his work on the *Buy Better, Wear Longer* campaign, he explains the importance of collaborating with activists and letting their own personal voices and platforms guide the conversation. This collaboration with members of the community of the cause lends credibility and perceptions of authenticity on both a macro and micro level. Maintaining this perception of authenticity is important, as demonstrated by the backlash in Pepsi's *Live For Now* campaign, mentioned in chapter one. The Pepsi campaign faced backlash for trivialising the Black Lives Matter movement through its portrayal of Kendall Jenner, a privileged, white, 21-year-old model framed with a can of Pepsi as a peacemaker. In contrast to the *Buy Better, Wear Longer* campaign, which leveraged the values and principles of real activists to lend credibility and perceptions of authenticity to the campaign.

The use of deep research and the integration of lived insight and collaboration further resembles design thinking principles, which are at their core human-centred and involve gaining a deep understanding of users' needs, experiences, and contexts (Brown, 2010; Gobble, 2014). The practitioners apply these design thinking principles to better identify and address specific social or political problems. While acquiring a profound understanding of the community of the cause's perspectives and expectations, the practitioners further reinforce their roles as moral intermediaries as they mediate between the brands and the causes they are trying to support in addition to the moral and political leanings of themselves, their clients and their audience.

In conclusion, this chapter explored the complex and evolving landscape of advertising and brand activism, shedding light on the complex roles that practitioners play, expanding from cultural intermediaries to include roles as moral intermediaries. Through the literature review, empirical research, and corresponding analysis, this chapter unveiled the nuances of the mediation processes between practitioners, clients, the public, and the community of the cause and how this impacts the creative process. While Cronin (2004) saw practitioners as reflecting existing cultural ideas, the practitioners of today's brand activism campaigns perceive themselves as change agents capable of driving cultural shifts and societal change. This shift in perspective is illuminated by their roles as moral intermediaries, where they mediate between clients' moral standing, societal sentiment, and their own ethical

values. This newfound sense of empowerment is coupled with a proactive stance in campaign creation, transcending the conventional client mediation process. This chapter also brought forth the practitioners' ability to navigate the intricate landscape of public sentiment. Brand activism campaigns invite criticism and praise alike, with practitioners acknowledging that both are essential for authentic dialogue and meaningful change. Their role as moral intermediaries extends to understanding, channelling, and even inviting public discourse. This notion challenges the traditional idea of avoiding criticism, signalling a shift towards embracing the discomfort that accompanies true activism. Furthermore, this chapter sheds light on practitioners' intricate interactions with the communities of causes. Their application of design thinking principles to provide human-centred solutions to social and political problems exemplifies their role as moral intermediaries, capturing the nuanced experiences and expectations of specific communities. Thorough research and collaborations with authentic voices from these communities ensure that brand activism campaigns resonate with credibility and authenticity.

Overall, this chapter has illuminated the transformation of advertising practitioners into dynamic agents of change. From their role as cultural intermediaries to their newfound positions as moral intermediaries, they are shaping campaigns that challenge conventions and drive authentic conversations. These findings demonstrate the complexities of mediating the expectations of the various actors in the field and how that impacts the overall creative output. The findings from this chapter in this dissertation deepen our understanding of the domain and field of brand activism and further set the scene to explore the individual component of the Systems Model of Creativity in the following two chapters.

Chapter 4 – The individual – Professional identity

As discussed, according to Csikszentmihalyi (1997) and his Systems Model of Creativity, creativity can only be observed through the interrelation of the domain, field and individual. The previous two chapters have outlined findings demonstrating how brand activism has impacted the domain of branding according to the practitioners' perspectives and how the presence of the various actors in the field has impacted the creative process for these campaigns. The individual, or in this case, the practitioners are the final element of the Systems Model of Creativity yet to be discussed. This chapter is the first of two that explores the influence of the individual's background and identity on the development of brand activism. This chapter more specifically focuses on the concept of professional identity and how this is impacted by brand activism.

This chapter begins by outlining the relevant literature on the Systems Model of Creativity that explicitly focuses on the 'individual' element. This is followed by literature that relates to the concept of cultural capital, as it is known to be required for access to the domain. Lastly, literature relevant to professional identity in the advertising industry is reviewed. This chapter then presents the findings of this dissertation's empirical research in an attempt to answer the following questions:

1. How do background and cultural capital shape a practitioner's perspective in engaging with brand activism?
2. How has brand activism impacted on the professional identity of creative practitioners?
3. How has technology impacted the professional role identity of creative practitioners?

Based on the detailed analysis of interviews, these findings reveal that the practitioners interviewed for this research possess a significant amount of cultural capital, which influences their perspectives on brand activism and their engagement with it. These findings also reveal that these practitioners think of themselves as catalysts of change. This notion refers to the self-perception and role they assume, primarily focusing on driving positive change, innovation, and meaningful impact.

4.1 Literature

4.1.1 The Systems Model of Creativity – Understanding aspects of the individual

The Systems Model of Creativity supposes that practitioners have internalised the domain's rules and regulations as well as the sentiments and judgements of the field in order to anticipate the success of creative practice (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015). It is the interrelation of all three components where creativity can be observed, and using this model allows the contributions of an individual to be viewed through a coherent and theoretical lens (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015). This model positions individual motivation as an important factor of creative output since the individual must seek access to a domain and learn its various rules and processes (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015).

According to Csikszentmihalyi (2015), acquiring access to the domain does not guarantee the individual will make a creative contribution. The individual must possess the ability and the desire to produce novel work. Csikszentmihalyi (2015) suggested there are four kinds of personal qualities that may aid in the creation of novelty, namely, innate ability, cognitive style, personality, and motivation. These qualities and the various traits that are included, such as a tendency for rule-breaking, divergent thinking and problem-finding, are important contributing factors to creativity. In addition, individuals must also possess the ability to convince the field that their creative contributions are worthy of being added to the domain, which may involve traits such as "the ability to express oneself in such a way as to be understood" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015, p. 115). This chapter will explore the individual practitioner in the context of their professional identity and how this has been impacted by brand activism.

As previously discussed, a study by Drew et al. (2022) explored the creative practice of social media food influencers by applying the Systems Model of Creativity. In this study, the individual is the social media influencer. As discussed in the previous two chapters, Drew et al. (2022) recognised the influence of the domain and the field on creative practice. However, they also explored how this practice was impacted by individual traits such as "self-conception, extrinsic motivations such as economic and social gain and/or intrinsic motivations such as the desire to construct an authentic online identity that illustrates their passion for food" (Drew et al., 2022, p. 316). According to Drew et al. (2022), the creative practice of social media food influencers included constructing a narrative that communicated

a social and cultural identity that resonated with their chosen community. The individuals drew inspiration from their own personal experiences, their interactions with society, and their culture. These factors also shaped their perspectives and impacted the motivation behind creative practice.

Another study that was previously discussed by Vanden Bergh and Stuhlfaut (2006) applied the Systems Model of Creativity to advertising practitioners. This study investigated if advertising creativity is a social or an individual process by analysing ten years of the *Moment of Creation* article from the magazine entitled *Agency* (Vanden Bergh & Stuhlfaut, 2006). Vanden Bergh and Stuhlfaut (2006) discussed the individual creators as also being members of the domain where they “borrow ideas, symbols, experiences and artifacts to use in the creative” (p.282). The data for this study was pulled from published interviews of advertising practitioners recalling the creative process of their campaigns. Using this data, Vanden Bergh and Stuhlfaut (2006) found that practitioners did not emphasise their roles as individuals and instead illustrated the collaborative nature of their creative processes. They based this result on the practitioners’ use of the word ‘we’ instead of ‘I’ when explaining their ‘moment of ideation’ and creative process. Therefore, it does not appear that questions about the individual’s background or personality were asked in the original interviews.

A study by Roca et al. (2017) also applied the Systems Model of Creativity to advertising and was discussed in the previous chapters of this dissertation. Roca et al. (2017) built on the work by Vanden Bergh and Stuhlfaut (2006) but focused more specifically on a hypothesised creative identity in Colombian advertising practitioners. Their study explored the existence of an individual national creative identity that shaped practitioners’ creative practice through factors of national history and culture. Roca et al. (2017) found that the creatives they interviewed did not clearly identify with the hypothesised Colombia creative identity. However, various respondents mentioned a few common identity traits such as “being ‘adaptable and resourceful,’ as well as supportive of ‘pro-social ideas,’ and ‘increasing community wellbeing’” (p.9). Roca et al. (2017) illustrated the influence of the social context in shaping the advertising creativity identity. They also found that the practitioners based their creative identity mainly around ‘social marketing topics’ where they tried to solve social problems such as poverty or violence (Roca et al., 2017).

The above studies that applied the Systems Model of Creativity collectively illustrate that creative practices are influenced by a combination of individual traits, domain-specific factors, and broader social and cultural contexts. While personal experiences and motivations may play a role in shaping creativity, collaboration and the societal context may also impact how individuals perceive and execute their creative endeavours. At the same time, the Systems Model of Creativity suggests that for an individual to make a creative contribution to the domain, they must first acquire access to it (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015). This access is said to be dependent on both external and internal factors. External factors include domain-related role activities and the amount of cultural capital an individual has and is able to utilise (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015). In addition, there are also internal factors that may dictate an individual's access to the domain. This includes subjective traits such as motivation and interest, as mentioned in the studies above (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015). It is important to note that these factors are not mutually exclusive and can compensate for one another.

4.1.2 Cultural capital and access to the domain

Cultural capital includes social assets acquired by an individual (Bourdieu, 1984). According to Bourdieu (1984), there are three forms of cultural capital: embodied, objectified and institutionalised. Embodied cultural capital refers to cultural value or knowledge acquired while growing up through socialisation processes (Bourdieu, 1984). Costa (2014) noted that embodied cultural capital is formed through family background, participation in various communities and interactions with groups or networks. Similarly, Tan and Liu (2018), who researched children's education, summarised embodied cultural capital to include "knowledge, skills, quality, or even awareness affiliated with individuals through social or educational activities, such as communication between parents and children, parental guidance in schoolwork, parental aspirations towards children's achievement, or home cultural/social activities" (p.899). Lastly, Scott (2017) noted that knowledge and competency acquired through fine arts training make up part of the embodied cultural capital used by tattoo artists. Embodied cultural capital is inherently connected to the individual and the cultural and social characteristics acquired throughout their lifetime (Bourdieu, 1984; Kraaykamp & van Eijck, 2010).

Objectified cultural capital refers to an individual's physical property (Bourdieu, 1984). This includes cultural goods such as art, books and other instruments or machines. These cultural goods can be acquired with economic capital, however, they require embodied

capital of the individual in order to use them for their true purpose (Bourdieu, 1986). Therefore, meaning derived from objectified cultural capital is divided into two parts, one as a physical commodity and the other as a symbolic object (Kraaykamp & van Eijck, 2010). In a study by Hu and Wu (2021), objectified cultural capital was measured by respondents' access to the following resources: newspapers, and books such as encyclopedias, dictionaries or others excluding textbooks, dedicated study space with equipment such as desks or electronics and cultural resources such as literature and art.

Lastly, institutionalised cultural capital refers to the recognition acquired from associating with various institutions. It is a type of cultural capital that marks social status through the acknowledgement of credentials (Bourdieu, 1986; Kraaykamp & van Eijck, 2010). This recognition of an individual's cultural capital through institutions such as the educational system makes those holding qualifications comparable to one another.

Cultural capital has been found to impact the creative industries such as advertising, resulting in a lack of diversity in aspects such as class, gender and ethnicity (McLeod et al., 2009; Spring & Yang, 2019; Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2021). This lack of diversity is largely explained by the precariousness of the work as graduates trying to enter the profession often must be in positions to first accept roles as over-worked and unpaid interns to begin their careers (O' Brien & Arnold, 2022; O'Brien & Kerrigan, 2020). One study by McLeod et al. (2009) explored the relationship between class and creative careers in British advertising agencies. They investigated how class and background impacted career choice, progression and the creative work itself. Their study conducted interviews with advertising creatives and asked questions about topics such as childhood, family and education. Based on their findings, their interview participants were divided into the working class, middle class, and wealthy middle class. McLeod et al. (2009) found that the working class found it slightly more difficult to break into the industry as they did not have relatives to assist with the economic pressures associated with internships. However, they also found that once the creatives from working class backgrounds had entered the industry, they were able to capitalise and develop their social networks (McLeod et al., 2009). McLeod et al. (2009) call the working-class group 'new cultural intermediaries' as they use their cultural capital to "bridge the gap between the privileged habitus of agency life and the cultural landscape of those occupying a different social position" (p. 1034).

Cultural capital and its various forms discussed above influence advertising practitioners' access to the domain and engagement with brand activism. Embodied cultural capital, acquired through upbringing, family background, and interactions, equips practitioners with cultural knowledge and awareness and may enable them to more authentically align brands with social causes. Objectified cultural capital, involving physical and cultural goods, influences practitioners' ability to effectively use resources and may shape their capacity to convey activism messages. Lastly, institutionalised cultural capital, gained through recognition from institutions, signifies social status and credentials, potentially granting practitioners more credibility in advocating for brand activism. Moreover, the interplay between cultural capital and individual identities further influences practitioners' approach, potentially leading to conflicts between personal and professional values in the context of brand activism. Therefore, cultural capital influences practitioners' depth of understanding, creativity, access to resources, and social recognition, all of which may shape their capacity to navigate and contribute meaningfully to brand activism.

4.1.3 Professional Identity

As mentioned, the above three types of cultural capital are external factors that impact an individual's access to the domain and may impact their engagement with brand activism. In relation to internal factors such as motivation and interest, the following section will now explore the complex concept of identity. Individuals possess multiple identities that reflect and inform who they are and how they act. Examples of these multiple identities include cultural, religious, familial, professional, and moral. More recently, as life and work domains become more integrated, there is also a blurring of these personal and professional identities. The presence of multiple identities can lead to conflict and tension. In relation to brand activism, this tension might be caused by a conflict between moral identity and professional identity, creating the question of how much one's core values and personal identity impact who they are in a professional setting.

Studies on professional identity have a general consensus that actions and interpretations of work situations are influenced by a perceived role identity (Lee & Lau, 2019). There are three major dimensions that construct a professional role. These are boundary, identity and expectation (Ashforth, 2000; Lee & Lau, 2019). Boundary refers to the limits that define the responsibilities and actions expected of the individual within that specific role. Identity refers to the self-imposed meaning that structures individual reactions

to the organisation, and lastly, expectation refers to the norms, standards and anticipated behaviours that determine success within the role (Ashforth, 2000; Lee & Lau, 2019). It is important to understand how these dimensions intersect and how professional identity is formed within the advertising industry since “a strong role identity is an important driver for creative performance” (Lee & Lau, 2019, p. 131).

Lee and Lau (2019) also identified increased competition, placing pressure on the industry to perform and continuously create new products and services. This expansion causes role boundaries to be in a state of flux (Lee & Lau, 2019). Lee and Lau (2019) explored the changing role of advertising professionals in relation to an increase in social media marketing. They found that an internalised segmentation of traditional and digital campaigns was causing practitioners to constantly adapt to new responsibilities and identities (Lee & Lau, 2019). This expansion of role responsibilities has caused practitioners to shift their professional identities from ‘idea generators’ to ‘solution facilitators’ as they now “facilitate the… process by providing their clients with knowledge and solutions regarding the formulation of strategy, technology applications and tactics for consumer engagement” (Lee & Lau, 2019, p. 140). This drive for technological innovation may impact the creative ideation process and overall professional identity of practitioners as it expands the practice of advertising outside of the boundaries of design and communication.

Advertising awards are widely accepted as evaluation criteria for campaign, agency, and practitioner performance (Helgesen, 1994; Polonsky & Waller, 1995; Tippins & Kunkel, 2006; West et al., 2003). Arguably, one of the most prestigious industry awards is the annual *Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity*. Over the past decade, this awarding body has added new categories, such as Innovation and Sustainable Development goals. This indicates the expanding scope of advertising creativity and a moral and technological broadening of industry peer expectations. In addition, as noted in the industry literature from chapter two, the advertising award bodies reflect a similar attitude to consumer market research, which presents brand activism as an important business and marketing strategy (Edelman, 2022). The campaigns that won the Grand Prix category, the most prestigious award, in 2022 focused on topics such as cultural appropriation (Dentsu Webchutney, 2021), environmental sustainability (Michelob ULTRA, 2020; SHEBA Brand, 2021), gender equality and women’s rights (DDB Latina, 2022; Havas Middle East, 2021; Publicis Groupe India, 2022), racial equality (Ads Of the World, 2022), censorship and cultural preservation

during the Ukraine-Russia War (ADVexpressTV, 2022). In addition, several of these award-winning brand activism campaigns can be considered socially innovative. For example, Vice Media's *Unfiltered History Tour* campaign focused on cultural appropriation and uses augmented reality via smartphone technology to provide users with an unfiltered tour of the disputed artifacts in the British Museum (Dentsu Webchutney, 2021). This tour reframed the British Museum as a collection of stolen goods because of colonisation.

Another example that showcases the importance of technological innovation and incorporating it into creative work is the *Smart Farm* campaign created by Leo Burnett India for Lay's (Cannes Lions, 2023; Leo Burnett India, 2023). The campaign addressed the effects of climate change, which has impacted seasonal weather patterns and made the traditional farming knowledge of rural Indian farmers obsolete. This change has forced the farmers to monitor their crops on a daily basis. However, the farmers' land is typically spread out over twenty-kilometre ranges. Without proper equipment, farmers are unable to cover the distance each day. The *Smart Farm* campaign addressed this issue by using satellite imagery and remote sensing to build a warning system for the farmers. This technology used A.I. to compare real-time satellite images with those of past years and combined this information with data on weather patterns. This technology was able to analyse the crops based on colour to determine factors such as low nitrogen levels, water stress or signs of disease. This information was simplified and colour-coded onto individual plots of land so farmers could easily identify and then address crops that need attention (Leo Burnett India, 2023).

Media innovations such as the *Unfiltered History Tour* and *Smart Farm* are influenced by institutional factors, technological developments, sociocultural factors and power relations (Krumsvik et al., 2019). Kübler and Proppe (2012) also found that novelty is a key driver for advertising award success. Novelty adds a layer of complexity to the professional roles of creative practitioners as they include technological media innovation into their creative practice. According to Krumsvik (2019), media innovation is significantly related to technological change, and the advertising industry has experienced many changes related to technology and media innovation over the past decade. For example, the internet has altered how advertisements are produced, distributed, and received. Technological innovation has resulted in additional software and hardware intermediaries such as social media, streaming services, and smartphones. These intermediaries allow digitised advertising and media to provide a more interactive space in which consumers may have a sense of

agency to react, respond and participate and, therefore, simultaneously contribute and experience messages (Windels & Stuhlfaut, 2018). Additionally, Deuze and Prenger (2019) suggested that technology has impacted media production by stimulating the emergence of a "global market for media makers…for the inclusion of many different voices and communities" (p. 19). These innovations have transformed the media industry in relation to production, distribution and consumer experience (Prenger & Deuze, 2019). They have also led to the development of new technology-focused professional roles in the advertising industry and have altered the creative process.

New professional advertising roles include, for example, user experience strategist, digital analyst, digital strategist, community manager, content strategist, creative technologist, user experience designer, digital designer, front-end developer, back-end developer and quality analyst (Windels & Stuhlfaut, 2018). These new roles, which facilitate technological innovation, have impacted the process of creative ideation as well as opportunities afforded to practitioners to pursue strategies rooted in brand activism. In addition to incorporating how technological innovation impacts the creative practice and professional identity of practitioners, this dissertation expands on this discussion as it explores how the expansion of their role responsibilities to include the political and moral ideology expressed through their client's companies using brand activism impacts their overall professional identity.

Furthermore, a study by LaVoi and Haley (2021) explored another shift in advertising agency business models with the emergence of pro-social purpose agencies. They described pro-social agencies as agencies that embody purpose-driven, prosocial intentions such as "working towards the bettering of society, a social aim, or to solve current social problems" (LaVoi & Haley, 2021, p. 372). Their study aimed to understand how these agencies and their practitioners embody and reflect the various prosocial intentions. LaVoi and Haley (2021) found that the practitioners they interviewed for their study believe their pro-social agencies have operational and functional differences from traditional agencies. They also found that practitioners believe advertising agencies are influencing the emergence of the fourth sector, described as "a 'new organisational landscape' of hybrid organisations that use strategies from all sectors (private, social, public)—unified through pro-social intentions" (LaVoi & Haley, 2021, p. 372).

The above literature is relevant to this dissertation's exploration of advertising practitioners' professional identity in relation to brand activism and particularly its more socially innovative manifestations. It sheds light on various aspects of professional identity within the advertising industry, specifically focusing on how advertising practitioners' roles and perceptions are shaped by evolving factors, such as social media marketing and the emergence of pro-social purpose agencies. The following literature will now explore creative identity and the various tensions that creative practitioners may experience working in the industry.

Creatives have previously often been studied with a focus on issues like topically concerning the narrative of creative individualism, the process of creativity, and gender roles (Hirschman, 1989; Kover, 1995; Nixon & Crewe, 2004; West, 1993). The collaboration between role types in agencies can cause tension, as creatives are often focused on the aesthetics of the final product and the management of their own identities, whereas account managers try to ensure campaigns meet client expectations and are motivated by quantifiable outcomes (Hackley & Kover, 2007; Malefyt & Morais, 2010; Nixon, 2006; Windels & Stuhlfaut, 2018). "Creatives feel that their professional needs are not circumscribed by organisational bureaucracy" (Hackley & Kover, 2007, p. 68); therefore, particular tensions can arise between themselves and their clients as well as the account services staff (Alvesson, 1994; Chan, 2017). These tensions are classically distinguished as conflicts between the 'suits' and the 'creatives' (Alvesson, 1994; Chan, 2017). Researchers view this relationship as one that is afflicted with mutual distrust and misunderstanding, resulting in executives' restrictions on creativity due to conflicting motivations (Hackley & Kover, 2007; Hughes, 2007). According to Hackley and Kover (2007), creatives view the approval of clients and account staff as a transactional relationship maintained for job security and actively seek out approval from their industry peers (Hackley & Kover, 2007). Hackley and Kover (2007) discussed this type of approval as difficult to obtain. Additionally, there are relatively few opportunities for creative role advancement, making permanency in creative roles often precarious.

Similarly, Malefyt and Morais (2010) expressed that this tension felt between the accounts staff and the creatives is rooted in their role differences. Malefyt and Morais (2010) explained the accounts staff to be focused on the client and the consumers' needs, listing their responsibilities as "designing and managing consumer research through ethnography, focus

groups, and surveys; writing creative strategies (creative briefs), testing creative ideas in focus groups and online; measuring advertising effectiveness through quantitative analysis; and tracking advertising campaigns for the long term" (p.338). In contrast, the creative's role is described simply as conceiving and designing the work for the client (Malefyt & Morais, 2010). While this description is simple, the underlying context of the role is more complex. According to Malefyt and Morais (2010), "[Creatives] spend weeks inventing narratives, meticulously designing graphics and carefully choosing words. They take pride in their craft and have passion for their ideas" (p.339). This tension is summarised as "the accounting side wanting client…stability and the creative side desiring to distinguish itself with iconoclastic work" (p.339). This dynamic is essential to understanding how advertising practitioners' identities and priorities may influence their approach to brand activism.

These identity tensions experienced by creatives and their managerial peers are important to consider when discussing brand activism and more socially innovative strategies. In particular, it is important to question how identity tensions formed by the precariousness of creative work and practitioners' ability to gain status from peer recognition and industry accolades may conflict with the interests of managerial staff, who may see the risks of divisive or innovative strategies as too high.

Recent research has emerged regarding the identities and experiences of creative workers, which reveals further potential identity tensions (Chan, 2017; Gotsi et al., 2010; Reid et al., 2016). These identity tensions are caused by the expectation of creative innovation to happen within the bounds of an economic context that differentiates commercialised creative work from work in fine arts (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007; Gotsi et al., 2010; Hackley & Kover, 2007; Michlewski, 2008). These tensions have placed creative practitioners within the liminal space of artistry and economics, creating a paradox between the portrayals of creativity and commodification (Meyer & Schulz, 2017). The goals of fine arts define this paradox as a pure form of self-expression juxtaposed with advertising creatives whose work is goal-directed (Meyer & Schulz, 2017). These motivations are distinguished as the economic logic and the artistic logic of practice, and both can apply to creatives who produce work that influences or shapes society (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007). The economic logic of practice that Bolin (2019) applied to industrial or professional media production is defined by its market orientation and prioritisation of cost efficiency to increase value (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007). In contrast, the artistic logic of practice is aligned with

‘everyday’ media production and produces work resulting in “identity, social difference, and cultural value” (p. 115) as part of the social and cultural economy. The artistic logic is therefore categorised as a motivation to create art and focuses on social value instead of economic value (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007).

According to Bolin (2019), there is tension between the for-profit motivation of the industry and the motivations of individual professional media practitioners. They share instincts with ‘everyday’ media producers motivated by “non-profit, aesthetic and affective reasons” (Bolin, 2019, p. 115). Similarly, Eikhof and Haunschild (2007) rationalised there is a great risk of a person’s artistic practice being surpassed by economic logics once that person has become professionalised. Also, as media work continues to be transformed by new business processes from platforms such as Google and Facebook, there is a loss of revenue for media industries. This loss places workers under increasing pressure to create more marketable and profitable content (O'Donnell & Zion, 2019). This discussion on identity tensions caused by the expectation of creative innovation within economic constraints further emphasises the complexity of creative practitioners' roles. Their identities as both artists and professionals play a role in how they approach brand activism as they navigate the tension between their creative aspirations and economic realities.

Overall, the literature above is essential in exploring brand activism from the practitioner’s perspective and the impact of the increasing integration of political and social concepts into creative work. The above literature is relevant as it sheds light on the internal conflicts and external pressures that advertising practitioners, particularly creatives, face. These tensions can significantly influence their willingness and ability to engage in brand activism and its more socially innovative manifestations. It provides insights into how their professional identities, motivations, and the broader industry landscape impact their approach to brand activism.

4.2 Findings

As outlined in the literature above, this chapter explores the individual as a component of the Systems Model of Creativity. More specifically, this chapter will explore aspects of the 'individual' in relation to their professional identity. The literature on the Systems Model of Creativity outlined that there are various dimensions and characteristics of the individual that assist in acquiring access to any given domain. One of these dimensions is the amount of cultural capital that a practitioner has acquired throughout their lifetime. The findings in this chapter will, therefore, begin by exploring the cultural capital acquired by practitioners before further exploring how they conceptualise their professional identity. Findings relating to professional identity are segmented into three main themes (1) A change in personal perception of the profession, (2) a professional identity as a catalyst of change, and (3) the impact of technological innovation leading to socially innovative ideas.

4.2.1 Cultural Capital

As previously mentioned, the amount of cultural capital owned by an individual impacts their access to a domain. Cultural capital is divided into three types, embodied, objectified and institutionalised. There are several elements of the practitioners' work and educational backgrounds that allude to their possession of these three types of cultural capital. This section draws data from the practitioner's interviews, work and education history and industry awards. During the interviews, practitioners were asked to identify any campaigns they had worked on that fit the definition of brand activism. Only the specific campaigns that received awards are included as part of this research.

As demonstrated in Table 7, the majority of practitioners interviewed for this research completed schooling at a tertiary level, all studying similar subjects such as advertising, marketing or design. This education provides a type of acquired institutionalised cultural capital. In addition, the seniority and work experience of practitioners also contribute to this type of cultural capital and provide insight into their access to the domain and ability to engage with brand activism. None of the practitioners who were interviewed for this research were in a junior position, and all had several years of experience working in advertising. Several of the practitioners are also decorated creative practitioners who have won various industry awards. For example, Participant Q has won awards from the *Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity, the D&AD Awards, The One Show and the CLIO*

Awards. Table 7 provides a detailed overview of the awards that each practitioner has received that correspond to the brand activism campaigns that they mentioned during the interview. In addition, there are numerous other award institutions globally, and this table only displays the most prominent ones. Therefore, practitioners may also have received several more awards for campaigns that they did not discuss during the interview as they were not categorised as brand activism, or they may have awards from more niche or local award bodies.

Table 7 also illustrates that these practitioners have well-established careers within the advertising industry and have all worked at large full-service agencies. Within these careers, practitioners demonstrate career progression and role flexibility. For example, one participant has experience working in the following roles: Creative Strategist, Concept Creative, Creative Technologist, Copywriter, Creative, Columnist, Copywriter, Creative Director and Associate Creative Director. In addition, several of the practitioners have had international careers and have worked in many different countries. The same participant described above serves as an illustrative example as he has worked in countries such as Poland, the USA, the Czech Republic, Germany and the UK. As previously mentioned, embodied cultural capital is acquired through family background, participation in various communities and interactions with groups or networks (Costa, 2014). Therefore, while not explicitly mentioned by practitioners, the concept of acquired cultural capital gained through professional and personal worldly experience through interaction with various agencies and colleagues in conjunction with the institutionalised capital gained through industry accolades may provide an explanation for their assertive confidence and motivation to access the domain of advertising and ability to engage in brand activism. This global experience contributes to their embodied cultural capital and enables them to navigate cross-cultural interactions more confidently. The practitioners' accumulation of cultural capital through professional experiences, educational background, and industry recognition contributes to their assertive confidence and motivation to engage in brand activism and provides insight into their overall professional identity.

TABLE 7 EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND AWARDS OF PRACTITIONERS

		INSTITUTIONS	PROGRAM/ROLES	BRAND ACTIVISM CAMPAIGN AWARDS
PARTICIPANT A	EDU.	**Colombia:** Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Universidad Central (CO)	Industrial Design, Social Communication & Advertising, Literature	**Clio Awards:** 2022 Bronze, 2015 Silver **D&AD Awards:** 2022 Wood Pencil, 2015 Service Innovations Wood Pencil **Cannes Lion:** 2021 Gold Lion, 2016 Gold Lion, 2015 Silver Lion
	PROF.	**Colombia:** JWT, FCB, SSA Bates, Aguayo Publicidad, Sancho BBDO, Euro RSCG, McCann Bogota, Commonwealth/McCann, Momentum McCann, McCann Worldgroup	Creative, Creative Director, Executive Creative Director, Regional Creative Director	
B	EDU.	**UK:** The BRIT School, Brighton City College, Coventry University	Design Foundation, Graphic Design	
	PROF.	**UK:** BlueFrog, Start Creative, Coca-Cola Enterprises, FCB Inferno Ltd, Trader Media Group, Crab Creative, Edelman, The Marketing Store Europe, Ogilvy One UK, McCann London, McCann Worldgroup, Milkmoney, Anomaly, Fallon, M&C Saatchi London **Netherlands:** AKQA **Germany:** AKQA	Freelance Designer, Business Development Representative, Web Designer, Graphic Designer (Print), Digital Designer, Lead Designer, Art Director, Freelance Creative, Freelance Creative Director, Creative Director, Group Creative Director	
C	EDU.	**Brazil:** ESPM Escola Superior de Propoganda e Marketing, Estacio	Advertising and Marketing	**Cannes Lion:** 2018 Bronze, 2018 Silver
	PROF.	**Brazil:** PS10 Propoganda & Soluções, Agencia Percepttiva, Agência3, DPZ Propoganda, Script Comunicação, Staff Brasil, Ogilvy Brasil, National Geographic, Media.Monks **UK:** Publicis Dublin, Core **(UAE):** TBWA\Raad	Creative Art Director, Junior Art Director, Senior Creative Art Director, Freelance Senior Creative Art Director, Creative Director	
D	EDU.	**Brazil:** UFPR – Universidade Federal do Parana	Advertising	**D&AD Awards:** 2017 Ambient Yellow Pencil **Cannes Lion:** 2017 Grand Prix / Titanium
	PROF.	**Brazil:** Heads Propoganda, Agência Babel, J. Walter Thompson Worldwide, Master Comunicação **USA:** TBWA\Chiat\Day NY, Ogilvy, McCann New York, DAVID Miami, Google	Copywriter, Senior Copywriter, Associate Creative Director, Creative Director, VP Creative Director, Group Creative Director	
E	EDU.	**UK:** Buckinghamshire New University	Graphic Design and Advertising	**Clio Awards:** 2019 Sports Grand, 2019 Sports Bronze **D&AD Awards:** 2019 Use of Social Media Graphite Pencil **Cannes Lion:** 2017 Bronze, 2019 Grand Prix/Titanium **Emmy:** 2019 Emmy for best commercial
	PROF.	**UK:** M&C Saatchi, Wieden + Kennedy London **USA:** Wieden + Kennedy Portland	Art Director, Creative Director, Freelance Creative Director	
F	EDU.	**Instituto Peruano de Publicidad Peru:** Instituto Peruano de Publicidad (IPP)	Advertising, Advertising Design & Art Direction	**Clio Awards:** 2020 Silver Award

	PROF.	**Peru:** McCann Erikson, Ogilvy & Mather, Publicidad Causa, Publicis Groupe, Wunderman Thompson Peru	Advertising Design, Art Director	**Cannes Lion:** 2020 Bronze
G	EDU.	**UK:** The University of Sheffield, The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)	Business Management and Informatics, Masters in Management, Organisation and Governance	**Clio Awards:** 2020 Bronze Award
	PROF.	**UAE:** Leo Burnett, Wunderman Thompson, Havas, VIRTUE Worldwide	Analyst and Planning Intern, Junior Strategic Planner, Strategist, Senior Strategist	
H	EDU.	**New Zealand:** Massey University, Auckland University of Technology	Design and Visual Communications, Advertising Creativity and Communications	**Clio Awards:** 2022 Bronze Award **D&AD Awards:** 2021 Graphite Pencil Award, 2x 2021 Wood Pencil Award, 2021 Yellow Pencil **Cannes Lion:** 2021 Bronze
	PROF.	**New Zealand:** FCB New Zealand, Colenso BBDO, M&C Saatchi, Clemenger BBDO Wellington **UK:** VMLY&R	Creative Intern, Young Creative, Creative/Art Director, Senior Creative/Art Director, Creative Director	
I	EDU.	**USA:** Ohio State University	Journalism	**Clio Awards:** 2x 2018 Bronze Award, 2018 Silver Award, 2018 Gold Award **D&AD Awards:** 2018 Wood Pencil; 2018 Yellow Pencil **Cannes Lion:** 2019 Silver, 2018 Grand Prix/Titanium, 2018 Gold
	PROF.	**USA:** Fallon, BBDO New York, Academic of Television Arts & Sciences, The One Club for Creativity, Mischief USA	Creative Director/Writer, Executive Creative Director/ EVP, Chief Creative Officer, Board Member, CCO & Co-Founder	
J	EDU.	**Argentina:** Escuela Superior de Creativos Publicitarios, Universidad Nacional de las Artes	Drafting, Audio-visual Arts and Screenplay	**Clio Awards:** 2019 Health Gold Award, **ANA International ECHO Awards:** 2020 Diamond ECHO award **Cannes Lion:** 2020/21 Bronze
	PROF.	**Argentina:** United Virtualities, Wunderman, Human, Geometry Global, Wunderman Thompson Argentina, HOY, Founders Agency **Italy:** Publicis Italy	Copywriter, Senior Copywriter, Freelance Senior Copywriter	
K	EDU.	**Belgium:** Erasmushogeschool Brussel, LUCA School of Arts	Marketing Communications, Visual Arts (Advertising)	**Clio Awards:** 2022 Gold **The One Club:** 2021 Gold Pencil **D&AD Awards:** 2021 Graphite Pencil, 5x 2021 Wood Pencil, 2021 Black Pencil **Cannes Lion:** 2x 2020/21 Grand Prix/Titanium, 2022 Grand Prix/Titanium
	PROF.	**Belgium:** Duval Guillaume, Happiness Brussels **USA:** FCB Chicago, Dentsu Creative	Creative, Concept Provider, Associate Creative Director, Creative Director, Head of Brand Acts, VP Creative Director, Executive Creative Director	
L	EDU.	**Brazil:** Faculdade Casper Libero	Advertising and Marketing	**Clio Awards:** 2019 Gold **The One Club:** 2020 Gold Pencil **D&AD Awards:** 2020 Black Pencil, 2x 2020 Yellow Pencil, 2020 Graphite Pencil, 2020 Wood Pencil **Cannes Lion:** 2019 Gold,
	PROF.	**Brazil:** Zero 11 Propoganda, E*-Inteligencia Criativa, DM9 DDB **USA:** Leo Burnett, FCB Chicago, Energy BBDO	Copywriter, Senior Copywriter, Associate Creative Director, VP Creative Director, SVP Creative Director, Head of Activation	
M	EDU.	**Brazil:** ESPM Escola Superior de Propoganda e Marketing, Miami Ad School Sao Paulo	Advertising and Marketing	**Clio Awards:** 2019 Clio Grand, 2019 Gold, 2018 Bronze, 2021 Silver

	PROF.	**Germany:** Jung Von Matt, DDB Berlin, BBDO Group, Innocean Berlin **Brazil:** Almap BBDO	Intern, Copywriter, Creative Director, Executive Creative Director	**The One Club:** 2019 Gold Pencil **D&AD Awards:** 2019 Wood Pencil, 2020 Yellow Pencil **Cannes Lion:** 2018 Grand Prix/Titanium, 2018 Gold, 2019 Grand Prix/Titanium, 2022 Bronze, 2020/21 Gold
N	EDU.	**Argentina:** Brother Escuela de Creativos **Brazil:** Universidade do Sul de Santa Catarina	Advertising, Art, Marketing, Social Communication	**Clio Awards:** 2020 Bronze **Effie MENA:** 2021 Gold, 2021 Bronze **WARC – Awards for Effectiveness:** 2021 Silver
	PROF.	**Argentina:** Young & Rubicam, Wunderman Thompson **Brazil:** Publicis Groupe **UAE:** Wunderman Thompson, And Us **Germany:** Innocean Berlin	Junior Art Director, Art Director, Senior Art Director, Senior Creative, Creative Director	
O	EDU.	**Colombia:** Underground Buenos Aires, Universidad Central (CO)	Creativity, Advertising	
	PROF.	**Argentina:** Young & Rubicam **Colombia:** Emepece + Grupo Inventa, Red Rock Interactive, Mullen Lowe SSP3 / Rocket, Havas, Mullen Lowe Group, Wunderman Thompson Colombia **Guatemala:** POP Experience **Australia:** Adpro Management Group	Trainee, Copywriter and Designer, Copywriter, Creative Director, Creative Specialist, Creative Team Leader	
P	EDU.	**Australia:** Macquarie University, University of Technology Sydney, University of Sydney **Germany:** Universitat der Kunste Berlin	Media, Media Arts and Products, Starting a Creative Business, PhD – Gender and Cultural Studies (Film & Literature)	
	PROF.	**Australia:** The White Agency, Lavender, Now We Collide – Creative Content Agency, AKQA, Geometry Global, Naked Communications, We Are Example, Edge-Advertising, Content and Media, Western Sydney University, Jack Morton Australia **Germany:** AKQA, Little Sun, Uferlos Studios, The WOMB	Copywriter, Campaigns and Communications Officer, Writer, Artist, Copywriter/Creative, Freelance Senior Copywriter, Freelance Creative, Creative Director, Senior Copywriter, Academic Tutor teaching Visual Communications and Advertising, Co-Founder	
Q	EDU.	**Belgium:** Sint-Lucas Gent School of Arts	Advertising	**Clio Awards:** 2022 Gold, **The One Club:** 2021 Gold Pencil **D&AD Awards:** 2021 Graphite Pencil, 5x 2021 Wood Pencil, 2021 Black Pencil **Cannes Lion:** 2x 2020/21 Grand Prix/Titanium, 2022 Grand Prix/Titanium
	PROF.	**Belgium:** Duval Guillaume, Happiness Anywhere **USA:** FCB Chicago, Dentsu Creative	Creative/Art Director, Senior Concept Provider/Art Director, Creative Director, VP Creative Director, Head of Brand Acts, Executive Creative Director	
R	EDU.	**USA:** Lehigh University	International Relations, Marketing	**Clio Awards:** 2017 Bronze

	PROF.	**USA:** Creative Artists Agency, Observatory (A Stawell & CAA Company), OFFFIELD	Assistant, Agent Trainee – Mailroom, Motion, Picture and TV Rotations, Agent Trainee Coordinator, Creative Executive, Co-Head of Creative, Executive Creative Director, Chief Creative Officer, Co-Founder and Chief Brand Officer	**D&AD Awards:** 2017 Wood Pencil **Cannes Lion:** 2014 Grand Prix/Titanium, 2014 Silver, 2014 Bronze, 2017 Silver
S	EDU.	**UK:** University of the Arts London	Advertising	**Clio Awards:** 2022 Gold **The One Club:** 2018 Best of Discipline, **D&AD Awards:** 2021 Black Pencil, 2018 Wood Pencil **Cannes Lion:** 2020/21 Grand Prix/Titanium, 2014 Silver, 2018 Gold,
	PROF.	**Poland:** Saatchi & Saatchi Poland, Saatchi & Saatchi Digital Poland, Cheil Worldwide Inc., Isobar Poland, MMP (Media & Marketing Poland), Ogilvy & Mather **UK:** Panlogic, VCCP Blue, Naked Communications, VCCP Digital, LBi, Karmarama, **Czech Republic:** Fallon **USA:** FCB Global **Germany:** Innocean Berlin	Creative Strategist, Concept Creative, Creative Technologist, Copywriter, Creative, Senior Creative, Columnist, Senior Copywriter, Creative Director, Associate Creative Director	
T	EDU.	**Colombia:** Universidad Catolica de Manizales	Advertising	
	PROF.	**Colombia:** Ariadna Communications Group, ISM – Innova Social Marketing, Mullen Lowe Group, DDB Colombia, Sancho BBDO	Copy intern, Copywriter, Senior Copywriter	

The following findings explore how the practitioners view their careers. When specifically asked about their career trajectory, several of the practitioners stated that they were happy and comfortable with their achievements. This indicates a certain level of seniority and or satisfaction with their careers, which reflects a confidence that is less likely to be found in junior employees. In addition, several of the practitioners stated that they were not worried about pushing or pursuing politically controversial topics as they felt secure in their roles. For instance, Participant C noted that he began his career late and only had around twelve years of experience in the industry. However, he felt that he was still in a very good place career-wise. He listed some achievements, stating that he had earned a number of international awards, which had given him the freedom to decide where he wanted to work. He also expressed a lack of concern for his job security when it came to pushing politically controversial ideas, which he attributed to his personality, labelling himself as "a bit [of a] rebel". However, he was also very aware when he was being too persistent and explained that he has a self-monitoring process for those occasions, stating, "There were situations where you try to make an idea happen, and I got a bit worried, like 'relax man, you are pushing this too much, take a step back'." He also thought that there had been a change in societal

sentiment which allowed more freedom of expression. This aided in his perspective that he was comfortable bringing controversial ideas to the pitch table. He stated, "I think nowadays, if you're being respectful with everyone, you don't need to be afraid of having a different kind of idea."

When asked about his career trajectory and goals, Participant B deviated from the question and instead slightly criticised the advertising awards industry. While awards are often highly sought out by creatives as a measurement of success and a driver of career progression, Participant B expressed that advertising is "quite an inward farcing industry… Which means we're producing something effectively for everyone else in the industry to kind of clap and slap each other on the back." He noted that while awards are positive in the sense that they give creative recognition of their work, he expressed that "it doesn't always fulfil…the objective of actually talking to real people." He elaborated on this point, making it clear that he did not measure the success of his career in awards but instead in terms of the changes he believes he had made.

> I'd like to do stuff that people talk about but talk about in a good way because it changes behaviour. Maybe it changes the way the world works, or maybe it just… makes things better slightly, or it changes the way companies feel they have to talk about their ways, or products, or sell, because… there's a better way of doing things.

Participant A, who held a very senior position, had a similar perspective to Participant B, measuring the success of his career trajectory on his ability to take on more social campaigns. He compared this to the typical sales activation type of campaigns that he referred to as 'day-to-day jobs'.

> From time to time, we can do jobs that really change the mindset of society, so that's what I really like to do. And I try to do one of those types of work once a month, or at least once every few months… We work for the business of our clients, but I really want to do something that improves society.

In addition, Participant A also lacked concern for his job security and felt comfortable pitching politically or socially controversial ideas. However, this lack of concern was attributed to his seniority, experience and the strong relationships that he had cultivated with his clients. These relationships were so strong that he stated that he works with "more than just clients. I work with friends." He elaborated that he maintained these strong relationships with even his biggest clients, stating, "Right now, my biggest client… is Chevrolet [and we are] real friends…We talk all the time." According to Participant A, when he proposed ideas

that were politically or socially untenable for his client, Chevrolet, "[his client contact] just says 'you're crazy, you know I support you 100%, but right now this idea, I cannot do it'. But I keep presenting…It is never a risk to sell her ideas that are controversial. Actually, she loves it."

Participant D explained that his career had progressed nicely. He categorised his sense of achievement as stemming from the fact that he has been able to create work that has made "a positive impact in the world. This is something that…has helped create awareness about a certain cause or change people's behaviours in terms of building a better world." He noted that this type of work is the work that he is most proud of.

Participant E elaborated on the typical career progression found within an advertising agency and how he had followed a similar trajectory. However, once he reached the level of Creative Director, he was adamant that the next step of Executive Creative Director was never his aspiration.

> I got to the [Creative Director] level, and then, for me, it was always about wanting to work on really good stuff, doing creative stuff, and not being in politics... So the next step [was] going outside the agency world, being freelance, and picking and choosing and having a slightly better lifestyle as a consequence.

In addition to Participant E being satisfied with his career and the role he had chosen for himself, he also felt secure within his job to pitch or pursue politically divisive ideas. Participant E related this sense of security to his personal opinion on the subject at hand. Using two campaigns he had worked on for Nike, *Dream Crazy* and *Equality*, which both address racial inequality, he stated that he was '100% invested' and 'believed' in the message and, therefore, was never concerned that his work might be too controversial.

Participant G was also happy with her career progression, noting the steep learning curve from where she started to where she was then as a "midweight strategist". However, she also had plans to continue progressing to a senior and then director title with the ultimate goal of being head of strategy. She also noted that she is happy at her current agency, particularly because they create work that "plays a cultural role."

> [The agency's] whole intention is to create cultural [movement]. And every piece of communication [created] has a cultural role…That's the first mindset that we have… We don't just create to create. Really, it's about having a stance, having a message that can change culture or can have an impact on culture.

In addition to feeling that she currently had a positive career trajectory, Participant G also expressed a sense of job safety and security, which enabled her to pitch politically controversial ideas to her superiors and clients. She explained that this perspective was an industry-wide standard and related it to the idea that "creatives [have] a lot of opinions":

> I know I will always be backed up because this is the kind of environment we live in. We are creatives… we have a lot of opinions. And that's known. And when you work in this industry, it's okay to have these opinions, and it's okay to have that agenda.

Participant L shared a similar professional journey to Participant G. He was happy with his career trajectory and his progression from living in a small country town in Brazil to working at a big agency in the United States, where he has had "the opportunity to work on global brands." However, he still had career goals he wanted to achieve, with plans to become an executive creative director (ECD) in the future. According to Participant L, as an ECD, you have more of a voice and more power and are able to get "more good things done."

Similar to Participant L, Participant N also attributed the ability to leave his small hometown in the south of Brazil as a reason he was pleased with his current professional trajectory. He described his international career journey, which has allowed him to work in countries such as Brazil, Argentina, Dubai, and Germany. Reflecting on this, he stated, "Advertising in a way [has] helped me to discover the world… I really like this possibility that the industry gives us to work in different cultures." Participant N explained that these opportunities were the best part of advertising, even when comparing it to quantifiable success such as awards or wealth. He stated, "I think that's my main goal right now, learning as much as I can with different cultures and different people."

Similarly, Participant H was also happy in her career, and she related this to her current agency and the type of work that she was able to produce. Participant H noted that they have a lot of Government clients, which she expressed enabled her to do a lot of work for good. In addition, she was happy with the agency that she was working in, stating, "In this agency, I've learned so much, and we do so much cool stuff… We're always striving to help people, and I really love that I can do that in my job." Participant I also noted that he was very satisfied with his career progression as he had just launched his own agency, which was seeing quick growth and expansion.

Participant J elaborated on his career trajectory, remembering his early ambition to create work that could be entered into festivals and win awards. He eventually worked at an agency that achieved these types of accolades, recalling his first submission, the *HIV on the Agenda* campaign for Fundacion Huesped. This campaign had the objective of bringing the discussion around HIV to the attention of the G20 leaders and ensuring that it remained a permanent topic for future summit discussions. He expressed the belief that the campaign was so successful because it bypassed the advertising stigma of being "superficial…[because] in the end, the important thing is when you do something that is more specific and important for the people." He also had no reservations about pitching politically controversial ideas, stating, "I think you always need to try it, and you don't think about the cost [to] you." He then reiterated his passion and motivation for brand activism, stating, "Then if your boss says 'Okay, we will go with this idea', then you will go with everything you have."

Participant K was happy with how his career had progressed, illustrating his progress from a small agency in Belgium to his current position at a large agency in the United States. He also noted that in terms of goals, his plans were to "keep on making work that is talked about, that is being seen, that is actually having an impact." He continued this sentiment, expanding this goal into changing the public perception of the advertising industry as a whole. His goal was to do work "that makes people think differently about advertising and maybe… have them think about it not as advertising." He further elaborated on this point:

> I guess that should be the goal… If you say… do you like advertising? No one will say yes. So that's a challenge, I think, for brands, and for us, as you know, industry professionals to really put work out there that… connects with people and really…. Can make a difference in the world. Whether it's on an economical level for a brand to really… sell more or its for a societal cause.

Participant Q had a similar perspective to his professional advancement as his creative partner, Participant K. He described a similar career journey from Belgium to the United States, where he elaborated on the achievement of his lifetime goals to produce a Super Bowl commercial and to win some advertising awards. Both of these goals were achieved within three years of moving to the United States. "It's been a crazy roller coaster ride. So [my career] trajectory is amazing. I couldn't wish for better." Participant Q had no ambition to become a chief creative officer or lead his own company because he believed those roles to be too managerial and less creative. Therefore, he was happy in his current position. This passion for creativity was also a reason he was not concerned about his job security when

pitching politically controversial ideas. This stemmed from his own personal agenda and willingness to prioritise his own passion and creativity above all. He also had the rationale that there were many other industries outside of advertising that he would like to work in one day. As an example, he listed a car mechanic and a tattoo artist. He expressed that while he loved his job, he was not married to it:

> So I'm willing to take those chances…Even here, if I would lose my job, I'd have to go back to Belgium. So it's kind of a bigger stressor now. But I think it's a passion. I really know what I want to do and what I want to do in advertising, and so far, it's paying off. And I think the reason why it pays off is because you take the risk. And if you don't, sure, you can be 60 [years old] in advertising, just doing the same stuff, but I would be bored as hell.

He also discussed how he felt when he was not passionate about a project and how this feeling was worse than losing his employment. So, he would rather be passionate and feel good about his work than play it safe.

> If I'm not passionate about a project, I lose myself. I really get very nervous. So I think that's more important. I'd rather not be nervous [and be passionate about the work] than lose my job.

The above findings suggest an interplay of the embodied and institutionalised cultural capital possessed by the practitioners. Many of the practitioners exhibited a strong sense of passion for their work and a belief in their ability to drive positive change through their creative endeavours. This passion and belief reflect motivation and commitment to the impact of their work beyond traditional career measures. Some of these practitioners also displayed a willingness to take risks and prioritise creativity. This risk-taking attitude, combined with a focus on creativity, enhances their sense of embodied cultural capital as it showcases their confidence in their ideas and their ability to innovate in the industry. Some practitioners also appeared to value exposure to different cultures, and their willingness to work internally and engage with diverse perspectives contributes to their embodied cultural capital by broadening their worldview and enhancing their ability to adapt and communicate across various contexts. The findings also revealed that practitioners exhibited a strong sense of institutionalised capital. Some of the practitioners discussed their career progression, moving from junior to senior positions, which showcases the accumulation of experience, skills and recognition within the industry. Some of these practitioners also mentioned international awards and recognition as markers of their success. These awards contribute to their

institutionalised cultural capital, as they highlight their accomplishments in a formalised manner and provide external validation of their expertise. At the same time, some of these practitioners also downplayed the importance of these awards, saying that they would rather focus on the impact that their work has on society. In addition, practitioners like Participant A and Participant B, who referenced industry standards, opinions and relationships with clients and colleagues, demonstrated their familiarity with the institutionalised norms and networks of their industry. Building these strong relationships and understanding of the industry trends also contributes to their institutionalised cultural capital as it enhances their career progression.

The findings also revealed insights into the practitioners' professional identities. Overall, the practitioners exhibited a range of perspectives on career success, their motivations, and their willingness to push boundaries within the industry. Several of the practitioners indicated that they value work that creates a positive impact, challenges norms, and aligns with their personal values and passions. Some noted that they prioritised cultural impact, while others focused on creating work that resonated with real people and downplayed the notion of chasing awards. Their levels of comfort in proposing politically controversial ideas varied based on their personalities and relationships.

Lastly, the findings also revealed various tensions between the professional and personal logics of practitioners. For example, many of them expressed a desire to create work that went beyond the pursuit of awards or commercial success. They were driven by a need to make a positive impact on society, change behaviours, or contribute to cultural movements. This highlights a potential tension between meeting the immediate profit goals of clients and contributing to broader societal change and reflects a tension between focusing solely on profit-driven advertising campaigns and creating work that aligns with their personal values. Some practitioners, like Participant E and Participant Q, mentioned their preference for focusing on creative work rather than getting involved in the politics of higher-level positions. This could be seen as a tension between personal creative fulfilment and the need to navigate corporate hierarchies and politics in pursuit of career advancement.

4.2.2 Change in personal perception of the profession

As previously mentioned in chapter two, the advertising and marketing industry has experienced tremendous change over the past few decades. In lieu of these changes, the

professional role of the advertising creative has been required to adapt and evolve alongside these innovations. Currently, with the rise in popularity of brand activism, practitioners are no longer simply managing the aesthetics of brands and their promotional communication but also have to navigate the realm of political and moral ideology. The following findings detail practitioners' personal perceptions of the advertising industry and how it has been impacted by the rise of brand activism. For example, Participant G spoke very candidly about how she viewed the advertising industry and how her perspective had changed as her use of brand activism increased.

> For a long time, until very recently… I believe that advertising is the devil. Basically, you're selling like crazy… you're just selling, selling, selling. So that's why I came in with this heavy agenda into the industry after at least a year of being like, 'We have so much more potential. We have so much that we can do. We're in every corner of these people's lives. Let's make some changes.'

Here, Participant G is expressing a tension between the for-profit motivations of her profession and her own personal motivations to have a positive social impact. She further illustrated her personal perspective on using brand activism and how that impacts her professional identity:

> So I love the fact that we can bring in these cultural changes. I love that we can [participate in] activism. I love that we can create social change. It's so important. I don't need to change the narrative of the industry being the worst industry. That's fine. Everyone can hate the industry. But when I bring out a piece of content, I want to create some kind of change. I want to create a conversation. And I think we have the potential to do that in all communication we do. So why not?

Participant C recalled that the first time he had encountered brand activism was when he created the *Mind Changer Workout* campaign for the 2016 Rio Paralympic Games. This campaign aimed to increase viewership of the Paralympic Games by having three Paralympic athletes train covertly at regular gyms. Hidden cameras recorded the initial scepticism of the gym-goers, who were soon amazed by the athletes' abilities. He remembered how much this one campaign impacted his own personal perception of his profession and the industry. The *Mind Changer Workout* campaign was his first big successful idea in relation to personal recognition, as it won industry awards from *Cannes Lions, D&AD, One Show* and *Effie Awards*. While he remembered being happy about the industry praise and success, what he recalled most was the impact he made on the lives of the athletes who were featured in the campaign.

> I remember being like really, really happy when one of the three athletes that were in the ad… closed a contract with Nike, and he called [to tell me]. I was so happy because of it… changed his life… It made a difference in his life, and I never realised before that my work as an ad man could make that important difference in someone's life… I think that was an award for me.

Similarly, brand activism has also impacted how Participant Q viewed his role and his profession, stating that it "made me love my job more… It got way more exciting for me personally." Elaborating on this perspective, he noted that during the early stages of his career, he created a lot of 'sales activation' type of campaigns, solely focused on commerce and less on creativity. These are the types of campaigns that are stereotypically associated with advertising. However, according to Participant Q, this "gets boring really fast… I cannot help feeling the [sense that there's] no need for it." Here, Participant Q refers to the negative connotations associated with advertising as being more detrimental than helpful to society. He elaborated on this point by comparing his professional identity to that of his siblings:

> My brother, he's a politician [for a left-wing party in Belgium]…He inspires me… He writes affordable business [proposals] for hospitals so they can serve more [people]. What a noble thing to do. I'm like, 'Wow, you're great!' I'm proud of him. My sister is a social worker. She opened a social bakery, where people that are not [typically welcomed] in society can go there and work. It's a place where nobody asks questions…nobody judges. What a noble thing... My younger sister is a teacher in science and drawing. And she has a great passion [to teach] people things. Like again, what a noble thing. So my siblings are amazing people… and I'm extremely capitalistic. I mean, I'm in advertising.

Participant Q recalled that when he was starting his career, this concept of social purpose was not as important, and he was happy to be in the industry. However, after watching his siblings grow into their roles in social service, he became inspired to do more and make some sort of social impact. He remembered that his first opportunity to partake in a social campaign was in Belgium for an awareness campaign to fight against drinking and driving. He also remembered how excited he was to be able to put out a positive message that a client was willing to pay for and that was geared toward the social good. It soon became a standard for Participant Q to try and incorporate a positive social element into his campaigns. He stated, "It felt good. And I think at one point I said, 'Okay if I want to stay in advertising, I think it should be a layer on my job. So I decided to do that, and I [have] tried to do it every day [since then]." Participant Q attributed this found passion and professional identity as an

ode to the example set by his siblings and their accomplishments. He then reflected on his current professional role compared to his more junior days:

> Now my job is really nice. Now I can try to do something [important], and I'm not saying I'm a saint. I'm still buying and selling dumb shit, but that's okay... [Brand activism] just became way more important at one point.

Participant P also held the view that brand activism's rise in popularity had moralised the profession of advertising. She also expressed that due to the increase in brand activism, practitioners held more influence over companies that choose to partake in a social or political campaign. This influence was justified by Participant P as a means of maintaining authenticity and in reference to several of the strategies mentioned in the previous chapter.

> That's something that I often told myself… If you can make these changes from within, especially for these huge multinational corporations, that's a huge impact… It's a much bigger impact than you're doing at home, [with] your recycling… If you can actually push a company… to stick to those goals and actually… stop ridiculous factory farming practices and everything. Then yeah, [that] actually makes me feel really good about that.

To Participant P, brand activism was allowing practitioners to transfer their social, political or environmental ideas on how companies should be managed and actually implement them. In this sense, Participant P viewed advertising practitioners as being the drivers of social change and overall social impact. She further illustrated this point by explaining that this attitude of positive social change and authenticity has been transferred into the agency where she was currently working:

> Within the agency… there's been things that I've done to try to make the agency more aware of diversity. More aware of how they're treating women or non-binary people in the agency… I felt like if I can make these kind of changes, even if they're just small changes from within… it could have a good ripple effect. So yeah, it definitely makes me feel better about working in advertising.

Similarly, Participant S also felt that the ability to use brand activism had impacted how he viewed himself as a professional. He elaborated on this by discussing the stigma and negative connotations typically associated with advertising work, namely its ties to capitalism and unnecessary consumption. He described the inevitability of working with clients that went against his own personal moral beliefs "like cigarettes or diesel cars or some pharma stuff" because, ultimately, that's your job. However, he expressed that by incorporating some

sort of activism… into your career and making other brands do more good… you can rehabilitate yourself a little bit… Maybe you can just… balance… let's call it for what it is, the evil you've contributed." He strongly believed that every creative practitioner, including film practitioners, should strive to participate in some sort of brand activism, and by doing so, the industry would be able to achieve this type of moral balance between good and evil.

> You could even start [by] just making your client donate $50,000 to a local dog shelter for me. That's enough. That's good. It doesn't have to be a gigantic political campaign that… turns [the] Russian Federation into the most tolerant LGBTQ state in the world. It doesn't need to be like that…Small steps…are definitely easier to attain… but also thousands of small steps make one giant leap.

Participant I also expressed that brand activism helped to balance the stigma and negative connotations of the industry as it allowed practitioners to use the media for something besides promoting consumerism:

> [Brand activism is] a good trend in that you can use your voice and the power you have in the media to put something good out in the world. It's raised a line, and if you truly believe in it, then I think it's great… It also pulls a lot of people into advertising now because, again, you can use the force of the media to do good, and it's a way to spend your day that doesn't just create consumerism.

Participant H was also cognisant of this shift in the advertising industry towards including more brand activism and 'social good' campaigns. She expressed that she wouldn't have wanted to be a part of the industry prior to this shift:

> What attracted me to the industry… was like, when you do get to work on things for like the fire service, or the Human Rights Commission or the New Zealand Transport Association…They're using us to help people in so many different ways. And so, for me, it's a way to actually kind of have a positive impact on society.

Even though the profession of advertising had not been previously associated with having a positive impact on society, Participant H always believed the opposite. She expressed, "Oddly enough, that's kind of what has attracted me to [a career in advertising] because of the opportunity to use creativity for social good." While Participant H also referenced that there are probably more altruistic careers and organisations where she can make this positive social impact, she stated, "For me, as a creative, I really enjoy this."

When asked if the rising popularity of brand activism had impacted his professional role, Participant L replied that he wasn't sure, but he could tell that it was a change in the right direction. He stated, "I think for the first time in history, brands are trying to do something good for the world as well, and not just themselves."

The above findings revealed how brand activism has impacted how practitioners view the advertising industry and their professional role identities. Several practitioners expressed the belief that brand activism has, in a sense, moralised their profession. The findings revealed how practitioners viewed the evolving landscape of advertising and highlighted how they are grappling with the tension between the profit-driven motives historically associated with the industry and their desire for meaningful social change. They view brand activism as the catalyst for a shift in their perspectives, making them re-evaluate their roles and the potential for their work to contribute to social good. They express that they view brand activism as a way to counterbalance the negative connotations associated with the industry. These practitioners explained that they are finding personal fulfilment in being able to use their skills and platforms to make a positive impact on society. This fulfilment is not just limited to personal satisfaction. Some of these practitioners recognised that they hold influence within companies and believe that they can leverage this influence to encourage brands to adopt more socially responsible practices. Brand activism has also caused a shift in how these practitioners view their professional identities. They no longer see themselves solely as promoters of consumerism but as drivers of social change and impact.

4.2.3 Professional identity: Catalyst of change

The following findings further illustrate how brand activism has impacted the professional identity of creative practitioners. While the literature provided in this chapter outlined the various tensions creative practitioners may feel due to role boundaries and artistic motivations, the following findings reveal practitioners as expressing a professional identity coined as 'catalysts of change'. This new professional identity refers to the self-perception and role that practitioners assume with a primary focus on driving positive change, innovation, and meaningful impact. These practitioners take an active and intentional approach to creating positive transformations, whether within their organisation, industry, or society at large. For example, Participant D made his identity as a catalyst of change known by stating, "I'm changing the world a little bit with my profession, with my creative work." It is quite clear that he believed in the impact of his work and his profession. Similarly,

Participant R expressed that the use of activism in his creative work was heavily tied to his professional identity, particularly as an early industry leader in this field:

> Personally, I was lucky that it afforded me career growth and [allowed me to develop] expertise. Then, I was seen as someone who knew about this stuff. Whether that can ever be true or not is another question. Because ultimately, [my career is] always changing and always developing, but… I've derived a lot of personal value and felt really great about those projects every time… I enjoyed them. They're very fulfilling. But also, I was able to be on this Forbes 30 under 30…40 under 40, and it was always for talking about social activism and innovation.

Participant G also related the use of brand activism to his personal and professional identity. Participant G explained that advertising represented a part of the culture, and she expressed the belief that brand activism allows consumers to re-position their perspectives on the profession away from the narrative of selling products through manipulation.

> The more we see [brand activism] as such, the more good we can create. So, it's a piece of art… it's a medium to learn, it's a medium to educate. It has so much potential. So when we're doing something with a political stance, or a political agenda that is positive and it's going to help people, it's great… Why not do it?

However, Participant G, who comes from a more restrictive culture in the United Arab Emirates, used a much more cautious approach to engage with brand activism. Participant G explained that she was educated in the United Kingdom and recognised that she might have a more liberal political view than the majority of the public in the UAE. Participant G explained that in instances when she pushed social messages that her clients may disagree with, she self-regulated her assertiveness. In these situations, she recalled thinking, "Maybe we're not ready. Maybe the audience is not ready for this." In a moment of self-reflection, Participant G discussed how she considered herself to be quite liberal, and she was very aware that her target audiences were probably more conservative. With this in mind, she noted that she was aware that her audience might not be in the same headspace and, therefore, too strong of a message could shock them in what she thought to be a negative way.

> The brand might not want to go to this level, and that's happened multiple times where I know the potential of a brand and the thing they can communicate and the message they can have, but they're just not ready. So I can't push my agenda on that. So it's a battle that I have to understand my personal agenda versus the brands versus what the audience is ready to hear. There are times when I can push back because I have the research to back up that the audience could be ready [but] sometimes I don't have that. So… it's a waiting game.

Participant N embraced a strong personal and professional identity, which is interpreted in this analysis as a type of changemaker. When discussing why he had chosen advertising as a career, he made it very clear that he was not born into a life of wealth and luxury but instead "came from a very humble family". He noted that neither of his parents had pursued tertiary education, and because of this, he lacked guidance on which career path to take. Based on his personal interests, he decided to pursue sports journalism. However, after taking social communication and advertising courses at university, he decided to work in advertising. Participant N's background informed his perspective when asked if his priorities lay with his artistic creativity, the client or the public and further reinforced his activist spirit.

> I'm not trying to be an artist. I'm not trying to be… a poet. So I… believe that the best thing we can do as people working in advertising is try to change… I think we have the influence to change the world. But of course, we are talking about a really small part of the world we barely change, only putting a question inside someone's head, maybe this is [all] we are doing. And maybe this is enough.

Participant N was really passionate about this personal and professional identity interpreted above to resemble a 'changemaker', further stating that he would love it if all of the briefs he received asked "to have one political value on the message." While referencing campaigns such as *Dream Crazy* by Nike, Participant N expressed his belief that political issues such as Black Lives Matter or democracy and the right to vote needed to be embedded into the industry's creative work. He explained that "advertising, in a way, is a consequence of what people are talking [about]", and since everyone has a different point of view, he expressed that brands should also maintain their own perspective and "[stand up] and [communicate] what they believe." While Participant N maintained this position that brands should have their own public voice on political subjects, he was quick to reiterate that this stemmed from his own personal motivations and identity as a societal changemaker. He also expressed that this identity was essential in order for any practitioner to create a brand activism campaign:

> To do that kind of campaign, you also need to be a bit activist. In a way, you need to have your own values in what you believe…It's always connected with the creative [themselves], the person, because if you are there, you are doing something that you believe will be easier. You are growing as a person. You are doing something that will impact someone's life.

During the interview, Participant N was living and working in the UAE in Dubai. However, he was adamant that his activist spirit, stemmed from his personality and his Latin American heritage as a native of Brazil. He said that brand activism allowed him to express this identity and also voice his opinions through his creative work. This was exciting for Participant N, as he explained that he had never before had the opportunity to have a voice, particularly one of power:

> Personally, I'm a bit [of an] activist. I think [coming] from Latin America, and coming from a place that I never had the opportunity… to have a voice in a way. So, I think as a creative, it's great… to have this opportunity to put your ideas of things that you believe… right into what you love to do in your work. So, I always feel proud and happy because, in a way, I feel that my voice is there. I feel like represented by the brand itself. Not because I'm doing it, but because when I look [at] the results and people reacting to it and discussing it, I think this is the most important thing. So I really like that because, in a way, I feel that we can extend our voice to more people through a brand or to a campaign or one idea.

Similarly, Participant K also felt that brand activism was tied to his professional identity, considering it as a source of inspiration for his creative work. He even discussed how the rise in popularity of brand activism had changed his creative process and what type of ideas he started his ideation process with. According to Participant K, "Brand activism is actually what I… often propose or bring to the table...I guess that has changed the way I propose ideas or think of ideas." He also expressed how important brand activism has been to his overall career progression:

> Maybe without that… I would have quit already. I don't know... It does give us some fulfilment… You do feel like you can use what you do every day to help others [and] make a difference. So I think that is important. I think it does make the job a little bit more attractive for other people… or maybe more respected. Although I don't think most people look at it that way or realise that there's a lot of creativity behind a lot of the brand activism that you see… So I don't know if it reflects on the outside world, but personally… I do think it is important… It is a driver… for sure.

Participant K also felt that brand activism has allowed him to express his own voice. He believed that both himself and Participant Q were so invested in the idea for the *Boards of Change* campaign because they had both immigrated to the United States from Belgium and were currently on work visas. This meant that they did not have the right to vote or participate in any type of formal democratic process.

> So, in a way, we felt like… we could not make our voices heard. In a way, we cannot contribute to change in this way. Maybe there's another way. So we did feel

> like it's great that we have something to contribute, even if it's just a little bit in our own way. We can… push brands or, in this case, the city to help make a difference.

Aside from this specific reference to the chance to voice a political opinion, Participant K also noted that he tended to push for brand activism campaigns because he held the personal view that brands and big companies have a responsibility to speak out because they have the economic leverage to instigate change.

The above findings revealed that the practitioners demonstrate a new professional identity that positions them as what can best be described as 'catalysts of change'. They perceived their roles not only as advertisers or creators but also as individuals who could drive positive change, innovation, and meaningful impact. This identity centred around actively seeking ways to create transformations within their organisations, industries, or society as a whole. Several practitioners, such as Participant D and Participant R, expressed a deep belief in the impact of their creative work. They see their profession as a means of making a difference in the world and acknowledge the potential for their work to contribute positively to societal issues. The passage from Participant G highlighted the complexities of navigating this new professional identity within varying cultural contexts as she acknowledged the challenges of integrating brand activism in a more restrictive cultural environment. Her self-regulation stemmed from an awareness of differing political views and the potential negative impact of strong liberal messages on a more conservative audience. Participant N also shared how his personal background and identity as an activist informed his perspective on this new professional identity as a catalyst of change as he discussed how his humble origins led him to embrace advertising as a way to effect change. Many of the practitioners expressed a sense of pride in being able to voice their opinions through their creative work. This allowed them to express their identity and beliefs and gave them a platform to reach wider audiences, which could potentially effect change. At the same time, some practitioners highlighted the inherent tensions that arise between their personal motivations for social change and the economic objectives of the advertising industry. They noted that while they may have ambitious ideals for societal transformation, they also needed to consider brand readiness and audience reception, which could sometimes lead to compromises. In summary, the findings revealed a shift in the professional identity of advertising practitioners. They consider themselves as catalysts of change who are motivated by a desire to contribute positively to society. This shift is evident in how they prioritised brand activism, navigated cultural and personal factors, and integrated their own values and

perspectives into their creative work. However, this identity shift also brought about tensions between their personal motivations and the economic realities of the advertising industry.

4.2.4 Technology enabling social innovation

The final section of this chapter discusses the impact of technological innovation on practitioners' professional roles and, therefore, role identities. Incorporating innovative technologies into campaigns is becoming increasingly important to the industry and is reflected in some of the *Cannes Lions Festival of Creativity* award-winning campaigns, as previously discussed. The findings in this section focus on the use of technology and relate particularly to the creation of more socially innovative campaigns that enable practitioners to act as technological intermediaries – a term that describes a new role where practitioners serve as enablers, translators, and problem solvers, leveraging technology to drive positive change, improve processes, and create solutions that have a meaningful impact on society or industries. They play a crucial role in maximising the potential of technology and ensuring it is effectively utilised to address real-world needs on behalf of their clients.

Participant K expressed how the constant evolution of technology has put extra pressure on his role. He stated, "It's going so fast, and [with] so many new technologies popping up and so many social media platforms and trends… it always goes faster and faster, and it feels like you constantly have to keep up." He further elaborated that this pressure stems from a fear of being "rendered obsolete":

> If you're… a creative who comes up with ideas that are not using some of those most recent technologies and platforms, then… you're not gonna be around for that long. You have to keep up all the time and bring… sometimes… avant garde-ish type of ideas that are… ahead of their time.

He explained that this need to keep up with new technologies has added "an extra skill set for creatives." He compared today and the complexities of the online world to the past, where publishing mediums consisted of "classic media" such as radio, TV and print:

> It's crazy… every week, there's a new… hot thing, a new platform, a new technology that's gonna take over the world. And brands want to be a part of that. So… it's an [extra investment, not only] timewise, and just… reading, talking, researching, but then also on understanding how those platforms work if you really want to leverage them with your campaigns.

In addition to the task of learning what and how to use new technologies in the industry, he also explained that these advancements have changed how they actually produce their creative work:

> It's no longer just knowing how to make a great image and write a great headline or great copy or voiceover. No, it's like… the way you have to think [for] all these different media channels is different… It's no longer the art of photoshopping and [writing] lines… it's way beyond that.

Participant Q also felt this pressure to keep up with technology and cautioned that it could be threatening for a creative professional, "especially when you get older." Using the example of TikTok and its sudden rise to popularity, he stated, "This is going to sound horrible, but I don't understand TikTok. I don't understand why it exists. And the problem is, every new brief involves TikTok, and I just personally, sometimes just don't get it." He expressed how he relied on his junior creatives to understand and bring these new platforms and technologies into purview. He also provided an example of how this is a cycle of the industry, reminiscing on the time when he was the young junior creative with the technological knowledge:

> I had to explain to a CCO once what a meme was, and he didn't understand. And I'm like… 'but you're the creative.' And I looked at him as like, 'You're the creative leader of this company. Come on.' But now… because I'm getting older, I'm like, 'Oh, I get it.'… And I think I'm a modern person, but… it goes so fast. It's really threatening.

While Participant Q expressed that these new technologies and the pressure to keep up with the current trends felt 'threatening', he also expressed that they enabled creativity, and he was receptive to the idea that his profession required constant learning, growth and exploration:

> I think it's really scary [but] it's [also] the enabler, which is amazing. Because I don't have a worry, I'm like, 'yeah, but we'll figure it out, they'll [be] technology, we'll figure out how to do it. But on the other hand…it's terrifying to know that… probably next month, there will be something bigger than TikTok… You have to [put in] a lot of effort to get it… [and] to understand it.

Participant Q also referenced the pace at which technology evolves, reflecting on how many changes have occurred in the past decade alone:

> We're far away from traditional TV and print. But it's not that long ago… I'm only in advertising for 11 years…So, imagine when it's 30. I mean, there's going to be a

> lot more steps to think about and a lot more challenges… [It's] good to keep you on your toes.

Participant H shared a similar perspective about the pace of technological innovation and how it has impacted the industry and her role. She stated, "You always have to grow… and be aware of the ever-changing landscape of the tech and… knowing… what is available. What can you do? Who can we partner with? What's the next thing?" She also elaborated on the difficulties of keeping current with new technologies:

> It is hard to have your eye on all the balls [at] once, for sure, because it's moving at such a pace. And things that were really hot like five years ago [are] off the charts now, and new things are coming up, and new developments are happening. And I guess that's more exciting than anything else.

Participant S echoed this sentiment, explaining that technology has changed everything about his role, stating, "The whole work is different than [it was] years ago… More social stuff [and] media has changed [now there are] different mediums with different media to work for."

Participant C explained that these types of innovative ideas required extra work from everyone, stating, "It always has a major demand from everyone because it's new territory, and especially for us too… and when you are doing…a TV spot or something like that, everyone knows what to do." Participant C expressed that the new possibilities afforded by innovative technology have impacted the overall ideation process and what it meant to be creative. He related this to a shift in perspective as to what an advertisement could look like. He expressed that now everything could be advertising, and it is no longer limited to a single medium:

> So I think in the old days, you were thinking a lot about the medium… nowadays if I want to have an idea and I want to execute this idea in the best way possible for this idea… I think technology [has] just taken to another level… especially when it comes to let's do something that no one's ever done before [and], then we look at technology because basically, we're going to [find] something. But at the same time, it's very difficult to make an idea happen with technology because of the cost… It's very difficult to find a simple idea that is very low-cost and involves technology.

To Participant C, keeping track of these new technologies was now a part of the job. He noted that he kept a folder bookmarked on his web browser to keep track of internet pages that detailed new technologies for him to use in the future.

According to Participant B, recent technological innovations have greatly impacted his professional role as an advertising practitioner. He explained that new technologies have affected fundamental parts of his job, such as the use of different production mediums and how he came up with his ideas and his overall work and creative processes. He began by describing the fundamental media changes, elaborating on "where the stuff you produce gets seen like that's changed… It used to be A4 sheets and TV spots, and now… anyone can look at anything at any part of their day." Here, Participant B was expressing how technology has afforded greater access to consumers and was no longer restricted to specific locations or time slots thanks to platforms like the internet, social media and smartphones.

Participant I described a similar experience with technology and how it has changed the pace of the industry, stating, "Technology means everything in advertising. Just tactically, everything is a lot quicker." Participant I argued that this new pace has caused the market to become over-saturated due to an increase in the number of ways to reach consumers. He explained that because of this over-saturation, it was ever-more important to place more emphasis on creativity in order to break through all the noise:

> I think the onus is even heavier on creativity because there's so much noise out there. You have to find technology and use it in a way that's relevant, and that breaks through and… you're constantly learning, like every day there's some new thing to learn.

Participant K also expressed that technological innovation had profoundly changed the advertising profession. Similar to Participant C, this perspective was centred around an expansion of media channels. Participant K made reference to a recent campaign he had worked on for Canon, where they used virtual reality to recreate one of the most iconic skateboard parks that had been demolished. This allowed people to skate at the park in virtual reality.

> You can do so much more…it used to be like you make a print ad, a TV spot or a radio spot [or]… you put up a billboard… [Those are the] options you had back in the day. Now… anything is possible…there's some brands who have done really great technological-driven campaigns and come up with new products and new technologies… And then there's virtual reality, which I think is really big… So that does create a whole new spectrum of ideas… That's very inspiring.

Participant N offered a similar perspective, believing that the current time is the best time to be in advertising because everything was now possible. He explained how he often came up with technological ideas and always had to ask his creative partner if it was possible. According to Participant N, his partner always replied, "Everything is possible." Participant N credited this optimistic perspective about limitless creativity to the recent advancements in technology. He was personally motivated to constantly look for new ways of doing things.

> Every week [I'm] checking what is new in the world in terms of technology…Last week I was checking [the] MIT [database, and they are] developing a plant [that] can illuminate. It's like a light plant. So you can have these plants in your house, and these plants are literally light… This is unbelievable…So this is something new that when I look, I said, 'Oh, I need to do something with that.' I don't know why [and] I don't know what yet, but I'm always looking to those kind of things that can also [facilitate innovative] ideas.

While Participant N seemed to have the belief of technology first, idea second, he quickly stated that "Technology is not the idea… but we can take these elements and create a beautiful idea to move people or to communicate something new."

The above findings shed light on how technological innovation has impacted the roles and creative processes of these practitioners. These practitioners acknowledged the fast pace of technological evolution and noted that they felt pressure to keep up with these new technologies and trends to stay relevant in the industry. Failure to do so may render them obsolete. Practitioners like Participant Q noted that it was important to constantly learn, grow, and explore to keep up with the ever-changing landscape. Some of these practitioners were excited by new technologies and were constantly exploring new ways to incorporate them into their campaigns as they were motivated by the limitless creative possibilities. Some of these practitioners view keeping up with new technologies as an extra skill set as they were now required to not only be proficient in their traditional creative skills like design and copywriting but also to understand how to leverage these new technologies and platforms to make their campaigns stand out. These practitioners noted the need to think differently about creating content for various media channels that extend beyond traditional media. However, at the same time, some practitioners like Participant E believed the increased number of media channels and, therefore, more ways to reach the consumer puts more pressure on being creative to break through the noise and make an impact. Despite these challenges, practitioners also recognised these new technologies as enabling creativity and opening new

possibilities for innovative campaigns. These advancements in technology have expanded the possibilities for advertising, which now includes virtual and augmented reality, along with other emerging technologies offering new avenues for creative ideas and campaigns. Overall, these findings showed that technological advancements have brought significant changes to the advertising industry, impacting the creative process, media channels, and overall ideation. The industry is now driven by a need to stay up to date with emerging technologies while also harnessing creativity to stand out in an increasingly competitive and technologically driven landscape.

The following findings detail how technology has impacted creativity and what practitioners think is possible. For example, Participant Q described how technology has enabled creativity and "makes everything possible." He expressed how technology inspired him during his creative ideation. He stated, "What technology does for me is [it] makes everything available... Even if you think about it and it sounds impossible, there's almost always an answer in technology." He elaborated on this point by discussing his work on the *MindTunes* campaign for Smirnoff. This campaign used innovative brainwave technology and allowed paraplegics to create music using their minds. The campaign focused on individuals who were previously artists and had become paralysed later on in their lives. While brainstorming for this campaign, he pondered, "'What if we could find a way to make music with brainwaves?'"

> We didn't know that technology existed… We always felt in the back of our minds, 'there must be something'… and then we [found] the technology. And the idea just got way bigger because of that specific technology.

Participant Q credited his work on the *MindTunes* campaign to his perspective on limitless creativity. He admitted that he is excited about what's possible, making reference to a Super Bowl commercial entitled *Coors Big Game Commercial of Your Dreams: Dream Study* for Coors Light. This campaign conducted a sleep study to see if it was possible to implant ads into people's dreams. This was extremely exciting to Participant Q.

> Now we're playing around with 'Hey, what if we can tap into people's dreams?' It's not that… we know that the technology exists, but we always feel comfortable [that]… there's gonna be a way [to do it], technology will help us find a way. Look at VR or AR. You can basically do whatever you dream of. So I think [it] a liberator for me… it really helps me think very freely.

Participant L also reminisced on how much advertising has been impacted by new technology. He expressed that technological innovation has made everything easier and harder at the same time. He illustrated this point by recalling the early years of his career, where the focus was on print media. He noted that while it may not be easy to come up with ideas for a print campaign, "you have that space to play with." However, presently, Participant L viewed creativity as limitless, stating, "The world is endless." Participant L illustrated his point using the *Limitless* campaign by Red Bull, where they took a man up to the edge of the stratosphere, essentially into space and had him free-dive down. He contrasted the Red Bull campaign to his own, illustrating the range of possibilities for advertising, stating, "It goes from a book to a man in space. So, it's endless." To Participant L, this broadness could sometimes make it difficult to narrow down an idea and "find that goal." However, he also saw this exact scenario as an example of how technology provided way more opportunity.

> It's like I said, if your best idea is a book…[and a book is gonna achieve the goal], it's a book. If sending a man to the moon… is gonna achieve your goal. Send a man to the moon… They have way more opportunities right now than in the past. And I think it's awesome. I think advertising is way richer nowadays than 15 years ago.

Participant R expressed that the outlook provided by the practitioners above regarding limitless possibilities from technology could lead to the best creativity. He embodied this perspective and used it as a guiding method to run his own company, Offfield. To illustrate this, he shared an inside joke he had with his colleagues about the importance of ideating in a mental space of limitless creativity as opposed to thinking logistically, implying it is the job of the creative practitioner to think this way:

> We used to joke about when people would get too into the technology, too early into the process…We used to joke, 'Where's the antenna go?'…Because you're… trying to figure out someone else's job. We're not responsible for figuring out where the antenna goes. There are really talented people we're gonna work with who know exactly where it goes. Or the fact that [it] doesn't need an antenna anymore… and those are the kinds of things that I think can be really freeing when you just focus on the experience or the story you want people to enjoy and then figure out how to get it made.

In opposition to the practitioners above, Participant S related the idea of technologically limitless creativity to naivety. He expressed that a lot of the younger creatives come up with innovative ideas that may sound 'cool' on paper, but they are unfeasible.

Participant S suggested that you need to find the balance between what's innovative and what's feasible to accomplish now. While he held this critical perspective, cautioning the role of limitless thinking, he also illustrated his own example that was quite the opposite when discussing the *Last Tree Standing* campaign:

> Technically speaking, that wasn't really possible to do… it wasn't impossible, but it was just… the task was so enormous… that the potential cost would have been prohibitive… We just kind of [found] a way to do that for close to nothing. So I guess… thinking of ideas [and] cool concepts is the… easier part. Finding a way to… make it…feasible… that's the difficult part. And that's why you have great agencies…[always working with] great producers, [the] people who can make [stuff] happen.

In reality, Participant S' campaign required a high degree of external collaboration to make it feasible. According to Participant S, "One of the really important insights about this project is that it brought a lot of people from advertising together." As previously mentioned, this collaboration involved practitioners from a variety of different countries and a variety of skills, such as project managers, designers, coders, 3D modellers, influencers, actors and directors. This level of collaboration was mirrored and mentioned as important by the other practitioners who created more socially innovative campaigns.

While discussing the *Dress for Respect* campaign, Participant C remembered that when they first came up with the idea, no one was sure how to execute something like that. According to Participant C, "The first time we told the idea [to] our producer, like 'no we want a dress', and his face was clear, it was like 'I don't know how to do this' but then, 'okay, let's do it.'" He explained the technology required for his idea was almost non-existent, stating, "We are doing something that we have no reference of. We don't remember seeing this anywhere, so we need to talk to some companies [and] some producers who are able to do this." Therefore, external collaboration outside of the agency became a very important part of the creative idea for this campaign. Participant J shared a similar experience to Participant C while working on the beginning stages of the *Degree* Incorporated campaign for Unilever. This campaign created an inclusive deodorant for non-able-bodied people. According to Participant J, "The first step was to start to think proto-types, and yes, we have the ability to think and develop ideas, but not products, so you need to start to talk with people".

Participant J reiterated the importance of collaboration for technologically innovative ideas. According to Participant J, "You always need people who know more than you about [technology] because it is really common to be like 'Hey, I have this idea', and it's possible [but] you don't know [how to do it], maybe AR or… [developing] a product." He elaborated on this perspective by discussing his work in the early stages of the *Degree inclusive* campaign:

> I remember two years ago when we [came up with] the idea… in the first moment, it was like, 'Okay, an adaptive deodorant, how can people with disabilities use it?' And so the first step was to start to think [about] proto-types… We have the ability to think and develop ideas but not products. So you need to start to talk with people.

While Participant J left that agency, he continued to help with the research and development and elaborated on the collaboration required to create the product. He noted that this involved collaboration between the Wunderman Thompson agency in Argentina, people with disabilities, production companies in Turkey and a production team from Wunderman Thompson in the US.

These findings shed light on the impact of technological innovation on the creative processes and professional identities of these practitioners. They described how technology has enabled limitless creativity and expanded the possibilities to create innovative campaigns. Practitioners like Participant Q expressed that technology opens up new possibilities and makes seemingly impossible ideas feasible. They felt inspired by the availability of technology and expressed the belief that it liberates their thinking, allowing them to explore creative concepts that were previously beyond reach. These findings also revealed the importance of collaboration in creating innovative campaigns. As technological innovations become more complex, practitioners are increasingly reliant on external collaboration to bring their ideas to life. Campaigns involving new technologies often require the expertise of professionals from various industries, including designers, coders, 3D modellers, and more. However, while technology offers boundless creative opportunities, some practitioners, like Participant S, cautioned against getting carried away by unrealistic ideas. Balancing innovation with feasibility becomes crucial. He explained that while innovative concepts might be appealing on paper, turning them into reality requires careful consideration of the resources, costs, and expertise needed. Overall, these findings reveal that advertising practitioners view themselves as problem solvers who can make real changes to the world

through their work. They see technology as a tool that empowers them to overcome challenges, address social issues, and create impactful campaigns that resonate with the public. This emphasises their new roles as technological intermediaries as they use technology and create innovative solutions to real-world problems.

Overall, these findings shed light on the impact of technology on their professional identities and creative practices. These practitioners explained that they feel the need to incorporate innovative technologies into their campaigns to stay relevant and competitive. They indicated that they felt the pressure to keep up with the fast pace of technological evolution. They acknowledged the need to constantly learn, grow, and explore new technologies to remain current. Failure to do so may render them obsolete, given the increasing number of media channels and the challenge of breaking through the noise to make an impact. However, despite the challenges, practitioners were excited by the possibilities that technology offers for creative ideation. The availability of new technologies, such as virtual and augmented reality, opens up limitless creative opportunities, inspiring practitioners to explore innovative concepts that were previously beyond reach. In addition, based on their responses, using these technologies to create socially innovative campaigns enables these practitioners to act as technological intermediaries and find solutions to complex problems.

4.3 Discussion

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, acquiring access to the domain does not guarantee the individual will make a creative contribution. The individual must possess the ability and the desire to produce novel work (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015). This chapter set out to explore how background and cultural capital may shape a practitioner's perspective in engaging with brand activism. It also aimed to explore how brand activism impacts professional identity. It began by presenting relevant literature on understanding the concept of cultural capital. This was followed by a review of the literature on professional identity in the advertising industry. Upon this review, this chapter presented the findings from this dissertation's empirical research. These findings revealed that the practitioners interviewed for this research possess a significant amount of cultural capital, which significantly influences their perspectives on brand activism and their engagement with it. They also revealed that these practitioners exhibit a new professional identity as catalysts of change, which refers to the self-perception and role that they assume with a primary focus on driving positive change, innovation, and meaningful impact. Lastly, the findings revealed practitioners to act as technological intermediaries as they embraced technological innovation and expanded their role responsibilities to become problem solvers.

The practitioners' experiences while growing up, family background, and interactions with various communities have shaped their cultural values, knowledge, and skills and contributed to their embodied cultural capital. This type of cultural capital equips them with unique perspectives on brand activism. While these practitioners appeared to have relatively similar amounts of cultural capital that assisted them in engaging with brand activism, their upbringings and backgrounds were actually quite diverse. Some of the practitioners noted that they were from small rural towns in Southern America and were proud that they had advanced into careers in large network agencies in the United States. Many of the practitioners exhibited a passion for work that created a positive impact, challenged norms, and aligned with their personal values and passions. This suggests that their upbringing and socialisation processes have influenced their motivations and beliefs about the potential of advertising to contribute to social change. In addition, their access to formal education, career progression, and industry recognition highlighted their possession of institutionalised cultural capital. This institutionalised capital not only contributed to their career advancement but also shaped their professional identity. Many of them have reached senior positions, won awards,

and have international experience, showcasing their expertise and industry recognition. This status and recognition influenced their willingness and ability to engage in brand activism, as they have the credibility and media platform at their disposal. The practitioners' embodied and institutionalised cultural capital interacted to shape their perspective on brand activism. Their accumulated knowledge, skills, confidence, and industry recognition enhanced their motivation and confidence to engage in socially innovative strategies. The practitioners exhibited a strong sense of passion for work that went beyond immediate profit goals, aligning with their personal values and passions. The interplay of these forms of cultural capital resulted in practitioners who are both motivated and equipped to push the boundaries of traditional advertising to create meaningful social impact.

Even though these practitioners were working for or have worked for large full-service agencies, their view of the advertising industry reflects the values of the new and emerging pro-social agencies, as discussed by LaVoi and Haley (2021). As the practitioners expressed how brand activism has, in their view, moralised their profession, they indicated how they see the evolving landscape of advertising as grappling with the tension between the profit-driven motives historically associated with the industry and their desire for meaningful social change. This reinforces the idea of the emerging fourth sector of hybrid organisations that are unified by pro-social intentions (LaVoi & Haley, 2021). Similarly, just as Lee and Lau (2019) perceive an expansion of role boundaries due to pressure on the industry to perform, these practitioners describe an expansion of their own role boundaries. Brand activism has influenced how these practitioners perceive their roles within the advertising industry. They no longer see themselves solely as promoters of consumerism but as agents of positive change. This shift is driven by a belief in the impact of their creative work and a desire to contribute to societal issues. This new professional identity emphasises their role in driving transformations within their organisations, industries, and society as a whole.

The findings also focused on how new technologies have and continue to impact the creative process for advertising practitioners. This, in turn, relates to the creation of more socially innovative campaigns and enables practitioners to enact as technological intermediaries – a term that describes a new role that allows them to use technology and create innovative solutions to real-world problems and expands the practice of advertising outside of the boundaries of design and communication. The findings indicated that these practitioners felt pressure to keep up with the rapidly evolving technologies to remain

relevant in the industry. They viewed staying updated on these trends as a necessary skill set alongside their traditional creative skills. This pressure stemmed from the ever-increasing number of media channels and the desire to stand out amidst the noise. Despite the challenges, practitioners were excited by the creative possibilities that emerging technologies offered, such as virtual and augmented reality. This reinforced the notion that technology has caused an expansion of role boundaries and created a shift of professional identity for creative practitioners from 'idea generators' to 'solution facilitators', as explained by Lee and Lau (2019). The practitioners noted that they were expected to not only possess creative skills but also leverage technology to solve real-world problems and create innovative solutions, thus solving problems both for their clients and for the public. This shift has expanded their scope of expertise to include collaborating with experts from different industries, which became essential to navigate the complexity of technological innovations and transform conceptual ideas into practical campaigns. The practitioners' perspective on technology was framed as an empowering tool that made everything possible by liberating their creativity and enabling them to tackle challenges and address social issues. This perspective is best evidenced by Participant L when explaining the range of creative possibilities, stating "It goes from a book to a man in space. So, it's endless." This viewpoint reinforces their role as problem solvers who use technology to make a meaningful impact on the world. Their role as technological intermediaries involved balancing the potential of technology with feasibility and collaborating across disciplines. This dynamic landscape of advertising and social innovation emphasises the practitioners' evolving role as both creative minds and technological problem solvers.

In addition, similar to the literature that discussed various identity tensions that creative practitioners may experience either between their role differences or artistic logics compared to the economic motivations of clients or accounts staff, these practitioners experienced identity tensions when engaging in brand activism (Bolin, 2019; Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007; Malefyt & Morais, 2010; Meyer & Schulz, 2017). Some of these practitioners expressed tensions between pursuing profit-driven advertising campaigns and aligning their work with personal values. This conflict arose as they strived to balance client objectives with broader societal impact. Some noted that they preferred to focus on creativity rather than engaging in higher-level corporate politics, highlighting a tension between personal fulfilment and career advancement. These practitioners expressed pride in voicing opinions through their work, allowing them to express their identities and beliefs while

reaching broader audiences. However, tensions also arose between their personal motivations for change and the economic objectives of the advertising industry, leading to compromises.

In conclusion, this chapter has explored the complex interrelation between cultural capital, professional identity and brand activism. It highlighted that access to the domain alone does not guarantee creative contributions; the individual must possess both the capacity and inclination for innovative work. Through an examination of practitioners' backgrounds and cultural capital, the chapter revealed that their unique perspectives on brand activism were shaped by their diverse upbringings, family backgrounds, and interactions with various communities. The combination of their embodied and institutionalised cultural capital equips these practitioners to engage in brand activism, fostering a new professional identity as catalysts of change. Their passion for work that drives positive change aligns with the evolving values of the industry towards meaningful societal impact and mirrors the emergence of hybrid organisations, blurring traditional sector boundaries (LaVoi & Haley, 2021). The practitioners' shifting professional identity from mere promoters of consumerism to agents of positive transformation further highlights their commitment to driving societal change. In addition, the expanding role of practitioners and their need to stay in line with rapidly evolving technologies underscores their role as problem solvers and innovators. The practitioners' navigation of technological landscapes highlights their capacity to leverage technology not just for creative expression but for real-world solutions that align with their moral and societal values.

The findings from this chapter in this dissertation deepen our understanding of the individual as a component involved in creating brand activism. The following chapter will continue this discussion on the individual as an element of the Systems Model of Creativity but will focus on the ethical considerations of practitioners engaging in this novel strategy.

Chapter 5 – The Individual – Ethical Considerations

The previous chapter explored the role of the individual in relation to professional identity. This chapter continues the discussion on the individual as an element of the Systems Model of Creativity by exploring the ethical considerations of practitioners when they engage in brand activism. The chapter begins by reviewing relevant literature related to ethics, specifically the study of ethics in the advertising industry. It then presents findings of this dissertation's empirical research in an attempt to answer the following question:

What ethical considerations guide practitioners' engagement in brand activism?

Based on the analysis of the interviews, the findings reveal that practitioners exhibit a sense of ethical becoming, which is showcased in how they perceive their ethical growth over time. The findings also highlight a reliance on personal moral identities to guide ethical decisions. Lastly, the findings reveal that practitioners evaluate the ethics of brand activism based on their own perceptions of authenticity, which thus further repositions their role as moral intermediaries.

5.1 Literature

During the height of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in the United States and globally after the police murder of George Floyd, Bristol Dry Gin decided to join the conversation by posting on Twitter (now X). The tweet read, "When the shooting starts, the looting starts. Voted No one gin by rioters for its complex botanical mix and high flammability. #gin #bristol #PartyParrot #burningbridges" (BBC News, 2020b, para. 1). At the same time, McDonald's (2020) released a short YouTube video entitled *One of Us,* which listed seven of the most notable cases of police brutality in the United States, and a message stating that they supported black communities across America and were donating to the National Urban League and the NAACP. Bristol Dry Gin was met with severe backlash due to the insensitivity of its message, and McDonald's was praised as an ally of the BLM movement. While the delivery of these campaigns was different, consumers viewed only one as unethical, even though the overall ideology was the same as each brand aligned itself with the BLM protestors and movement. This leads to the question of how practitioners make sense of the ethics behind brand activism, which often involves co-opting a controversial social or political message.

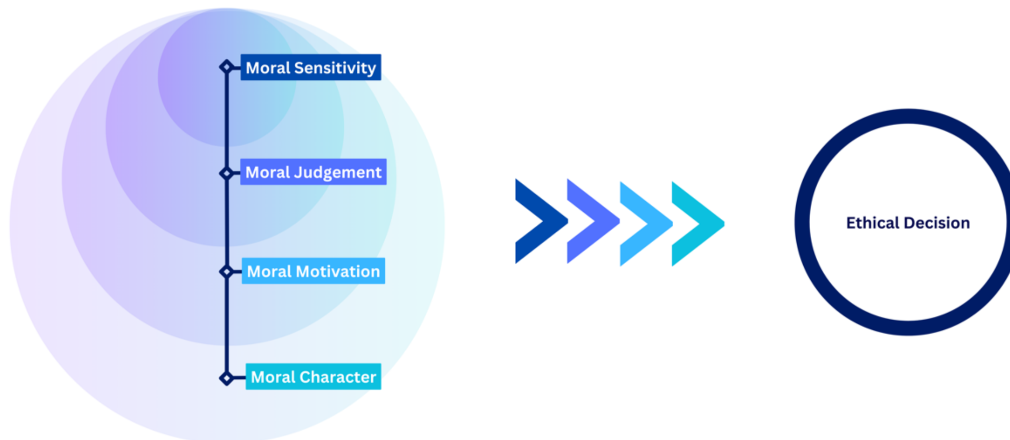
There are various macro-level ethical issues that may arise from engaging with brand activism. For example, one ethical issue revolves around the perspective that brand activism is turning social and political issues into commodities. Another stems from the amplification of political polarisation and the contribution of brand activism to the ideological filter bubble that exists online. Lastly, some may see brand activism as insensitive or tokenistic, as brands may use social or political issues solely for marketing and branding purposes, which may diminish the significance of these important causes.

While exploring the ethical dimensions of brand activism, it is essential to consider the broader context of advertising ethics. Historically often conceived of as an immoral profession, the advertising industry has been labelled an ideological tool to recruit citizens into an all-encompassing consumer culture and an accelerator of social and cultural degeneration (Cohen & Dromi, 2018; Ewen, 2008; Marcuse, 1964). As previously identified, specific studies regarding ethics and advertising often focus on issues of consumption, i.e. how advertisers are viewed as aiding and abetting unnecessary consumerism or unhealthy products and behaviours such as smoking and fast/seasonal fashion (Cohen & Dromi, 2018;

Drumwright & Murphy, 2004; Hunt & Chonko, 1987; Moon & Franke, 2000; Rotzoll & Christians, 1980). Despite the prominence of critical macro-level perspectives on advertising as a profession mentioned above, surprisingly few meso-level (industry specific) and micro-level (individual specific) studies investigate how advertising practitioners view the ethical obligations of their professional practices (Cohen & Dromi, 2018; Drumwright & Kamal, 2016; Drumwright & Murphy, 2004). These studies leave a gap regarding ethical issues that are fuelled by political and social ideology.

Moral psychologist Rest (1994) argued that ethical behaviour is the result of four components: (1) moral sensitivity, (2) moral judgement, (3) moral motivation and (4) moral character. Moral sensitivity refers to the recognition of an ethical dilemma, and it is characterised by "awareness of how our actions affect other people" (Rest, 1994, p. 23). Sensitivity includes imagining all possible scenarios and the resulting "cause-consequence chain of events" of each (Rest, 1994, p. 23). The next component is moral judgment, where a context-dependent decision is made on what to do, determining "which action is morally right/wrong" (Rest, 1994, p. 23). This component is followed by moral motivation, which refers to an agent's motivation to follow through with moral action and consists of "prioritizing moral values relative to other values" (Rest, 1994, p. 23). The last component of Rest's (1994) Four-Component Model is moral character. In order to act ethically, an agent must possess the courage to uphold their convictions and persevere against barriers and obstacles when faced with opposition (Rest, 1994). Together, these components determine moral action and can be referred to as a process of awareness, judgment, intention and behaviour (Nguyen & Crossan, 2022; Rest, 1994). However, it is essential to note that this process is not linear; instead, "the four components comprise a logical analysis of what it takes to behave morally" (Rest, 1994, p. 24). While this dissertation's research is qualitative and, therefore, does not intend to measure any of these psychological traits, it is essential to understand Rest's (1994) Four-Component Model as a framework for describing moral decision-making. This is demonstrated visually in Figure 10.

FIGURE 10 REST'S (1994) FOUR COMPONENT MODEL OF ETHICAL DECISION MAKING



5.1.1 Ethical decision-making in Advertising

Research on advertising ethics and moral behaviour often focuses on the first two components of the moral decision-making process, namely moral sensitivity and moral judgement (also known as moral reasoning). A seminal study by Drumwright and Murphy (2004) that addressed these components examined how practitioners in the advertising industry perceive and think about ethical issues. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with advertising practitioners and found that their ethical considerations were often characterised by two types of moral distortion, namely, 'moral myopia' (p. 11) and 'moral muteness' (p. 13). Moral myopia refers to the distortion or disregard of ethical dilemmas by practitioners. Drumwright and Murphy (2004) described practitioners who experienced moral myopia as having a "distorted moral vision that results largely from rationalization or from an unwillingness to focus on the problem so that it is seen clearly" (p. 11). These rationalisations included passing on ethical responsibilities to the client, consumer or society at large. Moral myopia thus describes practitioners' skewed sense of moral sensitivity as they distort or disregard ethical issues. In addition, moral muteness, which is the second type of moral distortion identified by Drumwright & Murphy (2004), refers to a failure to address ethical issues at either the personal or organisational level. Moral muteness occurs when "individuals recognise ethical issues but remain silent and avoid confronting them…[it] occurs whenever people fail to communicate moral concerns that they genuinely feel" (Drumwright & Murphy, 2004, p. 13). Moral muteness was characterised by the compartmentalisation of personal versus professional ethics. It includes the justification that the client is always right and that ethical righteousness in advertising may lead down a rabbit

hole that questions the dynamics of the entire industry (Drumwright & Murphy, 2004). Here, moral muteness describes practitioners' skewed sense of moral judgement as they have a distorted sense of what action is ethically right or wrong. However, Drumwright and Murphy (2004) also found an exception they called the 'seeing, talking' advertising practitioner. These practitioners were characterised as seeing and communicating their ethical concerns, which included saying no to clients. This behaviour demonstrated 'moral imagination,' which is defined as "being able to see and think outside the box, envisioning moral alternatives that others do not" (Drumwright & Murphy, 2004, p. 17).

Schauster et al. (2020) addressed the concept of moral judgement but used the term moral reasoning. They explored the moral reasoning of advertising and other media practitioners by directly applying moral psychology and using the Defining Issues Test (DIT). The DIT is a classic measurement of moral reasoning and has been used in several other studies on advertising and other media practitioners (Rest, 1994; Schauster et al., 2020). This test activates and assesses three moral schemas: pre-conventional (following rules and eluding punishment), conventional (satisfaction of needs) and post-conventional (devout moral values). Various studies using DIT suggest that advertising practitioners have the lowest moral reasoning scores compared to public relations practitioners and journalists (Coleman and Wilkins 2002; Coleman and Wilkins 2009; Lee et al. 2016; Plaisance 2014; Wilkins and Coleman 2005b, Cunningham). However, Schauster et al. (2020) found that professional identity impacted the moral reasoning scores of advertising practitioners, determining unethical behaviour to become more prevalent over time due to exposure to unethical opportunities. Their study illustrated that moral judgement and sensitivity may be impacted by professional identity and personal experience within the industry.

Drumwright and Kamal (2016) conducted a study that used qualitative interviews to understand how advertising practitioners in the MENA (Middle Eastern, North African) region create meaning from their interactions with ethical decision-making and how this impacts the dispositions and norms of the industry. The researchers explored ethical issues from macro, meso and micro perspectives. Respectively, this research considered factors such as laws and regulations in the MENA region, hiring practices that affect agency personnel in the industry and personal considerations such as the existence of moral myopia and ethical immunities. Drumwright and Kamal (2016) found that moral myopia (the distortion or failure to recognise ethical issues) was present among the practitioners they interviewed. This moral

myopia was related to a narrow definition of ethics by practitioners. The researchers also found a difference between junior and senior practitioners, with the former being more sensitive to ethical issues related to concepts such as religious freedoms, copyright, privacy and plagiarism. In contrast, the researchers found that senior practitioners developed ethical immunities, a concept that explains practitioners becoming accustomed to unethical behaviour over time. Drumwright and Kamal (2016) observed that these ethical blind spots were amplified by a lack of government regulations, making it more difficult for advertisers to establish professional, ethical norms.

Drumwright and Kamal's (2016) study also addressed the concept of moral judgement and categorised various types of behavioural ethics, which were 'please-o-holic', incrementalism, self-interest bias and obedience to authority. The please-o-holic approach explained the practitioner's ethical decision-making as client-focused, which means they justified their actions as doing whatever it took to please their clients. Incrementalism refers to practitioners becoming more unethical over time by slowly making more and more ethical compromises. Practitioners who identified with conformity bias justified their actions by believing everyone else to be unethical anyway. Self-interest bias refers to an approach where practitioners see ethical decisions as anything that is in their own best self-interest. Lastly, those who identified with the obedience to authority bias noted that they were simply following orders. Similar to the study by Schauster et al. (2020), this research by Drumwright and Kamal (2016) illustrates the impact of professional identity and personal experience on moral sensitivity. It also illustrates how practitioners may skew their processes of moral judgement by using various types of rationalisations to avoid moral conflict.

Research by Cohen and Dromi (2018) also explored the ethical awareness and decision-making of advertising practitioners. The researchers used ethnographic methods, including interviews and participant observation, collected over the span of nine months, from three separate advertising agencies in the United States. This study aimed to explore the social processes found in advertising and analyse how practitioners frame the moral worth of their work. Cohen and Dromi (2018) identified that advertising practitioners use several workplace narratives to justify the morality of their professional practice. These narratives are similar to the ethical considerations found by Drumwright and Murphy (2004), as they both illustrate the concept of moral myopia. Cohen and Dromi (2018) discovered that industry professionals represented the morality of their work in the form of three distinct narratives,

documenting practices as either account-driven, creative-driven, or strategy-driven. Professionals identifying with the account-driven narrative morally justified their work by rationalising that they were caring for their clients. In these instances, the professionals justified their work as moral as they were acting in what they believed to be the best interest of their client's business. Strategy-driven narratives were similar but focused on the care for consumers (Cohen & Dromi, 2018). Lastly, the creative-driven narrative was employed by practitioners who morally justified their work through the logic of artistic value and creating meaningful and engaging advertisements. Similar to the studies above, Cohen and Dromi's (2018) research also illustrates how practitioners use various methods of rationalisation and justification to skew their processes of moral judgement.

The studies reviewed so far are all concerned with understanding how advertising practitioners make ethical decisions and how their moral sensitivity and judgement are influenced by various factors. These studies highlighted how a practitioner's professional identity may affect their ethical considerations and influence their moral sensitivity, judgement and rationalisation processes (Drumwright & Kamal, 2016; Schauster et al., 2020). The studies also discussed ethical distortions such as moral myopia and moral muteness, and identified various rationalisation strategies that practitioners use to justify their actions (Cohen & Dromi, 2018; Drumwright & Kamal, 2016; Drumwright & Murphy, 2004; Schauster et al., 2020). While the studies reviewed above have covered a wide range of topics related to advertising ethical decision-making, researchers still know little about practitioners' ethical perceptions of brand activism, which is a potential minefield in terms of ethical decision-making. As brand activism gains prominence, practitioners' roles extend beyond conventional marketing strategies, making their individual moral frameworks an integral part of their professional identity. Therefore, this dissertation notes the importance of including the components of moral character and moral motivation in the study of advertising ethics as related to brand activism. By including these components, this research can better grasp the interrelation among personal values, ethical considerations, and the complex nature of brand activism within the advertising industry. While this research does not aim to measure or evaluate the components of ethical decision-making, it does introduce moral motivation and character as factors that provide additional ways to comprehend how practitioners might rationalise their ethical choices. This is especially relevant because the subjects within brand activism often closely resonate with a practitioner's personal identity and moral values. The following section will now explore the concept of virtue ethics as it is

related to the two components of Rest's (1994) model, namely moral motivation and moral character.

5.1.2 Virtue Ethics, Moral Motivation and Moral Character

Unlike other ethical frameworks that focus on rule-based determinations of right or wrong, virtue ethics centres on personal growth and excellence (Nguyen & Crossan, 2022; van Hooft, 2014). This aligns well with the complexities that creative practitioners face with brand activism, where they often navigate ambiguous situations that require more than just rule-following. Virtue ethics looks beyond mere actions, considering the motivations and intentions behind decisions. In the context of brand activism, where intentions and motivations can significantly impact ethical choices, a consideration of virtue ethics becomes highly relevant (Nguyen & Crossan, 2022). Virtue ethics, also known as character ethics, emphasises doing the right thing and maintaining the right motivations (Baker, 2008). This emphasis aligns with the idea that ethical decisions are influenced by both the character traits of a practitioner and their underlying intentions (Baker, 2008). Virtue ethics provides a nuanced lens to understand the complexities of brand activism. Advertising practitioners engaged in brand activism often balance personal values, organisational goals, societal expectations, and ethical considerations. Virtue ethics acknowledges the complex nature of such decisions. Johnston (2020) suggested that there is some contestation about mixing virtue ethics and business, as they are conceptually different in terms of businesses' self-serving motivations as opposed to the public-serving motivations of service workers like medical professionals. However, by applying a perspective of virtue ethics, the dimensions of moral motivation and moral character become more relevant in understanding how an individual may make sense of their ethical or moral decisions in the case of brand activism.

One study that explores the moral and ethical decisions of advertising practitioners through the lens of virtue ethics is Baker's (2008) Model of the Principled Advocate and the Pathological Partisan, which compares the virtue ethics of opposing archetypes in public relations and advertising practitioners. Principled advocates are "practitioner[s] of character and moral excellence who [have] the right dispositions, motivations and emotions and consistently responds to professional situations with moral vision" (Baker, 2008, p. 246). Baker's (2008) model explores the virtues of truth, authenticity, respect, equity, social responsibility, humility, care for others and transparency. This model focuses on the virtues embodied by a 'principled advocate' emphasising character over actions while

simultaneously rejecting vices. Vices are recognised as the antithesis of virtues and are represented by the 'pathological partisan'. The vices are arrogance, deceit, secrecy, manipulation, disregard, artifice, injustice and raw self-interest. Baker (2008) defined a pathological partisan as someone who "abandons moral vision, virtues, principles and values in support of a cause. As one habitually enacts the vices in practice, one becomes a Pathological Partisan" (p. 241).

The following review explores moral motivation and moral character, which are often overlooked in advertising ethics studies. Moral motivation consists of "prioritizing moral values relative to other values" (p.23). Different scholars have different views on what drives moral motivation. For example, Kohlberg (1969) suggested that it came from moral understanding and higher levels of moral reasoning. In contrast, Hoffman (2000) and Johnson (2007) emphasised the role of emotions and rewards. They said that moral motivation is driven primarily by emotion. Hardy and Carlo (2005) expressed identity to be central to moral motivation and suggested that "when morality is important and central to one's sense of self and identity, it heightens one's sense of obligation and responsibility to live consistent with one's moral concerns" (p. 234).

Several scholars agree that identity plays a role in moral motivation (Eisenberg, 1986; Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Mussen & Carmichael, 1983). However, Blasi's (1983) Self Model of Moral Action closely links identity to moral behaviour. This model consists of three components, which are judgment of responsibility, moral identity and self-consistency (Blasi, 1983). Judgment of responsibility sees the individual as assessing right and wrong and considering whether they feel responsible to act. This judgment stems from the second component, moral identity, which reflects how central morality is to a person's character. Lastly, self-consistency refers to the inherent desire to live consistently with one's sense of self. Therefore, if moral concerns are central to one's sense of self, then levels of moral motivation will be increased (Blasi, 1983). In contrast to Blasi's (1983) model, Hardy and Carlo (2005) argued that the desire for self-consistency is not a direct source of moral motivation. Instead, they said moral action springs from a desire to align with one's identity as a moral individual.

The final component to be explored in this literature is moral character. Nguyen and Crossan (2022) expressed that character is an extremely important part of the ethical

decision-making process. They expanded upon Rest's (1994) model by adding traits like courage, humility, integrity, and justice, believing character to be pivotal in ethical choices. Their approach was rooted in virtue ethics, relying on good character for good decisions. While character is often linked to personality, Hogan (1973) defined it as traits evaluated morally by society. Hogan's (1973) model includes dimensions such as moral knowledge, socialisation, empathy, ethics of conscience, ethics of responsibility, and autonomy. Similarly, Hoffman and Hoffman (1964) described moral character as a set of virtues subject to moral assessment, including traits like honesty, self-control, and service to the group, which require adhering to cultural norms.

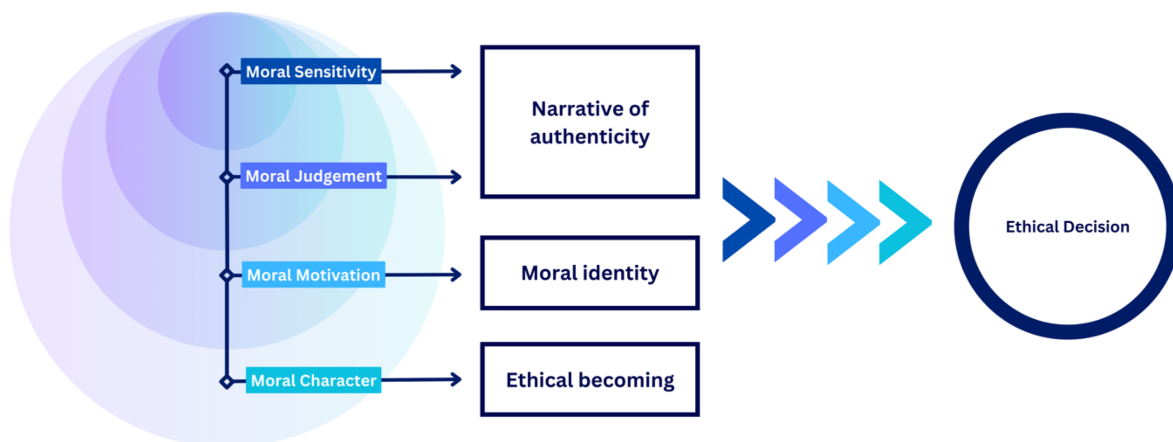
Including the components of moral motivation and moral character in this research can help to grasp the ambivalence of ethical decision-making in the context of advertising brand activism. These components offer insights into the different aspects that influence how individuals make ethical choices, going beyond traditional rational analysis. The connection between identity and moral motivation, as suggested by Hardy and Carlo (2005), adds depth to the understanding of ethics. When morality is central to one's sense of self, the motivation to act ethically increases. This connection sheds light on how personal identity intertwines with ethical considerations. Nguyen and Crossan's (2022) virtue ethics approach stresses the significance of character in ethical decisions. This perspective aligns with the idea that good character traits lead to better ethical outcomes. Virtue ethics accounts for the complexities of real-world decision-making and the inherent moral ambiguity in some situations. By combining these components, the understanding of ethical decision-making becomes more holistic, acknowledging the interrelation between cognitive, emotional, identity-related, and societal factors. This complexity helps explain the ambivalence of ethics in the context of brand activism, as ethical decisions are often influenced by a multitude of factors that interact in intricate ways.

Overall, the literature presented above evaluates the existing research on advertising ethics and moral behaviour, and it emphasises the need to include moral motivation and moral character when considering ethical decision making. This inclusion calls for a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the ethical decision-making process of creative practitioners engaging in brand activism as they strive to make large-scale social and political changes.

5.2 Findings

The following findings explore the ethical considerations of practitioners when engaging in brand activism. As discussed in the literature, this dissertation expands from the current body of research on advertising ethics to include all four components of Rest's (1994) model. The findings are segmented into three themes, that correlate to Rest's (1994) Four-Component Model, illustrated in Figure 11. The first theme addresses the component of moral character as it discusses the concept of ethical becoming. The second theme addresses the component of moral motivation and centres on practitioners' reliance on personal moral identities. Lastly, the third theme revolves around moral sensitivity and judgement, where practitioners use a narrative of authenticity to evaluate the ethics of brand activism based on their own perceptions of authenticity.

FIGURE 11 REST'S (1994) FOUR COMPONENT MODEL OF ETHICAL DECISION MAKING INTEGRATED WITH FINDINGS



5.2.1 Ethical Becoming

The first theme to emerge from the analysis of practitioners' understanding of their ethical considerations when dealing with brand activism is a sense of ethical becoming. This term is used to describe how practitioners perceive themselves as becoming more ethical over time as they develop moral character and progress from their junior to senior roles. As previously stated, moral character is not fixed; rather, it is dynamic and can evolve based on experiences, reflections, and intentional efforts to improve oneself. The concept of ethical becoming recognises that ethical behaviour is not static but can be cultivated and refined over time. Ethical becoming involves learning from mistakes and setbacks. When faced with

ethical dilemmas or failures, practitioners reflected on their past experiences and used them as opportunities for growth rather than allowing them to derail their ethical journey.

The following findings are divided into two sub-themes. The first outlines practitioners' experiences with moral myopia when confronted with ethical dilemmas as junior employees. The second theme explores how practitioners display a greater sense of moral character in their roles as senior employees, which exhibits a sense of ethical becoming.

Participant E compared how his perspective on refusing work that he felt was unethical or that went against his personal moral beliefs had changed as he gained more seniority in the industry. He compared his current work to his earlier career as an intern when he had to work on a cigarette brand. He explained, "At that time, I felt like I had no choice but to work on it because I was an intern, and I was trying to prove myself. So, I have regrets about that to this day." Participant P also recalled an experience working for a client that went against her personal moral beliefs when she was a junior creative "straight out of uni". She was working for a fast-food brand, that she described as a very challenging experience, particularly due to the fact that she was a vegetarian. She recalled that she was not proud of her work, and it was not something that she would share with her friends, who were all similarly politically aligned. She expressed the belief that this experience changed her, making her more susceptible to ethical compromise:

> I think because I compromised working on this client for a year or so… it made it easier to compromise again, and you know, it sort of opened up a bit of a door of compromise that I wasn't so proud of.

When asked how working on this client impacted the output of her creative ideas or her creative ideation process, she explained that since she was working in production at the time, the concepts were not coming from her, and therefore, this was not an issue. However, she did elaborate that the creatives on the account were also not enjoying their work due to similar ethical concerns:

> They found it so hard… They were always blocked creatively, and they would have to sort of go off onto another client and do something and then come back to it… they couldn't only work on that. They had to mix it up with some other inspiration.

Both Participant Q and Participant K elaborated on this contrast between being a junior and senior creative and the ability to refuse work based on ethical and moral principles. Participant Q explained this to be common practice within the industry:

> There's such a difference in the industry when you're a junior [to when you have] a more senior role. If you're a senior, you can have a very strong opinion [that] you probably can't have as a junior…You're surrounded by people with experience. You're not gonna be like, 'Oh, no, I don't want to do that.' You're not gonna refuse a lot when you're a junior…it's interesting because…you kind of do wrong things if you feel like you cannot say what you have to say or feel like you don't want to back that up.

He related this experience to a feeling of 'not knowing better' as a junior employee and a lack of power to follow through with personal moral convictions. He elaborated on this point by recalling an experience working as a junior employee in Belgium for a gambling client:

> Terrible. That's the worst feeling ever, [and I] still feel guilty about it… It was a weird situation. I was also more junior, so maybe I didn't feel like I had the experience to go against it or to talk back.

While he did not have a problem with gambling itself, he did take issue with the vulnerable audience that the client was targeting. He continued that he still felt bad about it and reiterated that his issue was derived from a narrative of caring for the consumer and their well-being (Cohen & Dromi, 2018). "Those guys were millionaires already, and they're taking money from… normal people and, even worse, vulnerable people. And we made a campaign for that." When asked if this moral objection to the client had impacted his creative approach to the campaign, he stated that it did not. However, this was more attributed to the fact that he did not take issue with the client until halfway through production. Therefore, in the early stages of ideation, he was merely excited by the creative opportunities to make something:

> No, I treat every briefing the same, so it has to be creative. I think I did the same for that because we made some small films, and we proposed crazy ideas… the briefing felt harmless. You always go on that high in the beginning. You create, you create, you create, and then you're like, 'yeah, sure, we'll do it.'

Participant Q also wondered if this 'high in the beginning' caused him to turn a blind eye to the ethical issues that he felt post-production. In addition, he also wondered if this creative

excitement was due to the fact he was a junior employee, and everything was new and exciting:

> I think we were all a little bit blindsided at one point, and we just did it… Maybe I turned a blind eye. I don't know. Maybe I was so focused on my production because maybe I didn't do a lot of productions, and it was exciting.

This feeling of moral myopia related to the excitement and novelty of working in the industry as a junior was also reiterated by Participant K as justification for 'turning a blind eye' to moral or ethical objections:

> You're kind of like in the moment. You're like, 'Oh, we can still make something really cool for them or really fun.' I didn't give it that much thought at the time. Maybe that's why I did it. But growing older, I guess you develop a more outspoken view on things, so it didn't really bother me all that much back then.

He continued this feeling of moral myopia, citing that he thought it may have always felt a little wrong or immoral, but he did not really notice until later in the production stages:

> It's weird. I think it always felt wrong. But I guess it really kicked in right after the shoot, where I was like, 'Oh, wait,' and you get more and more information, and then you see [who they're] targeting. But you already shot it.

Once he had begun to feel uncomfortable with the client's targeting strategy, his attitude changed. However, being a junior employee, he noted that he did not have the power to do anything about it:

> I was like, 'Oh no, wow, we did something awful,' and you cannot pull the plug anymore, especially when you're more junior… I think that was completely wrong, and I think after that, I swore that was the last time I would ever do that… and if somebody would fire me over that, I don't care.

After this experience, Participant Q explained that he and Participant K, both juniors at the time, had a conversation with their Chief Creative Officer (CCO) and said: "Don't ever put us on a briefing like that again, even if it means that we cannot stay because it was a bad feeling."

Participant K made it clear that currently, as a senior creative, he had refused to work on individual campaigns as well as for entire brands based on his ethical principles. These

decisions have been respected by his agency. However, he illustrated an example of when he was a junior employee in Belgium and felt he was unable to refuse work based on his own principles:

> [It may have been because] I was very junior, and at the time, it's harder to refuse a job or be like, 'I don't really think this is right.' Now, when you have more experience… you're a bit more respected. You have more of a voice… So yes, [now] definitely I will definitely speak up.

Also, by citing a form of creativity integrity, he justified the importance of speaking up and refusing to work on campaigns and brands that did not align with his personal beliefs.

> If you don't believe in it personally, it's hard to really put your heart and soul into it and really create something that is going to help that customer or that client thrive… that makes it harder [to create good work].

Participant L had never been in a situation where he felt morally or ethically unsure about taking on a client or a certain creative project but expressed that he would refuse the work if that type of situation were to arise:

> Luckily, I haven't [been in that situation before], at least I don't remember… which is great [because] I don't want to be in this situation. But I would probably say, 'Guys, I don't feel comfortable,' and get another person to do it.

Participant L was then asked if this confidence in his ability to refuse work came from his seniority and experience within the industry. He elaborated and expressed that it would probably be a different situation if he were still a junior employee:

> Now, it's easier to just say no. So, first of all, I would be 100% uncomfortable [regardless of] my position. Today, I would say no for sure. When I was a junior writer in the beginning of my career, I don't know what I would have said. I would probably try to say no. But I don't know. Again, it depends on the message [or] the client. If it's too offensive, if it's too controversial, I'd have said no even when I was 20 years old.

The above findings highlight the concept of ethical becoming, referring to the way these practitioners perceive themselves as becoming more ethical over time as they progress from junior to senior roles in their careers. The practitioners demonstrated this sense of ethical becoming by describing a process of dynamic ethical development. These practitioners expressed the refinement of their moral character through experiences, reflection

and intentional effort for improvement. They demonstrated learning from their past mistakes and reflecting on these experiences, leading to an evolution of their moral convictions. Using these opportunities for growth, they expressed gaining a stronger ability to voice their ethical concerns, refuse work that went against their principles, and take actions that aligned with their moral values.

The findings also described instances of moral myopia among junior employees when they faced ethical dilemmas and how their perspective on ethical considerations evolved as they gained experience and seniority. The practitioners rationalised their moral myopia in various ways, such as compromising for career advancement, excitement and novelty of the work, and limited power to refuse. Both Participant E and Participant P discussed the experience of moral myopia related to the compromise for career advancement. They mentioned that as junior employees, they made these compromises to their ethical values to prove themselves or to advance in the industry. Other practitioners like Participant Q and Participant K attributed their moral myopia to the excitement they felt as juniors and the novelty of starting their careers. This initial enthusiasm led them to downplay or disregard ethical concerns as they focused primarily on creative opportunities. Moral myopia was also attributed to a lack of power felt by junior employees as they felt constrained in expressing their ethical concerns due to a lack of seniority and influence in the industry and organisation.

The following findings demonstrate how practitioners display a strengthened sense of moral character in their senior roles. This strengthened sense of character gives them the ability and power to refuse work that they believe is unethical or that does not align with their personal moral values. For example, Participant H had previously stated that she had no issues using politically controversial messaging in her creative work as long as it aligned with her own personal beliefs. However, she noted that she would feel deeply uncomfortable "pushing an agenda" that she was not personally invested or interested in, but she was not confident that she would refuse the work. Participant H explained that if this type of situation were to arise, she would need to reflect on the individual situation to consider if she would refuse the work. She explained how this consideration may differ from a traditional campaign brief:

> [Normally] when you have a brief, you have to separate your own personal thoughts and feelings on it. You have to put a lot of that aside a lot of the time; otherwise, it could become too much.

Participant H recalled the most 'extreme' campaign that she had ever had to work on that went against her personal moral and ethical beliefs. The campaign was for a fast-food burger restaurant, and the work on the account lasted for a couple of months. She recalled that while she did not fully agree with what she was doing in terms of ethical behaviour, she was also "not super anti it either". However, she followed this statement by illustrating a hypothetical situation of being asked to sell cigarettes. She explained that in that situation, it would be very difficult for her, and she stated, "I think I'd probably just have to have a conversation with my creative director and just say, 'Is it okay if I sit this one out? Because I don't believe in this.'"

Participant I mirrored Participant H's sentiment that creatives normally should not mix their personal beliefs with their professional endeavours. However, at the same time, he reflected that he used his personal beliefs to segment which clients he chose to work with:

> I think, as a creative, you shouldn't inject too much of your own point of view if it doesn't go with the message. But I also try to pick companies and people who are involved in things that I support or agree with. I wouldn't take a company that doesn't morally or politically line up with me.

Participant I also expressed that because of this selective process of taking on new clients, he would never be in a situation where he would have to work on a campaign that had messaging that went against his own personal moral beliefs. In addition, he noted that "most of the clients don't get involved in this kind of thing." While he did not explicitly state why, it can be attributed that for most companies, the risk may be too great to engage in any type of politics or controversial social messaging. He then provided an example of a situation where his moral motivation and identity were put to the test while discussing an experience working at a major agency in Minneapolis in the United States. Participant I explained that at the time, he was working pro-bono for a children's defence fund that supported stricter gun laws aimed at protecting schools and the children in Minneapolis. The agency was soon approached by a big national chain brand that wanted to give them the advertising account. However, as part of this client agreement, the national brand said, "You have to drop [the children's defence fund account] because we support the [National Rifle Association (NRA)], we are heavy NRA [supporters] and… we don't like what they are doing." According to Participant I, it was an easy decision:

> We turned that piece of business down even though it was hugely profitable and a national big piece of business because we said, 'They are our client in the beginning, and we support what they do, and they need us more than you do, so, you know, that's when you're put to the test.

Participant Q also provided an example of a situation where both his agency and he himself had refused work as the client's ideologies had not aligned with their personal moral or political beliefs. He explained that while working in Belgium, his agency was approached to create campaign assets by two political parties. He explained that for one of the parties, Participant Q and his creative partner Participant K immediately refused the work because the party's ideologies went against his own personal beliefs. Participant Q elaborated that his agency defended his personal decision to refuse this work, stating, "But even the agency was like, 'find another agency, we're not going to go there.'" However, for the second political party, Participant Q described the situation as an "interesting case" because it was a left-wing 'green' political party that aligned with his own personal ideological beliefs. He noted that the party was small, and when they approached the agency, "They presented themselves like 'this year it's gonna happen, we're gonna make a big fuss with a beautiful plan to make Belgium more sustainable'". He remembered that this plan was all about renewable energy, which was really intriguing to Participant Q and his colleagues, so the agency agreed to meet with the party. And so they [said], 'Give us two weeks, and we're going to give you a manifesto that's going to change Belgium.' So we were like super excited because I really strongly believed in them." However, when the client returned a few weeks later with their 'manifesto', Participant Q recalled the following:

> They came back, and they had like a one pager, with hollow words. And so we felt really bad, but our CCO kicked them out. He said, 'No… you cannot do that. Please don't ask us to make something. We can give you the best campaign. [But] to sell air, we cannot do that.'

Participant Q offered another example of himself personally refusing to work on a campaign, which was for a meat processing plant in Brazil as their policies clashed with his own personal beliefs. While Participant Q was not vegan or vegetarian, he said that he tried to be conscious of what he ate as he was "big on environmental [responsibility] and zero waste" and therefore refused the work because he "didn't want to give [the company] a good name." He referred this refusal back to his own personal moral standards, stating, "I don't believe in

them, so it's my ethical rules, my own beliefs… if I don't believe in it, I will not work on it, I will not even touch it."

Participant E shared a similar perspective of refusing work based on his own personal beliefs:

> There's been a couple of… things where I've had the opportunity to work on something in an agency, and I kind of declined it because I didn't feel it was morally right. There was a cosmetic… enhancement thing, and I was like, 'I'm not getting involved in that.

Participant P also provided another example of an opened door to compromising on her ethical convictions. However, this time she felt the work was justified by the limited amount she was required to perform. She recalled that one day, she had been requested to quickly join a meeting by her colleagues who asked, "We have this really urgent job. Can you just jump down there and do it?" Participant P remembered she had no idea who the brief was for, but sensing the urgency of her peers, she agreed. She entered the meeting halfway, and therefore, "the whole thing was already underway before I even knew what I was doing." She soon found out it was for a machinery company that she opposed as they "manufacture these massive forestry tractors and machinery… just literally chewing up and churning through forests." While she ethically opposed this, she had already agreed to join the meeting, and she was relieved when she found out that they only needed something small for their website, which required only a few hours of Participant P's time, and "thankfully, it was a very minor thing." While she compromised her ethical integrity at that moment, she noted that "if it [had been] any longer, I would have just walked out." While Participant P did not elaborate on her seniority at the time of this compromise, she also provided a more recent example where she refused work due to her own ethical beliefs and values. When Participant P was given a brief for a tourism campaign from the Saudi Arabian Government, she recalled that she immediately refused to work on the account. Her decision was due to her personal beliefs surrounding how the Saudi Arabian Government oppresses and persecutes its citizens (Amnesty International UK, 2020; Nereim, 2023; Poniscjakova, 2022). She further noted that there were some "valid arguments that opening up Saudi [Arabia] to tourism could also make it safer for [citizens] who are being…oppressed or persecuted [behind] closed doors…[because] with an open sort of tourism maybe those things [can] come to light." However, she remained set in her ethical convictions and refused to work on the campaign.

Participant C also recalled a few times when he had refused work due to a personal moral conflict. Participant C expressed that determining a brief or a campaign to be ethical or unethical is the responsibility of the advertising professional, and therefore, they have the right to refuse this kind of work. However, he did note that in situations where he had refused work, he was lucky that there were no repercussions:

> I think it's the responsibility for the ad man. The job is on my desk, so now it's my job, so I can say no. I was lucky that I didn't get into any trouble because of it, but I imagine I could have.

He did not elaborate on these situations; however, he attributed this ability to refuse work to an experience working on a campaign that he believed was unethical. He explained how working on this campaign made him feel:

> It was horrible. I felt very bad after. And I think it was important for me to feel like that because it was before I rejected the other ones, so when [the situation arose] again, I was like, 'No, I'm not doing this again, sorry.' I still think it wasn't the right thing to do. But I did it, and I think it was a good learning experience for me.

Participant C did not specifically express if this situation occurred while he was a junior. However, he did note it was an important learning experience for his current career.

Participant O argued that it had become easier for creatives in the industry to stand up for their own ethical and moral standards. However, she did not attribute this shift in power to her own personal experience. Instead, she thought that it was an industry-wide trend. She expressed that the traditional linear power dynamics and workflow of the client-agency relationship were in flux:

> Today it's easy to… explain that you do not agree with something because people know that is not correct… Before, it was awful. It was like, 'Okay, you have to do that because the client is asking you to do it.'

Participant G supported Participant O's perspective about creatives being able to stand up for their personal beliefs and moral convictions. She provided an example where she strongly disagreed with her client's casting choices as they promoted a social stereotype that she was against. She explained that "there was an FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods) brand that refused to include men in the kitchen." She explained how this choice implied that only women should be in the kitchen. This stereotype was being reinforced by the client, who

believed that it would not make sense to put men in the kitchen. Participant G found this whole situation very frustrating. She stated, "I felt like [they're] taking society back. This is not where we're going. This is against what I believe as…a feminist… I was very against it, and I had to be professional about it." In this instance, Participant G did not refuse to work on the campaign but instead was determined to change her client's attitude towards depicting men in the kitchen. She justified her thinking to the client because she felt that their decision was wrong for the overall brand strategy:

> Then I did so much research [and] created a whole presentation being like, 'Look, what you're doing doesn't make sense. Look at the category right now. Look where they are moving. Look at the global sphere.' I'm so glad I was in an environment where I was supported to do all of that research to then go and show the client… Internally, it was helping my personal agenda, but I really had to prove what [the client] was doing was wrong.

When Participant B was asked if he had ever been in a situation where he had to work on a campaign that contradicted his own personal moral beliefs, he said he had not. However, he knew others who had been in that situation. Participant B expressed that if that situation ever arose, he would simply refuse the work. He stated, "I just wouldn't work on it… I wouldn't want my name on it if I don't believe in it [or] don't agree with it."

The above findings illustrated ethical becoming and the strength of moral character in these advertising practitioners. The findings also offer insights into the practitioners' ethical considerations when working in the industry. The findings reveal that senior practitioners could more easily refuse work that went against their personal moral values. They were more willing to take a stand against projects that conflicted with their ethical principles, indicating their growth and evolving ethical consciousness over time when compared their experiences as juniors. The findings emphasised how, as senior practitioners, they actively demonstrated their ethical integrity by refusing to work on projects that conflicted with their moral beliefs. Their willingness to decline profitable opportunities in favour of ethical alignment showcases their strong sense of moral character. Some practitioners, like Participant N, who had previously compromised their ethics, reflected on those experiences. They used past compromises as learning opportunities, leading them to take a firmer stance against such compromises in the future. This willingness to learn from mistakes highlights Participant N's strength of moral character and sense of ethical becoming. Other practitioners like Participant I demonstrated an increased ability to choose clients and projects that aligned with his own

personal beliefs. He demonstrated a sense of power and agency to collaborate only with clients whose values resonated with his own, thereby incorporating his ethical considerations into his professional decisions. Similarly, practitioners like Participant G strived to bring about change within her organisation when she encountered situations that conflicted with her ethical beliefs. She engaged in dialogue, research, and persuasion to influence clients or colleagues to reconsider their approaches, showcasing her strength of moral character.

The above findings also offer insight into how practitioners ethically balance their personal beliefs and professional duties, and the impact of client relationships and current industry trends. Some of the practitioners, like Participant P, compartmentalised their personal views to fulfil client needs, while at other times, they aligned their client selection with their own ethical standards. Similarly, these ethical considerations may be influenced by the nature of their relationships with their clients. For example, Participant B stated that he would not work on a project that contradicted his moral beliefs, while at the same time, practitioners like Participant G took the approach of actively engaging in discussions and negotiations to influence her clients' decisions in her favour. Lastly, the findings revealed that industry trends may also influence the ethical considerations of practitioners, as noted by Participant O, who expressed the industry to be evolving towards greater recognition of ethical considerations. She noted that it had become easier to stand up for personal beliefs within the industry, suggesting a broader shift towards valuing ethics and personal convictions. In summary, the findings suggest practitioners' growth in ethical becoming and their demonstration and reliance on moral character to make decisions as they progressed in their careers. These practitioners exhibited a willingness to refuse work that contradicted their moral values, reflected on their experiences, and advocated for ethical integrity. The insights provided offer a deeper understanding of how ethical considerations play a significant role in the decision-making processes of these practitioners, which may shape their professional choices.

5.2.2 Moral identity – Personal values and beliefs above all else

The second theme to emerge from the analysis of the practitioners' understanding of their ethical considerations when dealing with brand activism is a reliance on their personal moral identities. As revealed in chapter two, practitioners believe a defining characteristic of brand activism is that it is often proactively led by practitioners. This notion was reinforced in chapter three when exploring the client mediation process. This form of moral motivation to

create and execute brand activism campaigns is related to the practitioner's sense of moral identity. The following findings reveal that practitioners rely on their sense of moral identity as a determining factor of their actions and notion of what is considered ethical. For example, when asked if he took any issue with brands co-opting or profiting on the back of social movements, Participant A said that he did not as long as he believed in his work. He stated, "If I believe in what I'm doing and it's changing people's mindsets to something better", then he had no issues with commodifying a social movement. This concept of personal moral values, above all else, was echoed by Participant H. She also expressed that the message needed to align with her own values and beliefs for the campaign to be ethical:

> I'm all for progression, and you know, like the greater good and that kind of thing. So if I feel like what I'm working on aligns with the values that I believe are kind of progressive and forward-thinking, good for everybody and inclusive, then that's fine with me.

Participant N also used this rationale of personal moral values above all else and justified that as his definition of being ethical. He stated, "If you're doing something that you believe in, you believe that is the right thing to do, I think you're doing something ethical." Participant N then rationalised his view of ethics through a lens of moral motivation and intention, stating that otherwise, the action would be disingenuous:

> When you start to do something that you disagree [with or your] values don't agree, I think this is a problem because you are just following what they are asking, and then it's not genuine.

Since Participant N related ethical behaviour to personal motivation and intent, he was cognisant that this could make it difficult to define the true intentions of a brand. However, he appeared to strongly believe that for creatives in the industry, it was a very personal question and, therefore, resulted in an individualised answer:

> I think if you are happy and proud of what you're doing, and you believe in what you're doing, I think you're doing right, and you're [behaving ethically]. But we never know.

Participant Q was also adamant that as long as his personal moral values and beliefs aligned with the message, it was ethical to produce brand activism campaigns. He even noted that personally, he liked to use politically divisive messages in his work as long as they

aligned with his personal beliefs. Upon reflection, he revealed that he was not sure if pushing his own personal political agenda using brands was the right thing to do:

> I know that's kind of a weird thing to say because I'm… pushing my ideas… politically, but I will never do it for the things I don't believe in… I mean, it is a weird thing to do because, to be totally honest, I don't know if that's the right thing to do.

He exemplified this point by discussing the *Boards of Change* campaign for the City of Chicago, stating, "It's clearly taking a side, and it's the side I believe in." He then reiterated that he would never work on a campaign that went against his beliefs. He also reflected that advertisers normally could not position themselves on either side of the political spectrum since they were often at the mercy of their client. He stated, "It's weird as an advertising person to pick a side. Normally, we cannot pick sides." While reflecting on this thought, he was adamant that he would only be in favour of brand activism if it aligned with his own personal beliefs. However, he also expressed the complexity of the strategy. More specifically, he expressed a fear of contributing to consumers' ideological filter bubbles:

> I have a fear, especially with big brands. My biggest fear is that we already get the information we want through Facebook. For example, we already get the news, and we already pick the side, I think… now we're only seeing that information. So yeah, I feel like if we do that for brands, it's oil on the fire.

Here, Participant Q was questioning if brands should hold such ideological influence, particularly as they may contribute to the filter bubble. He continued to demonstrate his doubt and confusion over the ethicality of brands taking political and ideological positions and whether or not that was fair to consumers, stating, "If I'm Coca-Cola and I pick a side, is that fair? I don't know. That's a difficult question." He then made reference to the thin line brands walked when they entered the realm of politics, relaying that he was always weary of briefs that were "highly political", particularly during the times of presidential elections in the United States, where he currently resides. He then provided an example from the past presidential election:

> For example…for these elections, I was pro-Biden, of course, because [I] want to go against Trump. If a brand would have asked me, 'Okay, we want to help push that message,' I would say yes in a heartbeat. But do I think it's right? I don't know… Who am I? Am I right? I don't know. It's difficult. The political topic is really hard.

Participant K also rationalised the use of politically controversial ideas and topics in his creative work as ethical as long as it aligned with his own personal values and beliefs. Participant K explained that the bipartisan nature of the political culture in the United States had informed his opinion on this topic. He explained that this type of bipartisan culture made everything blue or red. This bipartisanship even got passed on to brands:

> You could do a study and show people brand logos, and they'll be like, 'Oh, that's Democratic, or that's Republican…It's crazy. I mean, some might be in the middle, but a lot of them you just align to one side or the other.

Participant K expressed that the bipartisan nature of politics in the United States made the inclusion of brands in politics a difficult subject to discuss, particularly because there was no right or wrong answer. He questioned, "Can [brands] help push the political agenda? Yes. I'm pretty sure they can. There's a lot of PR-driven campaigns that have actually helped pass a law or change the law or a gun law."

Participant K further elaborated that his moral compass on brand activism was fuelled by his own personal beliefs and values by explaining another scenario involving a brand and gun laws in the United States. Within this scenario, he still included the importance of authenticity for brand activism to pass his own test of ethic:

> If a brand is pushing to get more strict background checks in place, and that comes from a true brand purpose, I'd say yes. And maybe that's because that [aligns] with my ideals. But then, on the other hand… would I ever part with a brand that… promotes the right for everyone to have a gun without background checks? That would be, for me, a moral objection, and I would say no.

Participant P explained that the ethicality of using politically divisive messages in advertising creative work was a subjective topic. However, she still had a similar perspective to the practitioners mentioned above, stating that she did have any issue using politically controversial messages as long as they aligned with her own personal moral values and beliefs. Participant P rationalised her thinking in that she believes consumers can make their own decisions. Interestingly, she further explained that her opinion on consumer agency would still be based on the "overtness" of the message:

> In principle, if they're using advertising [and] it's overt, and they're obviously pushing an agenda that the public can sort of make up their own minds about it, then yea, you can't babysit people, you can't sort of protect people from messaging. So, I

> think people should feel free to put whatever message they want out there because people should have minds of their own. They can take the message or leave it.

While Participant P saw consumers as being able to form their own opinions and make their own decisions on these topics, she did have a problem if the message was manipulative or covert. In these instances, she would be against the use of brand activism.

> I think if it's a covert thing, that's some kind of propaganda where they're using a brand or using a message in a manipulative way, whether there's like a political undercurrent that people might not realise or understand, then yeah, I think that's really dangerous.

Participant H also used a similar rationale to explain where she drew the line between ethical and unethical brand activism.

> I think if it's clear that there's an agenda being pushed… [and] you get the feeling that you're kind of being force-fed something or you're having to kind of shoehorn an agenda into things… I think that's when it would feel wrong.

The above findings highlight the central role of personal moral identity in shaping how practitioners make ethical decisions related to brand activism. These practitioners consistently emphasised that their personal moral values and beliefs were central to their decision-making process. They considered their own ethical compasses to be the primary criterion for determining the ethicality of brand activism campaigns. This suggests that their sense of self and moral identity strongly influence the alignment between their values and the messages they create. These findings revealed that the practitioners felt comfortable advocating for causes they personally endorsed, and this alignment was crucial in their perception of ethical behaviour. The notion of "walking the talk" is evident here, where they want their work to reflect their convictions. Some practitioners, like Participant Q, acknowledged the subjective nature of ethical decision-making and recognised that what might be considered ethical for one person might not be the same for another. They also acknowledged the complexity of intertwining brands with political and ideological positions and expressed uncertainties about the appropriateness of brands taking sides in politically divisive issues. However, these practitioners still used their personal moral identities to guide their decision-making, leading to internal conflicts and questions about engaging in such subjects. Other practitioners, like Participant P, considered the importance of message transparency and believed that messages that were clear in expressing an agenda allow

consumers to make their own informed decisions. However, there was a concern when messages were manipulative or covert, as she felt this approach undermined her ethical standards and could be seen as propagandistic. Lastly, some practitioners highlighted authenticity as an important factor in their evaluation of the ethics of brand activism. They emphasised that campaigns driven by a genuine purpose aligned with the brands' values were more likely to be considered ethical. These practitioners were concerned about brands exploiting social or political issues without genuine intent. At the same time, the complexity of the practitioners' reliance on personal moral identity for ethical decision-making was revealed in their acknowledgment of potential challenges and ambivalences. For example, Participant Q expressed uncertainty about pushing his personal political agenda using brands, and he questioned whether it was the right thing to do. This ambivalence was intensified by the fear of contributing to consumers' ideological filter bubbles, and it points to the ethical dilemma of whether brands should take strong political stances, that may increase social division.

The relationship between ethics, brand activism, and the commodification of activism is intricate and complex. On the one hand, practitioners' emphasis on personal moral values can contribute to authentic and meaningful brand activism campaigns. When practitioners genuinely believe in a cause and align it with their values, it can result in campaigns that resonate with audiences and drive positive change. This belief is a manifestation of the sincerity that many consumers expect from brands engaged in activism. On the other hand, practitioners' strong reliance on personal moral identity can also lead to challenges. As seen in the case of Participant Q and his doubts about pushing his own political agenda, there is a potential for personal biases and subjectivity to shape the message that brands convey. Personal bias can blur the line between authentic advocacy and opportunistic commodification, as brands may take advantage of trendy or popular causes without truly engaging with the underlying issues. The ambivalence within the realm of brand activism arises from the tension between sincere activism and potential manipulation. Brands driven by profit motives can co-opt social and political causes for their own benefit, potentially diluting the impact of genuine activism. This is particularly concerning in an era where social and political issues are increasingly intertwined with consumerism. The practitioners' focus on personal moral values highlights the subjectivity of moral judgment in the context of brand activism. Overall, the findings suggested that these practitioners heavily relied on their personal moral identities to guide their ethical decisions when engaging in brand activism.

The ambivalence surrounding ethics in brand activism highlights the complex relationship between personal values, profit motives, and the potential impact on societal discourse and change.

5.2.3 Justifying ethics – The narrative of authenticity

The third theme to emerge from the analysis of the practitioners' expressions of their ethical considerations when dealing with brand activism revolves around their moral sensitivity and judgement. The findings reveal how practitioners draw a line between ethical and non-ethical brand activism based on their perceptions of authenticity and how this perception is grounded in their own moral compass and values. The findings reveal that practitioners use a narrative of authenticity to evaluate the ethics of their campaigns and consider themselves authorities in what is genuine, legitimate, or true in the context of brand activism. In this sense, their moral sensitivity and moral judgements are guided by a rather personal concept and narrative of authenticity, meaning that they tend to conflate the notion of ethics with the concept of authenticity and run the risk become blinded by their own moral identities, thus adding to the ambivalence of authenticity in the context of brand cultures. Their ethics are compartmentalised within the specific context of their campaigns and their clients. For example, Participant E stated that he had a personal moral and ethical issue using brand activism, saying "If it is not authentic, then it feels appropriated or co-opted." Similarly, Participant I stated, "There's a problem with virtue signalling, where it's empty… I do have a problem with brands that just go out there and say something because they think it will help make them look good. I think you have to do something." Similarly, Participant C stated that he also had a problem when "advertising [misuses] political issues or activism without the proper [motivation] to do it… which is happening a lot."

The following findings explore how practitioners use concepts such as 'realness' or 'impact' as measures of authenticity and, therefore, campaign ethics. For example, Participant E described his thought process to determine the line between ethical and non-ethical campaigns:

> Does it feel like they're just trying to profit by co-opting something? Are they just trying to attach themselves to a movement in order to sell more stuff? That's the kind of line for me… when they're using it commercially.

Here, Participant E centred his ‘feeling’ and perception of authenticity around the motivation of the brand to participate in the movement. In a sense, his statement is also paradoxical, as the main goal of most brands and corporations is always to attain a profit.

Participant J also drew the line between ethical and non-ethical brand activism based on his perception of authenticity. He conceptualised this using the word ‘real’, stating, “For me, ethical [campaigns, are] everything that’s real if the idea is real. If the voice of the brand is real.” While the use of the term ‘real’ was ambiguous, his conceptualisation is related to the moral motivation of the brand to participate in the movement. This motivation became clear when he defined what would be ‘un-ethical’, stating, “If you are a brand and you don’t have a voice and try to do something because you think ‘oh it could be great for the brand’ and just that, for me, that is unethical.” He then further explained that being ‘real’ was also related to some sort of genuine action. He used his work on the *Fireproof Newspaper* campaign to illustrate this point. The campaign was launched in response to the 2020 Córdoba Wildfires in Argentina (Reuters, 2020) and aimed to educate those living in high-risk regions on how these fires were starting. He found that most wildfires in the area were started accidentally by citizens using newspapers as kindling for barbeques or other backyard fire activities. While discussing this campaign, Participant J explained that himself and his team produced the maximum quantity of newspapers possible within the one-week news cycle timeframe. Even though they could have only made enough to film the campaign to Participant J, this would have made it unethical and therefore not ‘real’. Participant J was then asked to elaborate further on how he understood the term ‘real’ to conceptualise ethical work. To explain it, he illustrated a scenario of an agency that was focused solely on winning awards:

> Some agencies [and] advertisers try to win awards, so they only think about achievements and to have a nice case for a festival…If you develop a device and you develop only one, and you make a case about that, and it finishes after that [one] device, for me, it’s unethical. But if you develop the device and after that, you develop a lot, and it has a real impact [for] the people, that is really ethical… You need to make a real impact.

Participant L also used the word ‘real’ to define his line between ethical and unethical brand activism. However, his conceptualisation of the word relied more on the client’s actions as opposed to the campaign and agency actions. He also made it clear that these

actions must be actioned immediately and not be intended for the future. He offered a hypothetical situation to illustrate what he meant by the word real:

> For example, if I come up with something to clean up the ocean… but the client's not doing anything about this, and they start to say they are going to start a project like this in two years, then [we should] hold this idea for two years from now… We're not gonna take them the idea that is not true for them.

Like Participant L, Participant T determined the ethical standing of brand activism based on his perception of authenticity using the term 'impact' as a measure. He stated, "It's the impact that it has on society… the impact it has for the people, and if that is [good or bad] for the people." He continued to explain that, in a way, every campaign gave something to consumers, like entertainment or information. But he then questioned, "But what does [it] take from [them?]." To Participant T, it was this balance between give and take that made a campaign ethical or non-ethical.

Similarly, Participant J measured his perception of authenticity with the concept of impact. To Participant J, the line between co-opting a social movement and promoting a social or environmental cause depended on the idea and its 'realness'. He stated a campaign was ethical: "If the idea is real and will have a real impact for the people and the consumers." He explained that having a 'real impact' meant a brand giving back to the community:

> It's important to give something. I think the brands for a lot of years only ask [and take], but they never give anything. So if they give real things to the people, I think it's okay… I think it's a huge change for brands to start to do that kind of work.

Participant N used the concept of tangible action and accountability as a measure of authenticity and, therefore, the ethicality of brand activism. He illustrated his point using an example of a campaign that he did not work on, but he believed the company's actions to be unethical as they prioritised financials over ethical values and beliefs. He recalled a campaign from Burger King that was published in Brazil and was targeted at supporting the LGBTQ plus community. Participant N remembered that this campaign caused some backlash from community members, who tried to 'cancel' the brand by making statements to boycott the fast-food chain. This backlash caused the company's stock price to drop rapidly, and instead of standing behind their activist statements, they decided to keep quiet. To Participant N, this was an example of an unethical brand activism campaign and an example of a brand's self-serving motivation.

> So that's my question: at the end of the day, what are they looking for? To have good numbers on the stocks? Or are they trying to communicate values and… push society forward?

Participant Q also used the concept of tangible action to justify the ethics of brand activism campaigns. Participant Q held a very specific view of actions that he considered to be authentic and, therefore, ethical. He discussed the common practice of donating money to certain causes or social movements as a form of philanthropy. While he did not oppose brands donating money, he explained that "it's how they bring [the brief]to us. It's how the brief sounds." To Participant Q, if a brand were to approach his agency and say, "Hey guys, I want to be part of changing the world. I have another 20-50k set aside, donated to something and let's have a PR message out there", this would come across as not genuine in his view. In these instances, Participant Q said that he would challenge the client to take the money and put it towards a more relevant cause aligned with the history of the brand or to invest the money into something for a long-term and bigger initiative.

> So we try to convince them, like, 'Hey, we can invest that in a better way than just donate it now. Maybe you can look into your own process and do something with the 50k that has a long-term solution'… And they go with that, or they're like, 'No, I want to [donate now]'. Okay, fine, but then write your PR team because… I don't want to be involved in that.

Similarly, Participant K used the willingness to take action and the extent of impact to measure the authenticity and, therefore, ethicality of the campaign. He explained some brands have more of a right to participate in brand activism based on the impact that they can have. This perspective added to his narrative of authenticity.

> What is your place in the world as a brand? You know, there's a big difference between being… a Walmart, for example, or a supermarket that doesn't [have the resources to make] a big impact in people's lives.

He questioned what kind of impact a small brand can actually have when engaging in any form of brand activism. He believed that since bigger brands have more resources and power, they have a greater ability and responsibility to actually make a tangible difference.

> A big supermarket like Walmart… if they just changed one thing in their process… to promote a little bit more sustainable brands… that makes a real impact… So I think certain brands have more rights talking or even doing certain subjects or causes than others.

The above findings reveal how the practitioners justify the ethics of their campaigns through a narrative of authenticity, using concepts like ‘realness’, ‘impact’, and ‘tangible action’ to distinguish between ethical and non-ethical brand activism. Practitioners like Participant E and Participant J emphasised the motivation of brands to participate in social movements. They questioned whether brands were genuinely invested in a cause or merely seeking profit by attaching themselves to a movement. The term 'realness' was used by practitioners like Participant J to refer to genuine intentions and a sincere brand voice. Authenticity is perceived when a brand's actions and voice align with the cause, demonstrating a moral commitment beyond commercial interests. Authenticity was also measured by practitioners through the actual impact a campaign had on society. To practitioners like Participant T and Participant J, a campaign was seen as ethical if it gave back to the community, providing real value or change beyond just promoting the brand. Similarly, Participant N and Participant Q stressed the importance of tangible, immediate actions. They considered brands unethical if they prioritised financial gains over ethical values or failed to back their statements with concrete actions when facing backlash. Participant K also added the dimension of a brand's size and resources as a measure of ‘authentic impact’, suggesting that larger brands may have greater responsibility and capability to effect meaningful change due to their wider reach and resources.

Participant P used the concept of negative impact to measure authenticity. He determined his ethical line to centre around how much the campaign negatively impacts and appropriates the social movement itself and the activist parties involved. To Participant P, these campaigns cross the line into unethical “when it starts to encroach on people’s livelihoods [and] starts to take space or attention away from people who have struggled all their lives… making sacrifices and doing the hard work to make a difference.” In this sense, Participant P expressed that this negative impact on the social movement is what made a brand activism campaign unethical:

> [When] a brand is somehow taking… their language, taking their words, taking their techniques in a way that’s going to sort of detract from what they’re doing or detract attention from them, I think that’s when the ethics get blurred.

Participant P provided an example of what she believed to be an ethical brand activism campaign, namely the original *Real Beauty* campaign by Dove. This campaign was at the start of what is now considered Dove’s brand purpose. She explained that the original

campaign, which was presented in the form of a documentary-style interview process, was more straightforward and was more of an ethical way of performing brand activism:

> [The campaign was] just interviewing women, normal women – if you want to say that – about their thoughts on their own self-esteem, how they see themselves. I think that is sort of using activism but not appropriating activism techniques.

Participant P considered this campaign as authentic and non-encroaching on the body positivity movement as "it's sort of using that brand as a platform to get the message out there." She then reiterated that it becomes unethical if the brand were to take the aesthetics and language from an actual movement in the form of imitation:

> But if they [take] those kinds of techniques and… this sort of even aesthetics from say… the movement… Extinction Rebellion, if they're taking sort of aesthetics and language from an actual movement, then the ethics are encroached upon.

She illustrated an instance of imitation and unethical brand activism using an example of a meeting between her team and a client as they explored the pitch deck for a potential activism campaign. According to Participant P, "They were trying to make it look completely different to what [the brand] was doing [at the time]. They were trying to sort of include images of women on the street marching." While this made Participant P a little uncomfortable, as there was a misalignment between the brand's current image and what they were trying to produce, it was not until further into the meeting that she expressed the belief that they were crossing into unethical territory:

> I remember there was one image of someone from a gay pride march holding up a flag, and they had something that said like, 'These are the kind of activities that we want to appeal to, the way they want to show off about… who they are and their values' and … they even used the word… flaunt. [Saying] there is somebody… flaunting…holding the gay pride flag. And I remember making a comment on that picture saying… 'You can't use someone who's literally an activist on the street and say that you want to appeal to that market because they're the sort of person who is ego driven'… It's making so many assumptions.

In this example, Participant P took issue with how the client framed the activists. In this sense, the choice of the word 'flaunt' implied that the activist was, in fact, copying the aesthetics of activism. Participant P continued, further explaining what she took issue with:

> There's a difference between when they're just sort of softly using some images and some… inspiration from that world, to when they're directly saying, 'okay, we're going to use this market against themselves,' you know… use their language, use that ego against themselves.

Participant G also used the concept of negative impact to determine if a brand activism campaign was ethical or non-ethical; however, this soon became related to the work aligning with the client's overall message and actions. Participant G stated, "If there's going to be any kind of negative impact… the line's been drawn [and] there's something that ethically doesn't make sense." She then illustrated what she meant by the term negative impact, with a hypothetical example of a fast-food company deceiving customers into believing their products were healthy. To Participant G, this deception would have a negative impact on the lives of consumers, and therefore, the campaign would be unethical.

Similarly, Participant R expressed that for a brand activism campaign to be ethical, the brand's business model must be aligned with the campaign message. He used a hypothetical example of a brand wanting to create a campaign around "environmental stewardship", but its business model resulted in a negative environmental impact. To Participant R, this would be a core problem between the brief and the ask and in those instances, "a conversation needs to be had about what the plan is and what [the brand is] willing to do."

> And that's where you stay for a while… Is it defensible? What needs to be done? Let's have a conversation. And if you're not willing to do it, then maybe we're not willing to do the campaign. And that's often where that conversation has either ended or moved forward.

In the above example, Participant R alluded to the fact that creatives have the power to influence the client's business practices when it comes to brand activism. He explained that the conversations noted above needed to result in a positive outcome in order to proceed with the campaign. This outcome involved an actionable change from the client.

> When clients have made large-scale commitments and said… 'By 2040… we're going to make this commitment to climate change, or we're gonna make this commitment to our own internal practices,'… that helps make the work even better, and you've influenced a company to actually do more than just say something.

Participant R continued that for a brand activism campaign to be ethical, in his opinion, "you actually have to do quite a bit of research into the company." It was this research that assisted in ensuring the authenticity of the campaign. Participant R noted that normally, the account management team would be tasked with the initial interrogation of the main client. However, he also expressed that the creatives themselves could get a sense of a client's authenticity just by talking to them. This further highlights the importance of vetting their clients as part of the moral intermediation process, as discussed in chapter three.

> You get a sense of the person on the other side of the phone call or the conference, and you get a sense pretty quickly if they're willing to talk to their peers about this stuff. And if they're willing to kind of get you the information and look into it.

Participant R also said that for bigger clients, it could also be easier to acquire such information. He specifically referred to public companies that were required to report certain types of information, which may include sustainability or ESG reports for their investors. He continued this sentiment by stating he may also explore the company's employment choices:

> Understanding if they've actually made… any meaningful hires in these areas. And if you can talk to those hires, whether that's a chief diversity officer or the founder… I would say the brands that let you do that are always good signs.

According to Participant R, this type of research into the company is not only used to determine if the brand activism campaign was ethical in his perspective but can also be used to elevate the ideas and the creativity. He expressed that through this research, the creative can find "really great ideas that you probably wouldn't have had before because you go to talk to the person that's closer to the work."

The above findings reveal practitioners using the concept of negative impact as a measure of authenticity and, therefore, the ethicality of brand activism. Participant P and Participant G both emphasised the importance of considering how much a campaign negatively impacted and appropriated the social movement it was aligned with. Participant P argued that when a brand's campaign starts encroaching on the livelihoods and attention of those who have genuinely worked for a cause, it will become unethical. Authenticity was preserved when brands used activism as a platform to communicate a message without imitating movement aesthetics or language. Participant R expressed that ethical brand activism required alignment between a brand's campaign message and its business practices.

If a brand claimed to support a cause but contradicted that stance through its business model, it was ethically problematic. Participant R highlighted the importance of research into the company's commitments, practices, and even employment choices to ensure authenticity. Brands that willingly shared such information and allowed access to key personnel were seen as positive indicators. Overall, these findings revealed that these practitioners assess the ethics of brand activism campaigns by considering their potential negative impact and the alignment between campaign messages and business practices. These practitioners used their own self-perceptions to determine what it meant to be authentic in the realm of brand activism. This determination of authenticity was then used as a narrative to justify what was deemed ethical or not ethical. In this sense, they are conflating the concept of authenticity with ethics and morality. This micro perspective on ethics usurps and blinds practitioners to the macro-level issues with brand activism, such as the commodification of social movements or the further amplification of social and political polarisation. This compartmentalised view of ethics that focuses on the micro aspects of the actual campaign and the alignment to the practitioners' perceptions of authenticity and their personal moral identities and values contributes to the overall ambivalence of authenticity in the current state of brand cultures (Banet-Weiser, 2012). This critical position, discussed in chapter two, explains authenticity within contemporary culture and branding as ambivalent and thus cannot be analysed in a binary way as the line between authenticity, culture and branding is blurred.

The following findings describe how practitioners understand woke-washing to be the antithesis of authenticity. These practitioners explain how brands that participate in campaigns that are considered to be woke-washing are inherently inauthentic and, therefore, examples of unethical campaigns. This reinforces the practitioners' use of this narrative of authenticity to make ethical decisions as they further emphasise authenticity as a measure of moral sensitivity and judgement. For example, Participant H made use of the word 'token' to express her ethical concerns with woke-washing. She described woke-washing as "a brand just trying to… elevate their reputation or something or… be [attached in a tokenistic way] to something that's happening at the time." When asked to elaborate on her use of the word token, she exemplified her point by explaining how she perceived brands to engage with Pride Month:

> There are some brands that really obviously care and put in a lot of effort to have a relationship with… that community, but then there are others that are just like, 'We're here', and then it's clearly just for their own gain.

Brands that Participant H expressed to engage with Pride Month and brand activism in an inauthentic way made her uncomfortable. She stated this was “because it’s not true. It needs to be genuine… for me to feel comfortable with it.” Several of the other practitioners also used brands engaging in Pride Month as examples of woke-washing. For example, Participant K noted how easy it was for brands to announce that they supported LGBTQ plus rights during Pride Month, but recently, he had seen several examples of consumers “calling brands out for being there [only] one month a year, for Pride Month. But the rest of the year, we don’t hear from you.” He explained that this was an example of brands “jumping on the bandwagon, then trying to be part of it and commercialise it.” He expressed this tactic as the “absolute wrong way for brands to do [this].”

Participant M also explained brands co-opting Pride Month as the cause of his conflicting feelings towards brands joining political conversations and social movements. He questioned the sheer quantity of brands who participated in Pride Month and the authenticity of their sentiments:

> When you look at it, you’re like, ‘Dude, but what do you actually do to help the fight? Look at your company. How many [people from the LGBTQ plus community] do you have working there?’ They actually reflect that problem. So it’s a very thin line.

While still using the example of Pride Month, Participant Q explained the line of questioning he used that a brand must pass in order to avoid the stigma of a woke-washing campaign. Interestingly, he explained that this type of scrutiny was for smaller brands and not for what he called ‘love brands,’ such as Nike, Coca-Cola and Apple. He explained that these ‘love brands’ essentially had a free pass to join in on these types of social or political discussions “because they’re always about empowering people… in one way or another.” However, for small brands, the process and scrutiny involved to avoid the stigma of woke-washing and be perceived as authentically engaging in the discussion was much more rigorous. He used an example of a brand wanting to put an ad in the newspaper featuring their logo with the pride flag during Pride Month. He then provided the following line of questions to ensure authenticity:

> What are you saying? You’re just saying we support you? Or what do you do? Do you contribute every year to that cause? What’s the promise? What’s your promise going to be for the coming years? And way more important… How are you treating

> your employees? For example, do you have an open conversation with your employees?

The avoidance of woke-washing and ensuring authenticity was very important to Participant Q. He noted that as part of this questioning process, he would do his own research, and only if the results of that research "feels right and that checks out" would he then go ahead with the campaign. He also noted that if something felt wrong or tokenistic, then he would "always challenge [the brand]". He then provided an example of when he had challenged a brand that wanted to participate in Pride Month. He recalled a brief by a major airline company, stating that they wanted to surprise their employees for Pride Month. He remembered that, on the surface, this was an authentic gesture since the airline wanted to do something for their employees and was not looking for publicity. However, even in that instance, he still wanted to ensure authenticity with the brand, so he continued to conduct his own research into the history of the brand:

> We started digging, and we found out that they have [one] of the oldest LGBTQ communities called the Bulls Eye Club in the [1950s]. And they created that club in Boeing, and I mean… you just have to go to the heritage of the brand. And if that feels right, you can talk about pride.

While Participant Q expressed that this heritage assisted the brand in passing this authenticity check, he continued that, in some instances, this was not enough and that he would still challenge the brand to see what it was currently doing to be a part of the cause or movement:

> But then again, you should always challenge them, like, 'Okay, but what are you doing now for your employees? How are you pushing your employees to be open?' For example, now transgender, binary or non-binary, because there's a bigger conversation going on now. And then we have those talks, we do the research, and then we get to consensus… I would never just put an ad in the paper with the flag in [a brand's] logo. [If they] want us to do that, I think then [they] don't need us.

In reference to woke-washing, Participant N mentioned an article that he had read the week prior. While preparing for the interview, Participant N had bookmarked the article and highlighted one sentence in anticipation that he may be asked a question on the topic.

> In the article, there's a sentence saying there's no such thing as ethical consumption under capitalism… this is my doubt I have… What is the real purpose, the real meaning of all these brands?

This article made him question the role of brand activism and whether it could ever be truly authentic. He even questioned that while brands may claim that the social cause was their true purpose and aligned with their values, it was important for himself and for consumers "to go deeper and see the real meaning of it" and find out if there was any truth behind the brand's statements. He expressed that consumers were paying attention to brands who participated in brand activism because "they want to consume and to interact with brands that are taking action and standing out." It was because of this that he believed it was important to discern between brands who were participating for clout or for genuine intentions to create some sort of impact.

> Are brands really interested in communicating… brand activism… or [pushing] a political movement or something? Or at the end of the day, are they just following the ocean, let's say, because they know that this is the way to keep [getting] good numbers at the end of the year?

Participant N continued, and it was clear that he struggled between his personal love of brand activism and his concern surrounding woke-washing and commodification and appropriation of social movements:

> I mean, I love when, for my side, brands merge all these kinds of subjects. Talking about [the] environment, LGBTQ rights, women's [rights, and] all the subjects. But I have this question, you know, [at the end of the day, are] they just looking at themselves? Or are they really looking to the consumers and really want to push the [people] further or forward… So yeah, I don't know, it's a tough [subject].

Both Participant C and Participant E expressed that woke-washing has already infiltrated the space of brand activism. According to Participant C, there was a prevalence of "brands… using it just for the sake of using it", which has resulted in a loss of impact and importance. Participant E made a similar observation, noting that he was waiting for the "post-woke period." He felt as if too many brands and people were all saying the same thing, which over-saturated the industry.

> I don't mean to diminish the importance of it. I just think there's a danger at the moment that everything's becoming a bit vanilla. So, obviously, it's kind of time to move on a little bit.

The above findings further highlight how practitioners evaluate brands' engagement in social and political causes as ethical based on their own perceptions of what it means to be authentic in the context of brand activism. They emphasised authenticity as a moral

benchmark and exercised their judgment to determine the legitimacy of brands' participation. Practitioners perceived woke-washing as the antithesis of authenticity. They viewed brands that engaged in campaigns seen as woke-washing as inherently inauthentic and, therefore, unethical. Pride Month was often cited as a prime example of woke-washing. The practitioners discussed how some brands authentically engaged with the LGBTQ plus community while others merely participated superficially during Pride Month to capitalise on the moment. In addition, some practitioners noted that smaller brands face higher scrutiny to avoid being labelled as woke-washing and need to demonstrate a consistent commitment to a cause beyond superficial gestures. Participant Q noted that larger "love brands" may be given more leeway due to their established reputation for empowerment. Participant Q cited Nike as an example of one of these brands, which illustrated how practitioners might compartmentalise their ethics to remain in the microdomain of brand activism campaigns. This view of ethical awareness does not consider past indiscretions of a brand's moral misconduct but instead attributes the perceived authenticity of their various campaigns to be markers of their ethicality. This further emphasises the ambivalence of authenticity within brand cultures, such as brand activism (Banet-Weiser, 2012). These practitioners also used various methods to ensure that their campaigns were perceived as authentic and, therefore, ethical. Some note that they employed a series of questions to gauge a brand's intention when aligning with a cause. These questions ranged from assessing the brand’s ongoing contributions to examining how it treated its employees and its history of involvement. In their quest to justify the ethics of their brand activism campaigns through a narrative of authenticity, practitioners also conducted thorough research, and if something felt tokenistic or insincere, they challenged the brand's intentions. Authenticity was not solely reliant on historical context but also involved current actions and attitudes. Only one practitioner offered a macro view of ethics and questioned whether brand activism could truly be authentic within the framework of capitalism. This prompted reflection on brands' underlying motives and whether they genuinely cared about the causes they claimed to support. These findings revealed that while all the practitioners interviewed for this study had good intentions, they also had certain blind spots when it came to ethical decision making.

While several practitioners articulated various elements that were required for them to determine the authenticity of a client wanting to partake in brand activism, some instead described this determination as a ‘gut feeling’. For example, Participant P used the phrase ‘gut feeling’ to articulate how she knew when an ethical line had been crossed during the

stages of creative development. She stated, “I think it’s when… you feel it in your gut… You can sort of see that it’s going too far… There’s definitely a gut feeling.” Similarly, Participant J explained that some brands had a more natural claim to participate in brand activism, and he determined this by a ‘gut feeling’ as well.

At first, Participant K described the importance of the brand's history aligning with the cause or social movement in order to determine authenticity:

> I think it has to do with… the history of the brand in a way… It’s just strange if all of a sudden [as a brand] you’re like making a one-eighty and/or start talking about something that… you’ve never… as a brand done anything for, or you have no relationship to. It just feels inauthentic.

However, while attempting to describe why it ‘felt inauthentic,’ he used the concept of a gut feeling or intuition that he relied on:

> I don’t know how [it feels inauthentic] … it’s not a scientific way to determine it. It’s more like a feeling… brands live collectively in all of our minds… and I think that’s the image that we all have of a brand, and some things [align] with that image… and others just don’t.

Participant S initially expressed that he determined ethical versus unethical brand activism based on “whether or not this would hurt the world or whether this would improve the world.” However, he explained that since nothing is definite, he would rely more on a ‘gut feeling’ for final approval:

> Nothing is black and white… you can’t… say… something definitely is going to help or hurt the world… sometimes the consequences are… different long term [and] difficult to predict. But I think within our limited perception, we can make informed decisions, or at least educational guesses…You feel that ‘hey, this is going to be hurtful, or this is going to be constructive.’ And then you have the gut feeling. You feel that something has a right to be, or something definitely should be…swept under the carpet.

Participant Q expressed the importance of following this ‘gut feeling’ when it came to ethical decision-making. While he did not work on the campaign, he referenced the *Dream Crazy* campaign by Nike and the brand’s decision to keep Kaepernick as a sponsored athlete and then stood by the campaign amid the wave of severe backlash that followed the release.

> Nine out of ten brands would pull out in silence and hope that PR would never come back to them… [But] they're just ballsy. They're like, no… the deals on, the deal stays… That's thinking bigger… that's gut feeling.

He continued this sentiment by explaining the importance for creatives to trust their 'gut feelings' when it came to standing up for their creative work and ensuring the authenticity of their brand activism campaigns:

> You always have to trust your own gut to say… 'No… we have to challenge this… so that it doesn't derail' because… big ideas can derail… I think to me, it's trusting your instincts. Most of the time, you're right. And if it feels wrong, there's something wrong, and then you need to keep talking. Yeah, it's a lame answer, but there's no science behind it. There's also the thing that I don't know if I'm right. I'm just one person.

The above findings shed light on how practitioners justify their ethics through a narrative of authenticity and use the concept of 'gut feeling' to measure this authenticity, which is attributed to the overall ethicality of brand activism. These practitioners used a variety of criteria to assess the authenticity of clients engaging in brand activism. Some of these practitioners emphasised the importance of a brand's history aligning with the cause or movement they were advocating for. They believed that sudden shifts in a brand's stance could feel inauthentic, as it lacks a genuine connection to the cause. However, as they attempted to explain why this felt inauthentic, they often resorted to the concept of 'gut feeling' or intuition. This suggests that their perceptions of authenticity are not solely determined by concrete factors but also by a more subjective, intuitive sense. The notion of 'gut feeling' played a significant role in the decision-making process for practitioners. They used it as a tool to gauge whether an ethical line had been crossed or if a brand's participation in activism was genuine. This feeling seemed to emerge when something aligned with the collective image people had of a brand, and it further suggests a reliance on intuitive judgment rather than rigid criteria. The practitioners' reliance on 'gut feeling' can be attributed to the inherent ambiguity and complexity of brand activism in a capitalist context. While some practitioners initially expressed a desire for clear ethical standards, they acknowledged the fluidity of ethical judgments. They recognised that the outcomes of brand activism could have diverse and unpredictable impacts on the world, making it challenging to definitively classify actions as helpful or harmful. In these situations, practitioners fell back on their 'gut feeling' to guide their decisions, acknowledging the limitations of their knowledge and the need for a more intuitive, subjective assessment.

5.3 Discussion

This chapter set out to explore the ethical considerations of practitioners engaging in brand activism. This chapter began by presenting relevant literature on advertising ethics, followed by literature explaining two components of ethical decision-making that are often overlooked in these studies. These components were moral motivation and moral character (Rest, 1994). Upon this review, this chapter presented the findings from this dissertation's empirical research. These findings revealed the ethical considerations of practitioners engaging in brand activism. These findings were divided into three main themes (1) ethical becoming, (2) moral identity, and (3) justifying ethics through a narrative of authenticity. The first theme addressed the component of moral character as it discussed the concept of ethical becoming, showcasing how these practitioners perceived their ethical growth over time, evolving from junior to senior roles. Ethical becoming involves learning from mistakes, reflecting on experiences, and actively refining moral character. As practitioners progressed, they exhibited an increased ability to voice ethical concerns, refuse work against their values, and take actions aligned with their ethics. The second theme addressed the component of moral motivation and centred on practitioners' reliance on personal moral identities. These practitioners demonstrated the presence of a headstrong moral identity as they considered their own values as central to ethical decision-making in brand activism. This reliance may lead to authentic campaigns but also raises concerns about the ambivalence of that authenticity. The third theme revolved around moral sensitivity and judgement, where practitioners used a narrative of authenticity to evaluate the ethics of brand activism based on their own self-perceptions of authenticity. They used categories such as impact, negative impact, woke-washing and the presence of gut feeling to determine this authenticity. The gut feeling approach highlighted the subjectivity of these evaluations and the complexities and ambivalence of reconciling ethics, authenticity, and commercial interests in brand activism. Overall, the findings shed light on practitioners' evolving ethical considerations, the interrelation between personal moral identities and brand activism, and the challenges of determining authenticity and ethics in this context.

This chapter introduced the concept of ethical becoming, which encapsulates how practitioners view themselves as evolving ethically over time as they progress from junior to senior roles. This sense of ethical becoming highlights the dynamic nature of moral character, which is not fixed but rather shaped by experiences, reflection, and intentional efforts to

improve oneself. The practitioners' ethical growth was demonstrated through their ability to voice concerns, refuse projects that conflict with their principles, and align their actions with moral values. This finding revealed the opposite of the research by Drumwright and Kamal (2016), who found that junior practitioners were more sensitive to ethical issues, whereas senior practitioners had become more unethical over time. In contrast to identifying with ethical immunities, the practitioners interviewed for this dissertation instead described a process of ethical becoming. These findings also revealed a sense of moral myopia to be observed primarily among junior employees. Moral myopia was described by Drumwright and Murphy (2004) as a distorted moral vision. This was present in the practitioners' descriptions of ethical considerations from their time as junior employees as they made ethical compromises for career advancement, the allure of novelty, and a perceived lack of power. This highlighted the internal struggles faced by practitioners who may prioritise career progression over ethical considerations. As practitioners transitioned to senior roles, they became more attuned to the importance of aligning personal and professional ethics, exercising a greater willingness to stand against projects that contradicted their values. This demonstrates the growth of practitioners' moral character by illustrating their journey from a focus on short-term gains and external pressures during their junior years to a deeper understanding and prioritisation of ethical principles as they progressed to senior roles. The contrast with the research findings of Drumwright and Kamal (2016) highlights the complexity of ethical development. The fact that the practitioners' ethical growth was depicted through their ability to voice concerns, reject ethically conflicting projects, and align their actions with values suggests the transformation in their decision-making processes.

The findings in this chapter also revealed the practitioners' reliance on their personal moral identities as it is related to moral motivation, which played a pivotal role in guiding their ethical decision-making. Their commitment to authenticity was evident as they aligned their campaigns with their own values and beliefs. Practitioners were increasingly seeking to "walk the talk," ensuring that their campaigns genuinely reflected their convictions. However, this reliance on personal moral identities raises questions about the potential for bias and manipulation, blurring the line between authentic advocacy and opportunistic commodification of social causes. It is important to note that several of the studies on ethical considerations among advertising practitioners found professional identity and personal experience to impact moral judgement and sensitivity (Drumwright & Kamal, 2016; Schauster et al., 2020). Therefore, it is relevant to this chapter and its findings that the

previous chapter on professional identity found practitioners considering themselves as catalysts of change. This new professional identity is likely to be related to how practitioners make their ethical decisions. The practitioners' focus on personal moral values contributes to both meaningful and problematic aspects of brand activism. While genuine alignment leads to impactful campaigns, there is a risk of oversimplification and over-subjectivity in ethical decision-making, as for example demonstrated by Participant Q's hesitance to push a personal agenda through brand activism. This illustrates the fine line practitioners must tread when reconciling their personal beliefs with broader ethical considerations. These findings also highlighted how these practitioners compartmentalise their ethics by drawing heavily on their individual moral compasses when navigating complex ethical landscapes. The compartmentalisation becomes apparent when practitioners prioritise their personal morals and values in campaign decisions, potentially overlooking broader ethical considerations in the process. By relying on their own moral identities, practitioners may inadvertently allow subjective biases to influence their decision-making, potentially leading to campaigns that are skewed by their own viewpoints. This compartmentalisation of ethics is a reflection of the human tendency to approach ethical decisions through the lens of one's personal beliefs, thereby highlighting the challenge of maintaining a balance between genuine activism and self-serving interests. This reliance on personal moral identities by practitioners may be perceived to enrich the authenticity of their campaigns, fostering genuine alignment with their values. However, this reliance introduces a tension between authenticity and the potential for opportunism, influenced by biases and personal political agendas.

The findings in this chapter also revealed practitioners' reliance on their self-perceptions of authenticity to inform their moral sensitivity and judgment and to differentiate between ethical and non-ethical campaigns. These practitioners evaluated the ethicality of campaigns based on how they perceived authenticity using concepts such as impact and action, negative impact, alignment with business practices, and the avoidance of woke-washing as criteria of judgement. However, this nuanced evaluation of authenticity has its complexities as some practitioners also noted 'gut feeling' as a gauge of authenticity and, therefore, ethics. Practitioners relying on gut feelings and intuition to gauge authenticity can lead to subjectivity and ambiguity. The practitioners' struggles to definitively classify actions as ethical or unethical underscores the complex nature of brand activism within the capitalist framework. These findings demonstrate the compartmentalisation of ethics as practitioners focus on the micro perspective of the specific campaign rather than address the macro-level

ethical issue of brands commodifying social movements or further amplifying political polarisation. In the context of evaluating campaigns for authenticity and ethicality, these practitioners seem to narrow their ethical considerations to the immediate impact and alignment with their client's business practices. This approach allows them to make judgments based on tangible and immediate consequences, often at the expense of broader ethical concerns. Instead of delving into the larger ethical concern of brands commodifying social movements for profit, practitioners focus on evaluating individual campaigns based on their internal perception of authenticity. This focus on micro-level ethics enables them to maintain a sense of ethical propriety within their immediate work sphere while potentially neglecting the macro-level ethical implications. Banet-Weiser's (2012) notion of brand cultures and the ambivalence of the commercial appropriation of authenticity come into play here. As previously discussed in chapter two, brand cultures refer to the ways in which brands become central to cultural practices and expressions, influencing the formation of identities and meanings (2012). The practitioners' focus on authenticity at the micro level aligns with this idea, as they assess campaigns' authenticity to ensure they resonate with specific measures of authenticity set by the practitioners themselves. These practitioners appear unbothered by the problems of politicised brand cultures as long as they remain in line with their personal moral sensitivities and meet their self-identified markers of authenticity. However, the ambivalence of authenticity in this context is illustrated by the tension between genuine social change efforts fuelled by the practitioners' moral identities and personal perceptions of authenticity and these marketing strategies that garner fame and profit for large multinational brands. In these instances, the practitioners seem to miss the macro-perspective on the discussion of brand activism and ethics. Interestingly, most of the literature on the ethical imagination of advertising practitioners paints them as particularly bad at seeing the bigger picture (Cohen & Dromi, 2018; Drumwright & Kamal, 2016; Drumwright & Murphy, 2004). However, this is somewhat surprising since they are often quite aware of these macro-level critiques of their profession, which is evidenced by the various practitioners in chapter four who described that brand activism is moralising their profession. More specifically referenced by Participant G, who stated, “I don’t need to change the narrative of the industry being the worst industry. That’s fine. Everyone can hate the industry. But when I bring out a piece of content, I want to create some kind of change.”

Overall, the findings presented in this chapter provide valuable insights into the ethical considerations of practitioners who engage in brand activism. The exploration of

ethical becoming highlights the dynamic nature of moral character, revealing practitioners' evolution from a focus on short-term gains and external pressures during their junior years to a deeper understanding and prioritisation of ethical principles as they progress to senior roles. This contrasts with previous research, highlighting the complexity of ethical development and the potential for growth over time. The reliance on personal moral identities also offers a lens through which practitioners seek to authentically align their campaigns with their convictions. However, this reliance also introduces a layer of complexity and subjectivity, blurring the line between authentic advocacy and opportunistic commodification such as Pepsi's *Live for Now* campaign (Victor, 2017) described in chapter one. Furthermore, practitioners appeared to use a narrative of authenticity to rationalise their moral sensitivity and moral judgment, which is used to evaluate the ethics of their campaigns based on their own self-perceptions of authenticity. This evaluation often centres on micro-level considerations, focusing on immediate impacts and alignment with company practices rather than addressing the macro-level ethical issue of brands commodifying social movements. This compartmentalisation of ethics emphasises the practitioners' focus on the micro perspective, potentially sidelining broader ethical concerns associated with the commodification of social causes. In the context of Banet-Weiser's (2012) notion of brand cultures and the ambivalence of authenticity, these findings illuminate the tension between genuine efforts for social change driven by practitioners' moral identities and the commercial interests of brands seeking profit and fame. The practitioners' emphasis on authenticity at the micro level aligns with the concept of brand cultures, where brands shape cultural practices and meanings. However, the ambivalence of authenticity arises from the delicate balance between sincere advocacy and the potential for marketing strategies to exploit social movements for corporate gain. Ultimately, the findings presented in this chapter deepen our understanding of how practitioners navigate the ethical landscape of brand activism. It highlights the nuanced interplay between personal moral identities, micro-level ethical considerations, and the broader macro-level ethical challenges posed by brands' involvement in social causes.

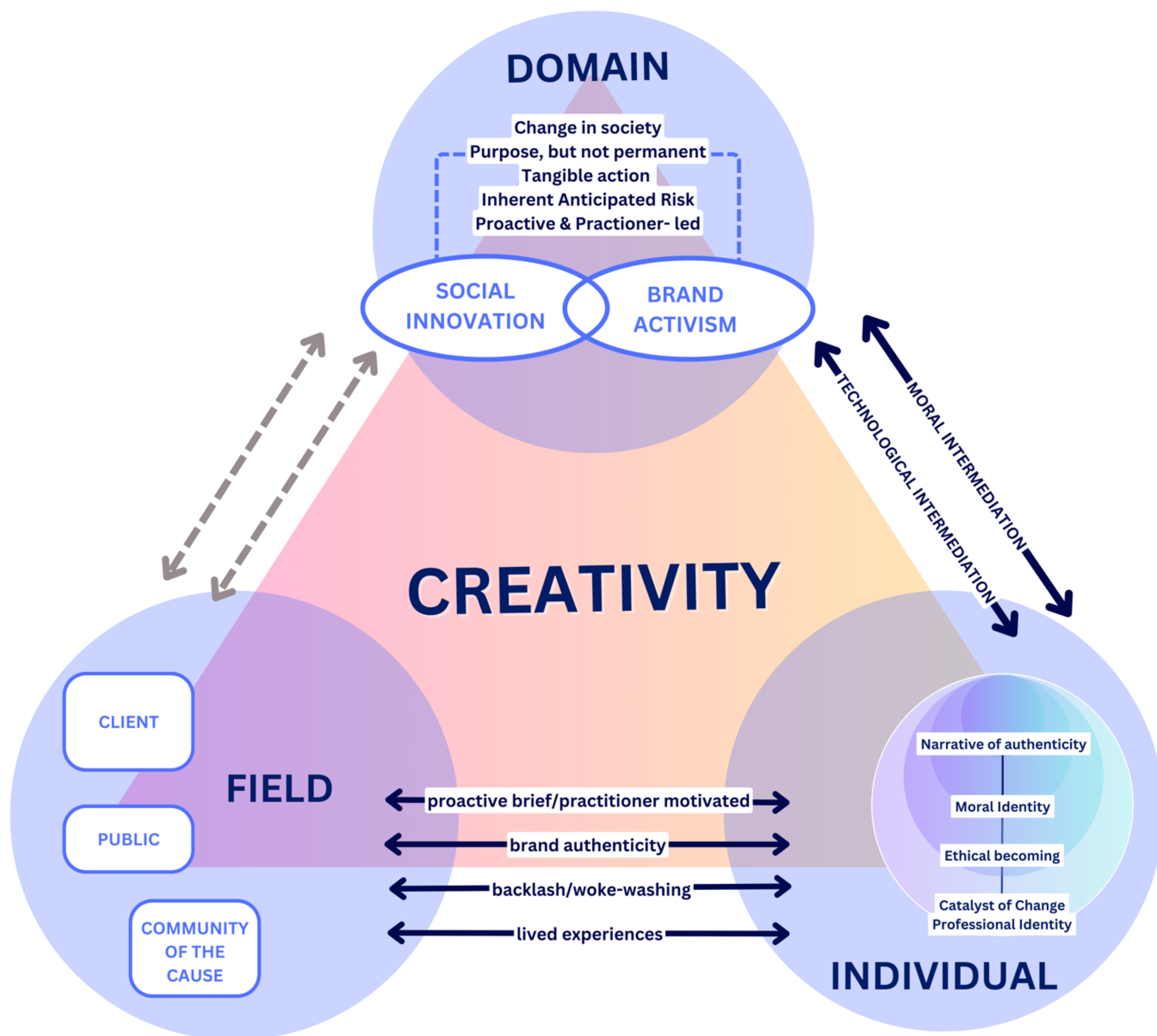
Chapter 6 - Conclusion

This dissertation set out to make two key contributions. The first was to critically interrogate brand activism in relation to how it differs from past and current branding strategies and discover the key characteristics from the practitioner's perspective. The second was to investigate brand activism in relation to how it impacts the professional practice and occupational identities of advertising practitioners. To achieve the above, this research aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How is brand activism defined in relation to other branding strategies?
2. What is involved in the creative process of developing brand activism campaigns compared to that of traditional campaigns?
3. How does brand activism impact the professional and creative practice and occupational identity of advertising professionals?
4. How does the utilisation of brand activism strategies impact how creative practitioners understand their occupational ethical work and professional moral obligations?

This dissertation used Csikszentmihalyi's (1999) Systems Model of Creativity to take a holistic approach to understanding the creative process, as this model includes the creative individual's traits and characteristics as well as the environment and cultural influences as factors that may influence creativity. Using this model, Csikszentmihalyi (1999) argued that "Creativity is a process that can be observed only at the intersection where individuals, domains, and fields interact" (p. 314). This dissertation used this model as a guide to structure the findings of the empirical research, dividing chapters into the domain, field and individual. The findings from these chapters are embedded into Csikszentmihalyi's (1999) model below in Figure 12.

FIGURE 12 FINDINGS ADAPTED TO THE SYSTEMS MODEL OF CREATIVITY



Overall, this dissertation examined the practitioner perspectives on brand activism in an attempt to answer the research questions posed above. This research found brand activism impacts the domain of branding as practitioners noted that it is now a requirement for modern brands. Additionally, five key characteristics of brand activism were identified, including its role in societal change, the need for purpose with measurable returns, the requirement for tangible action, the recognition of inherent risks, and the motivation of proactive practitioners. These findings provide insight into how practitioners conceptualise and influence the rules, procedures, and knowledge systems within the domain of branding. These findings are displayed at the apex of Figure 12, which shows an overlap between brand activism and social innovation along with all of the key characteristics of these types of campaigns.

While exploring the creative process of developing brand activism, the importance of mediating the perspectives and expectations of three distinct actors in the field was revealed. These actors were identified as the client, the public, and the community of the cause and are represented in the bottom left corner of Figure 12. The findings exhibited the nuanced processes involved in managing these actors while creating brand activism campaigns. While discussing the process of managing the client the findings disclosed a shift in power dynamics due to proactive practitioner-led campaign creation, overcoming development challenges, and maintaining brand authenticity. The practitioner's role in managing public backlash during brand activism campaigns was also highlighted, in addition to understanding the experiences of communities associated with the cause, achieved through research and collaboration. These processes are illustrated by the arrows in-between the field and the individual in Figure 12 as they demonstrate the various processes involved in producing and stimulating novelty. Overall, these findings on the creative process reveal practitioners as taking on new roles as moral intermediaries, which describes a role that mediates between the respective client's current and potential future moral standing as a brand, the perceived moral sentiments of consumers and other stakeholders, and practitioners' own moral, ethical and political leanings. This finding is visually depicted by the arrow between the individual and the domain in Figure 12 and is one of the more prominent theoretical contributions that this dissertation makes to the field of advertising research.

The final two chapters explored the role of the individual in creating brand activism campaigns. The various findings including aspects of professional and moral identity which were revealed are illuminated in the bottom right corner of Figure 12. While exploring the professional identity of practitioners, it became evident that practitioners possessed a significant amount of cultural capital that influenced their brand activism perspectives. Additionally, these practitioners adopted a new professional identity as catalysts of change, which refers to the self-perception and role that they assume with a primary focus on driving positive change, innovation, and meaningful impact. In addition, they were found to act as technological intermediaries where they served as enablers, translators, and problem solvers, leveraging technology to drive positive change, improve processes, and create solutions that have a meaningful impact on society or industries. They play a crucial role in maximising the potential of technology and ensuring it is effectively utilised to address real-world needs on behalf of their clients. This finding is demonstrated by the arrow between the individual and the domain in Figure 12. Lastly, while exploring the ethical considerations of practitioners

who engaged in brand activism, it was uncovered that they experience the concept of ethical becoming, a term that reflects practitioners evolving ethical growth guided by personal moral identities. These practitioners also use a narrative of authenticity to evaluate the ethicality of brand activism based on their own perceptions of authenticity. Overall, these findings exposed the complex interrelation between practitioners' perceptions, ethical considerations, and their roles in the evolving landscape of brand activism.

Despite the fact that this research is the first investigation of brand activism from the creative practitioner’s perspective, there are some limitations. This research had a limited sample size due to difficulties initiating contact with high-level practitioners in the industry. Further research could increase the sample size in terms of numbers but also in relation to experience. This research only interviewed practitioners who had experience working on brand activism. Therefore, future research could expand this sample to include the clients, members from the community of the cause, the public in general and other practitioners who have not worked on brand activism. Incorporating these perspectives might unveil a cynical view of brand activism, one grounded in scepticism toward the actual impact of such campaigns on societal change and the commodification of social movements. This limitation is illustrated by the dotted arrows between the domain and the field in Figure 12. While this research did not explicitly address the relationship between the domain and field, based on the accounts from the practitioners and data from the content analysis it is still apparent that these components interact with each other to select novelty. For example, since the public now expects brands to engage in brand activism and these types of campaigns tend to win advertising awards, it is clear that the actors of the field have an input into the domain.

In addition, this research’s reliance on qualitative data gathered through interviews and case studies limits the generalisability of the findings. While the in-depth exploration of practitioner perspectives provides valuable insights, a more extensive quantitative approach could complement these findings, offering a broader view of the prevalence and impact of brand activism across a wider range of practitioners and industries. The temporal aspect also presents a limitation, as the data collection process was confined to a specific period, and the ever-evolving nature of branding and societal dynamics could influence how practitioners perceive and engage with brand activism over time. Longitudinal studies could address this limitation, tracking the changes in practitioner attitudes and practices related to brand activism over an extended timeframe.

Furthermore, an in-depth examination of the role of education and training in shaping practitioners' perspectives on brand activism could offer insights into how academic institutions and professional development programs can better equip practitioners to navigate the complexities of this evolving field, particularly in relation to communication ethics. On the topic of training, this research also has various implications for the advertising industry in general. The findings demonstrate the potential importance of agencies engaging in brand activism as a means of attracting and retaining creative talent. The findings particularly focus on the importance of brand activism in retaining creative practitioners as it "makes them feel better about working in advertising." This dissertation has also brought attention to the need to develop more formal risk management systems within advertising agencies with a particular focus on protecting staff from online hate and backlash, which they consider an imperative fixture of brand activism.

In conclusion, while this dissertation provides valuable insights into practitioner perspectives on brand activism, there remain avenues for further exploration and research. By addressing the identified limitations and exploring the suggested future research directions, scholars and practitioners can continue to deepen their understanding of the intricate relationship between brand activism, practitioners' roles, ethical considerations, and the broader landscape of branding and societal change.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Brief campaign descriptions

Brief Campaign Descriptions
***No Black, No History, No News* | El Tiempo - Colombia** This is a print campaign that aimed to join the fight against racism. This campaign featured images of iconic moments in history involving people of colour, such as Michael Jordan's famous basketball dunk. However, the person has been removed in the image and replaced with the copy "No Black, No History, No News". https://campaignsoftheworld.com/print/el-tiempo-no-black-no-history-no-news/
***Equality Spell Check* | Lenovo – UAE** This campaign aimed to bring attention to the inequalities that women face in the workplace. The agency developed a word-detection plug-in for Microsoft Word that highlighted specific words as incorrect. When users clicked on the highlighted word they would be shown a statistic or a fact that revealed how the same word means something different for a female employee versus a male employee. https://www.lenovo.com/ae/en/campaign/equalityspellcheck/
***Zero Noise, Zero Emission* | BMW – Colombia** This campaign aimed to bring awareness to how climate change is causing habitat loss and various other repercussions for wildlife. This was a print campaign for BMWs new series of electric cars. This campaign did not feature the car, but instead featured six sleeping animals: Koala, Polar Bear, Red Panda, Three-Toed Sloth, Jaguar and Black Bear. https://www.adsoftheworld.com/campaigns/zero-noise-zero-emmisions
***Lost Roads* | Chevrolet – Colombia** This campaign aimed to change the stigmatised narrative of the Caquetá territory in Colombia. This area had belonged to a guerrilla army for the past sixty years and regular citizens could not go there due to risk of being kidnapped or getting stuck in combat. While a peace treaty had been signed five years prior there was still a stigmatised perception of the area, and also the former guerrillas who lived there. This campaign turned these ex-guerrillas who were seeking new ways of life into tour

guides for the area. This helped to encourage the rest of Colombia that Caquetá is now safe to travel. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3aGwrvtRpVY
***Icewatch and COP21 Paris* | Little Sun** This campaign aimed to start a dialogue on how small solutions towards addressing climate change can add up to make a big impact. This illustrated how everyone can be part of the climate change solution with little actions. This campaign was executed through various events finalising with an art installation in Paris that took place during the COP21. https://littlesun.org/blog/2016/05/29/icewatch-cop21-we-can-be-part-climate-solution/
***Voices of Racism* | NZ Human Rights Commission – New Zealand** This campaign aimed to combat everyday casual racism in New Zealand. This campaign was an immersive online experience that challenges users to put themselves in the shoes of someone who is receiving racist remarks. Each micro-aggression that populates the experience was derived from real experiences. https://www.adsoftheworld.com/campaigns/voice-of-racism
Dream Crazy | Nike – USA This campaign aimed to bring awareness and align the brand with the Black Lives Matter movement. This campaign used controversial activist Colin Kaepernick to show solidarity with the cause. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WW2yKSt2C_A
***The Talk* | P&G - USA** This campaign aimed to bring attention to the institutionalised racism in the United States and the bias that people of colour have historically had with the police force. This campaign illustrated 'the talk' that generations of parents have had to have with their children which discusses the realities of dealing with the police and understanding the bias which can result in police brutality. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFt0OHC3CDg
***Back to the Start* | Chipotle – USA**

This campaign aimed to bring attention to the food industry's state of sustainable farming or lack thereof. The short, animated film follows a farmer as he converts his industrial animal factory for a more sustainable future of farming. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUzzBPCLaGw
***Bank on Equality* | Scotiabank – Peru** This campaign aimed to address the gender wage gap in Peru, which is one of the highest in Latin America. This campaign awarded all female clients who opened a Payroll Account on International Women's Day with an equal salary to their male counter parts. This was paid to the clients in Scotia Points and was calculated using an algorithm developed by the bank that compared female and male client salaries. This included variables such as age, occupation, education and geographic location. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bsr7f18ue_8
***Refugee Nation* | Amnesty International** This campaign aimed to bring awareness to the refugee crisis of 2016 and encourage global support for these refugees. This campaign involved creating the national anthem and flag for the first ever Refugee Team that would be competing at the 2016 Rio Olympics. https://sites.wpp.com/wppedcream/2017/advertising/promo_and_activation/the-refugee-nation/
***Dress for Respect* | Schweppes – Brazil** This campaign aimed to bring awareness the amount of harassment women experience at night clubs. This campaign created a dress made with ultrasensitive tissue that would register every touch. This campaign then conducted a social experiment and had three women wear the dress to a popular club in Sao Paulo Brazil. The touches were monitored in real time and the experience was filmed with hidden cameras. https://sites.wpp.com/wppedcream/2018/direct/consumer-marketing/the-dress-for-respect
***Buy Better Wear Longer* | Levi's – USA** This campaign aimed to bring awareness to the current unsustainable level of global consumption. This campaign promoted the concept of buying better quality clothes to decrease over consumption and clothing waste and promoted the idea that reusing/buying used is better for the environment than recycling clothes due to the water consumption that is required for the recycling process.

https://www.levistrauss.com/2021/04/22/levis-launches-buy-better-wear-longer-campaign/
***The Gun Violence History Book* | The Illinois Council Against Handgun Violence – USA** This campaign aimed to bring attention to the brevity of the long history of gun violence in the United States. This campaign involved creating a physical book that illustrated this history and then resulted in a video where they physical shot the book with a gun. The message being that while the book has done what history has been unable to do. Stop the bullet. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsKFXfMZpsc
***Contract for Change* | Anheuser Busch, Michelob ULTRA – USA** This campaign aimed to encourage farmers to transition to become organic. This campaign addressed the major barrier of this transition being it takes 3 years without income and at the end of there is no guarantee that farmers would have a buyer for their produce. So, this campaign created a contract that would support farmers in their transition and guarantee a buyer for their produce in 3 year's time. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-3qvzNLCOc
***Boards of Change* | City of Chicago – USA** This campaign encouraged the 'disenfranchised' voices to ensure their voices were heard by voting. This campaign created voting booths made by the plywood boards that boarded up storefronts during the Black Lives Matter Protests of 2021 that had been painted by local artists with words of unity and justice. These voting booths were then strategically placed in areas that had low voter turnout. https://vimeo.com/657516517
***Fireproof Newspaper* | Sesocio Financial Investments, Firefighters Foundation Of Argentina – Argentina** This campaign aimed to raise awareness of the forest fires that were raging in the south of Argentina and highlight the threats facing the Amazon due to climate change and global warming. This campaign ran off the insight that bonfires and barbeques are often the source of forest fires and these are normally lit using newspaper. The idea behind the fireproof newspaper was to tell the story of the fire but should not be used to light them. This campaign also raised funds for the Firefighters Foundation of Argentina.

https://dare.havas.com/behind-the-work/close-to-home/

***The Uncensored Playlist* | Reporters without Borders - Germany**

This campaign took ten articles from five independent journalists in countries that have strict government regulations for censorship and turned them in ten uncensored pop songs. These songs were uploaded onto music streaming websites and were freely available. This allowed the previously censored news articles to be heard by citizens in the countries where they had been banned.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPWMFBQFPLQ

The Last Tree Standing | Greenpeace - Poland

This campaign aimed to stop the logging of the Białoweża Forest which is the last primeval forest in Europe. This campaign brought attention to the issue by recreating the forest in Minecraft which allowed users to explore the land digitally. Then, one day, the entire forest had been 'digitally' logged, leaving only one tree. This encouraged users to sign the petition to stop the logging.

http://www.wojtek-creative.com/tree